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WORLD POVERTY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

Nicole Hassoun

Most people know that the extent of world poverty is staggering.[1] Many do not believe that we are obligated to do anything about it. Often those who resist the idea that we are obligated to help the global poor are concerned about the freedom of individuals to live their lives. They believe that no one should be required to sacrifice her freedom for another person. This paper argues that it is precisely because no one should be required to sacrifice her freedom for others that we have a prima facie obligation to enable all people to meet their basic needs. It defends each premise of what we can call the *Argument from Autonomy* in turn.

The *Argument from Autonomy* might be summarized roughly as follows:

1) There is a coercive global institutional system.

2) Because this system deeply impacts the lives of individuals and communities in morally significant ways, we are obligated to ensure that it is legitimate.

3) For any coercive institutional system to be even *minimally* legitimate, as many of those subject to the system as possible must be able to autonomously agree to live under it.

4) For most people to be able to autonomously agree to live under an institutional system, they must be able to preserve the integrity of their body and mind.

5) Since it is not possible to tell which individuals will be capable of autonomously agreeing to live under an institutional system without being able to preserve this integrity, legitimate institutional systems must enable all of their subjects to do so.

6) The ability to preserve the integrity of one's body and mind requires that one is able to meet one's basic needs.

C) So we are, prima facie, obligated to ensure that the global institutional system enables all people to meet their basic needs.[2]

Let us now turn to the defense of this argument.

1. The First and Second Premises of the Argument from Autonomy

Let us say that an *institution* is an entity that creates, enforces, or arbitrates between norms, rules, or procedures governing interaction between social orders or individuals (Buchanan 1990, p. 2).[3] A group of institutions, in combination with the rules that support and constrain them, constitute an *institutional system.* Institutions and rules *coercively constrain* the actions of individuals or groups when those violating their dictates are likely to face sanctions for the violation.[4]

Global markets, bodies of governance (like the U.N.), and legal institutions (like the World Court) are part of the global institutional system. These institutions and rules coercively constrain individuals' actions. Global markets, for example, rely on there being an enforceable system of property rights and rules of trade. Institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), in combination with national governments, enforce these rules. When an institutional system contains many coercive institutions or rules, we can say that the system is coercive. There is, thus, a coercive global institutional system. This is the first premise of the Argument from Autonomy.[5]

The second premise of the Argument from Autonomy asserts that we have an obligation to ensure that the global institutional system is legitimate because it deeply impacts the lives of individuals and communities. International institutions not only "reflect, but also actively shape communities" (Hurrell 2001, p. 37). The character of a community is formed in part by the social and political institutions of that community. For example, communities under global communism would probably be very different from communities under global capitalism. Global institutions, like national institutions, also shape in a fundamental way the character and aims of every individual, "the kinds of persons they are and aspire to be" (Rawls 1993, p. 68). Each choice of basic institutional structure will favor some natural talents over others. One's ability to contribute to a scheme of social cooperation at all depends on what cooperative framework is in place (Buchanan 1990, p. 237). Because of these impacts, we are obligated to make sure that the global institutional system is legitimate.[6]

2. The Third Premise of the Argument from Autonomy

Many things might be required for legitimacy. At a minimum, as many of those subject to the rules of an institutional system *as possible* must be able to autonomously agree to those rules, for the system to be legitimate. Institutional legitimacy does not require that *everyone* subject to an institutional system be capable of autonomy because some people could not be autonomous under any system. People in permanent comas and small children, for example, could not be autonomous no matter how their institutional systems were structured.[7] Nor does legitimacy require that autonomous agreement be reachable in practice. It may be impossible to ask all individuals whether or not they agree to the rules of the global institutional system. Rather, a legitimate system need only be one to which all its subjects are *able* to agree, *if they could be autonomous under some implementable institutional system.*[8] This is the third premise of the Argument from Autonomy.

This criterion for institutional legitimacy is recognizably contractualist. It is similar to Rawls's liberal principle of legitimacy and Kant's idea of the original contract. Rawls believes that the basic structure of society must be such that people could rationally agree to it (Rawls 1993, p. 137). Kant argues that the basic law or original contract "can come only from the general, united will of the people" (Kant 1990, part II). He continues: "[I]f the law is such that a whole people could not *pos-*

sibly agree to it . . . it is unjust; but if it is at least *possible* that a people could agree to it, it is our duty to consider the law as just, even if the people is at present in such a position or attitude of mind that it would probably refuse its consent if it were consulted" (Kant 1990, part II). This is what allows people to retain their freedom and exercise their autonomy.

Some of the ways that the criterion for institutional legitimacy advanced here differs from Rawls's and Kant's principles are worth emphasizing. For example, it is obvious, but important to note, that our criterion for institutional legitimacy, unlike Kant and Rawls's criteria, has global scope. Furthermore, our criterion may require more than Rawls's criterion for legitimacy. On our criterion, whether or not people are asked to agree to an institutional system, as many of those subject to the system as possible must be *able* to autonomously agree to it. If Rawls's principle is interpreted in a way consistent with the original position argument, an institutional system may merely need to be structured so that it warrants agreement. It is not clear that the people need to be capable of freely agreeing to an institutional system on Rawls's theory even if they are asked. Finally, unlike Kant's criterion for institutional legitimacy, our criterion does not say that subjects' ability to agree to an institutional system is sufficient for legitimacy.[9] It is only *necessary* that an institutional system be structured so that as many people as possible are able to freely agree to that system. Though, one could add the sufficiency claim to the criterion for institutional legitimacy advanced here if one believes it is plausible.[10]

3. The Final Premises and the Conclusion of the Argument from Autonomy

Individuals subject to the force of the global institutional system must be able to secure autonomy in order for the global institutional system to be legitimate.[11] Because there are many ways of trying to account for the kind of autonomy at issue, we must consider some criteria for theory choice. We can start with a few criteria suggested in the literature on autonomy. Gerald Dworkin, for example, holds that a good theory of autonomy should be logically consistent, and empirically possible. Onora O'Neill claims that a good theory should explain why physically unconstrained people who are coerced, compelled, or manipulated as well as those in chains lack autonomy. O'Neill also holds that autonomy should be compatible with the values of interdependence and care that many feminists and communitarians extol (O'Neill 2000, p. 30).

Finally, a good theory of autonomy must avoid the "regress problem" to which Harry Frankfurt and Gerald Dworkin's "higher-order" theories of autonomy are subject (Wolf 1989). Frankfurt and Dworkin claim that, to be autonomous, one must endorse the beliefs, desires, goals, and values that one has (henceforth "desires"). This endorsement must not be alien to the individual (Dworkin 1989, p. 61). But what happens if, at a higher level, one rejects one's second-order desires (the desires that affirm one's first order desires)? In this case, it seems that one's first order desires can not be autonomous. Unfortunately, it is not plausible to claim that one's endorsement itself must always be endorsed. It is psychologically impossible for a single person to have an infinite number of desires. Nor can Dworkin or Frankfurt respond that one's highest level desires must just endorse the desires one level down. For, then, someone might ask: Why is this endorsement itself rationally justified?

One theory of autonomy that sidesteps the regress problem and fulfills the above criteria might be called the *rationality theory of autonomy*. The rationality theory holds that the majority of one's desires must be the result of deliberation and that at least the general

structure of one's desires must be sanctioned by reason (i.e., justified). To be autonomous, one must be a genuinely reflective person who has some degree of success in organizing one's desires. Otherwise, one may be constantly suffering from weakness of will or torn apart by inner conflict. To see why this is required, consider the case of Tamil. Tamil wants to be a teacher. She is committed to doing whatever it takes to teach in the local school. She also wants to watch TV twenty-four hours a day. She has not thought about these desires and ranked them in order of importance. Perhaps she will not be able to decide what to do. Perhaps she will spend her time going back and forth between her books and her television. No matter what she does, she will have reason to regret her decision. Her desires are like cars on city streets going this way and that but she lacks any traffic signals (Feinberg 1973, pp. 14–15). She lacks rules with which she can direct her desires. Tamil is not autonomous.

Of course, neither perfect coherence nor complete endorsement of all of the details of the structure of one's desires is required for autonomy. That would be empirically unrealistic. Furthermore, such a requirement would not buy one much: One could be hypnotized to have a perfectly coherent set of desires. One could be brainwashed to endorse all of one's desires, as well as the structure of one's desires.

One does not even need to consciously reflect on all of one's desires in order to be autonomous. Some desires of even the most autonomous people are not even conscious, never mind sanctioned by reason. For example, some trivial desires to smile or use the bathroom may not be the subject of reflection. Such desires do not need to be justified for one to be autonomous. Rather, they must merely be confirmable by reason; were they considered they would be found to be justified.

Even some of one's important desires do not need to be considered by reason for one to be autonomous. Such desires are foundational. They are central constituents of one's self. The self is composed of "basic cognitive organizing principles and fundamental assumptions and convictions together with the desires that constitute [one's] . . . deepest, most significant goals, concerns, commitments and values" (Noggle 2005, p. 101). Presumably, many foundational desires are desires for the objects of one's basic needs. Other plausible candidates are desires for things which bring purpose to one's life.

Even if some desires were originally given to one by an outside source, one might still be free with respect to those desires if they have become *integrated* into one's self (Christman 1989, Watson 1989). One might test whether any given desire is integrated by considering how one would feel if one acted on that desire. Would one's having acted on the desire *just be* one's acting (Christman 1989)? Feeling a sense of whole-heartedness in expressing the desire is, at least, indicative of its foundational status.

Affirmed foundational desires are those to which other desires must normally cohere (Noggle 2005, p. 101). They are used to justify other desires or would be so used if the process of justification were embarked upon and continued for long enough. Foundational desires are important to autonomy because there is no way one could be hypnotized to have such desires.[12]

Autonomy, on the rationality theory, will not "conflict with emotional ties to others, with commitments to causes, with authority, tradition, expertise, leadership, and so forth" (Dworkin 1989, p. 59). Nor are the values of community, care, and interdependence in tension with such reasoned evaluation. One might reasonably accept the example or traditions that one's culture, parents, role models, or leaders have provided, perhaps on the basis of one's emotional ties or com-

mitments to these traditions or individuals. Alternately, such beliefs may form the evaluative framework of desires with which one identifies. They may be foundational. Though we should not let some emotions (e.g., deadly rage) influence our actions, we must take our emotions into account to live autonomously.[13] It is important to take emotions into account in order to attain the peace of mind necessary for really having a life at all.[14]

In fact, for most people to do much of anything other than think about the state of their stomach, they must be fed. In order to do much, besides worry about survival, most people must have shelter and bodily integrity. The radically poor are likely to lack such things. They are likely to suffer from disabilities like frequent sickness and malnutrition. These disabilities can prevent normal development and clear reasoning and thus function as road blocks to autonomy.[15]

Those without elementary education and a diversity of experience may not gain the tools necessary for avoiding such disabilities. They may be unable to develop the skills and status they require to gain employment, receive loans, and get assistance in times of need. Radically poor children often lack access to decent education and broad experience. They are likely to be kept home from school to work. They may, thus, be unable to keep up with their peers or fail to learn well. Because they are often hungry and ill, the radically poor can have trouble learning well even when they do get a basic education and broad experience. Their ability to live autonomous lives is correspondingly threatened.

Furthermore, some disabilities can engender others. Without the money to pay for education, parents may not be able to send their children to school. Families may have to sacrifice food and essential medicines to pay for education or shelter. They may have to sacrifice education or shelter for food and essential medicines. If fewer of their basic needs are met, the chance that the radically poor will be disabled is greater. Their ability to lead autonomous lives may be imperiled.

When bodily integrity is threatened, mental and emotional integrity may be threatened as well. Even when the radically poor are not disabled, the fear of becoming disabled may itself interfere with individuals' ability to live autonomous lives. In order for most people to think with clarity about the future, to pursue anything beyond their next meal, they must be confident that they can preserve the integrity of their bodies and minds. Most people must be able to attain the objects of their basic needs in order to be capable of living autonomously.[16] As Nietzsche said, "the belly is the reason why man does not so readily take himself for a God" (Nietzsche 1989, p. 96).

Finally, poverty can threaten self-esteem. Poor people sometimes start to think badly of themselves just because they are poor, unskilled, or disparaged by others. If one thinks that one is worthless, one may fail to give one's desires due weight. One might look to supplicate oneself to other (richer) people in the hopes of attaining sustenance (as beggars do). In supplicating one's self, one may be unable to live autonomously apart from the desires of others. It is often the case that "without minimal standards of subsistence, agency itself fails" (O'Neill 2000, p. 134). Those who are incapable of autonomy may fail to have a life of their own. Legitimate institutions must provide safeguards against such possibilities.

Of course, I do not mean to claim that all radically poor people are ruled by their stomachs, incapable of reason, subject to the will of others, or unable to consent to institutional rule. Nonetheless, it is important to take seriously how an individual's ability to develop and maintain autonomy can be undermined by severe deprivation (O'Neill 2000, p. 167). Some people are able to secure autonomy without being able to preserve the integrity of their body and mind; without being able

to meet their basic needs. Nonetheless, when they are malnourished and in poor health, it is not psychologically possible for most people to do so. We cannot tell ahead of time who will be able to secure autonomy without being able to preserve the integrity of their body and mind, without being able to meet their basic needs. So we are, prima facie, obligated to implement a global institutional system that enables all people to meet their basic needs. As Ghandi's Talisman says, we should work to enable the poor to control their own lives and destinies; we should secure "'swaraj' or self-rule for the hungry" (Pyarelal 1958, p. 65).

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NOTES

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2. While it is probably strictly impossible to make anyone autonomous, institutions can be structured such that they enable people to develop autonomy. Institutional systems must at least provide one way for everyone to attain the material conditions for autonomy (e.g., food, water, and basic medical care). Teachers and parents surely do much more than this, and yet, we believe that some people raised by parents and educated by teachers can be autonomous. In fact, it is probably not enough for institutional systems to keep open only one avenue by which individuals can meet their basic needs. Those who are hungry will often do whatever is necessary to get food. If they are not able to get food in a legitimate way, they will often turn to crime, terrorism, or other unethical means of attaining sustenance. In order for institutional systems to be legitimate, they must enable all of their subjects to become autonomous in a legitimate way.

3. The institutions I am concerned with are embodied in formal organizations and are part of a comprehensive social system (akin to John Rawls's basic structure). A comprehensive social system is a legal, political, or economic system that governs the distribution of fundamental duties and rights, advantages and disadvantages that result from social interaction (Rawls 1993; Pogge 1989). I do not intend the term *institution* to refer to entities like the American Tennis Association.

4. See Hassoun 2008a, 2008b for further discussion.

5. The author defends the first few premises of the Argument from Autonomy at some length elsewhere. See, for instance, Hassoun, 2008a, 2008b.

6. Who is responsible for bringing about the requisite institutional changes will depend, in part, on what changes are required. At a general level we might say that the relatively affluent members of the world's population who inaugurate, uphold, or are in a position to change the global institutional system are responsible for doing so. Further discussion of responsibility is beyond the scope of this paper. Interested readers can see Pogge 1989, 2002.

7. Some of those in comas might recover with good medical care. A legitimate institutional system must enable these people to become autonomous enough to agree to the system. Similarly, most children who

receive proper care will be able to autonomously agree to an institutional system as they get older. Any legitimate institutional system must secure this ability for these children when they are old enough.

8. There are at least two reasons, beyond the value of the ability to autonomously consent, that this might be the case. First, the ability to secure autonomy has intrinsic value. Second, the ability to secure autonomy has instrumental value. Individuals need to have this ability in order to create and maintain a view of the good life. Individuals must be able to create and maintain a view of the good life in order to develop and exercise their talents, to live a worthwhile life (Feinberg 1989, p. 48). For further defense of this premise also see Hassoun 2008a.

9. Other conditions may need to be satisfied for an institutional system to be legitimate. If there are other conditions, questions arise about how to satisfy different principles for legitimacy. Further inquiry into these matters must be left for another time, however.

10. One might worry that even the kind of theory we have given is too demanding. There are two things to say on this account. First, the principles that individuals must be able to accept may be disjoint. We might follow Kant in holding that the principles can be agreed to in a piece-meal fashion. Agreement may only need to be possible with respect to coercive laws rather than to the whole structure of the global institutional system. Alternately, we might require only that individuals are able to agree to the general structure of the system. They need not be able to agree to the whole system. Unfortunately, consideration of such possibilities starts to take us far afield. The interested reader can refer to Kant and Rawls's discussions which are relevant to this issue. See Kant 1973, Rawls 1993.

11. Autonomy probably comes in degrees but, because it is easier to talk of autonomy simpliciter, we can use this locution. The reader should keep in mind the fact that we are concerned here only with autonomy sufficient to allow free agreement to institutional systems.

12. One's foundational desires might change over time. Desires that were originally foundational might lose their foundational status. If such desires could not then be rationally justified, and one continued to act on them, one would lose some of one's autonomy. Such desires are no longer part of one's true self.

13. Of course, nothing we have said precludes people from being autonomous but immoral.

14. See Rachels and Ruddick 1989 for defense of the idea that autonomy is constitutive of having a life.

15. Because autonomous consent requires even more than autonomy simpliciter, the radically poor may be even less able to agree to a global institutional system. If they lack education, for instance, they may not even know about the existence of global institutions.

16. Harder questions about what autonomy requires are considered by Joseph Raz in *The Morality of Freedom.* He considers the case of a man trapped in a pit with enough food and water to survive. The man is precluded from doing anything besides choosing when to meet his basic needs. It would be reasonable to think that with such constrained options such a person is not autonomous, but even if one does not accept this much, the Argument from Autonomy may still go through. Raz's hounded woman who is trapped on an island and must constantly avoid being killed by a hungry carnivorous animal would, however, probably lack autonomy on the rationality theory. Her mind may be so pre-occupied that she would lack even the ability for minimal endorsement of her desires (Raz 1998, chap. 14).

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