International Political Theory and the Real World[*]

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How should International Political Theory (IPT) relate to public policy? Should theorists aspire for their work to be policy-relevant and, if so, in what sense? When can we legitimately criticize a theory for failing to be relevant to practice?

To develop a response to these questions, I will consider two issues: (1) the extent to which international political theorists should be concerned that the norms they articulate are *precise* enough to entail clear practical advice under different empirical circumstances; (2) whether they *should* provide concrete practical advice on policy choice and institutional reform. These questions are related but distinct, and we should answer each quite differently. Regarding the first, I shall argue that it counts heavily against a theory if it is not precise enough to guide policy and reform given certain empirical assumptions. On the second, I will argue that theorists should be very cautious when engaging with questions of policy and institutional design. Some principles of IPT can be criticized for being insufficiently precise, but a degree of abstraction from concrete policy recommendations is a virtue, rather than a vice, of an element of IPT.

I conclude that we should aim to be precise without being concrete. To help fix ideas and anchor my argument, I will discuss these issues with reference to a principle that John Rawls has advocated in his influential work *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls 1999a):

a duty of assistance to societies that lack the capacity to satisfy the basic needs or protect the basic rights of their people.

How Practical Should IPT Be?

IPT has two central substantive aims. The first is to articulate and justify norms that should regulate the *conduct* of collective agents with international reach—states, non-governmental organizations, private enterprises. These include principles regulating the use of force, economic statecraft, and so on. The second is to articulate and justify norms that should inform the design and reform of *social arrangements*—including the institution of the sovereign state itself, supranational institutions such as the EU, and international law. These include principles evaluating property rights, sovereign prerogatives, rules of trade, and so on.

These two sets of norms are clearly interconnected, and both are usually understood to provide us with means of comparing and assessing different policies and social arrangements that we might now consider adopting or bringing about. Although I have stated the aims of IPT in normative terms—as principles regarding how states and other agents ought to or may act, and how institutions may or may not be designed—they clearly also possess an evaluative component. That is, they provide criteria by which we can make claims about whether one state's behaviour is better or worse than another state's, or how its behaviour might have been better, and whether some proposed reform of social institutions would make them more or less just.

How *practical* should IPT be? One view is that political theorists should not really seek to intervene in contemporary politics, or at least in policy discussions, at all. This might draw support from two approaches to political theory that differ from one

another quite radically in just about every other respect. The first would be an extreme form of idealism. On this approach, the aim of IPT is to articulate a concrete vision of an ideal global order. Such an order is no doubt likely to differ quite dramatically from our present one. Indeed, it may seem infeasible, not only because it cannot be brought about from the non-ideal circumstances of the present, but because it could not plausibly be brought about and sustained (given what we know about the capacities of ordinary human agents, unavoidable scarcity of resources, and so on). Political theory, on this approach, should not generally be concerned with the details of real-world politics or the policies that might be implemented in the real world. For one thing, human agents and their institutions may fall so far short of what they would be in an ideal order that reflecting on such ideals may tell us very little about the choices we confront in policy-making and institutional design.

The second approach would be an extreme form of realism. On this approach, attempting to use political ideals to inform public policy invites folly. Policies that are endorsed because they would better satisfy some normative ideal are likely to do more harm than good. Theories are likely to be based on unrealistic assumptions about the motivational capacities of ordinary human agents, we are warned, and to ignore the real practical constraints regarding what can be feasibly achieved in politics. Robert Goodin (who does not endorse this charge) outlines the argument:

> fixation upon unobtainable ideals engenders unrealistic aspirations and expectations, making even the best possible government and policies seem simply not good enough. It encourages dogmatism and discourages flexibility. It makes the best the enemy of the good. It encourages us to

"do good though the heavens may fall", rather than contenting ourselves with doing as much good as we can without the heavens falling. (Goodin 1995: 37)

In sum, actively pursuing ideals in politics may even undermine rather than promote them (see also Galston 2010).

Very few who are drawn to IPT find the kinds of extreme idealism or extreme realism sketched above to be particularly attractive. While there may be an important place in IPT for the conception of ideal global orders, however unobtainable they may be, surely this should not exhaust it (see Chapter 47). And we should surely hope that our ideals might give us some guidance in dealing with contemporary politics, even if we recognize that we will fall far short of them. Indeed, the more radically divorced a political theory becomes from what might, somewhere somehow, be practically possible for creatures like us, the less it seems to be a theory for us. Furthermore, even if the range of feasible alternatives to present policies and institutions is more limited than one might initially think or hope, it does not follow that extreme realism accurately represents the range of possibilities for change and reform.

In any case, most international political theorists would not consider their work to be of value if it could not connect in *some* meaningful way with contemporary debates—they want their work to have some practical role, and the belief that it might play such a role is (at least in part) what motivates them (see Chapter 29). This chapter is directed at those who endorse these goals. It explores how theorists might best develop work that is at once practically relevant and responsive to the empirical complexities involved in shaping policies and institutional arrangements in the real world.

An Example: Rawls's Duty of Assistance

In *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls 1999a), John Rawls articulated a picture of what social arrangements we should aim to bring about at the global level. They should take the form of a "Society of Peoples." Such a society would be composed of peoples that have a certain character, namely that they are "well-ordered." Two types of peoples can be well-ordered, in Rawls's sense. First are reasonable liberal peoples, which stably protect the basic liberties of all citizens, provide them with adequate means to exercise these liberties, and subject their laws and policies to democratic control (Rawls 1999a: 4). Second are what he calls "decent hierarchical peoples." Decent hierarchical peoples may fail to protect some basic liberties and may not possess a democratic character (and are thus unjust by liberal standards), but they nevertheless stably protect a core list of human rights (including subsistence rights), and incorporate processes for determining policies and laws that are consultative and thus responsive in some manner to the wishes of their people (pp. 63, 66).

Both decent and liberal peoples are, in addition, non-aggressive in their relations with other peoples. Each of these well-ordered societies should, on Rawls's view, interact with all others in accordance with eight principles, "The Law of Peoples" (see Rawls 1999a: 37). The Law of Peoples incorporates principles for dealing with peoples that are not well-ordered, and thus do not have a proper place within the Society of Peoples, including aggressive and dangerous "outlaw states," that undermine peace and fail to protect the human rights of their citizens (p. 81), and "burdened societies," whose circumstances are such that they lack the requisite capacities to sustain a well-ordered regime, whether liberal or non-liberal but decent (p. 106).

Rawls clearly intends his view in the Law of Peoples to be practical, in the sense that reflection on the ideal of a society of peoples and the law of peoples that governs their interactions bears on how we, who do not live in a society of peoples, should evaluate the options open to us. In particular, these ideals provide means by which we might judge progress towards it. Elsewhere, Rawls defines as the goal of his theory as "probing the limits of practicable political possibility" (Rawls 2001: 4–5). Of course, what is a practical possibility may be very far from being realized, which makes his ambition utopian. "By showing how the social world may realize the features of a realistic utopia," he writes, "political philosophy provides a long-term goal of political endeavor, and in working toward it gives meaning to what we can do today" (Rawls 1999a: 128). Although he recognizes that ideals like the society of peoples may be difficult to realize, such ideals provide (he argues elsewhere) "the only basis for the systematic grasp of [the] more pressing problems" that we must confront in non-ideal circumstances (Rawls 1999b: 8).

Some contemporary societies, at least, seem to meet Rawls's criteria for being reasonable liberal societies, outlaw societies, or burdened societies, even if societies may not fit neatly into any of these categories (whether or not there are any existing decent hierarchical societies is a somewhat more difficult question). It would not be going too far to suggest that an incipient society of peoples already exists that regulates its conduct, however imperfectly, by principles similar to some of those adumbrated in the Law of Peoples, and that this might be extended and deepened over time. This is no accident, since many of the principles spelled out in the Law of Peoples are relatively familiar ones. Some interpreters have viewed this as essential to Rawls's aims—he wants to draw

on norms that are already largely part of the global political culture to engage critically

with current practices (Wenar 2006).

To see whether it succeeds in this practical aim, let's focus in particular on the

eighth and final principle of Rawls's Law of Peoples: "Peoples have a duty to assist other

peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent

political and social regime" (Rawls 1999a: 37). Many theorists of global justice were

disappointed with this duty of assistance (which I'll refer to as the DA) on substantive

grounds. Why, they asked, should we not instead employ a more far-reaching principle of

distributive justice at the global level, such as Rawls insisted we must adopt at the

domestic level (Moellendorf 2002; Tan 2004; Caney 2005)? Was this principle not

unduly conservative, permitting unacceptable levels of international inequality (Pogge

2004)? Others rushed to Rawls's defence, arguing that important differences between the

global and domestic spheres make principles of egalitarian justice applicable

domestically, but not globally (Reidy 2004; 2007; Freeman 2007). Here, however, I will

put this important debate to one side. Instead, I will consider whether the DA succeeds as

a practical principle.

The Content of Duties to Assistance

Rawls introduces his DA as an "especially controversial" principle (Rawls 1999a: 37, n.

43). He claims that, unlike the seven other principles constituting his Law of Peoples, it is

unfamiliar, not drawn from "the history and usages of international law and practice"

(Rawls 1999a: 41, 57). It did not appear in his initial presentation of the idea of a Law of

Peoples in earlier work (Rawls 1993: 55). To understand the content of the DA, we need

to know *who* possesses the duty and to *whom* the duty is owed. On these points, Rawls is

clear: the duty binds all well-ordered societies within the Society of Peoples, and it is owed to all burdened societies. As he describes them, burdened societies "lack the political cultural traditions, the human capital and know-how, and often, the material and technological resources to be well-ordered" (Rawls 1999a: 106). What distinguishes them from outlaw states is that, to the extent that their people are poor or their basic rights are ill-protected, this is a result not of their unwillingness to achieve these ends, but of their incapacity. Even societies that do not actively cause rights violations through the agency of the state, but which fail to prevent them when they can, seem to qualify as outlaw states, rather than burdened societies (Rawls 1999a: 109).

The aim of the DA therefore is to enable burdened societies to become well-ordered. This requires at a minimum that the human rights and basic needs of their members are satisfied.[1] Once that long-term target is reached, a cut-off point comes into operation so that no further assistance is owed to each formerly burdened society (Rawls 1999a: 111, 118–19). This threshold may be reached even though "the now well-ordered society may still be relatively poor" (Rawls 1999a: 111), causing many critics to argue that the DA did not go far enough, since it allowed seemingly unlimited international economic inequalities so long as all societies were well-ordered (Beitz 2000; Pogge 2004). They questioned whether Rawls had the resource within his own theory to justify such a sharp distinction between the principles that applied domestically and globally (Pogge 2006). And more sympathetic critics embrace the idea of the cut-off, but claim that its target is too unambitious (Tasioulas 2005). But these issues, too, can be set aside, since they relate to the content, rather than the practical applicability, of the DA.

Rawls makes several other remarks about the DA which help us to determine its meaning. Importantly, he limits the degree to which assistance to burdened societies can be made conditional on their adopting particular institutional forms. More specifically, he does not regard it as permissible to make such assistance depend on their transitioning to just (i.e. reasonable liberal) societies. Rather, equal assistance must be provided to those societies progressing towards becoming decent hierarchical peoples. Aside from such assistance being made conditional on actually helping societies protect basic human rights and satisfy basic needs, it is owed unconditionally to all burdened societies. Rawls does not regard the causes of their having become or remaining burdened to be relevant to the duty to assist them (Rawls 1999a: 108). Even when a society is burdened due to factors such as "the political culture, the political virtues and civic society of the country, its members" probity and industriousness, their capacity for innovation', he writes, "the duty of assistance is in no way diminished."[2]

Concreteness

We might complain that a principle such as the DA is insufficiently concrete in the advice that it might provide to policy-makers who want to bring the foreign policies of their society into line with its requirements. Rawls goes no further than to note that such assistance can take plural forms, including technical cooperation and the integration of burdened societies into global networks of cooperation (Rawls 1999a: 108–9). For example, would Rawls's DA require that affluent countries significantly increase their aid to poorer societies? What policies on trade and immigration would it imply for existing well-ordered states? Other IPT theorists who have considered questions of assistance and distributive justice have gone a good bit further than Rawls. They have proposed specific

targets for the amount of resources that should be transferred to what Rawls would regard as burdened societies, as well as suggesting a host of institutional reforms at the global level.

It is easy to see why those discussing assistance-based responsibilities have focused on financial transfers, and might hope for a duty of assistance to be specified in these terms—there is clear appeal in the idea of simply providing money in a way that directly helps other societies. And, prima facie, a case for direct financial assistance as a means of acting on a duty to assist is relatively straightforward. Financial aid promises to relax the budget constraints of the countries that receive it, thereby enabling them to pursue investments designed to improve the wellbeing of their people. Providing aid to governments should serve an important role in the sound management of their affairs, and thus also their ability to reduce the poverty of their people. Aid might enable otherwise burdened societies to maintain their spending during periods of revenue shortfall. Infusions of foreign currency might smooth international transactions over time and thus help to limit short-term volatility in the exchange rate. Governments can also employ resources made available through aid for longer-term projects, such as improvements in infrastructure, education, and health care, without imposing the burden of financing them solely on present and future taxpayers.

However, one major challenge to any duty of assistance that specifies some level of direct financial provision is the risk that financial assistance will make no positive difference to the lives of those living in burdened societies and, disturbingly, may even worsen their living conditions. Two concerns can be distinguished. The first is that financial transfers may prove futile—they will be essentially wasted and will fail to

achieve the objectives for which they are intended. The second worry is that transfers may prove counterproductive, undermining the very purposes they are intended to achieve. It has been argued that direct financial transfers may inhibit development in a range of ways, for instance by creating a dependency mentality and overwhelming the management capacity of governments (Kanbur 2000); by crowding out private-sector development (Bauer 1976); by worsening bureaucratic quality and weakening governance or by undermining competitiveness through Dutch Disease effects (Rajan and Subramanian 2005; 2007). If these concerns are well-founded, societies will not be well-placed to know whether or not they should indeed provide financial support to burdened societies or instead explore other means of helping them. Keith Horton calls this the "Epistemic Problem" of aid (2010).

Some political theorists are much more confident when they pronounce on the effects of aid, and continue to formulate duties of assistance explicitly in terms of levels of financial provision. Singer, for example, considers that "[t]he worst that can be said with any certainty is that in the past, a lot of official aid has been misconceived and misdirected and has done little good" (Singer 2009: 121). Experts familiar with the literature on aid will find such assessments to be overly sanguine. This is not to say that the case against discharging duties to assist through direct financial provision is sound either. Rather, it is to point out that a great deal of care needs to be taken in making claims about the effectiveness of aid in relieving poverty. To quote two leading contributors to this literature: "the debate about aid effectiveness is one where little is settled" (Rajan 2005: 54) and "The empirical literature on aid effectiveness has yielded unclear and ambiguous results" (Bourguignon and Sundberg 2007: 316; see Chapter 41).

What we see in looking closely at this debate, as well as discussion of other measures that might be adopted to promote development, is a great deal of expert disagreement.

What position is it reasonable for political theorists to take on matters such as this, where there is expert disagreement? They themselves, of course, are not experts even if they are more conversant with the empirical literature than an ordinary lay person. There is a tendency, when confronted with such disagreement, just to cite and draw on the work of those experts who support what we believe (or hope) to be true. But it is far from clear that this is a responsible epistemic attitude for political theorists to take. When it comes to measures that would be effective in assisting burdened societies, what is notable is not merely the fact of disagreement among those who study the effects of interventions to promote development, but that there do not seem to be clear majority or minority views. Are there heuristics we should adopt?

Elizabeth Anderson has sensibly suggested that we can ordinarily exercise "second-order capacity to judge trustworthiness and consensus, and access to the information needed to make such judgments" when we encounter expert disagreement about technical policy questions (Anderson 2011: 145). That is, we can identify differences in "credentials, honesty, and epistemic responsibility" of those asserting expertise in some domain. However, it is not clear that the experts on one or the other side of disagreements on topics relating to economic development and poverty relief fall foul of the criteria Anderson identifies. The case is arguably quite different from (for example) the science surrounding climate change, where an overwhelming majority of scientists affirm that human activities have contributed substantially to it, even if they argue heatedly about the details. In the climate case, we are faced not with genuine expert

disagreement, but with expert and fraudulent arguments, where we need principle to help us distinguish which is which. But that will not always be the case (see Lane 2014). To be sure, it is good to maintain a healthy suspicion of expert opinion (see Buchanan 2002), but that is not the same as disregarding it or simply cherry-picking from it.

For these reasons, it is generally a mistake for political theorists to formulate their principles in very concrete terms that are linked to particular policy proposals, since doing so will involve making strong assumptions about what are, typically, contested questions of empirical fact. Political theory needs to be conjoined with evidence-based empirical assessment if it is to yield plausible policy directives.

Precisely because interest in IPT is motivated by an interest in the practice of real-world politics, there is a risk that the practical implications of some theory will be too readily assumed, or argued on an inadequate base of evidence. IPT is replete with ambitious proposals for reforms of policies and institutional arrangements. Yet international political theorists are often poorly equipped to engage with the complex empirical questions that lie at the heart of questions concerning institutional reform and policy. So it is a virtue, rather than a vice, of a principle like the DA that it is not formulated concretely. This makes it flexible, and not dependent on any particular and contested view of which policies and arrangements best advance the aim of helping burdened societies.

It is worth pointing out that, as a whole, Rawls's IPT might nevertheless be *more* concrete than would be desirable, and that it therefore makes unwarranted empirical assumptions. Rawls's theory takes as a given that the world is divided into peoples, and that these peoples possess territorial sovereignty and much the same powers and

prerogatives as modern states. Many have questioned, however, whether global justice might not be better achieved by moving away from this sort of Westphalian order; and have pointed out that it has already been eroded in some respects by processes of increased political and economic integration (Buchanan 2000; Valentini 2011).

While Rawls may perhaps be correct that his ideal of a Society of Peoples is the best we might reasonably hope for, shouldn't we at least leave open the possibility that alternative social arrangements might fare better? His domestic theory of justice does not, after all, specify some particular institutional form that a society should take (it could favour a property-owning democracy or some form of market socialism, for instance), but rather identifies principles that can be used to make comparative assessments of various such forms. Why, critics have reasonably asked, should his theory of global affairs not also be formulated more abstractly, rather than being wedded to the institutional form of the modern state from the beginning (Pogge 2006)? This is consistent with maintaining, as many of Rawls's more sympathetic readers have done, that the proposals for a more cosmopolitan global order in which the significance of the state is diminished would be infeasible or undesirable (Meckled-Garcia 2008; Risse 2012).

Precision

We might also complain that the DA is not sufficiently precise. A principle is not sufficiently precise if it is articulated in a way that does not lead us to draw out its practical implications, even on the assumption that certain empirical conditions hold. While admittedly not a concrete principle, the DA could nevertheless be quite precise. It would direct well-ordered societies to adopt particular policies towards burdened societies, so long as certain empirical circumstances hold, without being formulated on

the assumption that any particular conditions exist. Precision is not an all-or-nothing affair: principles can be more or less precise. The more precise a principle governing some domain, the more it narrows the range of permissible policies that can be adopted in that domain, assuming that certain empirical circumstances hold.

For instance, a principle that states we should always choose policies (among feasible alternatives) that raise the income levels of the bottom-income decile is more precise than a principle that states we should always choose policies that give somewhat more weight to increasing the income levels of the bottom-income decile than to increasing the income of groups in other deciles. Note that greater precision would not entail particular policy recommendations. It could instead indicate when some decision procedure should be used to determine policy: for example, when experts disagree as to which of a range of policies would best promote some social objective. An element of procedural justice, then, can be incorporated into the framing of a principle.

Insofar as theories aim to be practical, precision is a virtue. But it is also obviously not the only virtue, and many very precise principles will be less plausible than somewhat less precise ones. What then might it mean to criticize a theory for being *too* imprecise? There is probably no good general answer to this question. One pragmatic way of responding is that, once a principle within some domain reaches a certain level of imprecision, it becomes so indeterminate that it becomes difficult to compare it to competing principles. Indeed, its very meaning becomes unclear.

To explore the extent to which the DA is precise, let us consider the different ways in which duty of assistance might be understood. Precisely specifying a duty to assist requires identifying the duty-bearer, whom the duty is owed to, what it aims to

achieve, and how stringent it is. As noted, Rawls is quite clear about the duty-bearer

(well-ordered societies), whom it is owed to (burdened societies), and its aims (to

facilitate the transition of societies from a burdened status to becoming well-ordered).

But how stringent is the duty?

A society's duty to assist is stringent, in the sense in which I shall use the term, to

the extent that it (1) constrains the society and (2) can demand much of it. The duty to

assist constrains a society to the extent that it cannot justify refusing to assist burdened

societies by appealing to the costs to itself of doing so, or to other valuable ends that its

conduct could instead bring about if it does not do so.[3] When, if ever, can well-ordered

societies claim to have done all that is required of them by the DA, insofar as not all

burdened societies have become well-ordered? Note that duties can vary widely in terms

of their stringency. To illustrate with a traditional example, the duties of individuals to

refrain from breaking the limbs of innocent non-threatening people are ordinarily thought

to be very constraining—the costs they would have to appeal to or the good they would

thereby achieve would have to be *very* large for their conduct to be excusable or

justifiable—whereas the duties to refrain from being impolite are not.

Philosophers who have considered duties to assist have tended to focus on how

they apply to individual persons. And they have defended duties of differing stringency.

Consider, for example, the duty of assistance defended by Peter Singer: "if it is in our

power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of

comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer 1972: 231). This duty

of assistance is very stringent indeed. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable

moral importance," Singer means "without causing anything else comparably bad to

happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent" (p. 231). Your life, and perhaps some other very serious harm, is pretty much the only cost that could be deemed comparable to the death of a child, impartially considered.

We could imagine an analogue of this principle at the level of societies. Placed in the Rawlsian context, it could demand that well-ordered societies make sacrifices to assist burdened societies up to the point where they would be sacrificing something of comparable moral importance. What would count as being of comparable moral importance? Presumably it would be of comparable importance if the societies were to cease to be well-ordered, but it is not clear what else would reach this bar. Indeed, it might even require that reasonable liberal peoples, which hold themselves to a higher standard, risk becoming decent societies should this be required as a means of bringing burdened societies into the society of peoples. Rawls insists that, while we should not be concerned with distributive equality globally, we have a duty to ensure that all burdened societies become well-ordered. The question we are considering is how this goal fits with concern for objectives like domestic egalitarian justice, which require far more than that all citizens have a decent standard of living.

Others who have endorsed stringent duties to assist in general have nevertheless thought that these duties can become much less stringent in conditions of non-compliance. Liam Murphy, for example, has argued that stringent duties to assist impose their demands unfairly in situations of partial compliance. If an agent is complying with a stringent principle of assistance like Singer's while others are not, she has not only to do her own fair share but also to take on as much as she can of the shares of the non-

complying others. Full compliance with a stringent principle like Singer's might mean that few actually need to make very large sacrifices at all, given that smaller efforts might suffice if all make them. But in the case where there is a great deal of non-compliance with this principle, some agents might have to make very large sacrifices. On Murphy's account this would be unfair.

To avoid giving rise to such unfairness, Murphy argues that moralities should incorporate a "compliance condition": "the demands on a complying person should not exceed what they would be under full compliance with the principle" (Murphy 2000: 7). According to Murphy, "what matters are the effects on people's well-being of compliance with the agent-neutral principle; this is what needs to be fairly distributed" (Murphy 2000: 90). David Miller (2011: 239–40) has recently offered a further defence of this sort of position: "by doing my fair share I have discharged my obligation, and the injustice that remains, because of partial compliance, is the responsibility of the non-compliers, and only theirs." Here, too, an analogue might be endorsed at the societal level. Such a condition could be placed, similarly, on societies. The DA might be interpreted to require that each well-ordered society does only its fair share (as stipulated in the compliance condition) to enable burdened societies to become decent or liberal.

Others have endorsed much less stringent interpretations of the duty to assist. T. M. Scanlon (1998: 224), for example, endorses the following principle:

> If you are presented with a situation in which you can prevent something
> very bad from happening, or alleviate someone's dire plight, by making
> only a slight (or even moderate) sacrifice, then it would be wrong not to
> do so.

And one could imagine an analogue of this type of principle operating at the societal level. In that case, a reasonable liberal society would have to make some slight or moderate sacrifice to help burdened societies transition towards becoming decent or reasonable liberal peoples. While it is not perhaps obvious what should count as a slight or moderate sacrifice for a society to make, it would nevertheless provide a rough and ready way of assessing whether well-ordered societies are fulfilling their duty to assist.

So which of these quite different ways of understanding the DA is what Rawls has in mind? Is the DA a very stringent principle, requiring quite large sacrifices to assist burdened societies, or a much less stringent one? Does it incorporate a compliance condition, or some comparable principle for limiting the sacrifices well-ordered societies make to their "fair share," or not? Strikingly, the text of the Law of Peoples really offers us no clue whatsoever on these critical questions. At no point in this work does Rawls indicate the extent to which members of good standing within the Law of Peoples should make sacrifices to assist burdened societies. It has a clear cut-off and target point in the sense that we know when a society achieves a status such that other well-ordered societies owe a duty of assistance to it, but very little clarity about when a well-ordered society will have done enough, or its fair share, to help societies that remain burdened. One of Rawls's most sympathetic commentators interprets his view thus:

> wealthy states are obligated to discharge their duties of assistance prior to committing themselves to national projects such as space exploration or artistic achievement or continued growth in per capita (Gross Domestic Product (GDP)) for the sake of increased material comfort or consumer

> luxury. This is still a position weaker than that defended by Peter Singer in
>
> his famous essay on famine, affluence and morality. (Reidy 2007: 199)

The DA, thus expounded, is rather spectacularly imprecise. It leaves open whether it would require that societies not fund the arts, improve their highway systems, or mitigate inequalities in educational achievement when the resources devoted to furthering these objectives would enable moving some burdened societies marginally closer to becoming well-ordered.[4] But even Reidy's interpretation of Rawls's claim is far more precise than anything Rawls explicitly affirms. He does not rule out that the DA could demand sacrifices at the societal level that are on a par with those that Singer's principle would demand of individuals. This is puzzling, and concerning. It is puzzling because, as we have seen, one could interpret the DA in a way that would require very radical changes to the behaviour of well-ordered states, or on the contrary view states as fulfilling their duties when they make very small sacrifices to help burdened societies.

When people have criticized Rawls's IPT for being too conservative, they have tended to focus on the fact that it does not incorporate a principle to regulate global inequality. But our discussion of the possible ways of specifying the DA suggest that we cannot really assess how conservative or radical his doctrine is. If it demands that well-ordered societies reduce themselves to a very low standard of living when this is required to assist burdened societies, it is very radical, quite apart from whether it permits inequalities. This lack of precision leaves unclear which of a state's own domestic expenditures on its own citizens or policies it might adopt when interacting with others that should count as consistent with justice or not. It is hard to judge whether the DA succeeds in Rawls's aim of exploring the limits of practical possibility.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've contrasted two different ways in which an IPT might aspire to be practical. It might be concrete—spelling out specific policy requirements—or it might be precise—giving practical advice conditional on certain empirical assumptions holding. I've argued that IPT should avoid concreteness, given epistemic limitations, but embrace precision.

Notes

[1] Controversially, Rawls's conception of human rights is somewhat truncated, and excludes many liberal rights that have appeared on lists of human rights in international law. For discussion, see Tasioulas (2005).

[2] As Chris Armstrong (2009) notes, some of Rawls's interpreters have failed to recognize this important feature.

[3] The terminology here is developed in Barry and Øverland (2016). On the idea of the appeal to cost, see Kagan (1991) and Haydar (2009).

[4] Reidy (2007: 200, n. 13) himself seems to acknowledge this, noting that it is not clear whether Rawls's DA would require that well-ordered societies sacrifice democratic or liberal welfare rights to assist burdened societies.

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