

Liberal global justice and social science

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Abstract. My aim in this article is to ask how both the findings and the limitations of social science should inform the debate on global economic justice among liberal political philosophers. More specifically, I make three claims. First, I show that social science research casts doubt on key premises of important liberal global justice theories. However, second, I also suggest that empirical questions pivotal to these theories bring to the fore important limitations inherent to social science work on global issues. These limitations lead me to argue, third, that new normative concerns should feature in liberal discussions about global reform.

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Introduction

My aim in this article is to ask how both the findings and the limitations of social science should inform the debate on global economic justice among liberal political philosophers. More specifically, I will make three claims in what follows. First, I will show that social science research casts doubt on key premises of important liberal global justice theories. However, second, I will also suggest that empirical questions pivotal to these theories bring to the fore important limitations inherent to social science work on global issues. These limitations will lead me to argue, third, that new normative concerns should feature in liberal discussions about global justice.

A principal motivation for this article is the fact that conversation between normative political philosophy and empirical social science is far too rare. In order to facilitate this conversation, one must ensure that its participants understand each other's terms and points of departure. I accordingly begin my discussion with introductory remarks concerning the liberal debate on global justice, meant for social scientists unfamiliar with this debate (Section I). I emphasise the debate's enduring roots in John Rawls's ideas, particularly concerning: (a) the moral arbitrariness of

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natural endowments; and (b) the significance of the socioeconomic structures that form the background of interactions among agents. I move to introduce social science into the discussion, first by asking how it can inform Rawlsian claims, initiated by Charles Beitz,¹ concerning the moral arbitrariness of societies' natural resource endowments (Section II). I then ask a parallel question regarding Thomas Pogge's extension of the Rawlsian concept of a 'basic structure' to global politics (Section III).² Both Beitz's and Pogge's arguments turn out to hinge on causal claims that currently lack social-scientific support, but that also seem extremely difficult to evaluate through social-scientific tools. I therefore ask (in Section IV) what should be our normative position concerning global reforms that hinge on social-scientific confidence that we not only lack at present, but also seem unlikely to attain in the future. I end with some remarks regarding the broader implications of my claims (Section V).

I. Global justice in liberal political philosophy

Questions of economic justice across borders began to appear on the radars of liberal political philosophy only in the 1970s. This development – like many of the other developments that occurred in liberal political philosophy during and since that decade – was heavily indebted to John Rawls's work, and specifically to his *A Theory of Justice*.³ In order to indicate what it means to think about global justice within a Rawlsian framework, I must survey briefly some of Rawls's key ideas that bear on our discussion (though these are likely to be familiar to some readers).

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls seeks a public criterion of social justice that can regulate a liberal democracy's 'basic structure' – its 'major institutions', including 'the political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements'.⁴ Rawls derives this criterion from the contractual thought-experiment of the 'original position', the parties to which represent democratic citizens. These parties know 'general facts about human society' (such as 'the principles of economic theory ... the basis of social organization and the laws of human psychology').⁵ However, a 'veil of ignorance' deprives them of any knowledge of the particular individuals they represent and thus ensures that morally irrelevant (in Rawls's language, 'morally arbitrary') features do not influence their decision. Rawls argues that, so situated, the parties will opt for two principles of justice over other alternatives (most importantly, utilitarian alternatives). The first principle demands that all citizens will be accorded equal basic rights and liberties. The second principle, alongside fair equality of opportunity in attaining 'offices and positions' in society, contains Rawls's famous difference principle – the demand that 'social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged'.⁶

Though explicitly designed for an idealised, 'closed'⁷ domestic society, Rawls's theory seemed to have at least two important global parallels. First, some philosophers have argued that global economic interdependence generates a *global basic structure* that

¹ Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

² Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002) (hereafter *WPHR*).

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. edn, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) (hereafter *TJ*).

⁴ *TJ*, p. 6.

⁵ *TJ*, p. 119.

⁶ See the final statement of the two principles in *TJ*, section 46.

⁷ See, for example, Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 67.

is a subject of justice in much the same way as the domestic basic structure. Rawls held that the major institutions that comprise the domestic basic structure, such as a society's property and legal system, should be the main focus of a theory of justice, given their pervasive impact on individuals' 'life prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do'.⁸ Some of Rawls's main interlocutors have held that the same ought to be true, analogously, for global economic institutions. To introduce a key example that will occupy us at length here, Thomas Pogge, a prominent Rawls student and one of the pioneers of the global justice debate, has considered it simply 'undeniable that, today and in the foreseeable future, there is a global institutional order that importantly affects the options and incentives societies and their rulers face in their relations with one another and even affects profoundly the domestic institutions and cultures of especially the smaller and weaker societies'.⁹ According to the ambitious version of this reasoning, if one endorses Rawls's domestic theory, one ought to replicate it globally and endorse a *global difference principle*, holding that *global* inequalities ought to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the (globally) least advantaged. According to the more minimal version, even if the demands of global justice fall short of a global difference principle, substantive duties of justice (rather than mere charity) still apply to the global economic order.¹⁰

A second important global parallel that Rawls's interlocutors have drawn from his domestic theory concerns the idea of *moral arbitrariness*. At the domestic level, Rawls held that the 'veil of ignorance' should prevent the distortion of justice by morally arbitrary features – that is, unchosen features that are irrelevant to the assessment of agents' moral worth, such as their birth into a certain social class and their natural talents. These features reflect nothing but a 'natural lottery', and should therefore not be allowed to determine individuals' income and wealth.¹¹ Charles Beitz, another key figure in the global justice debate, has applied this idea to the global level, and argued that the different natural resource endowments of different societies, being a paradigmatic example of 'the natural lottery', ought not be allowed to determine societies' income and wealth. According to this reasoning, just as in the domestic case Rawls writes that we should regard 'the distribution of natural abilities in some respects as a collective asset',¹² Rawlsians must similarly regard the global distribution of natural resources as a collective asset, and redistribute these resources in accordance with a global difference principle.¹³

Pogge's argument concerning a global basic structure and Beitz's argument concerning 'the natural resource lottery' remain the two most important arguments extending Rawlsian principles to the global level, and have shaped much of the ongoing liberal

⁸ 'The basic structure', Rawls writes, 'is the primary subject of justice, because its effects are so profound and present from the start.' *TJ*, pp. 6–7.

⁹ Pogge, 'The incoherence between Rawls's theories of justice', *Fordham Law Review*, 72 (2003–4), pp. 1739–59 (pp. 1751–2. I focus on the question of an empirical analogy between a domestic and a global 'basic structure'. Whether or not there is a normative analogy between domestic and global institutions – and specifically, whether there exists a global basic structure in a strictly *Rawlsian* normative sense – is a matter of considerable dispute, which depends on the precise way in which one reads Rawls's domestic theory. For the details of this dispute, see my 'A Poggean passport for fairness? Why Rawls' theory of justice did not become global', *Ethics & Global Politics*, 3 (2010), pp. 277–301.

¹⁰ For the ambitious version see Pogge, 'An egalitarian law of peoples', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 23 (1994), pp. 195–224; I discuss Pogge's later view, as an example of a more minimal version, in Section III. As will become clear there, the cogency of Pogge's claims regarding a global basic structure depends, among other things, on how one sees the intervening role of domestic basic structures in shaping individual prospects.

¹¹ See *TJ*, p. 64.

¹² *TJ*, p. 156.

¹³ Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, pp. 137–43.

conversation on global justice. In Beitz's case, this lasting influence is evident in the fact that even authors who depart from his specific Rawlsian formulations often continue to discuss rights to revenue from natural resources, based on the thought that the moral claim that nations can make to this revenue is far weaker than their claim to their 'non-arbitrary' social and political capital.¹⁴ Pogge's influence, in turn, has resulted from the radical implications of his conception of a global basic structure, and, more specifically, from his widely debated claim (discussed below) that affluent democracies, through global institutions, not merely fail to help the global poor but actively *harm* them, sharing active responsibility for their plight.¹⁵

The enduring significance of Beitz's and Pogge's accounts is interesting from the perspective of social science, since both of these accounts seem – initially, at least – amenable to social-scientific research. Accordingly, I now turn to examine how each of these arguments interacts with social science.

II. Social science and 'the natural resource lottery'

II.1 Social science input for the 'natural lottery' argument

Let us begin with Beitz's argument from a 'natural resource lottery', and its relation to prevalent political norms regarding natural resource ownership. Sovereign peoples currently claim exclusive original rights to the value of natural resources found within their territories, and particularly to resources traded as commodities in global markets, from oil through coal to diamonds. According to this claim, all revenue from the oil within Canada's territory, for example, originally belongs to the Canadian people. All revenue from the coal within German territory originally belongs only to the German people. The same claim could be made for every nation in the world: the people can legitimately transfer their rights over natural resources to internal or external actors, but only they are originally entitled to the value – to *all* of the value – of these resources.

One way to understand Beitz's view is to see it as challenging this prevalent idea of *national ownership* in the name of *cosmopolitan ownership*, according to which the Earth's natural resources are, in *some* sense that has practical significance at present, the common property of humankind. 'The fact that someone happens to be located advantageously with respect to natural resources', Beitz begins his classic treatment of the topic, 'does not provide a reason why he or she should be entitled to exclude others from the benefits that might be derived from them'.¹⁶ Such exclusion is morally problematic because 'some areas are rich in resources, and societies established in such areas can be expected to exploit their natural riches and prosper. Other societies do not fare so well, and despite the best efforts of their members, they may attain only

¹⁴ For only a few examples from recent years see Tim Hayward, 'Global justice and the distribution of natural resources', *Political Studies*, 54 (2006), pp. 349–69; Paula Casal, 'Global taxes on natural resources'; Hillel Steiner, 'The Global Fund: A reply to Casal'; Thomas Pogge, 'Allowing the poor to share the Earth' – all in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 8:3 (2011); Avery Kolers, 'Justice, territory and natural resources', *Political Studies*, 60 (2012), pp. 269–86; Chris Armstrong, 'Justice and attachment to natural resources', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22 (2014), pp. 48–65.

¹⁵ On Pogge's influence see the introduction to Alison Jaggar (ed.), *Thomas Pogge and His critics* (London: Polity, 2010).

¹⁶ Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, p. 138. I am assuming here that Beitz has in mind, primarily if not only, subterranean natural resources.

a meager level of well-being because of resource-scarcities.¹⁷ This thought, in turn, gives rise to a ‘resource redistribution principle’ – redistributing natural resource wealth across nations in order to correct the accidental fact that ‘natural resources are distributed unevenly across the earth’s surface’.¹⁸

Something like a resource redistribution principle will only achieve something significant, however, if Beitz’s empirical claim is correct – that inequality in natural resource endowments is a significant contributor to global economic inequality. In turn, from the perspective of liberal normative individualism – that is, a perspective that sees only individuals as the ultimate units of moral concern – global economic inequality is a moral problem only insofar as it bears on individual prospects. This means that for Beitz’s argument to work, *it must be shown that inequalities in societies’ natural resource endowments are a significant contributor to inequalities in the life-prospects of their individual members.*

Yet the problem is that it is in fact extremely hard to show that natural resource endowments make such a contribution. Individuals’ life prospects in today’s world are, to be sure, dramatically influenced by their country of birth.¹⁹ But there is no evidence suggesting that individuals’ prospects are positively correlated with the level of their country’s natural resource endowments. In fact, the social science debate regarding societies’ natural resource endowments focuses on the exact *opposite* claim – namely, that a negative relationship exists between resource abundance and individual prospects. As Leif Wenar notes, economists have repeatedly found that ‘many countries rich with natural resources are full of very poor people’.²⁰ Poverty significantly correlates with natural resource *wealth*. The key question is whether, beyond correlation, there is also causation involved. Yet there is practically no discussion of societal resource abundance as causing individual wealth or societal resource scarcity as causing individual poverty.

Those who believe that natural resource abundance tends to cause poor economic performance – a ‘resource curse’ – often emphasise two dynamics. The first dynamic, which has become known as the ‘Dutch Disease’, concerns the effects of natural resource exports on other sectors of a country’s economy. Especially in already-poor countries that rely on foreign expertise, capital, and labour to extract resources, natural resource extraction does little to advance domestic skills, capital, or labor, meaning that growth of natural resource exports only rarely has positive ‘ripple’ effects advancing the growth of other parts of the country’s economy. However, a growing resource sector does have *negative* effects on other sectors in a way that threatens the economy’s performance. Thus for example, natural resource revenue inflates the country’s exchange rate, since it comes in the form of foreign currency. As a result, agricultural and industrial imports become more attractive, while the country’s agricultural and industrial exports becomes less competitive. In such ways, a dominant natural resource sector can shrink other sectors of the economy,

¹⁷ Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, p. 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Note that there is controversy – both in general and within a Rawlsian framework in particular – over the exact relationship between rights to the revenue flowing from an object and rights of ownership over that object. For a recent discussion, see my ‘Rawlsian global politics’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 21 (2013), pp. 473–95. Additionally, one might argue that Beitz’s claims for redistribution of natural resource wealth render Rawlsian principles more ‘luck egalitarian’ than they actually are. See Samuel Scheffler, ‘What is egalitarianism?’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (2003), pp. 5–39. However, this is another dispute on Rawls interpretation which I shall put aside.

¹⁹ See Ayelet Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery: Citizenship and Global Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²⁰ Wenar, ‘Property rights and the resource curse’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 36 (2008), pp. 2–32 (p. 3).

making it less diversified, and more dependent on (often volatile) global demand for a specific natural resource.²¹

The second dynamic emphasised by proponents of the ‘resource curse’ concerns the fact that poverty in resource-rich countries is typically connected to specific patterns of authoritarian rule and economic mismanagement. Here the thought is that the political and economic destitution of many societies can be traced partly to an abundance of natural resources that frees autocrats from the need to tax their population, and thus from the need to elicit its cooperation or develop the foundations of a viable economy. Instead, not shackled by democratic elections and rule of law,²² resource-rich autocrats can systematically embezzle state revenue, buy off or forcibly silence potential or actual opposition, and neglect – often intentionally – the modernisation and diversification of the country’s economy. Resource-rich authoritarian countries thus often suffer a combination of what Michael Ross dubs a ‘repression effect’, ‘rentier effect’, and (anti) ‘modernization effect’.²³ These effects (alongside the many economically destructive civil wars that have been incentivised by natural resource ‘bounty’)²⁴ are said to explain why ‘many resource-rich countries are full of very poor people’.²⁵

The resource curse thesis has critics. But these critics do *not* emphasise the idea that a positive link necessarily exists between a society’s resources and its members’ fortunes. Rather, their focus is quite different. A key ingredient of the ‘resource curse’ connection between political and economic outcomes is (arguably) the idea that at least in the long run, authoritarianism hinders economic performance in comparison to democracy: if natural resource wealth harms economic growth, it will frequently do so indirectly, by promoting authoritarianism.²⁶ It is only the last clause – the claim that natural resources necessarily promote authoritarianism – that the critics contest. But none of the critics focuses on arguing that natural resource abundance necessarily makes a contribution (let alone a significant one) to individuals’ economic prospects. Rather, the main argument is that there *is no significant* link between resource endowments and individuals’ prospects: social and political institutions are considered far more crucial.

Some opponents of the resource curse thesis try to establish this criticism by emphasising the issue’s temporal sensitivity, arguing that once the time-frame is extended enough, we see that weak state capacity precedes the discovery of natural resources and is much more responsible for political (and presumably also economic) outcomes.²⁷ Other critics argue that whether natural resource abundance promotes authoritarianism or democracy depends on the varying calculations of economic elites, calculations that in turn depend on other factors.²⁸ And others still contend that

²¹ Michael Ross, *The Oil Curse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 48–9.

²² See Jose Maria Maravall and Adam Przeworski (eds), *Democracy and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²³ Ross, ‘Does oil hinder democracy’, *World Politics*, 53 (2001), pp. 325–61.

²⁴ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, ‘Greed and grievance in Civil War’, *Oxford Economic Papers No. 56* (2004), pp. 563–95.

²⁵ See also Leonard Wantchekon, ‘Why do resource dependent countries have authoritarian governments’, *Journal of African Finance and Economic Development*, 5 (2002); Benjamin Smith, *Hard Times in the Land of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

²⁶ John Gerring, Philip Bond, William T. Barndt, and Carola Moreno, ‘Democracy and economic growth: a historical perspective’, *World Politics*, 57 (2005), pp. 323–64 (p. 336).

²⁷ See Stephen Haber and Victor Menaldo, ‘Do natural resources fuel authoritarianism? A reappraisal of the resource curse’, *American Political Science Review*, 105 (2011), pp. 1–26.

²⁸ See Thad Dunning, *Crude Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

non-tax revenue increases the stability of *any* regime, whether democratic or autocratic.²⁹ But despite the different specific arguments, all critics of the resource curse thesis converge on the idea that whether a society is resource-rich or resource poor has little independent effect – that is, little effect that is separate from the quality of institutions – on how individual members are faring.³⁰ The more stable, effective and accountable political institutions are, the more likely it is that individual citizens will enjoy economic prosperity, regardless of whether the country is relatively resource-rich (Norway, for instance) or relatively resource-poor (Japan). Conversely, unstable, dysfunctional and unaccountable political institutions will exert significant pressures towards poverty of individual members, regardless of whether the society is relatively resource-abundant (Congo) or scarce (Mali).

To reiterate, for the purposes of our discussion it is not crucial whether supporters or critics of the resource curse thesis are correct, and which of their specific arguments are more cogent. The crucial point concerns what is *not* argued: neither side argues that the poverty afflicting the world's weakest societies stems from them being excluded from natural resources through borders. Neither side argues that more natural resources produce more economic prosperity for individuals. The interim conclusion of our discussion is therefore that there currently exists no social-scientific argument that natural resource abundance makes a significant contribution (even indirectly) to individuals' economic prospects. There is no proof that nations' natural resource endowments, to return to Rawls's terms above, have anything like a pervasive influence on individuals' 'life prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do'.

II.II Endowments and institutions

At this point, a critic might raise the following objection. Even if it is the case that social and political institutions are much more significant determinants of economic prospects, it might still be true that given 'good' social and political institutions, a significant increase in natural resources endowments translates into a significant improvement in individuals' economic circumstances.³¹

There are several reasons why this objection misses the mark, but we can begin with just one. The objection is misleading in asking how would resource abundance influence individual prospects given 'good' institutions, since abundant natural resources will frequently produce self-reinforcing pressures against having such institutions from the outset – or at least, such pressures arise, as many scholars emphasise, if the institutions that exist *prior* to the discovery of natural resources are inimical to 'accountability and state competence'.³² Since in such circumstances

²⁹ See Kevin Morrison, 'Oil, nontax revenue, and the redistributive foundations of regime stability', *International Organization*, 63 (2009), pp. 107–38.

³⁰ Note in this context that even those social scientists who do argue for a 'resource-blessing' emphasise the centrality of institutions. See Gavin Wright and Jesse Czelusta, 'Resource-based growth past and present', in Daniel Lederman and William Maloney (eds), *Neither Curse nor Destiny: Natural Resources and Development* (Stanford University Press and World Bank Publication, 2006).

³¹ This is the line of thought suggested in Beitz's later writing. See his 'Cosmopolitanism and global justice', *Journal of Ethics*, 9 (2005), pp. 11–27. I discuss below another possible line, that even if a global redistribution of natural resource wealth will have minimal impact on individual prospects, it is morally warranted.

³² James Robinson, Ragnar Torvik, and Thierry Verdier, 'Political foundations of the resource curse', *Journal of Development Economics*, 79 (2006), pp. 447–68 (p. 450). See also Haber and Menaldo, *A Reappraisal of the Resource Curse*; Anne Boschini, Jan Pettersson, and Jesper Roine, 'Resource curse or not: A question of appropriability', *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 109 (2007), pp. 593–617.

natural resource abundance can cause vicious cycles, perpetuating ‘bad’ institutions, there are many countries with regard to which it seems irrelevant to simply assume ‘good’ institutions.

Now, suppose the critic responds that we should focus on countries that have accountable and competent political institutions prior to the discovery of natural resources – that in *this* context, we should be able to speak of a significant positive link between a country’s natural resource endowments and its members’ economic prospects. For one thing, this response too faces immediate empirical difficulties, since, in recent years and into the foreseeable future, the majority of new resource-abundant states – specifically, the majority of the new oil states – will be countries whose current institutions are often far from transparent, effective, or stable.³³ More importantly, the response only adds to our critic’s (already-explicit) willingness to grant the decisive role of social and political institutions in shaping individuals’ economic prospects. And once this role is granted, the critic quickly loses even further ground, for at least two reasons.

First, once our critic revises the objection, so as to focus exclusively on those countries that have favourable institutions preceding the discovery of natural resources, this only puts further emphasis on how *institutions*, rather than the morally arbitrary endowments of natural resources, are the source of natural resource *wealth*. If social and political institutions are far more crucial determinants of a nation’s fortunes than its natural endowments, and if the former in fact shape whether the latter are a blessing or a ‘curse’, then the very idea that natural resource wealth is *morally arbitrary* receives a serious blow. To see this, consider how an imaginary representative of an affluent country could respond to the Beitzian requirement that her society transfers to poorer countries some of the wealth it has obtained from natural resources within its borders. This representative might say something like the following: ‘our level of natural resource endowments is no higher than – and in fact is often *lower* than – the endowment level of many of the poorer societies to which we are now required to transfer natural resource revenue. The key reason why we are on the giving rather than receiving end of the plan is therefore not because of the morally arbitrary endowments that we did not create. Rather, it is because of our social and political institutions, which we certainly *did* create. The endowments may themselves be morally arbitrary, but the affluence that they have generated for us is not.’ To reiterate the point emphasised above, it is the entrenched belief that natural resource wealth is morally arbitrary that has fuelled the continued philosophical interest in the idea of a global redistribution of this wealth. Taking arbitrariness away thus means taking away much of the grounds for giving any special attention to natural resources.

The second point I wish to make with regard to the revised objection will also carry us over to the next stage of the discussion. The more one emphasises the decisive economic role of social and political institutions, the more one is likely to be sceptical of the claim that holding institutions fixed, significant differences in countries’ natural resource endowments translate into significant differences in their members’ economic prospects. Not only is there no empirical backing for this claim. More fundamentally, it is not clear that such empirical backing could *ever* be provided. This is because it is extremely hard to show that abundant natural resources *independently* yield significant increases in citizens’ economic prospects *that the ‘proper’ institutions would not have obtained even without abundant natural resources*. We may be able to see well-governed resource-abundant countries putting their natural endowments to good use

³³ See, for example, Ross, *The Oil Curse*, pp. 9–10.

in increasing the affluence of their citizens. But we cannot see – nor can we disprove the possibility – that these countries would have been able to similarly increase affluence through development of human capital, were they more resource-scarce. This is a possibility that anyone who grants a decisive impact of social and political institutions on economic performance ought to take seriously.

II.III Isolating the impact of natural resource endowments

Suppose that a country with stable, accountable and transparent institutions discovers valuable minerals at time T . Two generations later ($T + 50$), the ordinary citizens of the country are tangibly better off. How can we know whether they would not have been just as (or nearly as) better off at $T + 50$ even if no natural resources were discovered at T ? How can we disprove the possibility that the country's institutions would have led to the development of human capital that would have compensated for the lack of natural capital?³⁴

In order to assess whether ordinary citizens of a resource-rich country with 'good' institutions would have indeed achieved a similar level of affluence even without abundant natural resources, social scientists would need to be able to assess what potential sources of revenue that are 'crowded out' by natural resource rent would come to the fore in its absence. Yet it is far from clear that social scientists can construct reliable models here. Consider, for example, the case of Norway. The rise in the living standards of the ordinary Norwegian has centrally involved oil revenue, ever since Norway discovered oil in the late 1960s. If this rise was only possible due to the backdrop of institutions of the right kind, it does not seem implausible to think that these institutions would have generated a tangible rise in affluence even if there was no such resource-abundance – a rise based, as in the Japanese case for example, on the development of human capital.³⁵ But it is not clear what social scientists can do to provide reliable answers regarding the fate of such a hypothetical Norway.

One difficulty here is that there are simply too few cases to which we can reliably compare Hypothetical Norway. In order to have a reliable natural experiment, we would need to find a sufficiently large number of other countries that are sufficiently similar to Norway in *all* relevant respects *aside* from resource endowments, and see how they have fared over the same time period. But once we think of all the relevant dimensions (including, but not limited to, population size and age, industrialisation level, political culture, geographic location, foundations of economy, security situation), it immediately becomes clear that the sample size will be extremely small, and thus insufficient to make confident judgments.

Another difficulty concerns counterfactual worlds that vary in too many – and unknown – ways from our world. This is especially true if, in search of significant impact of natural resource wealth, we narrow our focus to countries with truly significant natural endowments. We can see why this creates problems by considering our Norway example again. Since Norway provides much of Europe's oil and natural gas,³⁶ it is not clear that we can treat a counter-factual world without Norwegian oil and gas as equal in all salient respects to the real world. The potential implications of a

³⁴ A parallel thought is suggested in Haber and Menaldo, *Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism*.

³⁵ For claims along similar lines see David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

³⁶ See US Energy Information Administration, available at: {<http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Norway/norway.pdf>}.

resource-scarce Norway for the global economy are too diverse and too vast for us to have a clear picture of such a world. Would the OPEC countries, for example, have been more tempted to repeat their 1973 boycott of Western European countries in later years, if these countries could not rely on Norway's natural resources as an alternative? How would have such a move by OPEC reverberated through the global economy? How confident can we really be in saying that the *only* meaningful political difference between such a world and ours would be that Norway would have less oil barrels?³⁷

This last question points towards two social-scientific problems that are particularly acute in the context of the global economy – the sheer number of potential causal levers involved, and the fact that we are not truly able to compare our world as a whole to any other world. Both of these problems, I will argue below, have significant implications for global political philosophy. In order to properly set up these problems, however, we need to go through an additional stage of our discussion. So far, we have examined the first out of two arguments replicating Rawlsian ideas of domestic justice at the global level, and its relation to social science. We now need to turn to the second argument. Having discussed what social science can say about Beitz's notion of a 'natural resource lottery', I now turn to ask what social science can say about Pogge's notion of a 'global basic structure'. Here, I will argue, the structural problems of global social science loom even larger.

III. Social science and 'the global basic structure'

Since the beginning of the millennium, Pogge has been using the idea of a global basic structure to make the claim that global economic institutions ought to prevent the global poor from dropping below the threshold set by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). What makes this claim both dramatic and interesting from a social science perspective, however, is the nature of Pogge's concomitant moral accusation: since the 1970s, scholars have conceived democracies' global duties primarily as positive duties to help the global poor, yet Pogge argues that much before helping, citizens of affluent countries – and particularly *we*, citizens of affluent democracies through our elected governments – are *harming* the world's deprived. Through global economic institutions, we not merely fail to help but *actively contribute* to 50,000 daily deaths from poverty related-causes.³⁸

This provocative claim has left few global justice theorists indifferent. Some supporters of Pogge's views, and even certain critics, have characterised his arguments as 'groundbreaking'.³⁹ Others, however, have dismissed Pogge's claims as 'entirely speculative', insisting that it is implausible to attribute to citizens of affluent countries such 'barbaric' crimes.⁴⁰ Empirical issues are at the heart of the heated 'Pogge debate',

³⁷ For a sober assessment of the difficulty with global counterfactuals, see Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, 'Introduction', in Tetlock and Belkin (eds), *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in world politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); for a more optimistic view see Richard Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁸ The number comes from Pogge, 'Severe poverty as human rights violation', in Pogge (ed.), *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right – Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 30.

³⁹ Mathias Risse, 'Do we owe the poor assistance or rectification', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19 (2005), pp. 9–18 (p. 9).

⁴⁰ Both terms are from Joshua Cohen's 'Philosophy, social science, global poverty', in Jaggard, *Pogge and His critics*.

and these issues we will occupy us in a moment. Before we turn to them, however, we need to note two things. The first concerns the moral significance of the distinction between negative duties not to harm and positive duties to help. One reason why Pogge wishes to recast the problem of poverty as a matter of negative duties not to harm is that doing so prevents conflict between the demand to ameliorate poverty and ‘the grain of the Anglo-American moral and legal tradition, in which it is often denied that persons have duties to protect and aid other persons in distress’.⁴¹ Another reason, specifically with regard to *global* poverty, is that the negative duties strategy bypasses the *dilution through distance* that afflicts positive duties – that is, the idea that our positive duties to help become weaker the more we move ‘outward’, away from our near and dear and to ‘distant’ others.⁴²

Second, in order to see why these advantages of negative over positive duties depend on empirical considerations, we also need to note Pogge’s actual argument connecting negative duties to poverty and global institutions. Pogge begins this argument by claiming that persons have negative duties to enact and comply with just institutions, since the full content of individual rights and duties cannot be known solely through rules of personal conduct, apart from institutions. Even if I wish merely to satisfy my negative duties not to violate your rights, I cannot do so outside of an institutional framework specifying *what* your full rights are and what is therefore actually required by my negative duties to respect them.⁴³ This, in turn, means that my duty to enact and support just institutions can itself be understood as a negative one. Since we clearly ‘need shared institutions to avoid invading one another’s freedom’, we ‘have a negative duty to comply with such existing institutions, whenever non-compliance can succeed only if like non-compliance by others is constrained’.⁴⁴ Once individuals have a negative rather than positive duty towards institutions, they also become right-bearers – and therefore also bearers of negative duties to respect rights – by virtue of cooperating with others under a shared coercive institutional order.⁴⁵

Pogge believes this institutional understanding of rights and correlative duties must be replicated at the global level, among other things since he considers it evident, as noted above, that a coercive institutional global order exists. Specifically, Pogge sees global organisations, from the WTO through the World Bank and IMF to the G8, as the main foundations of this institutional order, skewing it in favour of the global rich against the global poor, in ways ranging from the rules allocating control over natural resources, through regulations of intellectual property rights, to ‘quotas, tariffs, anti-dumping duties, export credits, and huge subsidies to domestic producers ... that poor countries are not permitted, or cannot afford, to match’.⁴⁶ In these and other ways, Pogge accuses, global institutions limit the poor’s access to UDHR provisions, thus sharing much of the blame for the poverty-related death toll that ‘matches, every three years, the entire death toll of World War II, concentration camps and gulags included’.⁴⁷ Pogge insists that ‘*minor modifications in the global*

⁴¹ Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁴² See Pogge, ‘Reply to critics’, in Jaggard, *Pogge and His critics*, pp. 20–1.

⁴³ *WPHR*, p. 137.

⁴⁴ *WPHR*, p. 137.

⁴⁵ *WPHR*, p. 64. I bracket some philosophical challenges that one can raise regarding this argument, such as whether it makes more sense to simply say that individuals’ institutional responsibilities are a distinct category which cannot be understood neither as familiar ‘negative duties’ nor as ‘positive’ ones. For this and related challenges, see my ‘Rigorist cosmopolitanism: a Kantian alternative to Pogge’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 12 (2013), pp. 260–87.

⁴⁶ Pogge, *Severe Poverty*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

order that would entail at most slight reductions in the incomes of the affluent⁴⁸ will suffice to generate very different outcomes for the global poor, and secure their access to UDHR provisions. Our failure to pursue such modifications violates our negative institutional duties of justice.

This background should make clear how Pogge wishes to connect global institutions, global poverty, and negative duties. But it also makes clear how Pogge's argument hinges on empirical elements that are far from consensual. As Wenar emphasises, '[I]n order to carry through on his harm argument, Pogge must show not only that current global rules generate very bad consequences, but that we can be fairly certain that different rules would do better.'⁴⁹

This thesis, however, faces two key social-scientific problems, paralleling the issues that were apparent in our discussion of the natural resource lottery. The first problem is that, just as in the case of natural resources, there is a gap in social-scientific knowledge. Social scientists simply do not know enough on the impact that global rules have or might have on extreme poverty. Pogge himself, it is important to note, is keenly aware of this gap, emphasising that evidence on the causal role of global institutions with regard to global inequality is 'sorely lacking today'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Pogge explicitly sees his arguments as potential motivators for social scientists who might address the gap: 'One practical aim of my work', as he put it recently, 'is to stimulate more serious social-science research into the impact of global institutional design decisions upon the massive persistence of severe poverty.'⁵¹ However, just as in the case of the natural resource lottery, it is not clear that social scientists *can* fill the empirical gaps of the normative argument.

Pogge's argument hinges on the question of how extreme poverty would have evolved, had different global institutions been in place. Yet it is far from clear that social science can assess this huge counterfactual.⁵² Arguably the most important difficulty here is what we might call the *one world problem*. We only have *one* set of global institutions in place at any given time. This means that we cannot compare existing global institutions to another set of global institutions while 'holding everything else fixed'. Pogge is again aware of the issue: 'there being only this one world to observe, it is hard to obtain solid evidence about how the overall incidence of poverty would have evolved differently if this or that global factor had been different'.⁵³ But how to solve the issue remains unclear, and in the lack of a solution, we remain unable to make confident judgments concerning the causal relationship between global institutions and poverty trends. Whether one believes that global poverty is increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same (itself a much-disputed question),⁵⁴ some might argue that the trend is *because* of global institutions, others might argue that the trend is *despite* of global institutions, while others still might argue that global institutions are a relatively minor factor either way. Unable to hold everything else constant aside from these institutions, however, it is far from clear that we can confidently prove any of these options.

⁴⁸ Ibid, all italics are author's unless noted otherwise.

⁴⁹ Wenar, 'Realistic reform of international trade in resources', in Jaggar (ed.), *Pogge and His critics*, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Pogge, 'Reply to critics', p. 181.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² As emphasised, among others, in Risse, *Do We Owe the Poor Assistance or Rectification*.

⁵³ Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 17.

⁵⁴ For an extensive discussion, see Pogge's *Politics as Usual: What Lies behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

We can see this problem at play when we examine specific central issues, such as the relationship between global and domestic institutions. Arguably, in order for Pogge's argument to work, it must be the case that reforms in global institutions will significantly increase the likelihood of reforms in poor countries' domestic institutions. But it is far from obvious that this is indeed the case. In an essay titled 'Philosophy, Social Science, Global Poverty', Joshua Cohen, for example, insists that there is 'no reason to accept the claim' that

changes in global rules would suffice to lift most of the terrible poverty that so many people suffer from. In particular, I see no case for the claim that such changes will suffice holding domestic institutions fixed, and no reason to think that they will suffice by changing incentives and opportunities in ways that induce poverty-alleviating changes in domestic institutions.⁵⁵

My point here, however, is not to endorse Cohen's criticism as such. Rather, I merely wish to point out that it is extremely difficult for social science to construct reliable models that will support *either* Cohen's pessimism *or* Pogge's optimism regarding the causal force of global institutions. The enormous number of potentially confounding factors involved in the global economy poses structural difficulties towards creating such models.

More specifically, the combination between the one world problem and the ever-growing complexity of the global economy yields at least three obstacles to social-scientific analysis, all of which are evident when we ask how global institutions impact domestic ones. First, even if we could be confident that certain global institutions have a negative impact on the domestic institutions of poor countries, it is very hard to assess their *relative weight* in comparison to many other likely causes. Thus for example, many global dynamics that are in principle independent of global institutions, and are not always completely amenable to institutional interventions (such as dramatic fluctuations in the supply and demand for certain valuable commodities), can themselves be a significant cause of institutional crises in poor countries. Yet it is hard to assess their relative weight in comparison to global institutional factors.

Second, and very much related, global institutional reforms necessarily interact with an extraordinary number of causal levers, which in turn interact amongst themselves in unknown and potentially undesirable ways. This makes the effects of global institutional changes extremely difficult to predict.

Finally, all of these problems are compounded by the fact that not only existing global institutions might be novel: certain proposals for global reforms might be even more novel – indeed, *unprecedented*. One of Pogge's reform proposals, for instance, involves ending the ability of odious regimes to borrow funds and sell natural resources in their peoples' name.⁵⁶ This proposal (which will also occupy us below) in effect requires an extraordinary number of countries – specifically in Pogge's scheme, all of the world's democracies – to sanction a very large number of regimes. Predicting what would be the result of such reform is extremely difficult not only because of the number of factors that might be involved, but also because such a global policy has never been carried out before: we have even less comparative evidence to work with in such a case than we do in other global contexts. The combination of one world, multiple factors and unprecedented change is *especially* difficult for social scientists to assess.

⁵⁵ Cohen, 'Philosophy, social science, global poverty', in Jaggard, *Pogge and His critics*, pp. 20–1. Among other things, Cohen and Pogge provide radically conflicting estimates as to how much the elimination of protectionist trade barriers will (by itself, independently of other structural changes) benefit the global poor. See Cohen, *Philosophy, Social Science, Global Poverty*, p. 27; Pogge, *Response to Critics*, pp. 182–4.

⁵⁶ Pogge, 'Recognized and violated by international law: The human rights of the global poor', *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 18 (2005), pp. 717–45.

IV. What ought to be done? Reform under uncertainty

All of this brings us to a practical question, which applies both to Beitz's proposal of global resource redistribution, and to Pogge's charge of global harm: what ought global justice theorists do when they not only lack social-scientific evidence that seems necessary to motivate certain reforms, but also face serious obstacles in *attaining* such evidence?

One answer that may initially seem appealing is that global justice theorists should retain the reform proposals that suffer from social-scientific uncertainty. The thought here would be that it is worthwhile to pursue some reforms even given deep uncertainty, whether because of the mere chance that they would achieve important gains for the world's poor and oppressed, or because of the hope that these reforms will be worthwhile even if their benefits would be limited. Thus for instance, even if a global redistribution of natural resource wealth, or reform of the WTO, will not achieve *much* by way of combating global poverty, it would still achieve *something*.

I do not wish to deny that this strategy will make sense in some cases. But we should be cognisant of its important limitations. One limitation concerns again the distinctive structural circumstances of global politics, and specifically the structural problem of global collective action. In the enduring lack of a global sovereign, no state can have assurance that other states will join it in undertaking reforms meant to improve the condition of the world's poor and oppressed. This structural fact makes the deep uncertainty regarding the impact of many global reforms particularly burdensome, since it allows each state to excuse itself from undertaking the sacrifices involved in solitary action. Global collective action problems can run deep even where there *is* reasonable certainty that joint efforts by multiple states will actually achieve important moral aims: even under such happy circumstances, each state may often morally excuse itself from the sacrifices of solitary action, by claiming that, lacking credible commitment from other states, such sacrifice would be ineffective. But when there is deep social scientific uncertainty as to whether important moral aims will be realised even in the best case scenario, of full cooperation by a critical mass of states, it is *especially* easy for each state to provide moral excuses for its refusal to take action.⁵⁷

Alongside the issue of global collective action, there is also the matter of opportunity costs. Because there are always opportunity costs to prioritising any given reform proposal over others, the mere hope that some reform might have limited benefits for the world's poor and oppressed is often not a sufficiently compelling empirical foundation on which to base a normative call for political action. In such a case, the normative political theorist (at least one who is practically inclined) is better off shifting focus elsewhere, to discuss moral principles related to different potential reforms that have a greater chance of making a tangible real-world impact. Furthermore, a strategy that settles on the hope for limited global gains ignores not only practical but, for lack of a better term, *ideational opportunity costs*. There are ideational opportunity costs involved in pushing for reforms that rely on certain moral principles if other potential reforms that rely on conflicting principles can be more effective.

To make these claims (especially the latter) concrete, consider the conflicting moral principles underlying, on the one hand, Beitz's proposal for a global

⁵⁷ For extended discussion of these points see my 'Global taxation, global reform, and collective action', *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, 1 (2014), pp. 83–103.

redistribution of natural resource wealth, and on the other hand, the various proposals made in recent years to end the essentially neocolonial practice under which dictators enjoy customary rights to sell their state's natural resources to any willing buyer.⁵⁸ There are clearly conflicting normative principles at play here: the reform of dictators' 'resource privilege'⁵⁹ emphasises the idea of *national ownership* over natural resources, an idea that the Beitzian argument wishes to *undermine*. The key thought underlying recent philosophical discussions of dictators' trading privileges is that a state's resources belong to its people rather than to rulers, and that dictators (and corporations) who are transacting in state resources without obtaining proper consent from their people are therefore violating *national* property rights. Rather than contrasting the claim of national ownership with the claims of humanity as a whole, reform of dictators' trading privileges focuses on the contrast between the claims of sovereign peoples and the claims of those who wield effective political power. Insofar as the grounding rationales for these two proposals are in tension with one another, pursuing a global redistribution of natural resource wealth has a clear philosophical opportunity cost, in undermining the normative case for national resource reform.

In light of these difficulties, I would like to propose an alternative normative strategy for dealing with the structural uncertainty of global social science. This strategy sees the problems of global social science as an important reason to examine normative arguments for global reform that are far more independent of empirical and predictive uncertainty. These arguments, in turn, focus on *self-referring* moral reasons that liberal polities have against entanglement in certain foreign practices.

Two examples should suffice to give a sense of what such self-referring reasons can look like. First, consider the divestment of almost all liberal democracies from apartheid, culminating in the late 1980s. Divestment could have been justified through consequentialist reasoning, as a way to precipitate the collapse of the regime. But it is difficult to prove that apartheid would not have collapsed at about the same time as it actually did, even if the regime was less isolated (as was desired, for example, by the Reagan administration preaching 'constructive engagement').⁶⁰ This difficulty provides a further reason to examine an alternative, self-referring moral perspective on disengagement from apartheid. One might argue that liberal democracies had moral reasons pertaining to their own integrity to divest from a blatantly racist regime, *independently* of the social-scientific question as to whether divestment would be effective in precipitating apartheid's demise.

A second example has to do, once more, with dictators' 'resource privilege'. One way to see an end to dictators' ability to sell their peoples' natural resources is simply as a means to destabilise dictators' grip on power. But this perspective once again brings us to extremely complex social scientific questions, such as whether even a wide-scale boycott of dictators' resource exports can indeed be effective in weakening them, instead of simply producing 'rallying behind the flag', and imposing costs primarily on the population, as the sanctions literature often warns. A self-referring perspective, however, would emphasise the thought that democracies have principled reasons to end *their own complicity* in dictators' *theft* of their peoples' resources,

⁶⁰ See Pogge, *WPHR*, ch. 6; Wenar, *Property Rights and the Resource Curse*; Wenar, 'Clean trade in natural resources', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 25 (2011), pp. 27–39; as well as my 'Democratic disengagement: Towards Rousseauian global reform', *International Theory*, 3 (2011), pp. 355–89; and 'Our problem of global justice', *Social Theory and Practice*, 37 (2011), pp. 629–53.

⁵⁹ The term comes from Pogge, 'Achieving democracy', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 15 (2001), pp. 3–23.

⁶⁰ See Patti Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: the End of Apartheid* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

independently of the social-scientific uncertainty over whether doing so will also destabilise the regime. One could argue that even if political and economic circumstances in most dictatorships will remain the same as a result of liberal democracies prohibiting natural resource transactions, such a prohibition would still be morally required, just as ending colonialism would have been morally required even if one could not prove that doing so will make the victims of colonialism better off.⁶¹

To prevent misunderstanding, I should emphasise that taking seriously such principled reasons for global reform, does *not* mean adopting an indifference towards the consequences of reform.⁶² We can see this through the examples just given. If there had been, at the time, credible evidence that divestment from apartheid will threaten the basic subsistence of apartheid's victims, then liberal democracies' self-referring moral reasons to divest from apartheid would have been outweighed by opposing consequentialist considerations. Similarly, at present, if ending natural resource transactions with a certain dictatorship will have the consequence of producing absolute deprivation for its population, there will clearly be strong reasons in favour of continued transactions. In other words, highlighting self-referring reasons for reform is not the same as claiming that these reasons are always going to be decisive, regardless of consequences. Rather, the claim is that such reasons warrant independent attention: that the moral reasons for global reform are not *exhausted* by consequentialist considerations.

There are likely to be normative theorists who will find even this moderate approach to be overly self-absorbed and too removed from the practical needs of the world's poor and oppressed. But this likelihood only makes it all the more necessary to debate the normative questions that self-referring moral arguments trigger. It is important, in particular, to discuss the way in which a society's global conduct may or may not derive from 'moral duties to itself', from its own integrity or 'clean hands'.

Global justice theorists have yet to undertake such a discussion. Yet a recognition of the deep limitations of global reforms dependent on (structurally limited) social science should provide an important reason to pursue it. It is worthwhile, in turn, to note both some of the practical pay-offs that will arise if the discussion will vindicate self-referring reforms, and the new kinds of normative questions that will have to take centre stage in this discussion.

One important practical pay-off of self-referring global reforms is their dissolving of the aforementioned collective action problems endemic to international politics. Hinging reform of dictators' trading privileges, for instance, on the ability to destabilise them, also means making such reform dependent on successful collective action by multiple boycotting countries. If the goal is to destabilise the dictatorships basing their rule on natural resource revenue, each state can exempt itself from any duty to take solitary action by claiming 'ineffective sacrifice' – pointing out that the moral gains from such action will be miniscule unless others join, but the cost (in terms of lost access to valuable resources) will be significant. Furthermore – the excuse will continue – were that state to act alone, it will only be the 'sucker' incurring absolute and relative costs in relation to its competitors.⁶³ Yet when reform of dictators' trading privileges is justified through a prohibition on complicity in theft,

⁶¹ Lea Ypi provides a recent general articulation of this duty in 'What's wrong with colonialism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 41 (2013), pp. 158–91.

⁶² As Rawls notes, even a position with a non-consequentialist foundation cannot be indifferent towards consequences: such indifference would be 'irrational, crazy'. *TJ*, p. 26

⁶³ See Pogge's discussion of the 'sucker exemption', in *WPHR*, ch. 5.

such collective action excuses disappear. To take the analogy, one's duty not to steal from the person next door, for example, holds independently of the possibility that other neighbours will be stealing from that person (even if these neighbors are also competitors), as well as of the possibility that one's clean hands will not alter the neighborhood's overall condition.

Another, related payoff of self-referring reforms has to do with the significance of blocking self-seeking rationalisations. As long as powerful actors can attach social-scientific uncertainty to many global reform proposals, we are bound to see a proliferation of self-serving moral justifications for why it is morally permissible (or even morally necessary) to avoid reform. Just as the Regan administration sought to explain how continuing economic ties with South Africa represented 'constructive engagement' rather than merely profit-maximising, so can powerful oil corporations seek to explain why oil trade with dictators actually has a chance of improving the condition of their victims, accordingly suggesting that these victims may be disposed to consent to the continuation of such trade (in much the same way, for instance, that many ordinary consumers of cheap clothing rationalise their purchases of goods produced in sweatshops). It should be obvious, however, that a situation in which agents can permissibly benefit from actions that would normally constitute grave wrongs, simply as long as their doing so could be somehow conjectured to fit the victims' interests, would pose the danger of a slippery slope, since it would create a deeply problematic structure of incentives for agents' conduct: if agents would be allowed to benefit from the violations of victims' rights as long as this could somehow be shown to be in line with the victims' interests, then we are bound to see many agents seeking 'loopholes in morality'.⁶⁴ In contrast to all this, insofar as they are largely independent of social scientific uncertainty, self-referring reforms leave very little room for such loopholes.

These advantages may still not convince those philosophers who have very strong intuitions against self-referring moral concerns, seeing such concerns as befitting only 'moral dandies'.⁶⁵ But, with normative political philosophy as with empirical social science, mere intuition is not enough. An actual in-depth discussion is necessary, and such discussion will have to cover multiple sets of questions.

One set of questions has to do with whether and why there is a difference in the moral force of self-referring moral reasons in different contexts. Thus for instance, if, as I suspect is the case, many philosophers would be willing to concede that liberal democracies had a duty to divest from apartheid for the sake of their own moral integrity, but far fewer philosophers will say the same about a duty to disengage from kleptocrats, what argument can justify this difference?

Another set of questions has to do with the relationship between personal and political morality. To stick with our running examples, philosophers who intuitively resist 'clean hands' global reforms will be hard-pressed to deny that when the agent

⁶⁴ Pogge, 'Loopholes in moralities', *Journal of Philosophy*, 89 (1992), pp. 79–98. It is sometimes thought that a key problem with predictions made under heavy uncertainty arises when those who make the predictions are unlikely to incur serious costs if they turn out to be wrong. Nassim Taleb's treatment of decision-making under uncertainty, for instance, is heavily concerned with this lack of 'skin in the game', as he puts it. See Taleb's *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012). Here I am pointing to the problem of *too much* 'skin in the game' – where the fact that the predictors are *heavily* invested in the results of their predictions should give us reason to doubt both their motives and their accuracy.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Robert Goodin, *Utilitarianism as Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 69. But see also Chiara Leopra and Robert Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), for a more accommodating view of self-regarding concerns.

in question is an individual person, the duty not to steal a victim's property is independent of what other agents do. What then (if anything) is different when the property belongs to a people and is effectively stolen by a corporation colluding with a dictator, in a process legalised by a state?

A related set of questions concerns the interaction of integrity and responsibility. If democracies stop certain global practices out of concern for their own integrity, are they morally *responsible* for the negative consequences that their decisions may produce for 'distant' victims of poverty and oppression? Specifically, if democracies as third parties end ties with a morally abhorrent regime out of concern for their own moral integrity, but, losing their leverages *vis-à-vis* the regime, end up seeing it mistreating its subjects even further, can democracies be held morally *responsible* for this worsening of the subjects' condition?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, global justice theorists need to direct philosophical energies to the very idea of self-referring moral reasons. Such reasons, whether understood in terms of clean hands, duties to self, or integrity, have enjoyed considerable attention in philosophical discussions of individual ethics, including well-known discussions of the relationship between one's moral integrity and one's complicity in the harms that third parties inflict on innocent victims.⁶⁶ Yet these moral reasons and relationships have received virtually no attention from philosophers discussing global justice. There currently exists no sustained body of philosophical work discussing in what way a political community as a collective agent can have integrity in a way that parallels the integrity of an individual person, nor (for that matter), is there a discussion of how personal integrity relates to a society's sense of collective integrity (or lack thereof).⁶⁷ Answering all these questions represents one of the most important tasks of global justice theorists. The more global justice theorists are cognisant of the social scientific obstacles facing some of the key reforms they have been discussing, the more reason they will have to turn to this task.

V. Instead of a conclusion: The broader view

In order to be complete, the normative research agenda to which I have just gestured will obviously have to be elaborated in much greater detail. Rather than attempt such elaboration here, however, I want to conclude with some remarks on the broader implications of my claims, going beyond the specific proposals for global reform that I have discussed.

First, some readers might think that the points I have made regarding the limitations of global social science have domestic parallels. Should we therefore adopt similar epistemic humility about the expected consequences of domestic policies? And should such humility, in turn, similarly lead us to give a central place to non-consequentialist factors in domestic policymaking?

I do think that we should practice epistemic humility in the domestic context as well, and be wary, even in this context, of what Jon Elster for instance calls 'excessive ambitions' in the social sciences.⁶⁸ Such humility seems warranted given the enduring relevance of classic warnings, as to the limited ability of social science to predict future

⁶⁶ The most famous example remains Bernard Williams, 'A critique of utilitarianism', in Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism – For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁶⁷ To the best of my knowledge, the sole (and partial) exception is Ronald Dworkin's discussion of 'law's integrity' in his *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁶⁸ See Jon Elster, 'Excessive ambitions', *Capitalism and Society*, 4 (2009), pp. 1–30.

political and economic developments.⁶⁹ Epistemic humility seems warranted, furthermore, in light of social-scientific disputes even regarding past policies whose consequences may initially seem straightforward. Moreover, given the degree to which consequentialist political theories hinge upon social-science to yield practical prescriptions, I believe that the deep and enduring limitations of social science provide, already at the domestic level, an important reason not to adopt an all-out-consequentialist position on public policy.⁷⁰

Yet, notwithstanding all of these concerns, when it comes to domestic politics, I also want to qualify the demand for epistemic humility and its non-consequentialist implications. I do *not* want to suggest that this demand should apply just as forcefully as in the global case. Alongside some complex normative reasons,⁷¹ there are also simple empirical and strategic reasons. Empirically, there is a better chance of finding reliable natural experiments in the domestic as opposed to the global level.⁷² And strategically, I do not want to give the impression that in order to accept my arguments regarding the limitations of global social science, one must also accept a parallel position on domestic issues. Global concerns are important enough to stand on their own, and I therefore explicitly want to keep the argument ecumenical. It is less crucial for me to show that the points I have laid out might also apply to domestic politics. It is more crucial to show that these points are cogent at the global level, *regardless* of what one thinks about the domestic level.

These remarks, however, still leave aside an important issue, with which I will close. Even if one accepts the independent significance of global issues, it may appear that the self-referring reasons for global reform sketched above render this focus *too* narrow. The reason is that, even if acting on such reasons will be important as a way of retaining democracies' own 'integrity' or clean hands, this will not by itself provide any clear *future* path to improve the state of the world as a whole. So rather than solving problems of global justice, some may accordingly fear that my (tentative) proposals only seem to back away from these problems.

I think that this fear is unwarranted, for at least two reasons. First, taking seriously democracies' self-regarding moral reasons is not equivalent to giving up on efforts to realise a more just world. Rather, such a strategy can be understood as highlighting moral *constraints* that ought to *accompany* such efforts. Even someone who thinks, with Rawls, that we must always take as our practical compass a vision of perfect justice to which we try to transition, will presumably also accept that we ought to follow 'only courses of action that are morally permissible'⁷³ on the way there. The

⁶⁹ Examples go all the way from Smith's critique of 'the man of the system' to Popper's insistence on 'the Poverty of historicism'. See Adam Smith, 'Of the character of Virtue', in part six of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [orig. pub. 1759]); Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1994 [orig. pub. 1957]).

⁷⁰ The fact that Rawlsian liberalism has been so dominant in domestic political theory is fortuitous in this sense, insofar as a key feature of Rawlsian thinking is its emphasis on a non-consequentialist foundation for public policy. Indeed, it is probably too often forgotten that Rawls spends a third of *A Theory of Justice* arguing against various types of utilitarianism, the most influential consequentialist doctrine.

⁷¹ In brief: it is (arguably) easier to take distance from consequentialism at the global than at the domestic level, because at the global level it is easier to draw a moral distinction between what the state's laws officially call for and what consequences the state's laws bring about (since these consequences are clearly tied to the laws of other states). This is a distinction that consequentialism, at the most foundational level, cannot accommodate. And because it is easier to sustain this non-consequentialist distinction at the global level, it is easier to adopt a non-consequentialist perspective at this level. For related discussion see my 'Between domestic and global justice', *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 2 (2015), pp. 55–81.

⁷² See Dunning, *Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷³ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 89.

claims of integrity to which I have gestured can be seen as one way of following this kind of warning – of identifying which courses of action are *not* permissible as part of our efforts to achieve a more just world.

Second, more fundamentally, I am sceptical about the prevalent thought that we must always have a vision of *perfect* justice – in this case, perfect global justice – as a practical guide. The claim that ‘ideal’ visions of perfect justice are a necessary practical compass remains extremely influential in political philosophy in general, and in Rawlsian political philosophy in particular.⁷⁴ It leads many philosophers to hold that in circumstances where social science is unable to tell us how to best transition to a perfectly just world, we are condemned to mere ‘muddling through’, and even risk ‘an abandonment of the goal of any systematic theoretical guidance of political practice’.⁷⁵ In my view, however, this prevalent position is problematic.

For one thing, this position underestimates just how frequently the limitations of social science – in the global context at least – force us to ‘muddle through’.⁷⁶ Furthermore, this position underestimates our ability to develop, *without* recourse to visions of perfect justice, systematic normative accounts of complex political situations. Finally, at the most foundational level, the prevalent insistence on treating visions of perfect justice as a compass underestimates the degree to which these visions themselves are not fixed, but may shift over time. This, at least, seems to follow if we believe (with Rawls) that even ideal visions of perfect justice have to account for ‘limits of practical possibility’ to have practical value – to serve as ‘*realistic utopias*’⁷⁷ rather than *mere* utopias. If we hold this belief, then we need to recognise that concrete political choices – including our self-referring moral choices under the haze of social-scientific uncertainty – might shift the limits of practical possibility which condition, from the outset, the content of our visions of a perfect world.⁷⁸ If this argument is cogent, then it requires a much more flexible approach to global justice and injustice than the one that many philosophers take. But the task of establishing this argument, I shall leave for another day.

⁷⁴ For a useful survey of the debate surrounding this claim see Laura Valentini, ‘Ideal vs. non-ideal theory: A conceptual map’, *Philosophy Compass*, 7 (2012), pp. 654–64.

⁷⁵ A. John Simmons, ‘Ideal and non-ideal theory’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 38 (2010), pp. 5–36 (p. 24).

⁷⁶ See David Colander, ‘Muddling through and policy analysis’, *New Zealand Economic Papers* 08/2003, DOI: 10.1080/00779950309544384; David Colander and Roland Kupers, *Complexity and the Art of Public Policy: Solving Society’s Problems from the Bottom Up* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). For a rare acknowledgement of this point from the perspective of ideal theory see Lisa Herzog, ‘Ideal and non-ideal theory and the problem of knowledge’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 29 (2012), pp. 271–88.

⁷⁷ See Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Note that this is a more fundamental point than merely arguing – as many ‘non-ideal’ theorists have – that visions of perfect justice should be put aside for practical purposes because they are ‘uninformative’ about what we ought to do in the here and now, or are too ‘transcendental’. See, for example, David Wiens, ‘Against ideal guidance’, *Journal of Politics* (forthcoming); Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).