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Disciplinary Brief

JUSTICE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: VACCINE NATIONALISM DURING COVID-19

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What is Justice?

Nicholas Wolterstorff's Theology Brief on Justice clearly illustrates that the notion of justice pervades virtually every element of human existence. In contrast, my objective in this Disciplinary Brief is much more narrow and modest: to capture the trajectory of my evolving thinking concerning how matters of justice intersect with my own work on international development within the discipline of International Relations.

Tim Keller offers a straightforward definition of justice: 'giving humans their due as people in the image of God' (Scharold and Keller 2010). I like this definition, as does Wolterstorff (p.8). But when I challenge myself to unpack the notion of justice in light of my academic interests, I find myself understanding it as being intimately related to the creation, curation, and maintenance of the conditions for collective human flourishing. Two precepts flow from this conception of justice: that notions of justice are unavoidably political; and that there is something about justice that requires constant recalibration or re-adjustment.

Justice in International Relations

My research interests lead me to interrogate the idea of justice in much the same way as the political theorist Charles Beitz, who, at the outset of his classic article 'Justice and International Relations', posed the following question: "Do citizens of relatively affluent countries have obligations founded on justice to share their wealth with poorer people elsewhere?" (Beitz 1975, 360). This question increasingly occupies my own attempts to 'think Christianly' about how states provide development aid (see Day 2020). For me, the most basic answer to this question is settled: yes, citizens of affluent countries *do* have such obligations. The more difficult (and more pressing) question is how we—as both individuals *and* as members of political communities—should most effectively discharge these obligations in a rapidly

changing global environment.

Who does Justice?

International Relations (IR) primarily considers interactions between *states*, the most macro-level institutionalised communities of global politics. [1] Furthermore, for a range of historical, disciplinary and theoretical reasons, IR scholars have focused predominantly on the most powerful states and conceptualised them as unitary actors. This 'billiard ball' model of states, which 'black boxes' internal dynamics influencing behaviour, reduces interstate relations to an arena governed by materialistic laws derived from the relative economic and military might of its constituent units. This conceptualisation is problematic in myriad ways. Most consequential for the discussion at hand is how it dissolves the space for agency. Valerie Hudson (2005, 2) gets to the heart of this problem when she explains how states simply cannot function as independent actors in practice: "States are not agents because states are abstractions and thus have no agency".

The reason this theoretical discussion is relevant to a discussion about the pursuit of justice is because it drives at a crucial practical question: who *does* justice? Is it individuals, or is it states? Or is it some combination of both? In addition, how are we, as individuals, responsible for the action of the states we belong to? Getting even more practical, consider the question of redressing unequal development. Is the provision of bilateral (i.e. state-to-state) international development assistance something the *state* does? Or is the state acting on behalf of its citizens? Or is it perhaps the remit of a leader exercising agency on behalf of the citizens of a state?

Nationalists versus Globalists

These questions are the remit of political theory. In his book *Political Theory and International Relations* (Beitz 1979), Bietz essentially translates John Rawls' theory of justice from the domestic sphere to the international one. Beitz considers how Rawls' primarily within-state theory of justice applies *between* states. At issue is where—and how—to draw boundaries around political communities, especially as they relate to responsibilities to do justice to individuals outside these boundaries. Do states have obligations to individuals beyond their borders? What are they and to what extent should they operate? Such questions are not new, of course. They are central to enduring debates in political theory. But they have taken on fresh impetus in light of recent political framing pitting 'Nationalists' versus 'Globalists', most notably in the United States but also in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the West (albeit often employing slightly different terminology). The way these terms have become (or, perhaps more accurately, have been *made*) so politically salient illustrates just how relevant questions concerning international 'boundary-drawing' have become in contemporary political life.

In my observation, scholars of IR, as well as many Christians, are inclined to draw boundaries of moral responsibility too narrowly and too neatly. In both cases, this can lead to a tendency to excise obligations for individuals and states to do justice in part because of the ease of hiding behind neat and politically

convenient international boundaries. To be clear, I am not saying here that states and their leaders do not have primary obligations ('special duties') to their own citizens. Rather, I am arguing that the balance between the way states approach 'doing justice' to those inside their borders versus those outside them needs active tending. This tension—between the degree and direction that obligations and benefits do (and should) run between individuals within states and individuals beyond that same state's borders—will always be challenging to navigate. Nonetheless, I am of the view that this 'insider-outsider' tension has recently been resolved too far in the favour of the insider, at least in the rich Western states with which I am most familiar.

Against the backdrop of a changing and uncertain global order, there is a mood among Western states to circumscribe their international justice-doing activities. This tendency is evident in policies relating to immigration (see, for example, Glanville and Glanville 2020), climate change, development assistance, and now in the rise of vaccine nationalism, on which I will elaborate below.

Why Christians Should Widen Their Horizons

Three brief observations will help to sketch why I think we, as Christian justice-seekers-and-doers, need to be concerned about this relative tilt towards focusing 'within states' versus beyond borders. First, for most of us, the nature of our practical engagement with each other across the globe makes national-international distinctions virtually obsolete in important domains. This is especially the case when it comes to financial markets. Reitz's critique of Rawls turns on this notion. Beitz (1979, 374) argues that because the borders of states do not, in practice, demarcate where social interactions stop, then neither should they demarcate where social obligations stop. If global economic interdependence was substantial enough for Beitz to level these arguments over half a century ago, then the dramatic growth in international capital flows, people flows, information flows and trade since then strengthens this argument immensely. As Kok-Chor Tan (2004, 33) writes, "the greater economic "mutual connexion"' brought about by globalization, "has made the question of global justice all the more pertinent."

Second, the rules and institutions that govern these cross-border flows are themselves often a source of injustice, not least because the rules are typically written (and underwritten) by the most powerful states. As Kok-Chor Tan (2004, 21) acknowledges, "A theory of global justice would thus not only be concerned with the particular actions and foreign policies of individual countries, but, very importantly and more fundamentally, it would be concerned also with the background global institutional context within which countries interact". In other words, many of our shortcomings in doing justice beyond borders relate to not seeing (or being *unwilling* to see) how our own behaviours are contributing to the perpetration of injustice elsewhere. Expressed in more technical language, we are typically much more aware of our failures to uphold 'positive duties' (obligations that we should undertake to help others) than our failures to uphold our 'negative duties' (obligations not to inadvertently harm others through our actions).

I explore this dynamic as it applies to the provision of development aid in my recent article, which draws on Amos as a lens for 'thinking Christianly' (Day 2020). I argue that rapid recent changes in global financial

flows now mean that, more than ever before, what a state gives on the one hand through the provision of development aid (complying with a positive duty), it can easily take away with the other, through the pursuit of non-aid policies that harm developing countries (violating negative duties). Examples of non-aid policies of rich states that harm developing countries include unfair laws and practices concerning trade, arms transfers, agricultural and fishing subsidies, intellectual property laws and remittances.

A final observation concerns a particular manifestation of human selfishness. While we are quick to identify the limits of our obligations, very often advocating that they diminish (at best) at the border of our state, we rarely treat the benefits we accrue from outside our state in the same manner. For example, citizens of rich states obtain multitudes of cheap goods manufactured overseas that they use every day.

COVID-19 and Vaccine Nationalism

In their article on 'crisis nationalism', Eilidh Beaton and her co-authors state that "The COVID-19 pandemic presents a challenge for global justice: how should affluent countries balance their special duties to their own citizens and residents against their impartial duties of global justice?" (Beaton et al. 2021, 297). Since COVID-19 does not respect national boundaries, the most effective response to the virus would also be supranational. In practice, however, states have focused almost exclusively on their own needs. In many ways, what Beaton et. al term 'national partiality' is understandable in this crisis situation. Indeed, one might argue it is warranted: states *should* protect their own people to the best of their ability. However, the difference in this case is that the logic of extreme self-interest is ultimately counterproductive. Thomas Bollyky and Chad Brown (2020) pointedly assert that 'Vaccine Nationalism Will Prolong the Pandemic': "Distributing scarce early vaccine supplies to the settings and populations where they can do the most good is the most efficient way to bring this pandemic under control. Doing so would also speed the global economic recovery and avoid unnecessary geopolitical conflict."

Inequalities in Vaccine Allocation

Bollyky and Brown go on to report how many rich countries purchased more potential vaccines than they needed, with Canada reserving "enough potential doses to vaccinate its population more than four times over." At the time these authors were writing in late 2020, "Nations representing just one-seventh of the world's population [had] reserved more than half of all the promising vaccine supplies." In contrast, COVAX, the multilateral entity established to provide vaccines to lower-income countries, is struggling. According to Wouters et. al, "the widespread disregard for a global approach to vaccine allocation shown by national governments misses an opportunity to maximise the common good by reducing the global death toll, supporting widespread economic recovery, and mitigating supply chain disruptions" (Wouters et al. 2021, 1031).

Clearly, there are great injustices evident in the ability of different states to respond to the pandemic. Yet perhaps even more problematic than the inequalities around procurement, delivery and administration of

vaccines—and certainly less visible—is the way that longstanding violations of negative duties by rich countries are curtailing poor countries from being able to respond to COVID-19. As Eilidh Beaton and colleagues argue, “When existing global injustices have enabled some countries to exercise crisis nationalism, the case for partiality is morally suspect” (Beaton et al. 2021, 293).

Impacts on Poor Countries

Consider some of the impacts that just one domain of global injustice has had on the ability of poor countries to respond to the pandemic: the lack of access to global credit markets. In his recent paper reflecting on the likely impact of COVID-19 on the future of global development, Homi Kharas (2021, 3) points out how “Advanced economy governments have the exorbitant privilege of borrowing in their own currencies, while development countries cannot.” This reality has important flow on effects. First, the inability of poor countries to borrow is a large part of why they are at the back of the vaccine line (Collins and Holder 2021). The risk of pre-ordering prospective vaccines was too high. Second, while rich states have borrowed cheaply to finance huge stimulus spending, many poor nations have virtually no capacity to mount a fiscal response. In my own region, Australia was able to leverage additional expenditure in response to COVID-19 of 9.5% of GDP. This compares to 0.6% of GDP in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and 0.8% of GDP in Fiji, the Pacific Island region’s two biggest economies (Howes and Surandiran 2020). So, for example, not only is PNG’s economy much smaller in aggregate than Australia’s to begin with (around 60 times smaller), the size of its fiscal response as a proportion of its economy was also much smaller (around 16 times smaller). Third, the labour force in low-income economies is overwhelming employed in the informal sector. Such workers have their livelihoods withdrawn during lock-downs, unable to work from home via an online connection. They therefore likely find themselves in the double bind of being unable to access credit markets at the personal level, as well as living in a state that is unable to access credit markets for social spending.

Beyond Reductionism

In his brief, Wolterstorff voices his concern that scholars working across many academic disciplines, even those that “deal directly with interactions among human beings and social entities”, can become so beholden to reductionism that they do not bring justice “into the picture”. In this brief, I have tried to illustrate how scholars of International Relations are perhaps especially prone to this. The shape of the IR discipline means we face a pernicious form of reductionism that reduces states—the largest political communities comprising the globe and the historical focus of the discipline—to abstractions. The risk here is that, in the service of theoretical parsimony, people are squeezed out of the conceptual and analytical frame. Conceptualising states as mechanistic and deterministic entities tends to obscure that doing justice—or not doing justice—is a choice, made by people.

The challenge set by Wolterstorff’s brief is for us to broaden our horizons of moral obligation and responsibility, both within our disciplines and within the academy more broadly. The COVID-19 pandemic,

and especially the rise of vaccine nationalism, serves as a reminder of our collective tendency to ‘close down’ in the face of fear or uncertainty. It is also a reminder of how such responses can frustrate justice.

Further Reading

J. A. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1974). This volume, a contribution to *The Bible Speaks Today* series edited by John Stott and Moyter, led me to think through interstate relationships from a biblical perspective. Especially useful is the chapter examining the 'roll-call of nations' (Amos 1:3-2:3, pp.35-47).

Benjamin Day, 2020. Amos and the Beyond Aid Agenda: The 0.7% Target, COVID-19, and Reimagining International Development, *International Journal of Public Theology* 14, no. 4 (2020): 475–98. This article uses Amos as a lens through which to 'think Christianly' about the implications of the dramatic recent changes in the aid landscapes for how states should approach improving the lives of the poor beyond their borders.

Kok-Chor Tan, Justice without Borders: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Patriotism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In this book, Tan seeks to defend cosmopolitanism against the idea that its demands for distributive justice cannot also accommodate the special ties and commitments that ordinary individuals value—that is, nationalism and patriotism.

Charles R. Beitz, Justice and International Relations, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 4, no. 4 (1979): 360–89. Beitz's concern in this article is to translate John Rawls' theory of justice from the domestic sphere to the international one. He begins by posing the question: "Do citizens of relatively affluent countries have obligations founded on justice to share their wealth with poorer people elsewhere?"

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End Note

[1] IR academics habitually use the term ‘states’ to refer to what are colloquially known as *countries*—for example Nigeria, Nicaragua and Norway.

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