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Against Institutional Conservatism

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‘Nobody appeared to have the least idea that there was any other system but
the system to be considered.’

CHARLES DICKENS, *DAVID COPPERFIELD*

Abstract

In this article, I argue against institutional conservatism, and the reluctance to include radical changes to important institutions within normative principles for fear of losing practical significance. In making this argument, I will focus on the debate on global justice, in which the issue is especially clear due to the greater potential effects of radical institutional changes. My main target, then, is theorists who are institutionally conservative regarding the institutional system of nation-states (Blake 2001, 2013; James 2005, 2012; Risse 2012). Although, these theorists are institutionally conservative for (somewhat) different reasons, they all face significant and potentially debilitating problems in guiding action towards the fulfillment of their own moral commitments. Here, I focus on institutionally conservative arguments for (only) a low level of global redistribution. The problem arises because the continued existence of the current system of nation-states and the lack of international institutions with significant coercive powers present a significant obstacle to realizing their principled commitment to alleviating the basic needs of foreigners. As I will phrase it here, institutionally conservative theorists end up in a dilemma, the escape from which involves significantly weakening either their institutional conservatism or their normative priorities.

Keywords: global justice; institutional conservatism; nation states; global institutions; basic needs

1. Introduction

Some political theorists maintain that we have good reasons not to rely on radical institutional changes when theorizing about what people ought to do; when constructing normative principles. If we do, they claim, our principles will be unable to speak to actual political agents living their lives and acting *embedded* in these institutional practices. Or, to put it in positive terms, ‘institutionally conservative’ political theorists

hold that normative principles should be *action-guiding* in a sense that involves not straying too far from significant institutions by which the lives of political agents are currently organized – or rather, by which they are likely to *keep* being organized for the foreseeable future. This is because, if principles stray too far from this setup, acting on them will be blocked by major institutional obstacles and, thus, fulfilling the principles will not be action-guiding in a meaningful sense. This, of course, is not the case for all institutions that currently exist (presumably not, for example, the local darts club), but only those that both play an *important* role in human lives and are *entrenched* in human interaction.

In this article, I argue against institutional conservatism, and the reluctance to include radical changes to important institutions within normative principles for fear of losing practical significance. In making this argument, I will focus on the debate on global justice, in which the issue is especially clear due to the potential effects of great institutional changes. My main target, then, is theorists who are institutionally conservative regarding the institutional system of nation-states (Blake 2001, 2013; James 2005, 2012; Risse 2012). Although, these theorists are institutionally conservative for (somewhat) different reasons, I claim that they all face significant and potentially debilitating problems in guiding action towards the fulfillment of their *own* moral commitments. In other words, their principles are not action-guiding when measured by their own standards.

Centering on the debate on global justice, I focus on institutionally conservative arguments *against* comprehensive, global redistribution ('institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitanism'). The problem arises, I claim, because the continued existence of the current system of nation-states and the lack of international institutions with significant coercive powers present a significant obstacle to realizing their principled commitment to alleviating the basic needs of foreigners. As I will phrase it here, institutionally conservative theorists end up in a dilemma, the escape from which involves significantly weakening *either* their institutional conservatism *or* their normative priorities.

The strength and nature of this dilemma depends on *how* conservative one is with respect to the current institutional system. It depends, for example, on whether one

believes that a theory can still be action-guiding even if it proposes *some* radical changes to important and entrenched institutions as long as the institutions themselves are preserved or if *no* such changes are compatible with this goal. In most of its theoretical manifestations, institutional conservatism is most plausibly read as allowing for a relatively low degree of radical change. For the purpose of this article and to avoid charges of misrepresentation, however, I will conduct my analysis with two different degrees of such ‘institutional adjustability,’ and claim that *even if* institutional conservatism were to be understood in a way that allowed for *some* radical changes to current institutions, they would still run into the dilemma. I do this because it is not entirely clear how much change is actually within the scope of institutional conservatism, and so, I aim to show that understanding institutional conservatism in *either* of these two ways leads to the dilemma described above. Finally, I consider some institutionally conservative replies to this charge.

The objections made above, if true, have important consequences for institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitan arguments as they seem obligated to recast their arguments or provide new reasons in support of their cause. To make this argument, however, some of the central concepts upon which it rests must first be explained.

2. Institutional Conservatism: facts and feasibility

Institutionally conservative theorists hold that normative principles should be adjusted to the way in which certain, major institutions *currently* present themselves in the world. The institutions in question, which institutionally conservative theorists claim should be incorporated in our principles, are what I shall call ‘soft facts’. To elaborate, such features are ‘soft’ because they are based not on biological or logical necessities (e.g. that human beings need nutrition, that squirrels have tails, or that *Abbey Road* by The Beatles was released in 1969 – all of which, are ‘hard facts’), but are created and upheld through human action.¹ Note that I take this to be descriptively neutral, claiming only that soft facts are those that are contingent on human behavior, relations, and attitudes, while hard facts are those that are not.

Furthermore, they are ‘facts’ because while they are upheld by human action, they are *entrenched in human life* —that is, they play a significant role in the everyday lives of many people, framing and influencing their choices and views, and while they *could* be

changed, doing so would require great effort. Again, I use this in a neutral sense, which is compatible with the institutionally conservative understanding, according to which it is very unlikely that such institutions will change anytime soon and that doing so would lead to unforeseeable consequences. Institutionally conservative theorists emphasize the importance of aligning normative principles with the current design of ‘soft facts’ in guiding societies and individuals under present circumstances (as these facts are unlikely to change).

They might be contrasted with *idealists*, who hold that we should abstract from soft facts when developing normative principles, emphasizing questions about which institutions we *ought* to have, regardless of the current state of affairs (Caney 2005; Tan 2004). For the purpose of this article, the main part of my analysis will revolve around two specific soft facts, to which the institutionally conservative theorists I target all agree that we should adjust our theories: the existence of a system of strong nation-states and the absence of strong, international institutions.

To elaborate on this methodological difference, it may be worth reflecting on a distinction made by David Estlund between theories that are ‘aspirational’ and those that are ‘concessive’ (Estlund 2008, Chap. 9; Hamlin & Stemplowska 2012). These theories differ not in whether their requirements would *ever* be fulfilled, but in the plausibility of this happening and epistemic certainty of the outcome if it does *given the current context*, and in whether or not to adjust to such factors. Concessive theories *concede* certain (soft) facts about people, institutions, and societies, and how they are *likely* to work and act and continue to work and act. Thus, for example, a concessive theorist might claim that we will most likely continue to have nation-states and know little about alternative setups, and that, due to the improbability of this changing we should construct normative principles using this as a pretheoretical assumption. Institutionally conservative theorists advocate concessive principles.

Aspirational theories, on the other hand, are not adjusted to soft facts that are likely to endure, and set up principles that people ought to live up to even if they are currently not complying and are unlikely to do so (due to these soft facts). This is the position held by idealists from which institutional conservatives distance themselves. Importantly, for understanding this criticism, aspirational theories do not set standards that *cannot* be

met, although they may set ones that are *unlikely* to be met given that they are not adjusted to how people and institutions currently work and act.²

In this article, I will claim that institutionally conservative theorists (and particularly, institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans) propose principles that are infeasible in exactly the sense that their achievement is unlikely in any immediate future, and that this is due to the static role they ascribe to soft facts in their action-guidance.³

Concessive theorists, as the institutionally conservative ones examined in this article, concede the institutional setup in order to increase the feasibility and epistemic reliability of the implementation of their principles – and claim that *only* principles which are implementable in this way can be action-guiding. Idealists, on the other hand, concede hard facts, but not soft ones when establishing normative principles. Idealist principles are not action-guiding according to institutionally conservative theorists, because the *implementation* of their principles is infeasible given the current political and social context.

This infeasibility should be understood in a broad sense as meaning both that political agents are unable to act on idealist principles since the actions prescribed are obstructed by weighty political and institutional *obstacles* and that such principles involve a high degree of *epistemic uncertainty* (or lack of assurance), which entails that the risk involved makes them infeasible for agents to act upon (Blake 2001, 262, 2013, 4 and 112; and James 2012, chap. 4, 2013, 58-59; Risse 2012, chap. 16, respectively). As mentioned, I will show that institutionally conservative theorists fail to live up to this desideratum themselves.

While these approaches differ in their justifications for institutional conservatism (I will spell out and analyze these differences below), they converge on two elements which are the ones that are important for this analysis: they agree that theorists should treat the current setup of nation-states as a given, and that we have basic obligations to poor foreigners. And they do so because abstracting from these facts would make their theories non-action-guiding. I will argue, however, that institutionally conservative theorists cannot avoid the action-guidance problems they ascribe to ideal theorists and that they are, in fact, subject to their own critique.

3. Institutionally Conservative Non-cosmopolitanism

As mentioned, I will exemplify my more general point by focusing on institutional conservatism in the debate on global justice. More specifically, since institutionally conservative theorists almost exclusively sit on one side of the global justice debate chamber, I will be concerned with theories of *non-cosmopolitanism*, as opposed to *cosmopolitan* theories. I shall use ‘non-cosmopolitan’ to describe theories that hold that our only *positive* obligations to non-compatriots are to ensure the fulfillment of the means to a minimally decent life or their *basic needs* while our redistributive duties to compatriots are significantly stronger.⁴ I will use ‘cosmopolitan,’ on the other hand, to describe theories that claim that our positive obligations to poor foreigners involve securing *significantly more* than basic needs fulfillment—i.e. human flourishing, equality of opportunity, or raising everyone above a high threshold of sufficiency.

Institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitan theories hold both a methodological point and an implicit (and indeed often explicit), substantive critique of cosmopolitan theorists. From the institutionally conservative point of view, then, cosmopolitan theorists are seen as asserting principles that are methodologically *unable* to guide actual political action (although, as we saw, it is more precise to say that they do so *in an aspirational way*), since they are not informed by current social practices to a sufficient degree. If we wish to offer present-day guidance to agents in such circumstances, they claim, we must adjust our normative principles to this reality. And this is, to a large extent, *why* the substantive conclusions reached by cosmopolitans about our strong, redistributive obligations to non-compatriots are seen as misguided (Blake 2001, 261-266, 2013, 44-49; James 2012, chap. 4; and Risse 2012, chap. 16).⁵

Note here that I am not disputing the normative criterion that we owe only basic need fulfillment to foreigners, the empirical one claiming that this criterion actually pertains to the global sphere due to its current setup, nor the notion that normative principles should be action-guiding in the sense favored by institutional conservatives.⁶ Instead, my claim is that conceding these particular institutional soft facts in one’s theories with the purpose of guiding political action is at odds with attempting to guide action towards the fulfillment of basic obligations to foreigners.

Recall that this is with the institutionally conservative understanding of action-guiding in mind. On this view, principles are not action-guiding when the actions they prescribe are obstructed by weighty political and institutional obstacles. Institutional conservatism, thus, conflicts with non-cosmopolitan obligations to fulfill basic needs in exactly this way; the continued existence of strong nation states and the absence of strong, international institutions constitute weighty obstacles to the universal fulfillment of basic needs. This constitutes a dilemma, and escaping this (and avoiding incoherence), entails choosing one of two options.

Either, they can insist on institutional conservatism and *concede the existence and absence of the relevant institutions in their principles* (allowing for either of the two degrees of institutional adjustability mentioned below). This way, they can uphold the argument that their theories are more closely aligned with present-day circumstances, and thus, better able to guide political action than idealist, cosmopolitan theories, which abstract from such features. However, by insisting on institutional conservatism, as I will show, they must renounce being action-guiding regarding basic obligations towards poor foreigners as this is infeasible by their own standards, exposing themselves to the critique that their view is implausibly dismissive on this point.

Alternatively, they can stand firm on the importance of their self-professed goal of *alleviating basic needs deficiencies*. But guiding action towards this would mean severely weakening their constraints on which principles should be proposed, and thus, weakening their action-guidance argument against cosmopolitans. If non-cosmopolitans choose this second horn of the dilemma, they are able to coherently maintain their claim that we have action-guiding basic obligations to poor foreigners – that is, ones that are not obstructed by weighty political and institutional obstacles – but at the cost of weakening the maxim at the heart of their critique of cosmopolitanism considerably; that normative principles must be adjusted to the present setup of institutions in order to actually guide action.

3.1. Institutional non-cosmopolitanism

One cluster of non-cosmopolitan theorists grounds their arguments in the way in which institutions are structured and arranged. We might call this type of argument an *institutional disanalogy* argument, arguing that the domestic and the global sphere are

non-analogous with respect to obligations of justice (Caney 2001, 118). Not all such arguments are explicitly institutionally conservative, however, so for the purpose of this paper, I focus on the accounts of Michael Blake (2001 and 2012), Mathias Risse (2006 and 2012), and Aaron James (2005, 2012, and 2013). In the outline below, I attempt to depict the commonalities of these three accounts in order to make it (and my ensuing criticism) representative of the broader group of institutionally based non-cosmopolitan theories. I take it, however, that my analysis can bring important insights regarding many non-cosmopolitan accounts that rely more *implicitly* on conservative assumptions about the current institutional setup, suggesting that they ought to explicitly reject institutional conservatism.⁷

Institutional non-cosmopolitans generally affirm the non-cosmopolitan tenet that our redistributive obligations to compatriots are comprehensive (giving rise to a concern with relative deprivation), while our global redistributive obligations are only at a basic level, claiming that: ‘There is, I think, a threshold to decent human functioning [...] It seems to be a matter of moral gravity whenever we might prevent someone from falling below that line and fail to do so.’ (Blake 2001, 260. See also Blake 2013, 80, James 2005, Risse 2012, chap. 2). Although the theories differ somewhat in their specifics, they converge on the fact that the difference is due to people sharing a state, which places them in a particular relationship. A relationship, in which the state is charged with ensuring that its citizens have the possibility of pursuing good, autonomous lives, thus, playing an especially significant role in people’s prospects. No institutions on the global stage have comparable significance. It is this normative property; that people are co-engaged in relations that ensure their possibility of pursuing autonomous lives, which makes obligations between co-citizens comprehensive – and it is the lack of this feature that makes obligations between non-citizens merely basic.

To spell this out, Blake holds that there is, then, an important difference between the national and the global realm in that national institutions *coerce* their citizens—or rather, the citizens of a (democratic) nation *coerce each other* in a way that potentially undermines autonomy (Blake 2001, 265 & 279-282, 2013, 91-94 & 102-107). Some form of institutional coercion is necessary, however, since it makes autonomous lives possible by upholding a just system of rules and laws, which ‘seem necessary for the settled expectations without which autonomy is denied’ (Blake 2001, 280).⁸ To avoid that

domestic coercion undermines autonomy, co-citizens have a special claim on each other for a system of law and a distributive scheme that can justify the coercion that upholds it—i.e. one that is concerned with relative deprivation. Under the current institutional order, such justification is possible since nation-states *can* promote autonomy due to their inescapable impact on their inhabitants and relatively effective enforcement.

On James' account, the obligations that arise internationally stem from economic interactions across borders, which are embedded in the nation-state system. Nation-states engage in international economic relations with an expectance of mutual economic gains, and it is because of this relation that international obligations emerge – an obligation, that is, that such gains are distributed fairly. The global economy is not 'a well-integrated market akin to advanced-country economies, and, for all we now know, it may never become one' (James 2012, 22). More fundamentally, it is not the same kind of practice as the one that is present in the domestic sphere, the goal of which is to create primary social goods (James 2005, 300, 2012, 15). For James, it is the different logics and aims of the two practices that render the ensuing obligations different – in one, the purpose is to enable autonomous living and in the other, the purpose is to create mutual economic gains.

Finally, Risse claims that both coercive threats to autonomy and reciprocity are important, but that it must be supplemented by nonvoluntariness. What creates comprehensive obligations between co-citizens is the existence of all these factors; joint coercion, reciprocal provision of central goods, and nonvoluntariness (Risse 2012, chap. 3).⁹ He adds that a just world need not entail equality across countries and could, indeed, be as unequal as ours (Risse 2012, 281).

Although these accounts differ in their particulars, they agree that what triggers comprehensive obligations between co-citizens is the joint participation in relations that are especially impactful on their possibilities of leading autonomous lives. For this reason, citizens *owe more* to each other. They share a *strong*, institutional relation, one might say. In all the mentioned accounts, the lack of a similarly intrusive, institutional structure on the global level entails that an equivalently justifiable concern with relative shares is not needed here.¹⁰ They share only a *weak*, institutional relation. Hence, our only concern regarding non-compatriots is to ensure that their autonomy is not

undermined by absolute poverty (Blake 2001, 294).¹¹ Finally, these accounts all share an institutionally conservative approach, in that they base their theories on the capacities of the *present* institutions within these two realms to actualize (and enforce) a distributive scheme.

Blake explicitly refers to this approach as ‘institutional conservatism,’ which involves holding the current levels of institutional coercion constant, and showing how such institutions can be justified (Blake 2013, 45-48, 2001, 262). More precisely, Blake adjusts his theory to the facts of (unequal) state power; the division of territorial jurisdiction found today; and the fact that international institutions, in contrast, do not engage in ‘direct coercion against individuals’ and can be ignored by stronger states. He does not, then, ask which institutions we *ought* to have but takes the framework of the current coercive structures as assumptions, on the basis of which we may determine what is just. Although the institutionally conservative theories differ somewhat about how to treat *intermediate* institutions (such as the EU) on their approach, they agree that we should treat the existence of strong nation-states and the lack of similarly strong institutional relations with global reach as pretheoretical assumptions (James 2012, chap. 1, 2013, 58; Risse 2012, chap. 15-17). These two institutional features, however, are exactly the ones I will claim make their approach incompatible with action-guidance towards alleviating basic needs.

A cosmopolitan skeptic might, of course, ask if we could not simply set up strong institutions globally, thereby acquiring comprehensive duties towards foreigners. Institutionally conservative theorists, however, reject that move – and this is exactly the crux of their approach. Blake, for example, holds that only in cases in which coercion is needed to increase autonomy can this be justified. Since the world is currently divided into states with unequal capacities, some of which are powerful enough to ignore international law, international coercion would not increase autonomy. Thus, we should assume, or concede, the existence of the state system and the lack of strong international institutions.

James builds his institutional conservatism around the notion of *assurance*. In order for individuals to be motivated to risk engaging in cooperative ventures, they must have a measure of assurance that others will do their part and make the risk worthwhile.

Assurance can never be complete but is increased when the expectations that others will comply are increased – which is influenced by the existence of common social norms, laws, institutional enforcement, and expectations. In the current global order, agents generally have the assurance needed to engage in international trade relations. But this would not be the case, if it was fundamentally altered. We must, then, ‘take the state system for granted for lack of a feasible, reasonably well-assured alternative for the management of global affairs’ (James 2012, 22). More specifically, we cannot know whether the required level of assurance would be present and, importantly, the assurance needed for people to be motivated to cooperate to make this change – to make this different global order come about – is not present due to the mere unpredictability of this alternative (James 2012, chap. 4).

Similarly, Risse draws on the epistemic uncertainty regarding what a world without nation-state institutions would look like, and claims to deliver a ‘sweeping objection’ to the cosmopolitan notion of stripping down the system of nation states or establishing strong, global institutions with the capacity of current states. Theorizing an alternative, he claims, is infeasible because the risk and uncertainty involved is too great. They are both ‘too radical’ and we cannot ‘credibly assert that we should gradually approximate this goal because we do not understand the goal itself well enough to aspire at approximation’ (Risse 2012, 323). Both James and Risse, then, ground their institutional conservatism in epistemic uncertainty. Risse’s account, however, starts from the perspective of institution-building whereas James’ begins from the agents acting within these prospective institutions.

Note that the existence of strong nation states and the lack of strong, international institutions are soft facts as described above—i.e. they are entrenched, but upheld by human action. Furthermore, their conception of how theories should guide political action is concessive, since they adjust their theory to facts to increase compliance (Blake 2013, 45, 47, and 104). The reason that is given for this methodological choice is the ability of such an approach to better guide political action in the current world compared to more ideal approaches (Blake 2001, 262, 2013, 4 and 112; James 2012, chap. 4; Risse 2012, chap. 15 and 16). And while there are differences between the specific approaches, the dual goal of guiding actual political agents without abstracting from

institutional circumstances and fulfilling basic obligations to foreigners are repeated. This, then, is the core of the institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitan position.

4. The non-cosmopolitan dilemma

Let us look at the claims made by institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans from a more panoramic perspective. As mentioned, their non-cosmopolitan stance holds that we have moral obligations to fulfill the basic needs of and ensure a minimally decent life for non-compatriots (or at least that they have a moral claim on us, as a group, to have these needs met). At present, almost 2.5 billion people live below the 2 dollar per day poverty line, hundreds of millions are undernourished and almost 50,000 people die each day from poverty-related causes—and all this in a time of increased global wealth. Thus, one can safely conclude that we are a long way from a world that non-cosmopolitans would label as just, since the basic needs of foreigners are not (at all) fulfilled.¹² Furthermore, meeting even the relatively minimal obligations that non-cosmopolitans embrace would require significant changes to current levels of global redistribution. Even by non-cosmopolitan standards, then, the current distribution is unjust *and* we are not doing enough to change this (i.e. we have unfulfilled basic obligations to foreigners, and fulfilling them involves doing much more than we are currently doing to alleviate deprivation and need).

One might interject and claim that alleviating world poverty is not, in fact, very difficult, nor very costly (among others, this claim is put forward by Pogge (2008)). If this were the case, of course, a world in which basic needs were universally fulfilled seems relatively easily accessible and guiding action towards this end does not seem to be out of reach for institutionally conservative theorists. However, non-cosmopolitans in general, and Blake and Risse in particular, dismiss this claim.¹³ Furthermore, when Pogge speaks of world poverty alleviation as not being very costly, he often means in purely monetary terms, as in; the shortfall needed to bring the global poor above the absolute poverty line does not constitute a very great proportion of the GDP of wealthy countries (2008, 10). And often, it is on these grounds that institutionally conservative theorists dismiss his claims; as underestimating the extent of the *institutional* improvements necessary (Risse 2012, 290-294).¹⁴ On institutionally conservative accounts, alleviating basic need deficiencies is *not*, tellingly, easy or uncostly.

Cosmopolitans might complain that institutional conservatism, generally, does not give adequate attention to this transformative process—that they are not sufficiently intent on showing how to get to the target they propose (which I take to be a fair point of criticism in itself).¹⁵ Now, obviously *some* form of change is needed if we are to achieve global justice. And, indeed, institutionally conservative theorists are not concessive on *this point*; they do *not* think that we should take the existence of injustices as a pretheoretical fact to which we should adjust our theories. In other words, they *do* take such injustices (e.g. instances of severe poverty) to be objects of potential political change. This follows *implicitly* from their treating injustices such as basic needs deprivations as something that must be eliminated (and thus, *can* be eliminated), and follows directly from their methodological approach, which is *explicitly* oriented toward guiding political action (and hence, supposedly points to plausible goals of such potential action).

I claim that the basic needs fulfillment required by institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans is implausible or unlikely without changing the current institutional setup. Since institutionally conservative theorists are limited to developing principles from within a framework in which these facts are left (relatively) unchanged, guiding action (in the sense of action being unobstructed by major obstacles) toward basic rights fulfillment is beyond the scope of their theories.

As mentioned, however, institutionally conservative theorists are not entirely explicit about what adjusting one's theories to soft facts *actually* involves – that is, *how much* institutions might be changed without undermining the possibilities for action-guidance. These authors, then, are indeterminate regarding whether the state system is to be retained more or less in its current form or whether all that is needed is *some* system of units with sovereign and special territorial jurisdiction and responsibility.¹⁶ For this reason, I will target institutional conservatism at two different degrees of abstraction, the first targeting the most static conception. In both cases, I claim, non-cosmopolitanism becomes subject to the dilemma between institutional conservatism and basic needs alleviation.

Firstly, taking the institutional setup more or less as it is without radical, institutional changes, I will show that non-cosmopolitans are oblivious to the way in which the

existence of strong nation states *undermines* (or may undermine) the fulfillment of basic obligations owed to foreigners *globally*. The *current* institutional setup, then, is working heavily against the fulfillment of basic needs and rights – it, in effect, constitutes a major obstacle to achieving this goal. Conceding this means treating injustices regarding our basic obligations to foreigners inherent in these institutions as a given. Therefore, institutional conservatism problematically opposes guiding action towards the fulfillment of basic needs at the outset.

Secondly, one might understand institutional conservatism as allowing for *some* radical changes to the current institutional setup – but without abandoning a system of strong nation-states and without constructing strong, international institutions (James’ account, of the three, is most plausibly read as allowing for this). However, the most promising (perhaps only) ways of making universal basic needs fulfilment plausible require the establishment of strong, international institutions and the weakening the system of nation states to a point well beyond what such a reading would allow. To show this, I look at different ways through which we may come to increase the plausibility of fulfilling basic needs within a reasonable timeframe, and show that these involve establishing strong international institutions or weakening the system of nation states very significantly. Making basic obligations fulfilment plausibly achievable, then, requires *changing* the soft facts that non-cosmopolitans concede pre-theoretically.

Note that, although my analysis is primarily exemplified by way of the global justice debate, I take these points of criticism to be generally applicable to theories which are institutionally conservative – or, at the very least, as pointing out some problems that all such theories face. Institutionally conservative theories, then, must always be wary of conceding injustices inherent in the system and of placing the most plausible (or, even, the only plausible) routes to overcoming injustice beyond their scope of action-guidance. The two objections target institutional conservatism at two different levels of soft fact accommodation and institutional adjustability. Below, I will specify these objections and briefly reflect on how these points may be generalized to institutional conservatism in other fields of moral and political philosophy.

4.1. Can we eliminate poverty without institutional change?

A. INSTITUTIONAL CONSERVATISM WITH NO RADICAL CHANGES TO MAJOR INSTITUTIONS

The institutionally conservative approach, first, may be understood as claiming that the system of nation states and the comparative weakness of the international institutional setup must be conceded *without any radical changes*. This, however, places non-cosmopolitans in a dilemma is by making their principles *oblivious to injustices inherent in the institutional setup*. Understood this way, institutional conservatism prescribes a relatively static view of major institutional features of the world and a low level of institutional adjustability.

As several theorists have pointed out, however, the present global institutional order has deeply unjust consequences for the poorest of the world, effectively worsening or maintaining their deprivation. Thomas Pogge, for example, shows how international institutions create incentives for coups d'état, help dictators uphold oppressive regimes, and worsen the prospects for democracy by giving privileges to state leaders regardless of the democratic legitimacy of their authority. The problem is effectively created by the lack of strong institutionalized coercion and reciprocal relations within the international system (Pogge 2008, 13-32, 118-122, 145-150, 158).¹⁷

This highlights a related problem, namely that the lack of strong, international structures is especially harmful to poor countries that lack the capacity to coercively control the actions of their citizens *themselves* (Collier 2010, chap. 9). This, in turn, means that gains from trade or investments that could have been spent on freeing citizens from basic rights deficiencies are often siphoned out of the country, since poor governments are unable to coerce citizens and trade effectively (Beitz 1999, 147-149). If we adjust our theories to this lack of strong, international structures, treating them as pretheoretical assumptions (as institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans do), we cannot guide political action towards rectifying the basic rights deficiencies *caused* by their very absence.

Furthermore, the inequality between states (which is also explicitly conceded to both exist and *continue to exist* by both Blake (2013, 45-46) and Risse (2012, 281-282)) in wealth, know-how, and institutional capacities translates into vast differences in leverage and insight in bargaining situations, which results in trade agreements that leave poor countries with much less than their fair share (even by non-cosmopolitan standards), and which may even exacerbate poverty (Caney 2005, 172, Pogge 2008, 9, 16, 27, 133).¹⁸

These inequalities need not necessarily translate into unequal bargaining power, but rather do so *due to the lack of strong international structures* and the ensuing failure to enforce (more) equal bargaining positions.¹⁹ Again, the soft facts assumed by institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans serve to uphold and worsen basic needs shortages.

Note that I am not questioning the empirical non-cosmopolitan assumption, which claims that there are institutional relations of the relevant (strong) kind in the domestic context, but not in the global context (I grant this assumption for the sake of argument). Rather, I am claiming that the lack of strong institutions on an international level coupled with the strong, institutionalized powers of nation-states *by their very existence* creates and upholds severe poverty, which opposes the fulfillment of basic obligations. Therefore, conceding facts about the lack of international coercion and reciprocal relations, inequality between states, and state power (as institutional non-cosmopolitans do) renders the basic needs deficiencies *caused* by these facts beyond the scope of normative principles—and thus, beyond normative political action guidance.

If we take the international system of institutions *without allowing for radical changes*, fulfilling basic needs *in any near-future sense of the term* seems exceedingly hampered by major obstacles for it to constitute action-guidance in any real sense of the word – and, importantly, for it to do so in the sense in which institutionally conservative theorists use this word to distinguish themselves from cosmopolitans. Institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans, then, must give up (or severely weaken) either their institutional conservatism or give up rectifying threats to the basic needs fulfillment, which are inherent in the current institutional setup.

The more general issue, then, is that institutionally conservative approaches have a built-in tendency to construct normative principles which overlook injustices inherent in the current institutional system – and more importantly, which are not action-guiding regarding the rectification of such systemic injustices. Institutionally conservative theorists might defend themselves against this claim by noting that their accounts are often relatively critical of current institutions. Furthermore, many institutionally conservative theorists do not agree that the lack of international institutions and the system of nation states plays as large a part in the creation and perpetuation of poverty

as claimed above. Thus, there is some disagreement about the *degree* to which the current world order is producing these injustices (and which baseline should be used when deciding this question) (Risse 2005, 2012, 294-297).²⁰ But the point is more fundamental than this; even relatively critical versions of institutional conservatism suffer from the systemic defect that they cannot guide us toward the alleviation of injustices which can only be overcome by dismantling the institutions in question.²¹

The objection concerning the institutionally conservative obliviousness to injustices inherent in the current system is certainly important, and one of which institutionally conservative theorists (and their critics) should be wary – and this is the case outside the debate on global justice, as well. Furthermore, as Laura Valentini (2009) has pointed out (in the context of Rawls’ theory of international justice), besides overlooking such systemic injustices institutionally conservative theorists’ principles may even serve to *obscure* these problems by leaving the reader with the impression that the social context is unproblematic or neutral. Thus, one might say, institutionally conservative theorists are not only creating principles which cannot guide action towards rectifying important injustices, they may be sustaining their continued concealment. Institutionally conservative theorists, more generally, then, may be susceptible to overlooking inherent systemic injustices – and may even be charged with (unintentionally) naturalizing these.

B. INSTITUTIONAL CONSERVATISM WITH MEDIUM LEVELS OF INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTABILITY

As mentioned, the degree of deference to the current institutional setup required by institutionally conservative theorists to be action-guiding is not entirely clear. Instead of assuming that *no* radical changes are allowed, I will now undertake a similar analysis as above but assuming that *some* radical changes are within the scope of action-guiding theory. That is, radical changes which are within the scope of maintaining a strong system of nation-states and no (similarly) strong, international institutions. Although, I think most institutionally conservative theorists are most plausibly read as recommending an approach which tracks the current system of states and (lack of) international institutions to quite a significant degree, most of them would allow for *some* changes to this system as well. Not least, most institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans believe that states should act in a non-exploitative way in international relations of trade—although, again, they should do so from within the framework of the

current institutional system (Blake 2013, 99, 121, 128-129, Kurjanska & Risse 2008, James 2005, Risse 2008, 2012, part 3 – and, especially, James 2012).

So, while the import and strength of nation-states (and the lack of strong institutions in the international realm) should be held constant, the way they *interact* and relate should not and, thus, could change. So although none of them would allow for the kind of institutional changes which would entail escaping all of the mentioned threats to basic needs inherent in the international system, escaping *some* of them seems within the scope of institutional conservatism (and others are not, as mentioned, thought to be actually inherent in the system).

For the sake of argument, however, we may assume that such radical change to international cooperation falls within the notion of adjusting theories to institutional facts – that is, principles can still be action-guiding in the institutionally conservative sense while recommending such changes. Let us assume, then, an international system of institutions that did not have the undesirable consequences outlined above. Presumably, even in this imagined world of less unjust international institutions, not all basic obligations would be fulfilled – seeing as non-cosmopolitans, generally and *pace* Pogge, claim that international institutions cannot account for the extent and severity of poverty (Risse 2005, 2012, 294-297).²²

In a world of an unjust international order without inherent systemic injustices, then, there would still be basic needs that were left unfulfilled. I contend that, even in this much improved scenario (or, this less conservative understanding of their notion of adjusting normative theories to institutional facts), institutional conservatism would conflict with this goal. This is because empirically likely routes of reaching the goal of fulfilling basic obligations would require changing the institutional setup in ways that are beyond the scope of their approach. The second way, in which the dilemma occurs, then, is that institutional conservatism cannot guide action toward plausible routes to coming to fulfill such obligations.

Consider the quotidian observation that we do not make it voluntary for people to respect the law domestically and, say, pay their taxes. Rather, we ensure compliance through a system of coercion (or, at least, coercively backed incentives). This, of course, is because we are well aware that if compliance is optional, there is no assurance that

people will actually comply (and indeed we have good reason to think they might not). If we want to make sure that wealthy states comply with their basic obligations to foreigners, then, we would need some way of coercing them to do so (or, at least, provide incentives for compliance).²³ To ensure the fulfillment of basic obligations, then, a strong case exists for creating global institutions with greater powers of coercion, coordination, and incentivization if we wish to meet the goal of alleviating global poverty (Caney 2005, 159-164).

Institutionally conservative theorists, of course, cannot guide us toward this solution since their principles are developed on the assumption that no such institutions exist, and that this will continue to be the case (since such constraints are needed for their principles to be action-guiding). Risse, for example, explicitly rejects the idea of a global organization with coercive powers charged with the sole task of ensuring development (Risse 2012, 357-358). But if international institutional coercion to a degree that is significantly greater than the current level is needed to ensure that basic needs deficiencies are alleviated within a reasonable timeframe (or is, at least, a component in the most plausible solutions), non-cosmopolitans should wish to guide us toward such arrangements, and are faced with a dilemma if their methodology prevents them from doing so. In other words, institutionally conservative theorists must either conclude that basic needs are unlikely to be fulfilled, and, thus, refrain from trying to guide people toward their fulfilment, or reevaluate their notion of what can and cannot be done.

Furthermore, one may note that the incentives of the nation-state system are skewed against increases in global redistribution. Since governments are only accountable to their own citizens, they have no enticement to cater to the basic needs of poor foreigners (Caney 2005, 169) —except, of course, the cosmopolitan benevolence of their electorate (which has, so far, proved a woefully inadequate source of poverty relief). But, importantly, not taking the interests of poor foreigners sufficiently into account is not just a feature of the *current* system of nation states, but would be a feature of *any* system of nation states. It is an inherent problem that will persist in any institutionally conservative approach, which concedes the system of strong nation states and weak global institutions. Some institutionally conservative theorists are aware of this issue, but do not think it justifies modifying the setup (Risse 2012, 341-344). The main route to counteracting the nationalist bias pointed out by development theorists, however, seems

to be to set up global institutions with greater public accountability and actual, coercive powers (Bohman 2004). But institutionally conservative theorists cannot point us in that direction and fail to provide us with other routes to overcoming this key issue.

Related to the former point, the current system of strong nation-states and relatively weak international institutions gives powerful incentives to domestic politicians to ignore the needs and rights of deprived foreigners (Bueno de Mesquita 2011). Importantly, this means that many development projects and aid strategies are shaped by national economic and strategic interests instead of by the needs of the recipients.²⁴ Indeed, many development theorists hold that such national biases and the short-sightedness that comes with being bound to domestic election cycles are *primary* reasons that development aid has failed at achieving the goal of global basic need fulfillment²⁵ – development aid fails, then, because it is nationally founded rather than internationally or globally founded.

Relatedly, as Daniel Weinstock (1999) notes, an important function of political institutions is to give content and direction to our intuitive feeling that we owe something to the less fortunate. Without such institutions on a global scale, one might claim, our cross-border obligations will remain indeterminate and unclear. Note again, that the problems noted in this paragraph are not ones that are confined to the current institutional system, but ones that would persist in *any* global system built around strong nation states and much weaker international institutions. This is an important objection to James' argument that a radically different global institutional setup cannot provide the necessary assurance for the agents seeking to cooperate within its framework. Weinstock's argument, then, can be read as claiming that such assurance can never exist pre-institutionally. Rather, institutions must be constructed first and obligational content and direction – and the ensuing mutual assurance – will follow.

In response to these problems of structural bias and indeterminate obligations, creating international institutions, the leaders of which were accountable to all those to whom basic obligations were owed, seems to be one of the most promising routes, as several theorists have noted (Axelsen 2013, 468-469; Bohman 2004, 342, Caney 2005, 169, Held 1995, Laborde 2010, 52-57). Again, institutionally conservative principles cannot guide us toward this solution even though non-cosmopolitans should want to do so, given their

wish to eradicate basic need deprivation. Their institutional conservatism, then, renders these very promising routes to progress inaccessible given that they are by their definition not action-guiding.

Moreover, alleviating basic needs deficiencies will very often require developing much-improved access to different public goods such as electricity, infrastructure, health coverage, public administration, and law enforcement. However, the countries in which the poorest billion people of the world reside often have economies which are so small that supplying their citizens with these goods, given the scale and start-up costs of doing so, seems like an impossible task. Because of this, they are thoroughly dependent on international institutional cooperation to accomplish these feats (Collier 2010, 189-191). Institutionally conservative theorists, who take the lack of strong, international institutions as a pretheoretical fact, cannot guide political action toward this possibility, and thus, make this important development toward fulfilling basic needs inaccessible.

Institutional non-cosmopolitans, thus, cannot guide political action toward significantly strengthening international institutional capacities; yet this, I claim, represents one of the most plausible routes (and, in the absence of any alternative route from institutionally conservative theorists, *the* most plausible route) to progress with respect to meeting basic needs obligations. Even if we allow for significant changes to the current institutional system (much greater ones than their theories seem to allow), in order to overcome the inherent injustices noted in the first section, non-cosmopolitans will still be left with a very important set of threats to ensuring basic need fulfillment. Namely those problems, which are part of the system of nation states *qua* nation states – and these constitute considerable obstacles to achieving their professed goal.

Note that institutionally conservative theorists might, as Risse (2012, 293) does, point to the fact that ‘Development economics remains a discipline with substantial disagreement.’ This, however, is not sufficient to allow them to escape the dilemma. Even if development theorists do, indeed, disagree on the content of the precise recipes that will help countries achieve a flourishing economy, there is widespread agreement on what is *not working*. And that is *exactly* the lack of international, institutional cooperation and coordination and the tendency for wealthy nation-states to pursue strategic, short-termist and national interests instead of actual poverty alleviation. In

other words, even if we take Risse's 'sweeping objection' about the epistemic uncertainty about a world without strong nation-states into account (or, for that matter, James' claim that transitioning to such a world would be met with assurance problems), we should balance this against the epistemic *certainty* of the obstacles inherent in a world *with* strong nation-states. And if we take the goal of basic need alleviation seriously (as institutionally conservative non-cosmopolitans supposedly do), this should trouble us greatly.

Institutionally conservative theorists might still reply, however, that while significant changes to the global institutional setup are, indeed, necessary for getting to a world in which basic needs are met and global poverty is eradicated, such changes are far from those needed to ensure global equality or universal human flourishing. The institutional changes needed, they might say, to ensure basic needs fulfillment *are* ones that human agents can realize, while those needed to ensure global equality *are not*.²⁶ In other words, proposing global basic obligations is action-guiding, whereas proposing more demanding ones is not. But it should be remembered, first of all, that the principles institutionally conservative theorists would have to propose, if they are to meet the challenges outlined above, would look very different from what is now being recommended. They would be less concessive of the soft facts of the global institutional order, which, in turn, lessens the methodological distance from aspirational theories.

Second, institutionalizing the reforms needed for basic needs fulfillment would conceivably push the limits of feasibility considerably. Principles that seem utopian and out of reach for an institutionally conservative theorist under the *current* institutional order would plausibly look more action-guiding and accessible under a different one. In particular, conceding the global institutional order in a world in which key international institutions were significantly stronger and the capacities of wealthy nation-states in enforcing their agenda were decidedly diminished would allow for a very different, much more radical, content than now. On this background, cosmopolitans might argue (as Pablo Gilabert, for example, does) that we have an obligation to get ourselves to a situation in which global equality is a feasible aim.²⁷ Thus, we have a duty to ensure the institutional reforms needed for universal basic needs fulfillment *partly because* global equality is a feasible goal from there. And this, even on an institutionally conservative account is an action-guiding principle.

5. Conclusion: Action-Guidance and Other Values

In the above, I have argued that institutionally conservative theorists may find themselves in a dilemma caused by a discrepancy between their approach and their normative commitments. I have shown how this was the case for non-cosmopolitans, who cannot coherently maintain their commitment to alleviating basic needs deficiencies and their institutionally conservative notion of action guidance – even if understood in a less static manner. Thus, they are faced with a dilemma because their institutional conservatism makes them oblivious to injustices regarding basic needs inherent in the current setup of soft facts or renders the most promising routes toward meeting basic obligations beyond the action-guidance scope of their principles. To determine whether these arguments are ultimately persuasive and whether institutionally conservative theorists in other fields are caught in a similar dilemma, more must be said – but that is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Now, both institutionally conservative theorists and idealists (and everyone in between) must consider both the feasibility and desirability of achieving their normative aims. As I have argued above, however, institutionally conservative theorists face a genuine dilemma caused by their relatively static view of soft facts being irreconcilable with guiding action towards the realization of their normative commitments. The institutionally conservative arguments, in other words, treat radical change in soft facts as a *constraint* on normative principles – as a necessary condition that normative principles *must* live up to.²⁸ But, while feasibility or action-guidance may indeed function as a constraint regarding *hard* facts, the above analysis has shown that this is not the case for soft facts.²⁹ Here, action-guidance is better understood as one value to consider along with other important ones, such as the desirability of the outcome, the cost of getting there, and the uncertainty and stability of the solution.³⁰ When it comes to soft facts (such as institutions), in the words of Holly Lawford-Smith (2013, 254 [emphasis added]); ‘the better thing to say is not that feasibility is required, but that feasibility *matters*.’ And this is because it matters how *costly* it is to achieve an outcome – but it is not *all* that matters.³¹

Institutional conservatives should say instead, then, that ‘soft fact feasibility’ (or, for Risse and James, soft fact empirical uncertainty and assurance) is a weighty concern –

and one that is too often underappreciated by more idealist theorists. But moving from treating action-guidance as a constraint to treating it as *one* important feature of normative theorizing (however weighty) would mean having to weigh feasibility considerations against the moral deplorability of the status quo³² – and looking at this status quo from the point of view of the billions who are poor and deprived, a radically different, institutional setup may well be the better option, even if it seems uncertain and costly to achieve.

Notes

¹ For a similar distinction, see Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012.

² The different approaches might not be mutually exclusive. The question here, however, is not one of whether the different approaches may be compatible, but rather whether the specific approach employed by institutionally conservative theorists is consistent with the obligations they propose (which I deny).

³ See Barry & Valentini 2009 for this notion of infeasibility.

⁴ I use the term ‘non-cosmopolitan,’ as a common denominator for views that have also been called anti-cosmopolitan, internationalist, statist, or weak cosmopolitanism.

⁵ See also, Miller 2007, 17 and 264-269, 2013, 178; Rawls 1999, §1.1; Tamir 1993, 7 and 118-121 for other non-cosmopolitan accounts that exhibit less explicit institutionally conservative traits.

⁶ For such criticism, see Abizadeh 2007, Caney 2008, 500-501 for the first; Caney 2008, 500, Wenar 2008 for the second; and Ypi 2010, Valentini 2011, Tan 2004, for the third.

⁷ See, for example, Meckled-Garcia 2005 and Sangiovanni 2007. See also David Miller (2007, 2013, 155-161), although it is not his main disanalogy argument.

⁸ See also, Blake 2013, 22

⁹ Miller's (2013, 170-175) account is similar but brings in non-institutional elements as well.

¹⁰ Although, they all hold that *some* international inequalities may be problematic (See, for example, Blake 2013, 128 and Risse 2012, part 3). I will return to this later.

¹¹ Compare Blake 2013, 38-39, where he adds that we have a 'duty [...] to act so as to create liberal societies abroad.' Risse distinguishes two sources of moral obligations to foreigners; 'Common Humanity' and 'Common Ownership of the Earth' (2012, Part 1 & 2, respectively). However, the actual content of the obligations, which is what I am concerned with here, is akin to basic needs fulfilment.

¹² Indeed, they explicitly say so – see Blake, 2013, 5, 11, 81, 124; James 2012, 4-5; Risse 2012, 281.

¹³ Blake (2013, 127) states that 'justice in foreign policy is possible, but enormously difficult'. See also Risse 2005, 2006, 2012, 291-303

¹⁴ Additionally, in an important sense, Pogge's theory is significantly more *aspirational* than that of Blake, Risse, or James in that he *does not* concede the global institutional order as a pretheoretical fact. Rather, he treats it as a soft fact that could (and ought to) be altered. And it is in this light that the elimination of world poverty is judged not to be difficult – i.e. because Pogge believes that substantial, global institutional reform is feasible and accessible. The *input* of Pogge's analysis, in other words, is idealized. And this is the case even though Pogge's *outputs*, that is, his policy recommendations are less idealized than that of many other cosmopolitans. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this. For a distinction between idealizing input and output, see Volacu 2017.

¹⁵ See Gilabert 2012, 145-152 or Ypi's account of political philosophical activism in 2012, chap. 2. See also, Axelsen 2013; Tan 2004.

¹⁶ Compare, for example, James 2012, chap. 1 and p. 118.

¹⁷ In a similar vein, Leif Wenar argues that the international system of property rights effectively impoverishes citizens in poor countries and upholds powerful incentives to keep it this way (Wenar 2008).

¹⁸ See also Ypi 2012, 115-127, for an argument along these lines drawing on the notion of ‘positional goods.’

¹⁹ See Ronzoni 2009 on why international institutions must ensure ‘background justice’. See Collier 2007, 159-160, for an empirically based argument to this effect.

²⁰ See also, Miller 2007, 238-247, Rawls 1999, 108

²¹ In a similar vein, Valentini 2011 affirms that ‘social liberal principles designed *via* the interpretive approach [starting from practices as they are] are bound to overlook the justice-based interests of some persons,’ 416.

²² See also, Miller 2007, 238-247, Rawls 1999, 108. James seems to agree more with Pogge’s analysis (James 2012, 117-120) but does not think that alleviating the highlighted problems with the international structure would render the world just (James 2012, 12).

²³ The failure of the state system in establishing more demanding standards with respect to carbon emissions serves as a clear example of this problem (and this is even though climate change affects the wealthy countries in a much more direct way than failing to fulfil basic needs does).

²⁴ See Peter J. Schraeder et al. 1998, 294-323, for an interesting comparison of different aid programs.

²⁵ For two influential versions of this argument, see Bolton 2007 and Easterly 2006.

²⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this objection.

²⁷ See Gilabert 2012, chap. 7.

²⁸ See Gheaus 2013, for an illuminating discussion of considering feasibility as a constraint on justice.

²⁹ See, however, Gheaus 2013, 454-456, for reasons why even hard facts should be considered in a dynamic manner.

³⁰ Gilibert & Lawford-Smith 2012

³¹ I am grateful for the input of two anonymous reviewers and Richard Bellamy for helping me clarify these points.

³² See Gilibert 2012, 248-254, for this and other important considerations in the process of such weighing.

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