

# LAURA VALENTINI | Social Liberal or Cosmopolitan?

**David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*,  
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.**

The debate on global justice has long-been polarised between cosmopolitans – who believe that principles of distributive justice should extend globally – and social liberals – who limit the applicability of distributive justice to domestic political communities.<sup>1</sup> Until recently, the literature on global justice has been dominated by cosmopolitan writings, with John Rawls's *The Law of Peoples* offering the only comprehensive defence of social liberalism 'on the market'.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, David Miller's *National Responsibility and Global Justice* provides a second, much-awaited, book-length defence of a social liberal approach to international morality.

The book engages with some of the most pressing issues in international ethics. After offering a sustained critique of cosmopolitanism in general and of global egalitarianism in particular (chapters 2 and 3), Miller articulates his views on national responsibility (chapters 4, 5 and 6), human rights (chapter 7), immigration and states' territorial rights (chapter 8), and wealthy nations' responsibilities towards the world's poor (chapter 9). His treatment of these topics is sophisticated and insightful, often bringing philosophical reflection to bear on real-world cases. Particularly illuminating are Miller's discussion of how responsibility can be meaningfully ascribed to national communities (chapter 5), and his account of how nations can inherit responsibilities for their past conduct across generations (chapter 6) – both undoubtedly timely topics, yet relatively neglected in contemporary political philosophy.

I can certainly do no justice to the breath and depth of Miller's book in the space at my disposal. In what follows, I will therefore limit myself to raising a few doubts on whether his approach to international morality does indeed represent a real alternative to cosmopolitan outlooks. My sense is that, on further inspection, Miller's views are closer to those of his cosmopolitan opponents than he himself realizes.

To see this, we first need a working definition of cosmopolitanism. Although cosmopolitanism comes in many different forms, for the purposes of the present discussion we can understand this term as designating a particular set of views about the scope and, possibly, the *content* of principles of distributive justice.<sup>3</sup>

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1. For the distinction between 'cosmopolitanism' and 'social liberalism' see Charles R. Beitz, 'Social and Cosmopolitan Liberalism', *International Affairs*, 75 (3) (1999), 515-29.

2. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). This is not to deny that a number of influential articles have been written in support of social liberalism.

3. For Miller's own discussion of cosmopolitanism see chapter 2 of *National Responsibility and Global Justice*. I should also note that Miller's definition of cosmopolitanism does not coincide with mine.

First, cosmopolitans argue that principles of justice extend to the world at large. For them, societies do not merely have a weak duty to *assist* one another when their citizens are severely deprived, but rather a stringent duty of *justice* to do so.<sup>4</sup> Second, numerous cosmopolitans hold the even stronger view that not only deprivation, but also global inequalities should be addressed as a matter of justice. On this view, justice places limits on permissible global inequalities – in some cases requiring their complete elimination – and a just international order must comply with this demand.<sup>5</sup>

Although Miller argues against cosmopolitanism in general (chapter 2), and against the most extreme forms of global egalitarianism in particular (chapter 3), I find little in his book suggesting that his views could not be described as ‘cosmopolitan’ in the sense of requiring that (i) global poverty be addressed as a matter of *justice* and (ii) certain global inequalities be forbidden on grounds of justice. Let me consider both aspects in turn.

Cosmopolitan theorists contend that our duties to relieve the plight of the world’s poor are a *stringent* matter of justice. On this view, we do not merely have a moral obligation to help the poor by transferring resources that belong to us, but rather, we have a duty to give them what they are rightfully entitled to (and we now happen to possess).<sup>6</sup> This view is at odds with that of social liberals, who insist that our obligations towards less developed nations are grounded in *humanitarian assistance*, rather than justice. Interestingly, instead of following this social liberal avenue, Miller seems to pursue its cosmopolitan counterpart.

In chapter 7 of *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, he argues that the global fulfilment of certain human rights – including the right to have one’s basic needs met – should be regarded as a requirement of justice.<sup>7</sup> By claiming that the fulfilment of persons’ basic needs worldwide is a matter of justice, rather than one of humanitarian assistance, Miller appears to have significantly distanced himself from social liberal approaches traditionally conceived. This appearance may be misleading, however.

Later in the book, Miller makes it clear that those who are responsible for the fulfilment of basic human rights may be bound by two kinds of duties: either of justice, or of humanitarian assistance.<sup>8</sup> If duty bearers (i) have contributed to their recipients’ plight through past injustice, or (ii) are particularly well-

4. Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

5. See, e.g., Thomas Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), Charles R. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* with a new afterword (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), Darrell Moellendorf, *Cosmopolitan Justice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), Simon Caney, *Justice beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Kok-Chor Tan, *Justice without Borders: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and Patriotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

6. For this characterization of the distinction between justice and assistance see Brian Barry, ‘Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective’, in Brian Barry, *Liberty and Justice: Essays in Political Theory 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 182-210.

7. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, p. 166.

8. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, pp. 254-59. I am here trying to extrapolate the rationale at the heart of Miller’s analysis of a series of scenarios exemplifying the different kinds of responsibilities wealthy nations may have towards poor ones.

placed to relieve them from a plight they do not deserve and for which no one else is responsible, then they should act on grounds of justice. Otherwise, their duties should be regarded as a matter of humanitarian assistance. Consider the following example. Mary is in conditions of severe deprivation: her human right to subsistence is therefore unfulfilled. In such circumstances, I have a duty of justice to meet her needs only in either of these two scenarios. First, I am responsible for her plight, say because I have robbed her of all her belongings thus breaching a duty of justice. Second, I am particularly well-placed to help Mary (e.g., I am Mary's mother or her government) and no one else is directly responsible for her plight (e.g., it is the result of a natural catastrophe). However, if Mary's plight has been caused by Anthony – who then refuses to redress the harm caused – I only have a humanitarian duty towards her. In this case, the only bearer of a duty of justice towards Mary is Anthony himself.

This brief discussion shows that, on Miller's view, the justice-based nature of human rights is ultimately dependent on the existence of suitable duty-bearers. This reveals a tension within his approach. If he wants to stand by the claim that human rights are a matter of justice, then he seems to be forced to give up his further claim that the duties correlative to such rights are either duties of justice, or humanitarian duties depending on the position of the duty-bearer. Alternatively, Miller could drop his commitment to human rights' being a matter of justice, thereby moving closer to a social liberal outlook traditionally conceived.<sup>9</sup>

Although our discussion of human rights has not conclusively confirmed Miller's cosmopolitan inclinations, a closer look at his views about international inequality will help us to settle this matter. As I mentioned earlier in this review, Miller forcefully criticizes cosmopolitan approaches to justice, especially those which are based on a commitment to the fundamental value of global distributive equality (chapters 2 and 3). That is, he strongly opposes the view that there is something inherently wrong in the existence of global material inequalities that cannot be traced to people's responsible choices. From this it does not follow that Miller is insensitive to the existence of global inequalities. Yet, for him, our worries about global inequalities should not be 'intrinsic' but derivative. In Miller's words, 'material inequalities broadly conceived will naturally translate into inequalities of power, which then become a source of ongoing global injustice'.<sup>10</sup>

Such differences between societies' power-positions open the way to exploitation, unfair international cooperation, and severely restrict the self-determination of those who find themselves at the bottom of the power-hierarchy. As a result, these societies end up lacking 'a fair opportunity to pursue the particular goals that [their] members value most'.<sup>11</sup> Miller's objections to these inequalities are not intrinsic because, on his view, '[i]f we could prevent the conversion of material advantage into political domination, there would be nothing inherently reprehensible about some nations being richer than others'.<sup>12</sup>

9. I offer a more detailed discussion of Miller's account of the distinction between justice and assistance in Laura Valentini, 'Justice and Assistance: Three Approaches and a Fourth One' (unpublished manuscript)."

10. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, p. 75.

11. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, p. 76.

12. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, p. 79.

I find this a very plausible claim, and certainly one that sets Miller apart from those cosmopolitans who see ‘undeserved’ material inequalities as unjust per se. My impression, however, is that the latter group is perhaps smaller than Miller himself thinks. Most cosmopolitans worry about domestic and global inequalities precisely because of the impact they have on persons’ and, indirectly, their societies’ autonomy (i.e., self-determination). This is the rationale many domestic egalitarians adopt to defend their accounts of social justice. John Rawls, for example, places limits on domestic inequalities in order to allow each person to be free to pursue her own conception of the good without infringing on others’ right to do the same.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing intrinsically right or wrong about distributive inequalities in Rawls’s architectonic of justice: the reason why they matter is the impact they have on persons’ autonomy.

Of course, there might be differences in the levels of domestic and international inequality compatible with individual (or state) autonomy, but it seems that many cosmopolitans could fully agree with the spirit of Miller’s argument. Where does this leave us? There are two conclusions we might reach on the basis of this – admittedly brief – analysis. The first is negative, suggesting that in *National Responsibility and Global Justice* Miller has failed to provide a genuine and coherent social liberal alternative to cosmopolitan approaches to justice (except for the most extreme forms of cosmopolitanism). Alternatively, we might opt for a second, more positive – and in my view more productive – interpretation of Miller’s enterprise. On this reading, Miller’s work would reveal the artificiality of the stark dichotomy between cosmopolitanism and social liberalism, and help the debate move beyond these two contrasting views. One of the central messages of Miller’s contribution is that a plausible approach to global justice can neither content itself with mere duties of (humanitarian) assistance – as social liberals have traditionally claimed – nor can it demand perfect global equality – as argued by some cosmopolitans. Instead, the most fruitful approach to global justice must occupy a middle ground between these two extremes. In *National Responsibility and Global Justice* Miller has offered a thoughtful and engaging account of what such an in-between position might look like. Although some might remain unconvinced either by Miller’s ‘conciliatory’ project, or indeed by the particular way in which he situates himself between cosmopolitanism and social liberalism, Miller’s book remains an important and thought-provocative contribution to this literature, which will no doubt generate further debate in the years to come.

13. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 rev. ed.)