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Responsibility for Needs
John Baker & Charles Jones

Egalitarians believe, among other things, that everyone’s basic needs ought to be satisfied. In this paper we take belief in that principle (or something like it) for granted. The question we are concerned with is who is responsible for ensuring that the principle is honoured. A widely held view is that, as far as possible, responsibility for needs should be shouldered by individuals themselves, and that those who are incapable of satisfying their own needs should be looked after by the local communities to which they belong. We criticise this view and argue that every person has a strong degree of responsibility to act collectively to ensure that everyone’s basic needs are satisfied. This defence of global collective action is not in our view constitutive of egalitarianism, but the two ideas have a long association which we are happy to endorse.

We begin, in section 1, by considering the obviously mistaken view that each person should satisfy their own needs, arguing that any plausible approach must give a major role to collective responsibility. In section 2 we devise a more complicated principle in the same spirit. The revised principle combines the idea of giving each person a genuinely equal opportunity for satisfying their own needs with the aim of devolving collective responsibility to local communities. We proceed to discuss each part of the principle in turn. We argue that genuinely equal opportunity presupposes wide-ranging collective responsibilities (section 2); that the case for individual responsibility can be grossly exaggerated (section 3); and that global, collective responsibility for needs is unavoidable (section 4). We conclude in section 5 by recognising the place of devolved responsibility within a just global order. For the most part, we assume a working understanding of the idea of a basic need, although occasionally we make use of specific ideas. For simplicity, we use the term “need” throughout to refer to basic needs.

1. “Each person should satisfy their own needs”

Our starting point is a simple view which no one could seriously hold, but which provides a good basis for what follows: the view that each person should be responsible for satisfying their own needs. The most obvious reason why no one could seriously hold this view is that some people are quite clearly incapable of satisfying their own needs. Examples are young children and people with serious physical or mental impairments (although we will return to the issue of impairment in a moment). Again, some needs are intrinsically social, such as the needs for love and companionship. No one could satisfy these needs literally by themselves. A third reason is that some needs are for specialised services which no one seriously expects people to provide for themselves, even though it is logically possible for them to do so, such as needs for education and medical care.

There is a deeper reason why the view is untenable. It is that every act of satisfying a need “by oneself” takes place within a structure of choice which is socially constructed and maintained. For example, if I can “satisfy my own needs” by getting a job, getting paid, going into the supermarket and buying food, this is only because of a set of institutions which are created and sustained by others. My capacity to get a job results from a certain up-bringing within a certain family lodged within a wider array of family structures, and from an education that was available within a certain kind of
educational system. My skills are in demand because of the existence of a certain kind of economy and of certain economically effective preferences. The financial transactions between my employer, my bank and the supermarket depend on a specific set of social conventions, laws and relationships. And so on.

These objections to the simple view are not trivial. A very substantial proportion of humanity at any one time is either young or living with a serious impairment. Intrinsically social needs and needs for specialised services make up a large proportion of our most urgent needs on any account of what these are. And a very large proportion of the cases in which people are not currently “satisfying their own needs” are cases in which the social structures in which they find themselves provide them with no feasible opportunity for doing so.

This last point is brought home very forcefully by proponents of the “social model of disability”.1 These writers point out that for at least a large proportion of cases, disability is a matter of the difference between the ways social structures are adapted to the capacities of able-bodied people and the ways they fail to be adapted to people with physical and mental impairments. A stock example is the existence of stairs, which are an indispensable, socially constructed means for most people to get from one floor of a building to another. People who use stairs are not really satisfying their own mobility needs; they are using more widely provided means for satisfying these needs than those provided to people in wheelchairs.

Similarly, in a capitalist economy the basic means for satisfying most people’s material needs are provided by the labour market. That some people are able to access this market successfully is not simply a fact about them but also about the social system within which they operate. Without the labour market they would be as needy as any other unemployed person. It is therefore quite misleading to describe them simply as satisfying their own needs: there is no such thing as a “self-made man”.

A natural response to these obvious considerations is to seek to define a more complicated principle which preserves the spirit of the simple view in a more realistic form. In section 2 we spell out this more complicated view and begin to assess its strength.

2. A more complicated view

Consider the following three-part principle:

A. Social structures should be organised to ensure as far as possible that individuals have an equal and real opportunity to satisfy their own basic needs; that is, they are equally enabled to satisfy these needs.

B. In so far as people do have such an opportunity/ability, they should be responsible for satisfying their own needs.

C. Such responsibility for satisfying basic needs as it remains impossible to devolve onto individuals should be shouldered by people attached to them by kinship, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or other forms of communal attachment, not by strangers.

The principle modifies the simple view in three important ways. First, it recognises that people can satisfy their own needs only to a limited extent. They can make a greater or lesser contribution to satisfying their needs, but cannot in general take full responsibility for doing so. Secondly, it recognises that the degree to which people are able to take responsibility for their needs is a consequence of social policy. Social structures can enable or disable individuals in their efforts to satisfy their needs. Thirdly, it specifies who should be responsible for that contribution to need-satisfaction which
remains outside individual abilities. In the spirit of the simple view, it seeks to devolve this responsibility to those most closely connected to each individual.

The new principle has been formulated to preserve the spirit of the simple view in a form that is at least plausible, and therefore to articulate what we take to be a widely held view about responsibility for needs. Parts A and B are meant to capture what might be called the idea of equal opportunity for the satisfaction of needs, while part C is intended to express the idea of local responsibility for needs. In this and the next two sections, we discuss each part of the principle in turn.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of part A of the revised principle is the understanding of equal opportunity it involves, namely a strong conception in which equality of opportunity is defined in terms of capability rather than the absence of certain formal constraints. Why shouldn’t the principle be defined in more conventional terms? The answer is that in this context only a strong conception of equal opportunity will suffice because of the connection between responsibility and capability. Broadly speaking, no one can be held responsible for actions which are outside their control. The spirit of the principle is to maximise the extent to which each individual is responsible for satisfying their own needs. It follows that we should maximise the extent to which each individual is capable of doing so. Quite how to interpret the idea of maximising the degree to which each individual has some good or quality is a common problem in political philosophy which is answered differently by utilitarians and egalitarians. The egalitarian answer is to ensure, as far as possible, an equal distribution of the good in question at the highest possible level. For this reason, part A endorses the greatest possible equality of capability for satisfying one’s own needs.

On this understanding of equal opportunity, it is clear that part A is an enormously radical principle, since providing a social framework in which individuals can indeed take a large degree of responsibility for satisfying their own basic needs would arguably require very substantial changes to existing social structures. Within broadly market-based economies the only way most individuals are able to provide for their material needs is through employment. So if we are committed to ensuring that every individual is, as far as possible, able to satisfy their own needs, we must be committed to a policy of full employment, where full employment is defined in terms of guaranteeing a job to every person capable of doing one, with a level of pay at least adequate for meeting their material needs at market prices. It should be noted, in keeping with the social model of disability introduced earlier, that a much larger proportion of people are capable of employment than is often imagined. It should also be noted that any feasible policy of full employment has correspondingly radical implications for education and training, since the capacity of individuals to take up available employment depends on their learnt skills. Another wide-ranging implication concerns the treatment of what Kittay calls “dependency workers”, those whose work consists in the care of others. Much of this work is currently unpaid work performed by women. Part A implies that dependency work should be paid for so that dependency workers are themselves able to take responsibility for their own needs.

Material needs are not the only basic needs. If as seems incontrovertible people also have a basic need for rest and relaxation, for satisfying and supportive relationships, and for cultural activities and many other “leisure pursuits” in the broad sense of the term, part A also entails that employment should not be so time-consuming or exhausting or isolating as to make it impossible for people to satisfy these other needs. It may be too controversial to maintain that satisfying work is itself a basic need, but work which is so soul-destroying or personally destructive as to interfere with someone’s ability to cope would be contrary to the principle as well.
Clearly it cannot be the responsibility of each individual to ensure that she or he lives in the kind of full-employment economy just described, with everything this entails about education and training, the care of dependents, and the nature of work. These are by their nature collective responsibilities. Thus, part A of the principle, though it is specifically designed to create a framework within which individuals can be held responsible for their own needs, entails wide-ranging collective responsibilities for the framework itself.

Given these radical implications, and taking other social objectives into account, many people may prefer to reject part A, or to adopt it in only a qualified form. Nothing we have said prevents them from doing so. What we do maintain is that part A defines the limits within which individuals can be held responsible for satisfying their needs: the weaker the principle, the narrower the range of individual responsibility. In so far as collectives are unable or unwilling to endorse part A and to maintain the framework it entails, they cannot go on to hold individuals responsible for needs they are incapable of satisfying, but must exercise direct, collective responsibility of the type associated with social welfare or basic income schemes. Thus, with or without part A, there is a substantial degree of collective responsibility. How this responsibility should be distributed is the business of part C of the principle, which we discuss below.

3. Individual responsibility

Part B of the principle insists that individuals should be held responsible for satisfying their own needs to whatever extent part A makes possible. This is an attractive position in societies gripped by a revolt against a “culture of dependency” and subscribing to an ideology of self-reliance. In section 5 below, we try to identify the merits of these ideas. In this section, however, we argue that their merits can be grossly exaggerated. Inevitably, our discussion is connected to broader discussions about the use of markets versus collective provision, because markets constitute the strongest model for exercising individual responsibility for needs.

According to part B, individuals who have a genuine opportunity to satisfy their own needs should be held responsible for doing so. If they fail, it is not the business of the rest of us to intervene. The first argument against such a strict policy of individual responsibility is that it may be counter-productive. Suppose, for example, that the failure of Smith to satisfy his own needs occurs like this: instead of prudently taking a job and spending his income on food, clothes, and so on, Smith irresponsibly squanders his income on drugs and becomes addicted. He loses his job, and under the pressure of material need and drug dependency, unaided by any collective intervention, he begins to steal from shops and houses. We arrest Smith and put him in jail. Smith is now completely dependent and the collective cost of our policy of personal responsibility (in terms of crime, policing and detention as well as Smith’s lost productivity) is far greater than if we had intervened earlier under a more qualified policy. This hypothetical example bears only a superficial relationship to real problems of drug addiction, since in the majority of cases drug users do not start from a position of equal capability. But it does make the obvious point that the policy of strict personal responsibility can easily backfire. It might be replied that the example succeeds only because we have been unable to impose on Smith the full cost of his irresponsibility. But how much more can he pay? When we have exhausted his own capabilities, we must foot the bill ourselves.

A second problem with individualising responsibility arises from well-known ways in which coordinated, collective action can be preferable to uncoordinated, individual action. A classic example is the choice between individual and public transportation as means for satisfying people’s mobility needs. It is now widely
recognised that reliance on individual transportation in the form of cars is simply untenable in modern cities. Only a collective solution in the form of an efficient public transportation system has even a hope of solving this particular problem and many like it.5 A different type of problem occurs in cases of “public goods”, where the effect of some people providing a good for themselves is inevitably to provide the good cost-free to others. A standard example is the need for a healthy environment. I cannot satisfy my need for clean air without satisfying it for you, too. As classically demonstrated by Olson, uncoordinated individual action is likely to be sub-optimal because no one is likely to find it worth their while to shoulder the entire cost of providing such a good (of ensuring, to pursue the example, that no one pollutes the environment). The optimal arrangement, in which everyone contributes their fair share to providing the good, requires coordinated action.6 Another set of problems occurs in relation to monopolies such as water providers. Uncoordinated action by individuals to satisfy their needs for drinking water by purchase from the monopoly supplier is less efficient than a cooperative solution.7 This list is not exhaustive, but illustrates some relatively uncontentious ways in which the doctrine of strict individual responsibility can be seriously inefficient.8

A rather different line of attack on maximising individual responsibility is that this can undermine social solidarity. One of the key ties which bind communities together is collective provision for needs.9 It may be technically feasible to provide education or health care on an individualised basis, but it may make for a stronger sense of community to provide them collectively. In the case of education, collective provision or at least collective control also creates the possibility for certain common, core elements which can be used, benignly or otherwise, to foster social solidarity.

All of the arguments so far take needs for granted, without asking how needs are generated or defined. Human beings need water and oxygen and various nutrients as a natural species, but many of our needs do not arise so simply. They are in various ways generated by or defined in terms of the types of society we live in. For example, we have not always needed to be literate and numerate, but these are now basic needs by any account. The kinds of clothing, food and shelter we need depends not just on our biology but on what is necessary to function and to maintain self-respect in particular social structures. These facts are established by collective action, even if it is often unintended. That is to say, our collective action in defining and reproducing the kind of society we live in has consequences for each individual living in it in terms of what they need. The doctrine of strict individual responsibility says that although we collectively generate individual needs, we should hold individuals responsible for satisfying them. It would seem more in keeping with the idea of responsibility itself to recognise that like other actions, our collective action in generating needs entails a certain level of responsibility for satisfying them.

There is, finally, a certain harshness and inhumanity in the doctrine of strict individual responsibility. It entails that accident victims who have no insurance should be left on the street; that smokers, alcoholics and drug addicts who freely start their habits should be offered no help; that people who make unwise choices of education or employment should not have a second chance; that the person who swims too far from shore should be allowed to drown. These are dramatic but genuine cases of the conflict between responsibility and humanity. No one is logically compelled to choose humanity; but it would be ironic, to say the least, for humanity to have no bearing on whether to come to the aid of people in need, despite their need being of their own making. Generosity, fellow-feeling, compassion and decency call on us to respond to
need regardless of its provenance, and their call is not silenced, even if it is sometimes overridden, by other moral principles.\(^{10}\)

Our conclusion is not that there is no room for individual responsibility, but that it should not be exaggerated. The doctrine that individuals should be held responsible for satisfying their needs to the extent to which they are genuinely able to do so, attractive as it seems, can be counter-productive and inefficient, can work against social solidarity, ignores the social generation of needs and is ultimately inhumane. Collective responsibility is often better, even where individual responsibility is possible.\(^{11}\)

4. Local responsibility

We have come a long way from the simple view that individuals should be responsible for satisfying their own needs. We noted to begin with that there are many needs which individuals simply cannot satisfy on their own, and that satisfying virtually any need depends on a socially established framework. We constructed a principle which took these facts into account by aiming to maximise the degree to which individuals could be held responsible for satisfying their needs, and found that this presupposed an appropriate framework which it would take considerable collective action to establish. In so far as we are collectively unwilling or unable to provide such a framework, we are correspondingly unable to devolve responsibility for needs onto individuals themselves. Even within such a framework, we argued, there were a number of reasons why it would be unacceptable to push individual responsibility to its limits. Taking all of these points together provides a strong case for a substantial degree of collective responsibility for needs.

Part C of the principle set out above attempts to deal with this collective responsibility in the spirit of the original simple view, by trying as far as possible to confine collective responsibility to the people most closely related to individuals in need. According to this doctrine of local responsibility, it is the job of family, friends, compatriots and other communities to shoulder collective responsibilities for need, not the job of strangers. In this section we argue that local responsibility is too limited a view and that responsibility for needs is unavoidably global.

Some of the arguments against local responsibility are simply extensions of the arguments against individual responsibility. Providing an economic framework in which local communities have the capacity to take responsibility for needs is itself a global project because we live in a global economy. Like strict individual responsibility, strict local responsibility is potentially counter-productive, inefficient and inhumane. But there are other arguments more specific to the idea of local responsibility.

A very basic argument against limiting responsibilities to local groups is that such limits seem to contradict the widely acknowledged principle that every person is due equal consideration. If responsibility is tied to co-membership in a nation, religion, or ethnic group, those outside the group appear to be the victims of ethical demotion for no good reason. If the basic needs of everyone are accorded the same weight, why should the burden of satisfying those needs fall only upon some subset of humanity, thereby excusing others from responsibility?

One answer to that question is to insist that confining obligations in this manner is perfectly compatible with equal consideration: local responsibility is simply the best way to ensure that everyone’s needs are in fact met. Since this is an empirical claim, it raises the question of what would really happen if needs were met only by people near and dear to one another. The answer is that hundreds of millions of human beings would have unmet basic needs, for those near and dear to them would lack the means to meet those needs. This argument is especially important for those who place a significant
value on caring for particular others such as family members, since it reminds us that caring for others requires resources which can only be provided through global action. Otherwise, many people simply would not be cared for at all. Allocating responsibilities to particular groups would be acceptable, then, only if each of those groups possessed in equal measure the capacity realistically to fulfil those responsibilities. To put it another way, Part C has its own analogue to Part A, namely a requirement that local groups are equally able to satisfy their members’ needs.

Another common objection to global responsibility is based on the special relationships of friends and families. There are some needs, such as those for companionship and love mentioned earlier, which it is literally impossible for strangers to satisfy. Our needs for friendship or familial love must be met by people who are attached to us in special ways. And the importance of these needs is undeniable, given the value of intimacy in a fulfilling human life. This is an element of local responsibility we are happy to endorse, while remembering as always that the ability to carry out these responsibilities depends on adequate resources.

What we reject is the way Part C attempts to generalise these relations of intimacy. In saying that needs should not be met by strangers but by people related by ties of group solidarity, it ignores the fact that religious, ethnic or national groups are themselves composed largely and inevitably of strangers. Since the normative force of our special ties to our friends and family depends on the role of intimacy in a meaningful life, it cannot be transferred to these groups of anonymous strangers among whom intimacy is simply not possible (or is possible only with a small minority of other members). Hence Part C of the principle embodies a false dichotomy between strangers and group members, and the real choice is between two sets of strangers. The appeal of special responsibilities to compatriots, co-religionists, and the like is significantly weakened once its rationale is distinguished from the sorts of reasons used to defend special concern for family members.

The proponent of Part C of the principle might still object to global responsibility by claiming that we are constitutionally incapable of sympathizing with every other human being. Consequently, the only practical way to meet needs is to assign responsibilities to co-members of national, ethnic, religious or other such groups, where sympathy is sufficiently strong to underpin individual motivation. But this objection underestimates our capacities for sympathetic identification, for we can and do sympathize with the suffering of faraway people who lack the means to satisfy their basic needs. We can recognize that our own condition could have been one of severe deprivation, and this provides the basis for taking an interest in others. Of course, we cannot feel the same level of sympathy for every needy person; nevertheless, we can identify with the plight of the needy and understand that each instance is potentially as sympathy-generating as any other. Once we see that everyone is entitled to our concern, we have grounds for supporting institutions whose purpose is to meet the basic needs of everyone, near and far. And where sympathy within some community does seem to be locked within its own boundaries, we may reasonably attempt to extend those limits by helping its members to imagine themselves in other people’s shoes.

A related point often made by defenders of special, local responsibilities is that acceptance of such responsibilities and the sacrifices they entail is contingent upon mutual feelings of solidarity between group members. These sentiments presuppose some basis of identification such as shared nationality. There are two reasons to be skeptical about this claim. First, we have already seen that a sense of solidarity with all human beings is perfectly possible, especially where it is based on acknowledging the fundamental needs we all share. And secondly, even if nationalist feelings do facilitate
redistribution, this does not show that they are necessary for achieving it. The supposed fact that special sentiments help welfare states to function within their limited spheres of concern does not justify neglecting the needs of non-nationals.

One final point: Defending global responsibility with respect to human needs does not amount to denying local responsibility in other respects. For instance, once basic needs are protected everywhere, it is perfectly acceptable for the obligation to protect cultural, religious, and other community values to be restricted mainly to fellow members of those communities.

In this section we have argued that the requirement of equal concern for all human beings suggests the prima facie plausibility of global responsibility for meeting needs; that such concern would support limiting responsibilities to group members only where each group had roughly equal resources; that, apart from family and friends, those with whom we share various sorts of group membership are strangers, and therefore the ethical appeal of closeness in relationships does not support special concern for fellow nationals or compatriots; that, contrary to what is sometimes believed, human beings are able to sympathize with the suffering of faraway others; and that, while nationalist and patriotic sentiments may increase the reliability of redistributive regimes of institutionalized care (welfare states), this provides no reason for confining concern within national communities. The upshot of this section is that responsibility for needs is unavoidably global.  

5. The benefits of devolved responsibility

We have argued for a substantial degree of global, collective responsibility for satisfying basic needs. This does not mean that every need should be the responsibility of some global state, but that global responsibility is a major and unavoidable factor in a just world order. There is also a strong case for devolved responsibility, and we wish to conclude by reviewing some of its benefits.

The first reason for enabling individuals and communities to satisfy their own needs and expecting them to do so is simple efficiency. Individuals and local communities are in general the best judges of their own needs and in general can be counted on to have strong motivations for satisfying them. Given appropriate background institutions and an egalitarian distribution of relevant resources, it will therefore often be more efficient to provide individuals or communities with the opportunity to identify and satisfy their own needs than to try to do so for them.

A second argument for devolved responsibility is the point discussed above that some needs, such as those for companionship and love, can only be satisfied through intimate relationships. In these cases, devolved responsibility is a necessary feature of the kind of need involved, although ensuring that people have enough resources to be able to carry out their responsibilities remains a global issue.

A third argument is based on considerations of power and vulnerability. In so far as the satisfaction of my needs becomes the responsibility of some wider collective, that collective possesses effective power to define my needs and to provide or withhold the means for satisfying them. By contrast, if I am personally responsible for my needs and capable of meeting them, I am free to define them and to satisfy them. If our view in this paper is correct, collective power is to a large degree unavoidable and the problem can only be addressed by developing strongly democratic structures with appropriate guarantees for minorities. But there remains a case for individual responsibility where it is feasible.

A related reason for devolved responsibility is that in general, and again against an appropriate background, individuals tend to achieve satisfactions of self-realisation
and self-worth if they are able to identify and satisfy their own needs as distinct from relying on others to do so. Similarly, self-reliant communities can also develop a sense of efficacy and self-respect. The image behind the criticism of the “nanny state” taps a real egalitarian concern about dominance, subordination and self-respect. What is wrong with the current use of this image is that oppressed individuals and communities are expected to “stand on their own two feet” without access to the resources enabling them to do so. That is why we have argued that any defensible principle of individual or local responsibility has to be located within a framework of equal capability.

A final reason for devolved responsibility has to do with disagreements about needs. Individuals and cultures have very different conceptions of human well-being, and these conceptions generate differences in their lists of basic needs. If you disagree about whether something even counts as one of my basic needs, it may be unreasonable for me to expect you to take responsibility for ensuring its satisfaction. A more appropriate solution is to ensure that I have the opportunity to satisfy the alleged need myself or through a local communal effort. Devolved responsibility is a way to avoid imposing one definition of need on everyone.16

So there are genuine reasons for devolving responsibility for needs onto individuals and local communities. None of these reasons, however, provides a strong argument against our collective responsibility for (1) providing background institutions which ensure people the genuine opportunity – that is, the ability – to satisfy their own needs, (2) ensuring that those who are tied by communal attachments to people in need are themselves able to act to satisfy those needs, (3) providing a safety net for those who irresponsibly fail to satisfy their own needs, and (4) recognising that considerations of prudence, efficiency and solidarity may call for the assumption of global collective responsibility for needs even when it is possible in principle for them to be satisfied in other ways.

We end this paper as we began, with the principle that in a just world, everyone’s basic needs would be satisfied. Although we endorse this as an egalitarian principle, it has a wider appeal as well. What we hope to have shown is that the principle entails a strong, global, collective responsibility for ensuring its implementation. We cannot pretend that we care about people’s needs and expect to do nothing to meet them.

Notes


3. More precisely, egalitarians are likely to endorse some form of qualified leximin principle under which we seek first to maximise the capability of the least capable, then of the next least, and so on, subject to intuitive constraints about the degree to which large reductions of greater capability can be sacrificed for small improvements of lesser capability. (For a parallel discussion, see Philippe Van Parijs, Real Freedom for All (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 25&n.) For the purposes of this paper, it will suffice to stick to the general idea of ensuring, as far as possible, an equal capability to satisfy one’s needs.

5. For a relevant exposition, see Brian Barry, The Liberal Theory of Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), ch. 11.


7. See John E. Roemer, Free to Lose (London: Radius, 1988), 149-52 for a brief exposition of this and other inefficiencies in the market.


11. The foregoing discussion subsumes what might be considered two distinct categories, namely cooperation between responsible individuals and intervention on behalf of the irresponsible. Although the distinction is relevant to our problem, it is not central, since the doctrine of individualised responsibility is incompatible with both of these ideas.


13. An example of this objection may be found in George Fletcher, Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21.


15. For an elaboration of these and related arguments, see Charles Jones, Global Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).