

BOOK REVIEW
WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED GLOBAL JUSTICE?

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Kok-Chor Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* New York: Routledge, 2017, 154 pp, \$24.50, ISBN 9781138831971

The intensification of transnational relations occasioned by advances in transportation and information technologies is increasingly raising novel normative issues for political philosophy. To take an example, the traditional understanding of justice as a territorially bounded principle is increasingly being called to question by the realisation that as the world integrates into an “overlapping community of fate,” transnational harm becomes a veritable possibility.¹ For this reason, cosmopolitan minded scholars have gone ahead to develop theories of justice which are applicable to the global arena, birthing in the process a new subfield, which incidentally have become a growth industry in political philosophy.²

Along with a growing number of academic journals, numerous conferences and plethora of new courses offering mostly in Western universities, Tan’s Book, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* is one of the evidences that the subject of global justice is increasingly becoming prominent within the academia and policy circles. After authoring three major books and numerous articles on the subject of global justice, Tan decided to write a

¹ David Held, Democracy and Globalisation, *Democracy and Global Governance*, Vol. 3, 1997, 251-267

² Gillian Brock, Global Justice in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(2015) accessed 20/10/19.

concise book-length introduction to the subject of global justice.³ But, rather than develop the discourse in the book around the elaboration of the theories of global justice which are then applied to practical global problems, he inverts this conventional approach by engaging in the elaborate discussion of the real world practical problems in order to acquaint the readers with the debates and the issues that revolves around the idea of global justice.

Beyond the clarification of the meaning and import of the idea of the concept of global justice in the introductory chapter, the book discusses diverse issues surrounding global justice through a comprehensive examination of real world global problems such as world poverty, economic inequality, human rights, humanitarian intervention, immigration, global democracy and climate change.

Since the paucity of space will not permit an extensive treatment of the issues and debates highlighted in the book, I will only briefly examine Tan's characterisation of the field of global justice, identify what he deems to be the distinctive character of normative inquiry in global justice and review two of the real practical global problems which he discussed in the book, namely the challenge of global inequality and climate change.

Tan makes clear in his introduction that the subfield of global justice refers to normative inquiry that aims to "identify our duties to one another in the world at large beyond the confines of our country, and to clarify the basis and form of these duties."⁴ Like the traditional conceptualisation of justice, the global justice refers to *what we owe one another* or our mutual obligations to treat one another in a fair manner but unlike the former, it extends the scope of justice beyond the confines of the state to encompass the whole of humanity. So defined, global justice appears to be no more than

³ Kok- Chor, Tan *Justice, Institutions and Luck: The Site, Ground and Scope of Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) *Justice Without Borders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). *Toleration, Diversity, and Global Justice* (University Park, PA : Penn State Press, 2000).

⁴ Kok Chor Tan *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 2.

moral and political philosophy applied to the global level. However, Tan resists this interpretation by insisting on the distinctiveness of global justice. In his words, “global justice is not simply moral philosophy and political philosophy writ large or straightforwardly applied to the global plane.”⁵ Tan highlights two important points to make this distinction.

First, since global justice focuses attention on justice and moral issues raised by specific global problems, they provide philosophers with the unique opportunity of new test cases on the basis of which we could evaluate the adequacy of our moral and philosophical theories, and can, in fact, compel us to revise them.⁶ However, the field of global justice ... provides a new vantage point from which to re-examine, and, where necessary, recast our moral and political theories.”⁷

Second, there are fundamental differences between the moral/political context of the domestic state and the international system, which global justice analyses typically take into consideration. For one, the global arena is filled with sovereign state actors not found within the domestic setting. For another, there is no overarching global authority that exercises supreme control over the diverse sovereign actors on the global stage. Consequently, the moral and political relationship in which individuals stand in the domestic context differs from what obtains in the global sphere. Thus, Tan concludes that these relational and institutional facts render global justice a special field of study. With this submission, the rest of the book delves into an elaborate discussion of the real world practical problems, two of which are merely broached below.

One of the real world problems that Tan discusses is world poverty, a particularly worrisome moral problem.⁸ While there is near consensus that world poverty is a moral problem that has to be addressed, what makes it philosophically interesting is the diversity

⁵ Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* 3.

⁶ Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* 3.

⁷ Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* 3-4

⁸ Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?*

of answers to some of the fundamental questions around the issue. Such questions would include “what is the basis of our responsibility to address global poverty? Who has the moral responsibility to ameliorate global poverty? Exactly what does it entail to address the problem? What are the limits of such responsibility?”

As a window to the debate in the literature, Tan considers the Utilitarian and the Deontological approaches to the questions of global justice. The Utilitarian approach, which in Tan’s reckoning, is exemplified by Peter Singer’s “Famine Affluence and Morality” argues that the affluent individuals owe the duty to alleviate global poverty on the ground of the utilitarian principle which stipulates that if we can do something to minimise pain at no comparable cost to ourselves, we ought to do it.⁹ The utilitarian submission that the affluents have to alleviate global poverty, however, has come under severe criticisms on the account of its unreasonable demand in requiring that rich people keep making sacrifices for as long as there are poor people in the world.

The alternative to the utilitarian approach to addressing global poverty in Tan’s book is the deontological framework which could either be right- or duty-based depending on whether it emphasises rights or duties. From the right based perspective “persons have a human right to subsistence, and this right imposes obligations on others...to take positive steps to help ensure that everyone’s subsistence needs are met.”¹⁰ An advantage of this right-based approach to poverty alleviation is that it appears to overcome the charge of unreasonable over demand since when once individual subsistence has been achieved, the rich would have discharged their duties to the global poor. A new problem, however, surfaces: on what basis can we justify the claim that beyond the negative duty not to harm others, we have the rather controversial positive duty to guarantee subsistence for the poor? Tan identifies, at least, two possible attempts at justifying the positive duty of subsistence which

⁹ Peter Singer Famine, Affluence, and Morality, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring, 1972, 229-243.

¹⁰ Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?*

includes Kantian-based respect for persons as proposed by Onora O'Neill's and the idea that the capabilities upon which human flourishing depends would be missing in the absence of the guarantee of the resources for subsistence. If the right-based approach was one side of the deontological framework to alleviating global poverty, the other side would be the duty-based approach.

Surprisingly, beyond highlighting the Oneil's criticism of the right based approach to the question of global poverty, Tan fails to explain in any detail the duty- based approach. This, definitely, constitutes a major oversight in the second chapter of the book.

Apart from world poverty and other global problems the world faces, Tan examines the problems of global justice issue that arise from anthropogenic climate change, which he describes as one of the gravest challenges facing humanity today. For readers who are interested in the moral and philosophical debates deriving from the problem of climate change, chapter ten of Tan's book offers an excellent introduction to the key issues and controversies which have characterised climate negotiations and multilateral attempts to formulate a global climate policy. Here, Tan drew attention to the distinction between subsistence (permissible) and luxury (unnecessary) emissions and the general idea that saving the global climate is *common but differentiated responsibility*, a principle which suggests that the cost of addressing climate change be asymmetrically allocated to countries depending on their economic needs.¹¹ Focusing mainly on how the international community is to distribute the cost of reducing the emission of climate damaging substances, Tan outlines and discusses a number of principles which have been developed as a possible guide for allocating the cost in question.

To sum up, *What is This thing Called Global Justice?* is a concise introduction to the normative field of global justice and it adopts a language approach that facilitates an easy understanding of the issues at stake. Throughout, Tan exhibits an uncanny capacity for clarity of language and simplicity of expression which makes it

¹¹ Tan, *What is This Thing Called Global Justice?* 121

possible for his readers, philosophers or non-philosophers alike, to follow and comprehend the issues discussed in the book. On the flip side, a shortcoming of the book is the author's presumption of the validity of the idea of global justice as he completely overlooks the many objections which seek to show that the idea of global justice is incoherent. He should have, at least, highlighted some the fundamental objections to the global justice and provide appropriate responses. As it is to be expected in an introduction to an issue, Tan succeeds in furnishing abridged and sometimes incomplete analysis of the issues. However, it needs to be pointed out that he compensates for this shortcoming in providing a rich list of texts and materials for further reading at the end of each chapter.

Finally, the eurocentrism of the discourse on global justice shines through Tan's book. No mention was made of any African ideas or concepts which are directly or indirectly relevant to the real world problems under discussion. Tan may, of course, absolve himself of the charge of eurocentric treatment of the subject of global justice on the ground that African contributions to that subfield remain scanty and marginal. In spite of the highlighted weaknesses, of Tan's the book, *What is This Thing Called Justice?*, remains one of the finest concise introduction to the field of global justice. It is, therefore, a recommended reading for philosophy undergraduates and general readers who are interested in the issues of justice relevant to the global arena.

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