

International Obligations

By Nic Tideman

Introduction

Chapter 7 described the obligations of a nation to foreigners who wish to immigrate. A nation also has obligations to foreigners as continuing citizens of other nations. This chapter describes those obligations, along with the moral obligations of nations to one another that are not obligations in justice and actions that are not obligations despite calls for them. The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows. First is a discussion of moral obligations that are not obligations in justice. Second is a discussion of non-obligations. Third is a list of obligations of nations to one another in justice. Fourth and last is a description of offsets to the obligations of nations to one another.

Moral Obligations that are not Obligations in Justice

Moral people will recognize that their own well-being is no more or less important than the well-being of anyone else. This will lead them first to provide assistance to anyone in need. Thus a moral nation will provide assistance to nations that are impoverished, unless the institutions of those nations make such assistance counterproductive. While such assistance can always be provided by individuals acting independently, people may find it convenient to have their governments act for them collectively.

The impoverishment may be caused by slowness of economic growth or by some calamity. The cause does not matter. Moral people will help where they can.

One of the ways that moral nations can help one another is by refraining from instituting tariffs or other barriers to trade. The right of the citizens of a nation to themselves gives them the right to restrict trade between themselves and other nations if they wish. This is generally a bad idea for a nation because restrictions on trade are usually promoted by narrow interests that seek to increase their own incomes at the expense of the rest of the nation, with the aggregate income of the nation falling as a result of any restriction.

There are some ways that nations can increase their incomes through trade restrictions, but a moral nation will not pursue these because the harm that is thereby caused to other nations is greater than the added income of the nation that institutes the restriction. A moral nation will abide by a policy of free trade.

A moral nation will also participate in international forums such as the United Nations, to try to devise cooperative solutions to the world's problems.

A Request that a Just Nation will not Honor

A just nation will not extradite a person against his will. As explained in Chapter 8, all people, even criminals, have rights to themselves. No nation has a right to punish anyone for his or her past conduct. The obligation of every nation to provide refuge to every person who seeks it precludes extradition.

The Obligations of Nations to One Another in Justice

The obligation of every person to others, to leave as much in natural opportunities for every other person as he takes, can be transformed into obligations in justice among nations. First, each person makes a judgment as to whether the nation in which he lives can be trusted to fulfill the person's obligation if so commissioned. A person who judges that his nation can be so trusted has then only the obligation in justice to provide compensation as instructed by his nation. Having accepted the obligation, a nation should then ask whether other nations can be trusted to fulfill their obligations to their citizens. As a general rule, it is reasonable to presume that if a nation allows its citizens to leave if they wish, and if those citizens have places to which they could go and they choose not to, then those citizens are adequately represented by their government. Thus the global obligations in justice of people to one another become obligations of nations to one another.

The principal obligations of nations to one another in justice are obligations to compensate for excess appropriations of natural opportunities. There are many varieties of such appropriations.

First are the renewable opportunities that are entirely within the borders of the nation. This includes farm land, urban land, water from rivers and lakes that empty into the oceans, non-migratory wild animals, the sustainable harvest from forests, and other such resources. Then there are non-renewal resources in the ground within a nation, such as oil, gas, metals and gems. A nation owes other nations for these resources only if it uses them up or if, by inefficient restrictions on their use, it deprives the rest of the world of the value that they could generate.

There are resources that might travel to other nations by natural means if they were not diverted in the nations where they are currently found. These include water in rivers that cross into other nations, migratory birds, butterflies, and other flying creatures that are valued, and migratory herds of wild land animals that cross national borders. A nation should include in its appropriation from nature

both the value of these that it uses and any reduction in the global value of natural opportunities that results from inefficient limitations on their use.

There may be harms that a nation causes to its neighbors by its activities. These arise principally in the form of air pollution and water pollution and the reduced value of the electromagnetic spectrum to a nation that comes from the spill-over of broadcasts into other nations. The harms could take the form of noise pollution, light pollution, or other harms from imposed proximity to things that people prefer to avoid. The costs of all of these harms should be included in the list of appropriations of natural opportunities for which a nation may owe compensation to other nations.

Next come the harms that a nation causes that are not a matter of proximity. Most prominent among these are the harms that a nation causes by its discharges into the atmosphere of substances with global impacts. Greenhouse gasses are the most prominent of these. Substances such as chlorofluorocarbons, that diminish the ozone layer should also be included. If any nation were to conduct atmospheric nuclear explosions, or in some other way release noticeable radioactive substances into the atmosphere, these should be included in the account.

When first begin to account for their appropriations of natural opportunities, there will be an accounting to be made for the injustices of the past. To the extent that the unjust excess appropriations of the past were done by people, now dead, who consumed the income that these excesses gave them, there is no adjustment needed. However, if those with historical excess appropriations accumulated wealth that was passed on to others who are now alive, an accounting for the past is appropriate to the extent that present wealth can be traced to past excess appropriations from nature. If the ill-gotten wealth was used to endow a foundation that provides benefits to some or all of a nation's citizens, accounting for past excesses is again appropriate.

Another category of cost comes from a nation's appropriation of scarce natural opportunities from outside the boundaries of nations. This includes fish and other animal taken from oceans and seas, the use of geosynchronous orbits if these are scarce, and the global appropriation of electromagnetic frequencies for satellite communication if this precludes their use by other nations. This category does not include water or salt taken from the ocean, because there is no reason to believe that these are at all scarce. It probably does not include sand taken from the ocean, for the same reason. It is possible that mineral nodules on the floor of the ocean are so abundant that no compensation would be required for taking these either.

The appropriation account should also include the benefits that a nation receives from private activities or public services that are provided by other nations.

Finally there is the matter of differential rates of population increase. An increase in the world's population has both positive and negative consequences for the people of the world. On the positive side, there are the greater economies of scale in all of the activities with decreasing average costs—book publishing, movie

presentations, software provision, music provision, and others. With a greater population there is a bigger market for every innovation, and therefore a greater rate of innovation. With a higher birth rate one can expect a greater rate of birth of geniuses, and therefore a greater rate of provision of all of the things that geniuses give us. There is a greater expected size of small, specialized communities that value every additional member, such as (I presume) the community of scholars concerned with medieval Iceland literature.

Against these benefits of a greater population, one must set the costs. The primary cost is the reduced value of natural opportunities per capita that are available to people. We become crowded onto less and less land. (On a global basis, this should probably not count as a cost yet, because there are so many places in the world with low and declining population densities.) The costs of food and fuel rise. Lumber becomes more expensive. It becomes more difficult and costly to prevent harmful climate changes that result from economic activity. A greater population also means an increase in the number of sociopaths and other persons who tend to reduce human well-being.

With both positive and negative consequences of a greater population, it would be possible for the net effect to be either positive or negative. An extensive and detailed inquiry would be needed to estimate the net effect of population increase at any particular time. The geoliberal theory of social justice says that if enough of an inquiry has been undertaken to make it reasonably clear that an increase in population has a net negative effect on the well-being of humanity, then a just nation that has an above-average birth rate will compensate the nations that have below-average birth rates, for the estimated net cost of the above-average birth rate.

A just nation will make an effort to determine whether its past and current appropriations from nature of all sorts, and its other actions with other harmful effects outside its borders, cause the nation to owe something to others. If some responsible party is making a reasonable estimate of what the nation owes to others, a just nation will pay its assessment. If no outside party is making the calculation, a just nation will make its own calculation.

Offsets to a Nation's International Obligations

There are a number of factors that can offset a nation's international obligations. To the extent that a nation is harmed by the pollution and other such activities of its neighbors, it can claim a credit against its bill for appropriation of natural opportunities and other costly actions. If a nation maintains some of its natural opportunities (such as, perhaps, the Grand Canyon) in a way that provides benefits to the rest of the world, it can claim credit for those benefits. If the nation has developed technology that has provided benefits to the rest of the world, it can claim credit for the benefit from advancing the time when the world had access to the technology. If a nation provides a global public service such as global satellite

weather maps or protection on the oceans against piracy, it can make a claim for the value of these services to other nations.

Identifying the Magnitudes of Costs and Claims

Just as a person is never a good judge of his own cause, a nation is not a good judge of the costs it imposes on other nations or the benefits that other nations derive from its actions. A just nation will accept the valuation of the costs and benefits of its actions that are provided by a disinterested party that other nations trust. If the nation is judged to owe compensation to the rest of the world, a just nation will pay into a fund that provides compensation to the nations to whom it is owed.