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Global and Ecological Justice: Prioritising Conflicting Demands¹

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ABSTRACT

‘Global and ecological justice’ (or some variant) is a very popular catchphrase in policy documents, treaties, publications by think-tanks, NGOs and other bodies. I argue that it represents an informal combination of four distinct and sometimes conflicting ideas: global justice, protection of the ecology, sustainability and sustainable growth. To solve the practical, conceptual and logical complications thus caused, a more precise interpretation of global justice and ecological justice is suggested, on the basis of which it is also possible to rank the two and re-interpret the further goals of sustainability and growth.

KEYWORDS

Global justice, ecological justice, political theory, sustainability

1. CONCEPTUAL COMPLICATIONS

The notion of ‘global and ecological justice’ crops up in many fields, from international politics, diplomacy and social movements to Academia and academic think-tanks (cf. e.g. Langhelle 2000, Helm and Simonis 2001, Schlosberg 2004). It is a shorthand expression for a combination of at least four distinct ideas, mixed in different doses depending on context and purpose: global justice, ethical obligations owed to ecosystems as such, sustainability and sustainable growth. Hence, some (e.g. Langhelle 2000) see it as an interpretation of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, demanding: ‘... development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987). Its elements can also be traced in 'Agenda 21', for example, which opens with:

Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being. However, integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can – in a global partnership for sustainable development. (UNCED 1992, Article 1.1)

Each of the four concepts mentioned is essentially contested, and it is rare to see them clearly defined; in politics, this is often a matter of simple prudence. It is often wiser to assume a shared but unspoken common understanding where none exists – and in due course, the implementation of a widely supported policy may even give rise to the evolution of such a shared understanding (Wissenburg and Levy 2004). Not only is it, by political standards, reasonable not to define crucial concepts too clearly – it is also often reasonable to *combine* them. The core business of politicians is to make choices between competing interests, demands, goals and policies – in other words, to prioritise (cf. Langhelle 2000: 295). Any two (or more) policy goals that might vie for funding, might exclude one another or limit one another, have to be ranked. The vaguer the goals or the assumed relation between them (or both), the more freedom there is to combine them without clear prioritisation and without endangering a consensus, and the more room for broadening policy coalitions.

It is, then, no surprise that political texts like 'Agenda 21' avoid the problem of exact definition by implying a relation between concrete social, political and environmental problems on the one hand, and the concepts making up global and ecological justice on the other. It is also, from an academic point of view, highly unsatisfactory. There is, from *that* point of view, something irrational in aiming to combine things that may not be combinable at all, or less combinable than is desirable; and this in ways that are not predictable or predicted. Here, we touch on an important caveat for politicians as well: there is a limit to the functionality of fuzziness. Where some or all of the constituent goals of a fuzzy concept like global and ecological justice are mutually exclusive, no matter how (or how little) the goals are interpreted, and where this could have been known in advance, the result can only be symbolic politics. Symbolic politics itself may be extremely rational even or especially in a democracy, and unmasking a policy as symbolic may by the same token be imprudent – but paradoxically, it is impossible to assess the value of a policy, be it symbolic or 'for real', if we do not know when it becomes symbolic in the first place.

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In the next few sections, I hope to contribute to an answer to the question whether global and environmental justice is a purely symbolic political goal or not. I shall first argue that the relations between global justice, protection of the ecology, sustainability and sustainable growth are of a contingent nature. I then zoom in on two particular concepts, ecology (protection) and (global) justice, ask what both *demand* of us, and argue that the demand for global justice is better interpreted in terms of natural duties, retributive justice and justice in exchange than as a matter of distributive justice, the interpretation dominating present philosophical debates. I conclude that since the demands of ecology and justice cannot both be perfectly satisfied at the same time, trade-offs will *have* to be made, and finally defend a number of guidelines for such trade-offs.

2. RED HERRINGS

Sustainability means nothing more than ‘the ability to sustain’ or ‘... to keep in existence’. It means nothing, in fact, if we do not add *what* we want to sustain, where, and for how long.² Without those elements it is a sterile concept. Green political philosophers nowadays often distinguish between three goals for sustainability: ecological sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability (Dobson 1998).

Ecological sustainability demands that the existence of ‘the ecology’ is to be perpetuated, that is, the system of interconnected and interdependent species and natural phenomena on this planet. Note that ecological sustainability does not demand the survival or protection of any one particular animal, nor even that of any one particular species. The ecological system can perpetuate itself quite well without the woolly mammoth, the dodo or other once threatened species, not to mention threatening species like *homo sapiens*.

Environmental sustainability is aimed at keeping ‘the environment’ in existence, meaning: the environment of *humans*, as opposed to ‘the ecology’ (hence the deep conflict between ecologists and environmentalists; cf. Wissenburg 1998). On this conception of sustainability, we think of nature as resources; so long and in so far as they are useful to humans, they need to be sustained (cf. Langhelle 2000: 296). Of course, environmental sustainability can be very catholic in its implications – if the existence of ‘wild, untamed nature’ is useful, rain forests and Yellowstone and Kruger National Park are safe. But note that it all depends on what serves humanity. Nothing in the environmental sustainability conception excludes the possibility that we replace tigers by cats and cats by Japanese robot pets – anything goes as long as an ecology (artificial or not) generates all the resources desired.

Social sustainability, finally, means that what is to be sustained is ‘society’ – broadly construed. The notion of social sustainability is based on the idea that humans cannot thrive in an artificial environment only; they need – for reasons

I shall not go into here – real nature as well. Social sustainability, in brief, tries to combine and reconcile ecological and environmental sustainability.

Two things need to be noted now. First, the relation between protecting the ecology, an essentially conservative ideal, and sustainability, an essentially dynamic notion, is obviously contingent. Only on one interpretation of sustainability, the first, are the two fully and by definition compatible. The other two interpretations allow human interests to take precedence over the ‘interests’ of ecology, either by definition or incidentally, in the form of trade-offs between ecology and human needs. Sustainability in any form does not demand the preservation (let alone restoration) of ‘original nature’, a global or local ecology as it was at time *t*, but rather the preservation of the *processes* by which natural entities and systems reproduce themselves and produce resources. Under policies aimed at sustainability, the preservation or restoration of entities or systems themselves is at best a happy coincidence.

Secondly, sustainability and global justice are not intrinsically related either:³ the first concerns the question *how much* of which resources and processes should exist or be made to exist over time, the second concerns the question *what to do* with whatever exists at one particular moment. It is important to remember that justice is not the same as ‘the good’ or ‘the moral’ or ‘the ethical’ or anything as general as that. Justice relates to moral questions of ‘desert’ (or ‘justifiable claims’) occurring under conditions of scarcity. Where five individuals starve, and only four meals are available, there are *two* problems: one is the immediate question of justice, of the just distribution of available scarce resources, the other is the more remote issue of the good society, i.e., how many meals and persons there should be, overall. Answering the latter question, as sustainability aims to do, does not solve the former.

Sustainable *growth*, the active component of the concept of sustainable development, is a second red herring in the sea of justice: it does not necessarily imply, nor is it implied by, ecological care or justice – global, national, regional, or local. Growth and, say, distributive justice (a specific type of justice that will be discussed in more detail below) offer two fundamentally different solutions to the problem of social co-operation. Whereas the latter aims at the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of co-operation, the former aims to void the problem of distribution by enlarging the stock, so that ultimately every claimant can be satisfied. Like sustainability, growth refers to how much of *x* there should be, not to what to do with *x* or who *deserves* to get what under conditions of scarcity (Wissenburg 1999).

Growth and ecology can also be at odds with each other, as green thinkers have pointed out since Day One: growth (of economies, populations, life span or individual diet) by definition implies growth in artefacts and thereby a decrease in nature. Moreover, growth and justice combined are an even greater threat to the ecology. If global justice for instance demands that the South gets the same benefits from global co-operation as the North, the former has quite some catch-

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ing up to do not only in terms of knowledge and technology but also in terms of factories, energy and consumer goods – since it is doubtful that the North will be willing to give up its advantages or that it has a moral obligation to do so.

Thus, sustainability and sustainable growth are red herrings in a debate on global and ecological justice. They do not ‘belong’ there, any more than art or health does; they do not necessarily contribute to ecological protection or global justice. Combining these four ideals under one heading (say, that of global and ecological justice) cannot in reason mean that the aim is to *realise* them all; it can only mean that trade-offs are unavoidable, thus, paradoxically, that at least some ideals will ultimately have to be *sacrificed*.

Let us now consider the two core notions of global and ecological justice per se, without further confusing references to sustainability and sustainable growth. Even the combination of only these two ideals is not unproblematic – they are not perfectly compatible, hence trade-offs may be necessary, and the *cui bono* question rises. As a label uniting both ideals under one heading, global and ecological justice is a term that could, on the one hand, easily be used by supporters of the ‘environmental justice movement’ (Dobson 1998), but the terms can also suit radical ecologists and any school in between, depending on the relative moral significance attached to the world of humanity and the world of ecology. These extremes represent the ideal types of environmental and ecological justice respectively, as distinguished by Brian Baxter (2005).

The overall idea behind the environmental justice movement seems to be that over the past thirty or forty years, social justice as a motive in politics has been too one-sidedly construed as a matter of the just distribution of the benefits of the *output* of the productive process. Apart from the issue of taxes, both governments and philosophers would have ignored the input side and the burdens of production, and it is there that we find the disadvantages of the incomparable growth in welfare on planet Earth since the 1950s. It is easy to see that an inkling like this – the intuition that the burdens of growth are unevenly distributed to the disadvantage of the powerless – could find good soil in Third World countries as well: the parallel with rich Western countries producing goods in the North and dumping their waste in Africa, for instance, is all too obvious.

Global ecological justice is a term that could also and just as easily be used by radical ecologists. For the ecologist, what is relevant is that humans have used nature solely for their own benefits – one need not even say ‘abused’ nature, because the term ‘use’ is already enough to indicate that we would not respect nature as valuable in itself or for its own sake, as (to use a term from ethics) ‘the Other’ of humankind, as an object that deserves moral concern. Since nature is in fact a global system, a global ecology, whatever we owe to nature is owed on a global scale. For the radical ecologist, our obligations towards non-human nature are a matter of justice: we have exploited nature just like we exploited women, slaves and indigenous peoples – the latter, just like parts of the ecosystem, to the verge of extinction. Note that on this interpretation of

global ecological justice, social justice as justice between and among humans is of at best secondary importance. But there are deeper reasons for believing that the combination of global and ecological justice is a mismatch.

For one, the use of the term justice to describe our moral relation to nature verges on rhetoric. Perhaps the concept of justice, a trait of the relation between moral subjects, between entities with interests who can at least in principle choose between alternatives, can be applied to some animals (Wissenburg 1998, 1999), but how can we harm the interests of a rock or a cloud, let alone something as abstract as a system of interdependences? We may have general ethical obligations of *another* type in relation to (but not towards) the ecology, but we certainly do not have the *same* kinds of obligations to it that we have towards fellow humans.

Secondly, the radical green 'ecological justice' version of global and ecological justice may distribute duties and freedoms among humans; on the receiving side its aim is simply the protection of the ecology, a question of the good *use* of nature not distribution. Saving or protecting the ecology is not necessarily to the advantage of humans (the object of the other ideal type, environmental justice), whereas giving humans what they deserve is not necessarily good for nature. Good use, in ecological terms, is about using as little of nature as possible: far, far less than we do today, as far as that is measurable in renewable resources. Good distribution is about, among other things, compensating for past disadvantages – and that may even imply growth, hence more extensive use of nature.

Not only are global justice (even when limited to global *environmental* justice) and ecological justice (in the radical sense) potentially incompatible, and not only is justice probably the wrong word to use for our potential moral obligations with regard to nature – but also, and finally, justice is perhaps not the right word to use for our global obligations to one another either. Power seems to be a more appropriate concept.

3. WHAT HAVE THE ROMANS EVER DONE FOR US?

The political question of global justice is usually understood to relate to poverty, exploitation and the North-South divide, and less to, say, trade relations between the United Kingdom and the USA (cf. Helm and Simonis 2001, Schlosberg 2004, Nagel 2005). There is a reason for this, a reason that also forms one of two reasons why the philosophical answer to this political problem, the concept of justice and more specifically distributive justice, is perhaps not the *most* appropriate concept to use in connection with the North-South question. That reason is sovereignty.

Justice is a concept applied to the distribution of, or (a distinction that will be explained shortly) the retribution for exchanges of, the benefits and burdens of

social co-operation. It presupposes a shared background, a scheme of co-operation as in the family or society, whereas a major role in the present North-South debate, i.e., the real world, is given to the *denial* of a shared background. It is a debate mainly between states claiming sovereignty, as if existing in a state of nature and not in a state of interdependence and cooperation. Moreover, it is a debate less about the distribution of benefits and burdens, and more about access, about the possibility to create benefits and burdens in the first place. In other words, it is a question and a conflict that precedes any talk of justice: it is a question of power. This is the second reason why justice may not be the *most* appropriate value to invoke in assessing North-South relations.

Of course, it is not *only* a question of power. On the one hand, sovereign states proclaim their sovereignty, but on the other, reference is made to the heritage of colonialism, typically a good setting for questions of retributive justice, and reference is made to the common resources of humankind, typical for distributive justice (cf. e.g. Helm and Simonis 2001, Schlosberg 2004). Yet again I would argue that these *specific* terms, retributive and distributive justice, are not appropriate even where justice 'in general' is, second to power, relevant.

Before we investigate the claims of injustice made against the North, the terms in which these claims are phrased need to be clear. We owe to Aristotle (1980) a typology of justice used by philosophers to this day. Three of the types of justice he distinguished are relevant to our question: distributive, commutative and retributive justice. *Distributive justice* refers to the distribution of scarce goods that are commonly owned by a group (say, a society) – depending on the group: tax revenues, medals and titles, land and shares, etc.⁴ Distributive justice has a hierarchical structure: distribution takes place from top to bottom, from the collective to the members. *Commutative justice* or justice in exchange is non-hierarchical: it refers to voluntary exchanges between equals, e.g. the baker's bread for my money. Ideally, exchanges result in an equilibrium, a 'fair price': something that to me was worth x and to the baker y , has been exchanged for something that to me is worth x and to the baker y . Finally, *retributive justice* refers to the correction of unfair exchanges – involuntary exchanges (ordinary theft), voluntary exchanges against a unilaterally determined price (extortion, abuse of monopoly), etc.

There are two distinct claims made against the North for causing injustice. One is that the North sustains the inequality of colonial times in post-colonial times through unfair trade terms (including import taxes and export subsidies) and an unfair distribution of activities: the South delivers the resources; the North turns them into consumer goods and creates wealth. This may seem to be a question of the distribution of wealth, or a call for redistribution (Langhelle 2000: 312), but that would lead to a contradiction in terms. If it were a call for redistribution, it would have to be based on the idea that poverty is undeserved *and* that wealth is, that both are just quirks of fate, hence, that ambition, effort, work do not matter. But that is not the argument made here. This argument

rests on the assumption that the South either contributes equally or should be allowed to contribute equally to the creation of wealth, and therefore should receive or be enabled to receive an equal share of the profit. In other words, the argument presupposes that market rules, rules for fair trade, apply but are violated: to make a profit from producing and selling goods is in itself assumed to be justified, yet (a) some parties are able to participate in these markets and others are not, and (b) some transactions (those in which resources are traded; North-South transactions) would be more unfair than others (transaction in the North). Let us keep this in mind for a moment.

The second claim against the North is that it perpetuates and abuses its advantages gained in colonial times (cf. e.g. Langhelle 2000, Schlosberg 2004). In the past, the colonies were treated as part of the colonising country, and the colonised as members of the same society as the colonisers – but of course with a difference: the colonies and colonised were exploited. Nowadays, the argument goes, the North still uses its heritage from colonial times to maintain its relative advantage over the former colonies. This second claim, again, calls for retribution not redistribution: it is a call for compensation for unpunished crimes committed in the past.

So in the end, the North-South debate is about *retribution* for unfair trade taking place now, and about unequal starting positions preventing *commutative* justice in the future – it is not about the *redistribution* of wealth. The North can and sometimes does argue that unequal starting positions are irrelevant. Developing countries, the argument goes, have received ample financial and other support to overcome this disadvantage. They have had the opportunity to invest in heavy industry and in consumer industry, in knowledge and in information technology, not to mention that they had all the natural resources available just around the corner, unlike the North, but the South wasted all its chances due to political instability, tribalism, corruption and infatuations with utopian socialist ideologies. It reminds one of a famous saying: What have the Romans ever done for us?⁵ The North argues that at least a part of the South's claim is, in other words, based on envy. We do not need to decide whether and to what degree this rebuttal works – in a moment I shall argue that it is irrelevant.

The question of unfair trade and retribution on the other hand *is* relevant. Unlike a claim for redistribution, which is valid only within schemes of social co-operation, this is a claim that states *can* make against each other, but only if we see them as (as if) ordinary humans, as parties in commercial transactions, as strangers meeting in a market place. Strangers do have moral obligations towards each other, not only obligations of justice in exchange but also duties of a higher order and more fundamental nature – what John Rawls called 'natural duties' (Rawls 1972), duties like honesty, care, the obligation to aid one another (cf. also Nagel 2005). These are universal duties that precede and overrule any duties based on a shared context like society or a contract, since they apply 'by themselves' or 'naturally' or 'categorically': we cannot reason-

ably deny them to any person *x* without being forced to use the same reason to deny it to ourselves.⁶

This is exactly why bickering about the responsibility for alleged missed opportunities for development is irrelevant: the duty to help the unfortunate is universal and overrules any obligations arising from coalitions. It is not limited but only guided by considerations of prudence: giving heroin to a heroin-deprived addict, or money to a gold-digging femme fatale, may not be the wisest way to help – but the duty to help *itself* remains. Note that, in our context, this conclusion does not in any sense preclude the possibility that redistribution cannot be a good *means* for the creation of global justice; the point made here is that it cannot be the *goal*. Since goals determine the choice of means, the latter question remains open to debate until the former is resolved.

The consequences of understanding the North–South issue as, ultimately, a question of fair trade, are tremendous – not only for everyday politics, but also for political theory. The existence or non-existence of a world society or global scheme of cooperation ‘of a relevant kind’ (Barry 1991: 194; cf. Nagel 2005: 137), holding original ownership rights to a planetary stock of distributable benefits and burdens becomes a moot point. Political theorists have perhaps fallen victim to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic belief that we are all, proportionally or equally, heirs to the man who originally inherited the Earth; the social liberal argument that no one deserves the circumstances into which s/he is born can only serve to justify (re)distribution if those circumstances are, first, originally owned rather than unowned, and second, owned collectively rather than earned individually. Even if each of these premises could be justified, the social and political conditions for their implementation are failing (cf. Nagel 2005): legal practice knows virtually no global commons, for instance – Grotius only liberated the High Seas and Antarctica; even the air above land is private or national property.

In so far as there are no commons, global or national, one other favourite topic of debate in political theory becomes moot too: the question of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism in liberal contract theories of international (distributive) justice.⁷ Fair trade requires no common stock, indeed becomes impossible under conditions of collective ownership; instead, it requires the assumption that those trading are independent individuals.

But, finally, can we really see states as strangers meeting in a desert or in a market place? Or should we instead look at the entities that can really suffer from injustice – human beings of flesh and blood (cf. Nagel 2005): the coffee grower receiving but a tenth of what coffee costs in a shop? To do the latter, we must question the legitimacy of borders, the legitimacy of entering into mutually beneficial schemes of social co-operation that exclude others beyond the border. The philosophical justification for borders, and thereby for the existence of states, is flimsy to say the least. Arguments like shared cultures, languages and history do not answer but only *beg* the question for they are merely instruments of and

consequences of secession (cf. Näsström 2003): so what justifies the exclusion of others in the *first* place? Albeit in a different context, the cosmopolitanism versus nationalism debate *is* relevant here.

We have, then, two options. If borders and states are justifiable and not mere accidents of history, then the question of international justice is one of fair trade between nations and of mutually valid natural duties that states have towards each other. If what matters are the fates of human individuals, then states can only and at best act on their behalf, and the criteria of international justice are the fairness of trade among individuals, and (in fact broader than justice) our natural duties towards our fellow humans. Either way, the issue is first and foremost one of natural duties: unfair trade results from the exploitation of relative advantages in negotiations. If the (dis)advantages are deserved, they require retribution, but retributive justice is overruled by natural duty. If the (dis)advantages are undeserved, natural duty applies directly. In our case (linking back to the development motif in Brundtland), the disadvantages are by definition caused by differences in negotiation power – hence the duty that applies is that of *individual empowerment*. In practice, this may mean the building of institutions imposing global justice on nations; as Thomas Nagel says, ‘the path from anarchy to justice must go through injustice’ (Nagel 2005: 147).

4. THE TAO OF THE DODO

Global justice, we saw, was not a matter of justice in the strictest sense. In one respect, this is hopeful: it puts international ‘justice’ more on a par with ecological ‘justice’ in that both refer to more general moral obligations than the concept of justice allows. Yet it also bodes ill for the ecology. The natural duty to empowerment and the possible obligations that sustainability and growth may add, all amount to use and sacrifice of nature in the interest of humans.

What counter-arguments do we have to justify principled protection of the ecology? Remember our discussion of sustainability: only ecological sustainability can add something to defend the ecology. On all other conceptions of sustainability, the ecology serves as small change for various human purposes. This would not change if we painted animals into the picture as moral subjects, worthy of protection of their interests – it would still make the ecology merely ‘useful’ (i.e., small change), only for a larger constituency. The same goes for future generations.

Whether we have obligations to future generations, let alone which, is open to debate, even though the assumption is immensely popular.⁸ Future generations consist of future individuals, future individuals do not fall from the skies – in most cases nowadays, humans are or can be the result of voluntary actions of other individuals. We may have a natural duty to help the offspring of others once they exist, but I would argue that we do not have a responsibility to create

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room for them *before* that time. More precisely – since the word ‘we’ is misleading here – it is not immediately obvious that *I* should make room and sacrifices for *your* not yet conceived offspring. Rather, one might argue, we individual creators of future individuals owe it to them not to create them *unless* we can guarantee them a future, and we can only guarantee them a future if we ourselves live under circumstances prosperous enough to allow this. Then again, as with animals, future generations are more or less irrelevant in the present context: future generations only add to the number of users of nature.

The literature now leaves us with only two types of argument for the protection of the ecology. One is the old and worn idea that nature has intrinsic value. Apart from countless more or less technical complications that make it difficult to formulate a clear and distinct description of what intrinsic value can and cannot mean (cf. e.g. Wissenburg 1998, Hailwood 2004), the major obstacles to fruitful use of intrinsic value and similar notions in defence of the ecology are that it only convinces the already converted (it seems to take a leap of faith to ‘see’ intrinsic value, thus does not work on those it should impress), and that it does not solve anything: either ‘nature’ as a whole is made sacred and any infringement on it becomes equally immoral, or parts of nature have a special value relative to other parts – making trade-offs with those other parts, their values, and other interests still possible.

What is left then is a fairly recent invention: an argument derived from liberal political philosophy, but not exclusively valid in that context – no leaps of faith are required. In liberal philosophy, politics has the positive duty to allow citizens as broad a choice of lifestyles as possible (as compatible with other people’s freedom) so as to allow us to find the best life, a choice that would be empty without the at least potential presence of the material and immaterial conditions for particular lifestyles, the ‘life environments’. Every infringement on nature, every reduction of it, limits our choice just as much as every infringement on religious liberty or sexual liberty or the liberty of speech does; every such infringement is therefore *prima facie* wrong and needs justification. Thus, the idea of offering options can be extended to nature. I suggest (based on Dobson 2003, before that Wissenburg 1998) a kind of Rawlsian *Life Environment Principle*:

There is to be a maximum set of life environments compatible with a similar set for others.

Two objections are possible here. One is that this principle does obviously not exclude the existence of shantytowns, slums and slavery. I would argue, however, that it does (through the proviso ‘compatible with’) – but thereby it also excludes the short, nasty and brutish lives of many indigenous peoples, exactly those peoples whose ‘noble savage’ lifestyles so many value, and exactly those peoples whose ‘secret knowledge’ of the medicinal potential of their environment is so (rightly) appreciated by at least as many. If one wants to save those peoples’ lifestyles, and if (as so often has turned out to be necessary) one wants

to protect them against corrupting influences from the ‘civilised’ world – one will probably need an argument for some form of paternalism.

The crux then is in the ‘compatible with a similar set’ bit. Without that, it remains a maximising principle – with all the known disadvantages of utilitarianism. Yet even a libertarian will admit that one human’s freedom is limited by that of another.

Hence a second objection: the life environment principle definitely protects the ecology, possibly in particular against our desire to meet the needs of future generations at the expense of nature, since it implies what I have called the *Restraint Principle*, viz., that:

... no goods shall be destroyed unless unavoidable and unless they are replaced by perfectly identical goods; if that is physically impossible, they should be replaced by equivalent goods resembling the original as closely as possible; and if that is also impossible, a proper compensation should be provided. (Wissenburg 1998: 123)

Yet what the life environment principle does not protect is all existing human *ways of life*. If we reject paternalism, we need to accept that certain life environments will disappear, at least as cultures (though not necessarily by implication as bits of nature). In that context – the more or less ‘natural’ struggle for the survival of the fittest culture – we cannot avoid admitting that liberal political theory has paid (too) little attention to the structural processes that predetermine choice, such as the economy, processes that ‘undeservedly’ benefit one life environment over another.

Much more needs to be said about this principle: should life environments be the subject of a Rawlsian first, second, or other type of principle? Should it be relevant to principles in the first place? Furthermore: the idea of a life environment is focused on the individual, which is acceptable for liberals; but is it not too anthropocentric and too resourcist for others?

5. CONCLUSION

Sustainability, growth, justice and ecology are only contingently related, if at all, and sometimes pose contradictory demands. The roles of growth and sustainability depend on what we owe the ecology and what we owe each other globally. I concluded that global justice is best interpreted as the natural duty to promote individual empowerment, and ecological justice as demanding the life environment principle. But are these two demands compatible?

Intuitively, the answer is affirmative: the two seem compatible and even complementary. They offer principled protection for the ecology, not as the resourcist fountain of plenty for future generations but, independent of time, as the fountain of wisdom in our search for the good life. And yet – empowerment

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means that the ecology will be a victim of humanity: choices for theories of the good life and appropriate life environments are daydreams for many in our present world; rather, they are luxury hobbies for the better-endowed. Unless and until all humans have, at least in principle, the freedom to choose, that is, until we all have the means to survive in dignity, the 'interests' of the ecology will be overruled by our natural duty to empower one another. In fact, *everything* is overruled by this duty – even the liberty and sovereignty of states if they do not do what they are supposed to do: warrant the right kind of growth and a just distribution of that growth.

Moreover, given that there is a way in which we can sensibly say that global and ecological justice, as reconstructed here (i.e., as two distinct concepts in at best unstable equilibrium), imply growth – they also imply a need for a kind of sustainability: the success of growth cannot otherwise be warranted in the long term.

What then is sustainability's X, what is it that is to be sustained? In the first instance, it comes down *not* to global ecological (or broadly social) sustainability, if necessary at the cost of justice. The need for empowerment directs us elsewhere. Trade-offs between ecology and human needs are therefore impossible to avoid. Need outweighs other interests (if these are well-defined – and hunger is still for the greater part a political instrument or distributional failure, not a 'need' in this sense). Note that this can easily be defended from an anthropocentric, environmentalist point of view, but possibly also from that of ecocentrism or ecologism: humans are, after all, *part* of the ecosystem.

In at least one sense though, this is a very negative conclusion. No matter how moderately the relatively rich would learn to live, no matter how much they would come to believe that a fulfilling life is not one of acquiring endless amounts of expensive, seldom used, seldom satisfactory consumer goods (if materialism is really always that bad – which is open to debate) – we will *still* have to use more and more of nature. I have argued elsewhere that we can do so in a just or morally responsible way (e.g. Wissenburg 1998) – but for the ecology as unspoiled, untamed, virgin nature, in the words of Schopenhauer, the worst is yet to come.

NOTES

¹ Earlier versions of this article were presented at a meeting of senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Chile on 10 April 2003, at the sixth NESS Conference in Turku/Åbo, Finland, 12-14 June 2003, in a workshop on Global Ecological Justice, and at the Managing on the Edge Conference, Nijmegen, 25-26 September 2003. I owe special thanks for their very helpful comments to Graham Dawson, Avner de-Shalit, Alan Holland, Jan Kunnas, Oluf Langhelle and two anonymous referees of this journal.

² My argument being complicated enough as it is, I shall ignore the dimension of intergenerational sustainability and intergenerational justice here for most of the time. Although I do not want to deny their intrinsic relevance (think of non-renewable resources and the costs of renewing others, distributed over generations), adding future generations, as it turns out, adds nothing substantial to the argument made *here*.

³ I disagree here with Oluf Langhelle, who argues that ‘sustainability is a necessary condition for justice’ (Langhelle 2000: 296). Langhelle’s claim would be correct if intergenerational justice were a necessary condition for justice overall, but as I argue in this article, that premise (do future generations deserve anything?) and its exact meaning (i.e., what they deserve) are open to debate.

⁴ The suggestion has been made (cf. Helm and Simonis 2001) that we should conceive of distributive justice not as distributing scarce resources but as distributing *access* (rights) to scarce resources – but this only obfuscates the distinction between what one has a right or valid claim to, and what claims can actually be satisfied.

⁵ The source for this reference is, of course, the movie ‘Monty Python’s Life of Brian’.

⁶ Contrary to popular opinion, rights do not imply duties, nor duties rights – at least not between individuals. My right to free speech does not imply your obligation to listen; your obligation to protect me does not imply my right to jump in front of a cocked gun. Rawlsian natural duties should, then, not be confused with universal human rights, even though such duties and rights can refer to the same act, action or good.

⁷ With the exception of the question of international redistribution as an instrument of retributive justice, an ‘internationalisation’ of Robert Nozick’s (1973) argument for fair compensation for past infringements on commutative justice. For an overview and discussion of the most recent literature on the present incarnation of the cosmopolitanism versus nationalism debate, dominated by John Rawls’ *The Law of Peoples* (1999), see Reidy (2004). For the (ir)relevance of real-world political conditions in political philosophy on global justice, see Nagel (2005).

⁸ See note 2.

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