

Note on David Miller, "National Responsibility and Global Justice"

In ordinary life, says Miller, we think that we are obligated to contribute to ensuring a decent minimum of resources for everybody, and we think personal responsibility qualifies this obligation (are you in the gutter because you were pushed, or fell accidentally, or jumped in of your own volition?).

These same considerations should shape our thinking about global justice.

1. Initial problem: Different peoples with different traditions of thought and culture have different and conflicting conceptions of the right and the good. So how can we speak of global justice across nations, since there is no common agreed-on conception of justice across nations?
2. Second problem: Some think it makes no sense to think of nations and other collectives responsible for their policies. Only individual persons can be responsible agents. Talk of what collectives do has to be shorthand for complex stories about what lots of individual people do and the resultant effects. Miller denies this. He thinks imputing responsibility to nations and other collectives makes good sense.

Miller describes the case of a gang of teen-age boys who go joy-riding. They take turns drinking beer and driving the truck, which eventually crashes. Miller holds that in this setting, the individuals "identify with their group and its common ethos. These facts are sufficient for us to hold members collectively responsible for the results of that ethos, without having to trace the exact causal relationship between the actions of any one particular member and those consequences" (p. 133).

In a somewhat similar way, Miller thinks that rulers of a nation can be empowered and authorized to act for the group, and enact policies that express common values and ambitions of the people. Here it makes sense to say the nation is responsible for the policies enacted and it is fitting that the members of this national community should bear the costs, if for example the economic policies enacted create prosperity or the reverse of prosperity. It would be wrong to hold to a principle of global justice that required other nations to make up the shortfall in national income that Nation A suffers as a consequence of risky or short-sighted economic policies adopted by Nation A.

Miller asserts that in some situations the conditions for collective responsibility are satisfied with respect to the enactment of some policy. "Their members subscribe to a common public culture, despite individual differences in belief and value, and they participate in mutually beneficial practices whose shape they have a chance to influence. The more strongly these conditions obtain, the more

appropriate it is to hold nations responsible for their political actions, and the consequences that flow from these" (p. 136).

[Comment: One might yoke Miller's account of collective responsibility to Pogge's account of how nations harm the global poor, in order to argue that via collective responsibility the members of rich nations are morally responsible for harmful consequences of their governments' actions that shape the global economic order.

Comment: The gang of boys story does not require us to assess the situation in terms of group rather than individual responsibility. The boys might have been variously whole-hearted in carrying out risky behavior; the more whole-hearted are more at fault. Some boys might have been more easily able than others to use good judgment and suggest ways to have fun sensibly; the failure of the more able is more culpable than the failure of the less able. Some of the boys might have been acknowledged leaders of the group; leadership carries special responsibilities. And so on. An ethos does not do anything: individual people do things. Had there been a shooting, we should be very interested to learn who actually brought the revolver to the party, who proposed shooting, who actually pulled the trigger, who voiced doubts, and so on. Even if an assessment of individual conduct leads us to the judgment that each boy in Miller's story was equally at fault in producing the bad outcome, that is still a sum of judgments of individual responsibility not a judgment of collective responsibility.

For various purposes we can informally or formally institute procedures according to which we can attribute agency and responsibility to a group. The team played well or poorly; the team won or lost the game; the corporation declared bankruptcy. These are useful procedures, useful fictions if you will. Their utility does not tend to show that in the same sense in which one imputes moral responsibility to an individual person for the quality of her choices and actions, one can impute moral responsibility to a collective.]

Comment: When a nation embarks on national policies, the members of the nation are differentially responsible. Political actors may exert considerable control over the chain of events that takes place, while ordinary citizens might have little or no control over events. The consequences of policies enacted at one time can fall and typically do fall on people at a later time who did not bear the slightest responsibility for the institution and implementation of the policies—children, for example. Treating a nation as collectively morally responsible for the history it undergoes is fanciful.

Comment: Miller needs to make a distinction he does not explicitly mark. Holding nations responsible for their policies in the sense of making them or letting them absorb the costs of those policies can make sense in purely

instrumental terms. We can induce desired behavior in nations (sometimes, to some degree) by credibly announcing that if you do X, we will do Y, and if you do X instead, we will do Z. Holding collectives and individuals responsible for what they do can be a useful tool for producing better outcomes. This instrumental use of responsibility obviously does not carry with it any commitment to the idea that collectives are somehow really morally responsible for what we are holding them responsible for. In this sense I can hold my cat responsible for scratching on the sofa by reliably penalizing the cat when it scratches, so he has an incentive to leave the sofa alone. This policy does not commit me to the idea that my cat is morally responsible for choosing to scratch or not scratch the sofa.*

Comment: Repudiating the idea of collective moral responsibility does not mean that Miller is wrong to think that in appropriate circumstances we might to varying degrees find individual members of society responsible for the policies the society carries out. He notes that there may be a pervasive difference here between democratic and undemocratic governments. If the citizens overwhelmingly vote in favor of waging an aggressive war, they may be to some extent causally responsible and to blame for the waging of the subsequent aggressive war. Same goes if they overwhelmingly vote against a war that should be fought, and the nation does not fight the morally required war. But it is often tricky sensibly to assign responsibility to individuals in simple situations where one or a few persons act in ways that produce bad results for others; the assignment of responsibility to individuals for national policies is dicey at best.]

Back to 1. What can we say about global justice in a world in which people around the globe share no common standard of justice, of what we owe to each other?

Miller poses the problem in these words: "What can justice mean in a world made up of culturally distinct communities each enjoying some degree of political autonomy? It cannot require that everyone everywhere must enjoy the same bundle of freedoms, opportunities, and resources—a view that I shall refer to as global equality of opportunity. It cannot require this because people in different communities will want to have these advantages distributed in different ways. In particular, they will attach different relative weights to different components of the bundle" (p. 125).

[Comment: The problem is how to interpret this passage to render it consistent with Miller's own assertion that global justice requires that everyone has "a capability set that enables her to engage in each of these core activities, given the conditions prevailing in the society she belongs to" (p. 130). The "core activities" are activities that occur in all societies, says Miller. He must think that these are activities that are universally regarded as essential to a decent life. So

according to Miller a person who has these basic capabilities has a decent life. But if people do not agree on a standard, they do not agree. Employing different standards of the good life and the good life, they will not agree as to when people have equal access to the good life, but nor will they agree as to when people are at the threshold of decency.

One possibility is that Miller embraces "relativism lite." Relativism is the view that what is morally right and good is relative to the code of a society at a time. Relativism lite holds the same except it also asserts that there are some non-relative moral truths about the right and the good. But why isn't this just asserting and then in the next breath denying relativism?]

Another possibility is that Miller thinks that if one finds a lowest common denominator, a standard everyone accepts, then relativism is consistent with the claim that everyone agrees, to an extent, on what is right and good. He proposes the basic capability idea as this object of universal consensus. Qualification: he holds that a society's members might be factually in error as to what is required to attain a capability for a person or class of persons—they might for example underestimate what is required for a woman to be well nourished. In defining the decent threshold that justice requires, we are to correct for such factual errors.

Comment: But across cultures, people do not only disagree as to what is required to gain a given capability for a person. They disagree as to how to rank the different capabilities against each other—how important the various capabilities are, how different combinations of capabilities should be rated. Some societies might take to be an essential core activity a type of activity that another culture does not take to be essential in this way. If this is so, the lowest common denominator approach will not succeed. The culture that embraces a more demanding or expansive idea of core activities will regard as falling below decency a level of real freedom others regard as enough for a decent life. Cultures may also differ as to the justice question, whether each and every person is entitled to enjoy all the core capabilities. Some cultures might value sexual fulfillment for men but not women; or hold that aristocrats need cakes and ale but peasants, lacking noble blood, do not deserve such goods; or hold that a favored race or tribe should have the lion's share of good things. I don't see how Miller can defend the decent minimum as a requirement of justice without arguing in his own voice that this is the correct view and those who disagree, even if they comprise an entire society or culture, are in error.]

[Comment: The idea of justice as requiring a decent minimum for all is attractive. It needs further elaboration. Here are some questions: (1) Supposing we can settle on a list of what we are going to deem core activities—activities essential to a decent life—how do we decide what level of real freedom

to engage in all of them qualifies as good enough? Any particular choice seems arbitrary to a degree. (2) For any list of supposedly core goods, why couldn't having non-core capabilities counterbalance my shortfall in one of the core areas? For example, suppose I have very poor health, and not much can be done about that, but I have great access to education, or competitive sports. Can such a mixed package of capabilities be overall good enough? If not, why not? (3) Why is the good enough level specified in terms of freedom or capability rather than in terms of actual achieved quality of life? If the threshold good enough level includes some provision for good health, is it, for example, not getting malaria, or having the freedom to get or not get malaria that is valuable and should be required?(4) Does the basic justice requirement involve only getting people to the basic good enough level and not at all what happens to people above that level? For example, suppose that some people are unfortunately very poor transformers of resources into basic capability, so we could not move them closer to the basic capability threshold except at enormous cost? Should we maybe channel these resources to above threshold people, who would benefit greatly? Taken strictly, the idea that justice requires a decent minimum for all says we should prefer to get just one extra person to the decent minimum threshold at any cost rather than to get any number however huge of people now just barely above the threshold to get a further gain, however huge. This seems extreme.]

Under the heading, "The Limits of Responsibility," Miller ventures the opinion that maybe the obligation to maintain people at the decent minimum level of basic capability remains in force even if some of the people who fall below this level are blameworthy for their shortfall or responsible but not blameworthy for their shortfall. Suppose Arneson has lived a dissolute life for many years, and as a result is afflicted with severe health problems, which drive me below the basic capability level for many core activities—I can't move freely around the town, I cannot work at productive employment, I am depressed and so have little ability to laugh and play, my wife has (reasonably) left me and I have no further access to romance, my children hate me and will have nothing further to do with me, so I lack sustaining contact with close kin, I have burned my bridges with anyone who used to be my friend, and so on. Basic capability wise, I'm a mess. Miller observes: "I believe that even here we remain under an obligation to intervene, though it is an obligation that can be overridden by more stringent obligations to people who are *not* responsible for their condition. This is tantamount to saying that if we have to decide between respecting agents as beings with essential needs and respecting them as responsible agents (to revert to the dilemma that I introduced at the start of this essay), we should choose the former. But note that by parity of reasoning we need not respect the cultural values that led them into this predicament. If we commit resources to bring people who are collectively responsible for their condition to the threshold of decency, we may at

the same time mount an assault on the beliefs and practices that led them to falling beneath it (pp. 138-9)."

[Comment: It would be interesting to compare Miller's line on personal (and collective responsibility) and essential human needs with the lines taken by David Schmidtz and by Robert Goodin.

Comment: A question remains, on Miller's view, how stringent is the duty to sustain everybody at the good enough level. Also, the possible incentive effects of holding people responsible come into play. If allowing some Arnesons (see previous paragraph to stew in their own juices unaided decreases over time the number of people who come to need aid by this route, in the long run more people may be sustained at the good enough level if aid is withheld from the Arneson types. Miller holds that the decent minimum requirement trumps considerations of responsibility, but he does not say to what extent the decent minimum requirement takes priority over other values. We should note also that if we set aside as fanciful the idea of noninstrumental national responsibility (members of nations become deserving or undeserving in virtue of the policies their governments pursue), then in global justice contexts, personal responsibility issues may play little role in explaining how some people rather than others come to be living subthreshold lives. The global poor do not tend to be sinners, so global aid policies that try to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving poor and policies that make no such attempt may in practice recommend pretty much the same actions.

Comment: I don't see why Miller thinks that if we give priority to keeping people at the decent basic capability threshold over declining to aid those we responsible for their subthreshold condition, we then automatically should mount an assault on the beliefs and practices of people that get them to the subthreshold level. The people who are now subthreshold may have followed reasonable and prudent economic policies but nonetheless suffered from bad luck. There may be nothing to criticize in people's behavior. Even if people's voluntarily chosen and freely embraced way of life leads them to dire poverty they could have avoided, our responses might be mixed or ambivalent. They might be expressing loyalty to a hunter gatherer way of life we perceive to be admirable in many ways even if unsuited to modern conditions. Or the people whose responsible choices landed them in poverty might have been self-sacrificing—they volunteered to fight in an uncontroversially just war and in this way wrecked their economic life prospects. There are cases and cases.]

Miller observes that even if we accept his keep-everyone-at-the-decent-minimum idea of global justice "there remains the problem of how to distribute the responsibility for getting people over the decency threshold" (p. 139). Here different plausible principles conflict. Miller does not try to sort out all the

considerations that should shape our all things considered view. Presumably he rejects a simple strict requirement along the lines of P. Singer's or L. Murphy's proposals.

Miller concludes: "My aim in this essay has been to show that we can take the idea of national responsibility seriously and still recognize substantial obligations toward the world's poor. . . .A just world, on [Miller's] view, would be one in which the principle of national responsibility was given full play, and which would therefore exhibit considerable diversity (including diversity of living standards), but in which remedial responsibilities were also fully acknowledged, so that no one was condemned to live a life below the threshold of decency" (p. 140).