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# Global Collective Obligations, Just International Institutions and Pluralism<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** It is natural to see political philosophy as the domain, par excellence, of collective action and collective obligation. It is therefore surprising that the notion of collective obligation rarely assumes centre-stage within the subject. Elsewhere I have argued that we have good reasons for accepting the existence of global collective obligations – in other words, collective obligations which fall on the world's population as a whole. Here I shall argue that in many situations, forward-looking global obligations give rise to an obligation on individuals to work towards bringing into existence and support an institutional system which will enable their obligations to be met. Call such an obligation the 'Obligation to Promote Satisfactory Global Institutions'. I shall also examine a significant challenge to this line of argument, which I call the 'Pluralist Challenge'.

## 1 Introduction

Questions about distributive justice vary in their focus along two distinct dimensions. We can look at distributive justice as something which operates on a variety of different scales: within particular local institutions, at the level of the state and perhaps also at the global level. We can also distinguish between questions about how much (if anything) each individual is owed as a matter of justice, and questions about the kinds of institution which we might put in place in order to ensure that individuals receive what they deserve and to take remedial action when they do not. Here I shall be concerned with questions at the global and institutional level: questions about the kinds of institution which we might need to ensure an equitable distribution of the world's resources, and with the duties that individuals have to support such institutions.

I shall argue that individuals have a duty to support certain kinds of institution involved in the distribution of goods. Since these duties arise out of consideration of the rights of others we should see them as duties of distributive justice. Secondly I shall be discussing how a certain kind of moral burden, which falls on all of us collectively, should be shared among the various members of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Stephen Snyder for helpful comments and to both Stephen Snyder and Manuel Knoll for their patience in awaiting a revised version of my original paper.

world's population.<sup>2</sup> The notion of collective obligation will play a central role in my argument.

## 2 Collective obligation as a key notion in political philosophy

It is natural to think that political philosophy is concerned with reflection on some of the ways in which groups of human beings come together to confront common problems: in other words, with the domain of collective action. So it seems surprising that the notion of collective obligation rarely assumes centre-stage in normative political philosophy. If there are, or can be, collective obligations, then these are constraints on the kinds of collective action in which we may permissibly engage. Beyond this, considerations about collective obligations may play a central role in demarcating the form that legitimate political organization ought to take.

One obstacle to allowing the notion of collective obligation a central role in political philosophy is that the relationship between claims about collective responsibility and any constraints or requirements that they might impose on the actions of individuals is often obscure.<sup>3</sup> This point is familiar in discussions of backward-looking judgments about collective responsibility. Suppose the citizens of the United Kingdom bear, collectively, some responsibility for the policies pursued by its government overseas, and in particular for its participation in illegal acts of war in Iraq. It is unclear what responsibility lies with particular individuals who might have opposed that war, actively and strenuously; those who voted for parties which did not support the war; those who reached the age of adulthood while the war was being conducted, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Similar points apply to forward-looking political obligation. Suppose we think the present population of the planet has a collective obligation to mitigate the effects of world-

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Snyder for emphasising this point to me in correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> Other reasons, which I shall not discuss here, might include the suspicion that the notion of collective obligation is incoherent and the idea that claims about collective obligation are in some sense reducible to claims about individual obligation. For further discussion, see Wringe 2006, 2010, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, while the relationship between collective responsibility and individual responsibility may be obscure, it is not, and is not generally thought to be, non-existent.: It would go against the judgment of many involved in such protests to say that they bore no responsibility for the actions of their government; and it would make little sense of many people's view that as citizens of a country engaged in an illegal war, they bore a special responsibility for stopping it.

wide climate change. We might disagree about what, if anything, such an obligation requires of a citizen of a historically under-developed country; an American teenager; a Norwegian Old Age Pensioner and the lone parent of a developmentally-disabled child.

One might reply that if politics is concerned with collective action, political philosophers qua political philosophers need not worry if the implications of a claim about collective responsibility for the actions of individuals are unclear. However, even if political questions typically take the form ‘What should/can/must/we do’, the question ‘What should/can/must *I* do’ is more fundamental. ‘We’ can do nothing, without some ‘I’ or some ‘I’s doing something. So if the notion of collective obligation is to play a central role within political philosophy, we must address the implications of such obligations for individuals. I shall argue, then, that some kinds of forward-looking global obligation give rise to obligations on individuals to bring into existence institutions which can enable those obligations to be met.

### 3 Global collective obligations: The very idea

Suppose, as many have, that the notion of a collective obligation is coherent (French 1984; May 1987; Copp 2006; Pettit 2007; Isaacs 2011).<sup>5</sup> We may still wonder what kinds of entities can be the subjects of collective obligations. Entities which have a formal organizational structure, such as nation-states, business corporations and smaller bodies such as committees within a larger organization are obvious candidates (Gilbert 2008; French 1984; Copp 2006). However, I have argued elsewhere that groups which do not possess a formal structure of this sort can also be the subject of collective obligations (Wringe forthcoming, 2010, 2006; cf. also Isaacs 2011, chapters 1, 2 and 5). One unstructured collective which is particularly interesting here is the collective consisting of everyone currently alive: what one might call the ‘global collective’.

There are good reasons for thinking that some this collective bears significant moral obligations (Nussbaum 2006; Wringe 2006).<sup>6</sup> Consider a well-

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<sup>5</sup> For my own views see Wringe 2006, 2010a, and forthcoming French 1984, May 1987, Copp 2006, Pettit 2007 Isaacs 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Not everyone would accept that the population of the world does constitute an unstructured collective of the sort I suggest here. One reason for this has been explored in detail by Pogge (Pogge 2001) who suggests that global economic interconnectedness makes the world’s population part of a structured political community. Whether or not Pogge is correct, I think the argument from the nature of rights suggests that it makes sense to think of there being collective ob-

known objection to the notion of subsistence rights, conceived of as rights on the parts of individuals to have certain basic needs attended to (O'Neill [1986] 1998). It is often suggested that if such rights existed, they would necessarily give rise to obligations on agents to see to it that such needs are fulfilled (or, more plausibly to see to it that individuals acquire the capacity to meet these needs). However, it is often not plausible that this obligation falls either on some individual human being or on any salient organized collective body. Take for example the case of a starving individual in a drought-stricken region of a failed state such as Somalia. It may be quite implausible to think that any particular individual has an obligation to do something about her fate: everyone nearby who is in a position to help may be in a similar plight. It may also be true that the most obvious collective bodies are in no position to help either. Their state, for example, may lack the resources, the organizational capacity, or the territorial control which would be required to do anything about their situation.<sup>7</sup>

We ought not to say that individuals in such circumstances do not have the rights that more fortunately placed individuals – for example, those who are in a position to be helped by their compatriots – do have. To do so would in effect be to say that the protection that rights are supposed to afford individuals lapses in situations where they need it most.<sup>8</sup> An alternative is to see obligations as falling on a global collective.<sup>9</sup> The global collective body acts as what one might call an 'obligation-bearer of last resort'. The existence of collective obligations which fall on this body is thus something which can be taken to be a presupposition of the claim that there is a right to have certain kinds of basic needs met. We have here

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ligations on the world's population considered in abstraction from any political structure that might fall on them (just as it might make sense to think of a group of individuals who were in fact the members of a particular club or social group having certain obligations when considered as a particular social organized group, and other obligations in virtue of some other form of social organization, or in virtue of their being placed in such a way as to enable them to act together collectively to address some pressing need. For further discussion of Pogge's view see Meckled-Garcia 2008, Wringe 2010b.

<sup>7</sup> For useful discussion see also Griffin 2008. Sreenivasan 2012 has recently appealed to an argument along similar lines in defence of the claim that there is no human right to health.

<sup>8</sup> Of course the protection that rights provide is only metaphorical. Rights can only protect individuals to the extent that individuals act in accordance with the obligations that those rights generate. But what would be entailed by the suggestion that people in desperate circumstances have fewer rights is not this uncontroversial claim, but that these individuals would be deprived of the protections which rights can, and should, provide.

<sup>9</sup> See Wringe 2006 for arguments that this is the best way of avoiding the conclusion; and in particular that collective obligations falling on other bodies provide a less satisfactory solution.

what is effectively a transcendental argument for the existence of obligations falling on a relatively unstructured body – namely a global collective.

## 4 A Problem – The agency objection

Some authors hold that unstructured groups like the global collective cannot be the bearers of collective obligations because they are not collective agents.<sup>10</sup> We might express their objection as follows:

(Agency Argument)

- (P1) Only groups with a certain kind of internal structure are capable of collective action.
- (P2) Only groups that are capable of collective action can have collective obligations.
- C Unstructured groups cannot be the subject of collective obligation.

The first premiss of this argument is questionable. The phenomenon of collective action has been analysed in different ways by different authors. Some accounts of collective action require a collective agent with a certain amount of internal structures but others, such as Christopher Kutz's 'minimalist' account do not (List/Pettit 2011; French 1984; Gilbert 1989; Kutz 2000a, 2000b). In the absence of detailed argument about the nature of collective action we cannot simply make an inference from lack of formal structure to the incapacity for agency.

The second premiss is also problematic. Several authors, including Isaacs, Collins and Lawford-Smith appear to take it to be self-evident (Isaacs 2011; Lawford-Smith 2012; Collins 2013). In fact, it is highly contentious. For, as I argue elsewhere, the existence of collective obligations does not require that the collective on whom the obligation falls be an agent but only that some agent or agents be answerable for the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the obligation (Wringe 2010a). In the case of obligations which fall on unstructured groups, the agents in question are typically some or all of those who make up the group in question (Wringe 2010a.)

Does the second premiss of the argument follow from the claim that 'Ought implies Can'? It would if we accepted the claim that only agents have the capacity to carry out the actions which are necessary for a collective obligations to be fulfilled. However, if we think that some collectives are potentially agents without actually being agents, then this claim seems false. For it seems plausible that

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<sup>10</sup> Isaacs 2011 chapter 1, Lawford-Smith 2012 and Collins (forthcoming) all endorse the claim that only collectives which are capable of agency can be the subjects of collective obligation. For an argument against this view see Wringe 2010a.

if a collective is a potential agent, it has the capacity to do any of the things it would have the capacity to do if it were appropriately organized.<sup>11</sup> (The general principle involved here is that if I am capable of acquiring the capacity to do X by a certain time, then, in the only sense of can which is of interest here, I can do it. It is in this sense, for example, that one might judge that the students who are being taught by a particular teacher can pass the final exam which she devised at the beginning of the semester, and that those who are in receipt of a scholarship stand under a moral obligation to do so.)

## 5 Connecting individual and collective organizations

What bearing does the existence of a global obligation to satisfy subsistence needs have on questions about what particular individuals should do in particular concrete situations? Clearly it cannot give rise to an obligation on each individual to satisfy everyone's subsistence needs. No individual can do this. Indeed, the fact that no individual can do this, taken together with the claim that ought implies can, is precisely what supports the claim that there is a global collective obligation here.

However, this does not mean that global obligations cannot give rise to any obligations on individuals.<sup>12</sup> This would be to overlook the possibility that collec-

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**11** Lawford Smith (2012) has argued that this is not the case: she suggests that in general an unorganised group does not have the capacity to do things which it could do if organised, simply because it may be so difficult for the group to organise itself. She cites in connection with this case the German army under Hitler which (she claims) did not have the capacity to bring Hitler down even though it could have done so if appropriately organised. Her reason for denying this is to exempt the army (considered as a collective) from blame in this context. However, it is not clear to me that Lawford-Smith draws the right lesson from this example: it seems just as plausible to hold that the army as an institution was culpable even though, perhaps, no individual serving in it was (since they were, she claims, not in a position to be reasonably sure that others would have co-operated with them). One reason that it might make sense to do so would be that one could regard the structure or character of the German army as being to blame in this case. Doing so helps to make sense of certain kinds of reactive attitude that one might have in this case: for example one might think that the army deserved contempt, while reserving judgment on whether any particular individuals did.

**12** My interest at this point is in what, in principle, individuals would have to do in order to fulfil the collective obligations which fall upon groups of which they are a member. It is a separate, and important question, and one which I have addressed as to whether they are capable of doing so, and in particular, how we ought to understand claims of collective capacity in this

tive obligations can give rise to obligations on individuals that are slightly more complex than those which we have considered so far. I have argued elsewhere that collective obligations can give rise to individual obligations without being reducible to them. In particular, I have defended the following claim:

(C to I)

If in a particular situation a collective C has an all-out obligation to Phi, then, for any member M of C, and for any set S of possible actions of members of C that, if performed together, would constitute C's Phi-ing, if S includes M's doing A, then M has a pro tanto obligation to do A.<sup>13</sup>

(Roughly speaking, C to I says that if there is some way for members of a collective to act which will ensure the collective of which they are a member will do the thing it is obliged to do, then each of the members has a pro tanto obligation to act in that way.)

C to I is a principle connecting all-out collective obligations with pro tanto obligations on individuals. David Copp has argued that there are no plausible principles that will enable us to derive all-out obligations on individuals from all-out obligations on collectives. But his arguments do not touch the principle which I have defended.<sup>14</sup>

I shall not attempt to rehearse the argument for C to I here. Instead I shall try to show that if we accept C to I, we can derive from it two further principles, which are somewhat more concrete in their implications for individuals.

(Organizational Principle 1)

OP 1: A stringent obligation which falls on a collective, and which can only be fulfilled by collective action of a sort that is unlikely to come about in a spontaneous and uncoordinated manner generates an obligation on each of the members of that collective to promote modes of organization that would enable the obligation to be carried out, to the extent that it is in their power to promote such forms of obligation.

(Organizational Principle 2)

OP 2: A stringent obligation which falls on a collective which is organized in such a way as to enable the co-ordination of collective actions that satisfy global obligations generates a pro tanto obligation on individuals who form part of that collective to act in ways which are necessary for the fulfilment of those obligations.

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context. See in particular Wringe 2010, and for further critical discussion of the view I put forward there, Pinkert 2014, Lawford-Smith 2015.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to David Copp for useful discussion of this issue (though he should not be blamed for the formulation I have settled on).

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion see Wringe (forthcoming).

Both these principles require further explication. For example, much more needs to be said about which obligations are ‘stringent obligations’ and why both principles are restricted to the case of stringent obligations. The occurrence of the notion of a stringent obligation in these principles will also make a difference to the question of what counts as an adequate argument for them. Any such argument will at a minimum have to explain why it only applies to stringent obligations; ideally it should also say something about whether there are any related principles which apply to non-stringent obligations.

The intuitive case for restricting the principles in some way is fairly obvious: there would be something wrong with a principle that generated, or threatened to generate, a need for a world state out of a possible collective obligation to avoid littering sidewalks. The word stringent acts, to that extent as something of a place-holder. However, I shall take an obligation to be stringent provided that failing to meet it would result a large number of significant violations of individuals’ basic rights, where I use the term basic right in Henry Shue’s sense to mean a right which individuals must have in order for any further assignment of rights to them to have any point (Shue [1980] 1996).<sup>15</sup>

This characterization of stringency still leaves the content of OP 1 and OP 2 somewhat indeterminate. Further specification would involve discussion of which rights are basic rights; of what counts as a ‘significant’ violation of them; and how many such violations are required to generate a stringent obligation. These are all important issues, which I cannot pursue here. Even when these lacunae are acknowledged, it seems plausible that a good argument for OP 1 and OP 2 would go some way towards showing how claims about global obligation might give rise to relatively contentful requirements for action relating to particular individuals.<sup>16</sup>

OP 1 and OP 2 do not give rise to putative obligations on individuals which those individuals are unable to satisfy. Furthermore, they appear to be capable of

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**15** Shue argues – correctly in my view – that such rights must include both rights to a basic level of subsistence and to a certain level of personal security. For further discussion, see Beitz/Goodin 2009.

**16** Although I shall be providing arguments in favour of OP 1 and OP 2, I shall not be claiming that they provide us with the full story about the ways in which global obligations might filter down to the individual level. One reason for this is that OP 2 fails to generate any obligations on individuals in situations where there is more than one way for a collective to carry out its collective obligations – as will often be the case. Nevertheless, a successful argument for them would at least show how claims about global obligation might give rise to substantive claims about the obligations of individuals.



providing some kind of guidance concerning the ways in which particular individuals should act in particular concrete circumstances.

## 6 Deriving OP 1 and OP 2

How do OP 1 and OP 2 follow from C to I?

OP 1 addresses situations where a collective has an obligation which is extremely unlikely to be met by spontaneous action on the part of its members. Furthermore, if collective obligations are constrained by the principle that ‘ought implies can’, then such obligations can be met by some combination of actions. If the obligations cannot be met by spontaneous action, yet can be met in some way, then the way they can be met is, presumably, by means of organized action. But organization of the required sort does not come out of nowhere: it needs to be put in place by the action of individuals. So if a collective can only solve a problem by acting in an organized manner, it can only solve that problem by doing what is required to organize itself in the requisite manner.

It follows that if a collective has a duty which it cannot fulfil without organized action, then the ways in which it can meet that obligation involve organizing itself in the right way.<sup>17</sup> If there is a duty on the part of the individuals that make up the collective to act in ways which would enable them to fulfil the obligation, and these ways involve organizing themselves in particular ways, then, according to C to I they have a *pro tanto* duty to organize themselves in these ways. But this is what OP 1 says.

I have said that collectives that are unlikely to be able to meet their obligations in virtue of the spontaneous actions of individuals who make up the collective may be able to meet them by organizing themselves. Is the only possibility? In principle it seems as though it might not be. A collective might acquire the sort of organization required for meeting its obligations not by organizing itself, but by having some form of organization imposed on it from outside. Suppose the citizens of a nation comprehensively defeated in war have a collective obligation to institute some form of order which will perform the basic functions of a state (as one might hold, of the people of Germany in 1945) (Wringe 2010a).<sup>18</sup> Sometimes the required kind of order may be likeliest to come through being externally imposed.

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<sup>17</sup> Or perhaps acquiescing in having such a form of organization imposed upon it: see below.

<sup>18</sup> I thank my colleague Lars Vinx for suggesting this example.

This possibility is clearly irrelevant to the main kind of case that I have in mind here – that of the global collective. Here, there is *ex hypothesi* nothing outside the collective which could impose the requisite form of organization on it. However, the possibility might be thought to throw some doubt on the argument I have given for OP 2. Nonetheless, I do not think it should. In general, the chances of some external body imposing on a collective body just the forms of organization that it needs to fulfil its collective obligations (as opposed to serving the interests of those who are imposing that form of order) seems small enough to be discounted. It may be optimistic, but it does not seem to be unduly optimistic, to suppose that in general unstructured collective bodies are more likely to meet their obligations by finding their own form of organization than by having some form of organization imposed upon them from outside.

OP 2 is more complicated. However, in most cases in which a collective is organized in such a way as to enable an obligation to be met, it seems likely that the way the obligation is most likely to be met will involve the individuals acting in accordance with the forms of organization that already exist and which would enable them to meet the obligations. (It need not be the only way: perhaps the institutions we have are sufficient to enable us to fulfil a certain duty, but are not the only ones which could enable us to do so.) Changing forms of organization is complicated, time-consuming and unpredictable: in most cases obligations which could be met by a changed form of organization are less likely to be met in that way. So in most cases a *pro tanto* duty to act in accordance with existing organizations to meet given collective obligations will not be outweighed by a competing and incompatible duty to come up with other forms of organization.

I noted in section 4 that OP 1 and OP 2 were stated in terms of ‘stringent’ collective obligations (and I also noticed a concomitant argumentative burden of explaining why this should be so). Nothing in the argument that I have given so far provides such an explanation. In fact, the argument seems to justify much more inclusive principles, applying to all collective obligations, and not merely to stringent ones. This might even be taken as an objection to the arguments: the objection would be that if the arguments given are correct, our collective obligations give rise to too many obligations on individuals to be plausible.

My response is that the argument does provide support for versions of OP 1 and OP 2 which are not limited to stringent obligations. However, I have also argued that the obligations on individuals which these collective obligations give rise to are only *pro tanto* duties, and that in some cases these *pro tanto* duties might have a weight that is so low as to mean that they are almost always over-ridden. The point of restricting OP 1 and OP 2 duties to situations where the obligations involved are quite stringent is that it is plausible that in these

cases – and to a far lesser extent in other cases – the pro tanto duties generated by our collective obligations are likely to be strong enough not to be generally over-ridden by countervailing considerations.

## 7 An objection

In section 6 I argued for two principles concerning the obligations of individuals to support international arrangements. However, one might object that OP 2 is unduly conservative. For OP 2 directs us to support existing institutions insofar as they are *capable* of allowing us to satisfy our global obligations rather than, for example, devoting our energies to bringing about new forms of organisation. But it may then require us, wrongly, to support institutional arrangements which are themselves unjust.

There are three distinct questions which we might want to consider here. The first is whether OP 2 would require us to support unjust institutional structures in some possible world or other. A second is whether OP 2 would require us to support unjust institutional structures in the world as it actually is. And a third question is whether either of these two possibilities would constitute grounds for rejecting OP 2, and hence the line of argument which supports it.

I shall start by considering the last of these questions. One might think that if OP 2 would give us a duty to support unjust institutions in any circumstances whatsoever then this would give us compelling grounds for rejecting it. And it seems at least possible to imagine that there might be such grounds. Suppose we have good reasons to think that there is a global collective obligation to prevent irreversible climate change of a sort which will have catastrophic implications for unborn generations. We can certainly imagine circumstances in which the institutions which exist and which are capable of averting such a threat might be ones which engaged in practices which were obviously unjust, such as extracting forced labour from randomly chosen citizens.

Does this establish that OP 2 is unacceptable? I do not think so. There are two reasons why not. First, it is simply not clear that it is a requirement on principles of justice that they should yield intuitively acceptable results in all possible situations. Perhaps there are predicaments that are sufficiently far removed from our own circumstances that we are simply not very good at figuring out what would be the right thing to do if we found ourselves in them. If there are, then the fact that a putative principle yields intuitively unacceptable results in them should not count against the principle. Perhaps our intuitive sense of what would be right and wrong in such a situation is misleading in ways which would become apparent to us if we ever face such a situation, but

which are difficult to get a sense of when we are simply imagining a sparsely described philosophical thought experiment.

The second reason why OP 2 might ground an obligation to support unjust institutions in some possible circumstances is that OP 2 only gives us *prima facie* reasons to support certain kinds of institutional structure. It is consistent with this that the institutions' in question being extremely unjust might conceivably give us reasons for not supporting such institutions which outweighed those *prima facie* reasons. If so, we would not have shown that OP 2 had any obviously unacceptable consequences even in these counterfactual circumstances.

Let us instead concentrate on whether OP 2 gives us an obligation to support unjust institutions in the actual world, and whether a positive answer to this question would provide reasons for finding OP 2 dubious. Here the news is less good. For we might think that OP 2 requires us to support unjust institutions in the actual world. If so, it is much harder to argue that the fact that OP 2 has intuitively unacceptable consequences is unimportant.

Thomas Pogge has argued that world poverty involves the violation of the human rights – including, importantly, the liberty rights of a large proportion of the world's poor. In particular, he argues that the current international economic framework, incorporating as it does such things as state sovereignty privileges, plays an important role in allowing these rights to be violated. (I focus on the passive here, rather than on Pogge's view that we are actively involved in violating these rights, because I am interested in questions about institutional frameworks.) It may still be that the existing economic system should be one which is *capable* of allowing for political action to address, say our global obligation to see that the subsistence rights of all human beings are met. If so, then OP 2 would give us reason to support an unjust institutional order in the *actual* world. This seems like a substantial and serious objection.

When considering whether OP 2 might have unacceptable consequences in some other possible world, I emphasized that OP 2 only gave rise to a *prima facie* duty to support certain kinds of institution; and I suggested that there might be countervailing obligations not to participate in unjust institutions which would outweigh this *prima facie* duty. However, this response is liable to seem somewhat thin when we are considering the implications of OP 2 for our actually existing institutions. In this context it would be good to have some idea of what this countervailing duty might be. I now turn to this issue.

## 8 How to develop institutions

I have argued that there are global collective obligations, that these obligations give rise to *prima facie* obligations on individuals to institute and promote forms of global organisation which would enable these global collective obligations to be met. If, as seems plausible, global poverty involves the violation of human rights, the institutions which are required here will include institutions which aim at preventing and rectifying distributive injustices. However, I have also argued that this *prima facie* obligation is likely to give us an obligation to support institutional frameworks which actually exist, even if these frameworks are ones which, in practice, enable substantial injustice. I have also argued that this unattractive aspect of my view might be mitigated to some extent if there were some kind of countervailing duty which could over-ride it.

Three things seem necessary here. The first is to say something about what this countervailing duty might be; the second is to explain why we should think that such a duty exists; and the third is to say something more detailed about the ways in which this kind of duty might interact with the problematic parts of OP 2.

As far as the content of the duty is concerned, notice that OP 2 says that we have a *prima facie* duty to support institutional frameworks which would enable our collective global obligations to be met. But the word ‘support’ is very non-specific: there are many different ways in which one can support an institution; or rather, there are many different activities that could count as forms of support. (To the extent that I pay my taxes and shop in supermarkets, I am arguably thereby supporting the existing international political and economic system. But there are other things which I could do which make my support more or less whole-hearted.) We should also notice that institutions of all sorts are not static: they are constantly subject to forces that lead them to develop in one way rather than another. Furthermore, it is arguable that in order for any existing set of institutions to actualize its capacity for meeting our collective obligations it would need to develop, and to develop in some ways rather than others.

So OP 2 is compatible with the existence of a further obligation – namely an obligation to develop institutions in ways which make them more, rather than less just. If there is such an obligation, we should probably think of it as being something like a Kantian ‘imperfect duty’ – one where we have a certain amount of discretion about how and to what extent we are going to fulfil it. It would surely be absurd to think that each of us should be responsible for promoting the development of all the institutions in which they participate in the direction of greater justice. However, even an imperfect duty of this sort would seem to be enough to mitigate the problematic aspects of OP 2.

But do we have such a duty? It might seem unacceptably *ad hoc* to infer from the fact that the existence of a duty of this sort would make an otherwise problematic position intuitively more acceptable. So one might hope the duty in question could be inferred from some kind of higher level principle – perhaps even from the principles connecting global and individual obligations which I appealed to in section 5. Unfortunately, it is hard to see any reason for thinking it can.

Instead, I think we should question the idea that supposing that a duty of this sort exists is *ad hoc*. Arguably, it is not less *ad hoc* than the line of thought which lay at the root of the initial objection. The idea that there would be something problematic about supporting unjust institutions, even if they were institutions which could enable us to satisfy our global obligations is not something we simply have a brute intellectual compulsion to believe. It must be based on something. If it were not, there would be no way of articulating the force of the intuition to someone who did not share it – as we are presumably inclined to think we can.

What might such a line of thought be based on? One answer is that by participating in such institutions we would be causing certain kinds of harm. If so, we might ask what kinds of obligation we have around harms that we cause. One which stands out in this context is an obligation not to cause avoidable harm. But there are certainly cases where we may cause harm, because something else we have an obligation to do cannot be achieved without it. In such cases other obligations arise: obligations to mitigate or make amends for the harms we cause. In the light of this I suggest, albeit tentatively, that we take our duty to promote just developments in the institutions in which we participate to derive from a much more general duty to mitigate harms in which we are implicated when we act in ways which are necessary for us to meet the obligations which we have.

If this is correct the upshot is that we have a duty to support institutional frameworks which would enable us to meet our collective obligations. Some of the institutions we have an obligation to support are institutions which are capable of responding to distributive injustice. But if such institutions are capable of helping us in this way, it is reasonable to expect they will have a downside: they will, in practice, often undermine our attempts to bring a more just world into existence. Alongside our duty to support such institutions, we also have a duty to be vigilant about, and to work to mitigate those injustices. To the extent that existing institutions seems to give rise – as Pogge emphasizes – to distributive injustices, we have a particularly strong reason to be attentive to these issues.

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