

Essay for GV4321 – “In your opinion, are Beitz’s claims for a ‘cosmopolitan international morality’ defensible?”

Introduction

When I began researching this essay I thought that the topic was very abstract and theoretical, and as I have continued with the work, I have come to realize that it is actually hugely relevant to contemporary world events. Social changes and advances in technology have meant that world society is increasingly interdependent and this requires shifts in both domestic political theory and also international relations theory. Charles Beitz wrote about this in his text “Political Theory and International Relations”¹. Beitz’s arguments were picked up and developed by the international relations theorist Stanley Hoffmann. He summarised this social change as a movement towards an “incipient cosmopolitanism, or man as a world citizen”². This concept of man as a “world citizen” is a very useful way of summarizing, in a phrase, the main meaning of Beitz’s argument for a cosmopolitan international morality. The term ‘cosmopolitan’ (as defined by the Oxford English dictionary) is someone that is

¹ Beitz, Charles R. 1979. Political Theory and International Relations. Princeton: Princeton University Press

² Hoffman, Stanley. 1981. Duties beyond borders: On the limits and possibilities of ethical international politics. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press. p95

“free from national limitations or prejudices”³. Now that I have provided an introduction to the key terms used, I can move onto the essay.

In this essay, I will be examining the key points of Beitz’s argument for a cosmopolitan international morality and comparing them with the views of other political theorists to provide a balanced view of whether they can be defended. I will conclude the essay with my own thoughts on whether Beitz’s claims are defensible. I will attempt to show that whilst Beitz’s position is well argued and coherent, it does not attempt to bridge the gap between his ideal theory and the real world. Beitz knows this and wrote in 1979 that his argument was “a critique and revision of orthodox views”⁴. He intended the theory to provide a starting point for a change in international relations.

Background to Beitz’s theory

When Beitz published his theory of cosmopolitan international morality, he intended it to provoke discussion and debate in the subject of international relations. As well as presenting his new theory of global relations, Beitz argued against two of the existing hegemonies in international relations. Firstly, he argued against the view that international politics existed in its current state as a state of nature. This view, which Beitz attributed primarily to Machiavelli and Hobbes, maintained that the relationships between countries such as inequalities and wars were natural and unchangeable. Beitz said that this was nonsense and

³ The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, © Oxford University Press 1996

⁴ Beitz, Charles. 1979. “Political Theory and International Relations” vii

believed that this communitarian view was responsible for the belief that nothing could be done about gross inequality between rich and poor countries amongst many philosophers and political writers. The second view that he wished to oppose was “the idea that states, like persons, have a right to be respected as autonomous entities”⁵.

Beitz opposed these two hegemonies using a mixture of existing thinking on moral cosmopolitanism and his own theories on international relations. To examine this closer I will use the analytical tool of three pictures.

Using ‘pictures’ to explore Beitz’s theory.

These three ‘pictures’ are a tool for examining the different aspects of a theory.

The three pictures are;

- picture of reason, which is concerned with how and what to think about ethical issues and which questions are relevant or irrelevant.
- picture of the subject, which is concerned with what it means to be ‘human’ and why we have moral values.
- picture of ethico-political space, which is concerned with where ethics takes place and what scope it has.

⁵ ibid. p69

If we now apply this theoretical framework to Beitz's theory, it becomes clearer what we are actually looking at when discussing the essay question. I will look at each of the pictures in turn.

The picture of reason in Beitz's theory of cosmopolitan international morality is concerned with how we as citizens of the world deal with global inequality. It raises issues of distribution as well as making us question how and why some people have lots of utility, whilst others have little. It is a theory based on ideal theory and therefore is criticized for its poor 'fit' with real world issues.

When looking at the picture of the subject, Beitz questions the world order and the reasons behind the seeming lack of interest in redressing inequality. He asks us questions so that we question ourselves and the views that we hold to be true. He challenges the hegemony of individual endeavor and asks what responsibilities we have to others, both nationally and internationally.

When we look at where Beitz's theory is located in ethico-political space we see that it is located globally, but acts locally through individuals. He thinks that we each have responsibilities globally and therefore does not think that it is pointless to formulate ideal theories to aspire to.

Now that I have examined the main parts of Beitz's theory I can continue to look at how it is derived.

Where the theory comes from.

Beitz draws heavily from the writing of a political philosopher called John Rawls. His work on moral cosmopolitanism is regarded as the national starting point for Beitz's international theories. Beitz applied Rawls' formulation of ideal theory to a global, rather than national sphere. Rawls' work was based on a requirement to "respect one another's status as ultimate units of moral concern – a requirement that imposes limits on our conduct"⁶. It says that people are free, but must not let their freedom impose on others. This basic idea fulfills both requirements of Forst's conditions of universal norms and rights⁷, reciprocity and universality. Firstly, one person asks no more of the other than he or she is willing to give (reciprocity) and everyone has good reasons for accepting them (universality). This last point is very important when considering applying Beitz's view to the real world. People are unlikely to subscribe to a way of life where they are forced to give up utility with no guarantee of receiving utility from others. To encourage redistribution amongst citizens of a state, the state must lay down guidelines of rules to facilitate this in the form of a social contract. This principal of sharing utility is easily theoretically applied within the confines of a state, with boundaries – both physical and legal. It is theoretically possible for individuals to see the results, both positive and negative, of their actions and therefore will not behave in a way that decreases other's liberty. But how can this work internationally? Beitz takes Rawls' work and adds a new theory that enables him to 'bypass' this concern.

⁶ Pogge, T.W. 1992. "Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty," *Ethics* 103(1): p49

⁷ Forst, Rainer. 1994. *Kontexte der Gerechtigkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, cited in Gosepath, Stefan. 2001. "The global scope of justice" *Metaphysics* 32 (Jan) 2001. p139

The 'moral point of view' and 'veil of ignorance'.

Beitz constructed a hypothetical viewpoint known as the “moral point of view”. He defined it as follows; the “moral point of view, requires us to regard the world from the perspective of one person amongst many rather than from that of a particular self with particular interests”⁸. This moral point of view is crucial to the theory of a cosmopolitan international morality. “There are occasions when we have reason to override the

This point of view forms part of Beitz’s ideal theory and means that individuals act in the interests of maximizing global utility rather than personal utility. Another part of ideal theory is the ‘veil of ignorance’. The term ‘veil of ignorance’ is used here to convey a state in which parties would not know their fortune in the distribution of natural resources and therefore are impartial and objective. So, using these two theoretical tools, Beitz constructs a theory of global independence far more advanced than currently exists. In practice, there is very little evidence of this existing. I will look at this in detail below.

National and International morality.

In Stephan Gosepath’s article, “The Global scope of Justice”, he asks “What is the scope of justice? Is justice global, universal, boundless?”⁹. Gosepath puts forward an ideal theory argument that justice is “immediately universal, and

⁸ Beitz, Charles R. 1979. Political Theory and International Relations. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p58

⁹ Gosepath, Stefan. 2001. “The global scope of justice” Metaphysics 32 (Jan) 2001. p135

therefore global”¹⁰ on the basis that human beings are all morally identical, “the ultimate moral principles, their form and content, has long been regarded as essentially invariant across people”¹¹, and all have an interest in global equality. This is a key issue in the debate over a cosmopolitan international morality. Do people in one country have any obligation to their fellow humans regardless which part of the world they live in? Beitz says “persons of diverse citizenship have distributive obligations to one another analogous to those citizens of the same state”. He assumes that the domestic and international realms are similar enough that a synthesis of political and international theory can generate international principles of justice. Beitz bases this on Rawls’ notion of a cooperative scheme within a state.

Before continuing to argue whether it is possible to apply this principle to an international context, I think that it would be valuable to look at some of the key points of why this theory works on a national basis. I will take an opinion from either side of the debate to illustrate Beitz’s supporters and critics.

Robert Goodin examines the relationship between fellow citizens and foreigners in his text “What is so special about Our Fellow Countrymen?”. He examines the effect of ‘special relationships’ on moral duties and asks whether “we have more and stronger positive duties toward those who stand in special relationships to us than we do the world at large”. He concludes that yes, we do have stronger duties to our fellow citizens but questions why this is the case. Goodin agrees with Beitz that the person is more important than the state “it is the boundaries

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Goodin, Robert. 1988. “What is so special about Our Fellow Countrymen?” *Ethics* 98 (July). p664

around people, not the boundaries around territories, that really matter morally”¹² but grudgingly concedes that citizens of a country feel obligations to their country, and their country to them. He compares this to a doctor with a list of patients, and says, “territorial boundaries are merely useful devices for ‘matching’ one person to one protector (country)”¹³.

Henry Sidgwick, a supporter of national ideal theory, takes the opposite view. He states that foreign policy should “promote the interests of a determinate group of human beings, bound together by the tie of a common nationality”¹⁴. The use of language such as ‘special relationships’ and ‘bound together’ suggests that we share some level of connection or intimacy with our fellow countrymen, or at least that there is more of a connection domestically than with foreigners. Beitz disagrees with this entirely; “discrimination on the basis of citizenship is like discrimination on the basis of race or sex”¹⁵. I would agree with this statement as it appears here, but can also see that practically that it is flawed. Most citizens of western countries would not deny that they should provide some aid to poorer nations, but how many would agree with helping homeless people in Africa instead of in their own countries. The key word in the last sentence is ‘instead’. It is very difficult to persuade people to redistribute wealth, when they are aware of the negative impact that it may have on their personal situation.

Beitz uses the veil of ignorance in these circumstances and his theory here is based more on idealism than realism. He extends the veil of ignorance to leaders

¹² Goodin, Robert. 1988. “What is so special about Our Fellow Countrymen?” *Ethics* 98 (July). p686

¹³ *ibid* p686

¹⁴ Sidgwick, Henry. 1919. *The Elements of Politics*. London: Macmillan, 4th ed. p309 cited in Beitz, Charles R. 1983. “Cosmopolitan Ideals and National Sentiment,” *Journal of Philosophy* 80:p592

¹⁵ Beitz, Charles R. 1983. “Cosmopolitan Ideals and National Sentiment,” *Journal of Philosophy* 80: p593

of countries and hypothesizes that if state leaders were acting in global rather than national interest, they would redistribute resources so that each society would have a “fair chance to develop just political institutions and an economy capable of satisfying its members’ basic needs”¹⁶. This is a position that is currently impossible in world politics – but what Beitz is trying to do is to make us ask, “What if?”. He points to increasing co-operation between nations, such as aid and foreign trade. There has also been an increase in the size and strength of supra-national bodies such as NATO and the United Nations. It could be argued that the increasing size and power of these bodies would mean that we are moving towards a scenario where a world government exists, but whether it would have enough legitimacy to redistribute wealth is an entirely different and very complex question. The signs aren’t too positive, global interdependence is currently rather unidirectional, i.e. the poorer countries are reliant upon the richer nations to provide support and aid, but the richer nations do not have any reliance on the poorer states.

Nigel Dower looks at the same issue in a slightly different way and does not suggest that wealth distribution for the sake of global equality is the answer. Rather he talks of a “collective prudence”¹⁷ which will guide our actions to avoid storing up “trouble on a global scale”. This is a form of collectivism, albeit a very mild version that is more concerned with protecting world welfare as a way of protecting your own personal welfare. This is a more moderate view.

¹⁶ Beitz, Charles R. 1979. *Political Theory and International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p61

¹⁷ Dower, Nigel. 1998. *World Ethics – The new agenda*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press. p7

Conclusion

The main questions in this debate are how similar the national and international realms of politics are and whether principles and institutions common to domestic politics can be used in international relations. Beitz states that the “main difference between international relations and domestic society is the absence in the former case (*international relations*) of effective decision making institutions”¹⁸ (*italics mine*). It is currently impossible to establish a supra national governing body because of the existence of anarchy as a distinguishing feature of the international sphere. Beitz does not believe this hampers his theory as it is based on being possible in the future. But how do we get from the current international situation of anarchy to a system that is ordered enough to sustain a cosmopolitan international morality? A national principle of redistribution that works through a central body cannot be transferred to the international sphere where anarchy prevents the creation of a central redistributive body. To put it another way; if you believe, that anarchy is a feature of international society, then you cannot also believe that a fully co-operative international society is ever possible.

¹⁸ Beitz, Charles R. 1979. *Political Theory and International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p155

To conclude, I return to the original question, “are Beitz’s claims for a ‘cosmopolitan international morality’ defensible” and then pose another one, “what is meant by defensible?”.

The central problem of the work is one of feasibility and realization. There is a disjunctive, unidirectional relationship between Beitz’s ideal theory and the real world, i.e. you can theoretically apply ideal theory to the real world but cannot apply characteristics of the real world to ideal theory. Beitz intended his theories to be idealist and something to aspire to and as such are very easy to pick holes in. Many philosophers have criticised the inconsistent use of grammar and the lack of any real attempt to link his theories to the real world and these are valid points. Beitz’s theory is defensible in that it may be the beginning of a process of consolidation of international principles of justice which will improve net world welfare and utility. However, it must be also noted that some of the ideal theory will never cross over to reality. The veil of ignorance, whilst a useful construct, can never be created or sustained and therefore people’s decisions will always be made (to a greater or lesser extent) with their own welfare in mind. People are naturally more concerned with self-preservation above overall world welfare and therefore I must conclude that Beitz’s theory is theoretically useful as a construct of ideal theory, but practically useless.

Bibliography

- Beitz, Charles R. 1979. Political Theory and International Relations. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Beitz, Charles R. 1980. "Nonintervention and communal integrity". Philosophy and Public Affairs 9(4) p385-391
- Beitz, Charles R. 1983. "Cosmopolitan Ideals and National Sentiment," Journal of Philosophy 80: p591-9
- Dower, Nigel. 1998. World Ethics – The new agenda. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press.
- Forst, Rainer. 1994. Kontexte der Gerechtigkeit. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Goodin, Robert. 1988. "What is so special about Our Fellow Countrymen?" Ethics 98 (July).
- Gosepath, Stefan. 2001. "The global scope of justice" Metaphysics 32 (Jan) 2001.
- Hoffman, Stanley. 1981. Duties beyond borders: On the limits and possibilities of ethical international politics. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press
- Hutchings, Kimberly. 1999. International Political Theory. London: Sage.
- Pin-Fat, Veronique. 1997. "Charles Beitz: From a moral point of view- ideal theory in a non-ideal world," Ethics and the Limits of Language in International Relations Theory: A Grammatical Investigation. 5: p184-222
- Pogge, T.W. 1992. "Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty," Ethics 103(1): p48-75.
- Thompson, Janna. 1992. Justice and World Order: A Philosophical Enquiry. London: Routledge
-
-

-
-