

# Global inequality and national responsibility

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to revisit national responsibility in the context of global inequality. Special obligations vis-à-vis universal obligations are at the centre of the academic debate on cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Another prevalent dichotomy is individual versus collective responsibilities. This paper moves the discussion of cosmopolitanism and nationalism from the axis of universalism and particularism to the axis of individual versus collective responsibilities. By addressing collective responsibility instead of special obligations, this paper argues that Miller's concept of national responsibility substantiates a strong argument against political cosmopolitanism. Building on Miller's approach, a need for a framework of national responsibilities in *institutional* terms rather than *cultural* terms is outlined. It is shown that the cultural approach of national responsibility is determined insufficiently and suffers from the same institutional deficit as the cosmopolitan argument.

**Key words:** Global inequality, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, individual and collective responsibilities and political institutions.

## Introduction

The fact of global inequality is beyond dispute. The moral concerns for the needs, rights and welfare opportunities of impoverished people are as well unquestionable. At present one billion people are suffering from malnutrition (cf. UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation 2009). In the year 2000, the world's leaders committed themselves to the United Nations Millennium Goals. Among these goals are cutting down global poverty, providing universal primary education, granting maternal and child health care and addressing other special needs of the least developed countries.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it remains to consider *who* is responsible for the occurrence of severe poverty and extreme global inequality. No simple answers are available.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/sept\\_2010\\_more.shtml](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/sept_2010_more.shtml)

In contemporary political theory, human and social rights are to an increasing extent conceptualised within the growing research field of cosmopolitanism. This branch of analysis is highly focused upon questions relating to “global order”, “global justice” and “global democracy” as opposed to traditional forms of “nationalism” and “national self-determination” (e.g. Singer 1972, Nussbaum 1996, Held 1995, Beck 2006, Caney 2005, Pogge 2008). Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer strongly urge for a greater concern for the rights of impoverished people on a global basis (Pogge 2008; Singer 2009). There is, however, a considerable disagreement present, especially among liberal political philosophers, about the moral grounds of our duties to address *cross-border* issues and responsibilities. Whereas proponents of cosmopolitanism place their preference upon an understanding of global poverty as part of the struggle for global justice; proponents of liberal nationalism distinguish between global humanitarian duties and a nation-bound political enterprise constituting national obligations (Miller 2007). Liberal nationalism aims at rehabilitating the normative significance of nation states.

Generally, national-theoretical arguments are more prevalent in public political debates than they are in the academic literature. However, a growing emphasis has recently been given to the national-theoretical position by thinkers like Buchanan (2004), Calhoun (2002), Kymlicka (2001) and Miller (2007). In particular, David Miller has attracted much discussion and contestation. Miller places emphasis upon the vital importance of taking national communities seriously. While accepting the moral imperative of justice for all, Miller points out that liberal democracy, political responsibility, and political motivation pivot upon national feelings and identity (Miller 1995; 2007). Liberal nationalism represents a theory that contests multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Although we live in a modern and global world, we must grant Miller some plausibility as he underpins that people have a need for local anchorage, security and social cohesion. However, to identify an empirical fact is not to justify a normative model for a good society. In the view of recent ethnical and national aggressions, e.g. the Balkan wars, we must treat the national-theoretical claim of the vital role of national communities and cultural fellowships with caution.

The aim of this paper is to revisit the concept of national responsibilities in the context of global inequality. Special obligations vis-à-vis universal obligations are at the centre of the academic discussion about cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Another prevalent dichotomy is *individual* versus *collective* responsibilities. By addressing collective responsibility instead of special obligations, this paper argues that Miller’s concept of national responsibility underpins a strong argument against cosmopolitanism as a political doctrine. In other words the paper moves the

discussion of cosmopolitanism and nationalism from the axis of universalism and particularism to the axis of individual versus collective responsibilities. Building on Miller's approach, I touch upon a framework of national responsibilities in *institutional* terms rather than *cultural* terms. It is shown that the cultural approach of national responsibility, which I argue Miller addresses, is insufficiently determined and suffers from the same institutional deficit as the cosmopolitan argument.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, I discuss the lack of concrete moral guidelines within cosmopolitan thinking by addressing the individual and universal component of a cosmopolitan standard argument. Second, the paper addresses that the concept of national responsibility adds something important to the concepts of individual and collective responsibility. It is, however, shown that the cultural foundation of national responsibility suffers from ambiguity. Finally, a framework for a substitution of the cultural approach with an institutional approach is outlined.

### **Killing or letting die**

Before proceeding further, it is worth noting that the disparity between cosmopolitans and nationalists are not merely differences of opinion, but also different understandings of moral responsibility derived from global inequality. To introduce some clarity, I distinguish between two comprehensions of moral importance of impoverished or starving people. The first defence argues "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer 1972, 231). By 'without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance', Singer means without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent (Singer 1972, 231). The second defence argues that we are obliged only to refrain from harming others and cannot be condemned for failing to help them. Considering the arguments from the victim's point of view, the decisive difference between the two signifies a *positive* theory of rights and a *negative* theory of rights. Do you have a positive right to be remedied or do you have a negative right not to be harmed by others?

If we, however, consider the arguments from an agent's point of view, the two defences represent two well-defined moral-philosophical positions in the discussion of whether it is morally worse shooting a person rather than omitting to feed a starving person. Or differently put, is it morally worse *killing* someone or *letting* someone *die* (Bennett 1981; Lippert-

Rasmussen 1998)? Given the fact of global poverty and inequality, every person's actions stipulate de facto a situation of not giving money to e.g. famine relief. The western consumerist Paul, who buys new clothes has, as Singer argues, inevitably let someone die by not scarfing the money spent on new clothes to those in more important needs (Singer 1972, 235). By buying new clothes instead of wearing old clothes, Paul has literally *chosen* not to prevent someone from starving or dying. And if we accept that the distinction between killing and letting die has no moral significance, we ought to adduce that Paul is acting in a morally unjustifiable way. Arguably, we ought to expand our moral obligations toward disadvantaged people in the Third World (Lippert-Rasmussen 1998, 26). On this backdrop, it is easy to agree with the cosmopolitans' arguments in favour of a "cosmopolitan world order" in which human rights are safeguarded (Brooks 2008, 316-317) and have a global scope (Caney 2005, 66). But how persuasive is the cosmopolitan argument? Is it a sufficient framework to theorise over current political challenges and institutional sustainability and feasibility?

### **The cosmopolitan standard argument**

Let us therefore consider the cosmopolitan theory. In the last decade the cosmopolitan approach has had a tremendous appeal to political philosophers and theorists. The cosmopolitans argue in favour of a cosmopolitan world order enabled to safeguard global rights of impoverished people on a global basis. On the other hand a growing emphasis has recently been given to the national-theoretical argument by thinkers such as Miller and Kymlicka addressing the national dimensions of moral obligations and moral responsibilities. We can therefore identify a cosmopolitan standard argument opposed to nationalism: (1) *if universal and individual rights can be justified, their application cannot be constrained by individuals' membership of national societies*. Generally speaking, the cosmopolitan standard argument establishes: (i) *individualism* (human beings are the ultimate units of concern rather than family lines, tribes, nations, or states; and (ii) *moral universalism* (Caney, 2005: 3-4; 232-233).<sup>2</sup> Examining cosmopolitanism, this section focuses on the individual and universal components that I take to be some of the most influential and important in cosmopolitan theories. The two components are put under scrutiny separately. In order to address cosmopolitan issues, it is shown that ambiguity does not concern the universal component, but the individual one.

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<sup>2</sup> Moral universalism is defined by three assumptions: (a) there are valid moral principles; (b) the moral principles apply to all persons, who share some common morally relevant properties; and (c) persons throughout the world share some morally relevant similarities (Caney, 2005: 35-36).

If moral universalism is a valid position, the cogent argument is that moral principles shall be distributed on a global scale. Therefore, the moral value of various good and bad things that can happen to people should be valued in the same way no matter whom those people are and where in the world they live. A world in which there is a starving individual in Africa is as bad as a world in which there is a starving individual in US, all else being equal (Miller 2007, 28). From a moral point of view, a citizen in New York should be no more concerned about her obligations to aid those with physical contact to her than about her obligations to aid strangers far away from her. The fact that a person is physically near to her may make it more likely that she *will* assist him, but this does not mean that she *ought* to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of moral universalism, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him) (Singer 1972, 232). In Martha C. Nussbaum's words, we are "world citizens" devoted to "the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings" (Nussbaum 1996, 7). Furthermore, instant communication and transportation opportunities make it obligatory to recognise the world as a "global village" (Singer 1972, 232). The universal component of the cosmopolitan standard argument signifies a commitment to the standpoint that killing someone is of no more moral significance than refraining to remedy a particularly needy individual and thereby causing death. Geographical gaps have no moral implications. With a similar thought in mind, Singer gives primary emphasis to the *individual* moral obligations to economically remedy famine or other natural catastrophes (Singer 1972). Pogge opts also for "a reflective moral response from each and every one of us" (Pogge 2008, 151).

This argument is vulnerable to an immanent critique. If we accept that global inequality is best understood in terms of moral *universal* obligations, and that the individual is not allowed to discriminate between people in need (one close and one far away), the argument lacks to explore *whom* the individual in a concrete situation should select and help. As Shue puts it, to prevent every death and deformity caused by deprivation of uncontaminated water or nutritious food is beyond the individual's capacity (Shue 1980, 131). If the individual cannot remedy every single human being deprived of subsistence, some legitimate moral guidelines to choose between the vulnerable is required. Why should Susanne prefer to help a starving person in Africa and thereby potentially rectify global inequality instead of a vulnerable homeless in the US asking her for money? The answer is not clear from a cosmopolitan point of view. As a citizen of the world Susanne's obligations are time and space independent. Given neglect of the distinction between killing and letting die, the distribution of obligations to provide aid

to specific persons, institutions and countries are blurred. Attempting to avoid this problem, a majority of political and liberal theory has addressed the importance of negative freedom and negative rights. Literally, it is easier to refrain from harming anyone than positively to help everyone in need. However, this practical matter of distribution does not justify any moral weakening. Although individuals are psychologically and physically constrained, the normative imperative that vulnerable people worldwide should be provided aid does not alter. Consequently, critics of cosmopolitanism do not have a strong argument against the *universality* of the moral principles upon which cosmopolitanism rests.

On the other hand, strong structural, economic, and political relationships between the developed world and the world's poorest countries prevent the western consumerist Paul from fulfilling his negative obligations to refrain from harming anybody. Unavoidably, there is in Bennett's words "an endless list of person's omissions" (Bennett 1981, 87). The individualistic component of the cosmopolitan standard argument has invoked several critical objections. Critics of cosmopolitanism question the fruitfulness of interpreting responsibilities for rectifying global inequality in *individual* terms instead of *collective* terms. If every individual in the northern hemisphere participates more or less equally in harming needy people, we make no progressions by addressing individuals' universal moral obligations. Rather, we should ask: does it make sense to frame the discussion of global equality and justice in terms of individual moral obligations? One could state that the dispute about global equality and justice is vulgarised, when discussed in terms of the individual's redistribution of money to famine victims. Drawing attention to the collective level, the individual Paul is not the most important moral agent. With Ian Hunt we can say that cases of rescue are "collective acts" and "collective obligations". Individual obligations are condensed to participate in the collective actions, e.g. by means such as donating money to international organisations, like UNICEF (Hunt 2003). Pointing to the collective level, an answer to the essential *political* question of *who* is responsibility for *what* is required. It is a question of political distribution of responsibility.

#### Equivalence between moral and politics

Having outlined the cosmopolitan argument for individual and universal distribution of moral concerns, we may ask what *political* and *institutional* implications the cosmopolitan argument launches. To put it differently, what is the relationship between moral principles and politics? In the literature it is widely discussed whether cosmopolitanism primarily refers to a moral doctrine or a political doctrine as well. Miller emphasises, correctly, that cosmopolitanism

needs to add “a further premise” in order to justify the theoretical assumption that cosmopolitan concerns express political conceptions of global equality and justice (Miller 2007, 30). Defining the cosmopolitan standard argument by (i) individualism and (ii) moral universalism cosmopolitanism does not *eo ipso* contain a principle for politics. If the cosmopolitan standard argument wishes to criticise nation-partial institutions and policy agendas, a third assumption must be added: (iii) *a conceptual equivalence between moral and politics*. Equivalence embraces here the notion of close relation between universal moral obligations and political implementation doctrines. Moral cosmopolitanism, so conceived, identifies a close correspondence between the moral level and the political level. Consequently, the argument aims at a global and cosmopolitan policy, like for instance global equality and global non-partiality as the only morally acceptable policies. A strong and a weak version of cosmopolitanism can be distinguished. Accepting (iii) a strong cosmopolitanism is established. This kind of strong or political cosmopolitanism is less popular in the literature than a weaker form for cosmopolitanism stating that the cosmopolitan standard argument does not dictate specific organisational institutions and principles. Rather the weak cosmopolitan argument, it is argued, signals a “moral regulative principle” through which the specific and local organisational institutional and principles can be analysed and criticised. Despite ambiguities, Nussbaum adopts that the principle of the equal worth of all human beings can be understood as “a regulative constraint on our political actions and aspirations” (Nussbaum 1996, 133).

However, although Nussbaum’s and Singer’s comprehensions of cosmopolitanism do not neglect the relevance of governmental responsibility entirely, Nussbaum and Singer do not answer the delicate question of *who* is responsible for the occurrence of famines and other natural catastrophes. Many cases such as earthquakes and tsunamis have no relevant human actor involved and therefore no one to blame. On the other hand, many cases such as rainforest disappearances, droughts, etc., have no utterly innocent and natural explanation. The causal explanation may be difficult to trace, but that does not alter the fact that human activities and social events of for instance exaggerated and unsustainable deforestation can be ascribed responsibility for a later occurrence of drought. Drought can potentially cause bad agricultural yields that eventually lead to poverty and malnutrition and in the worst case a famine. With this in mind, it is clear that cosmopolitan ideas of moral obligations with a global reach do not capture everything of importance in order to analyse causes and responsibilities for specific events sufficiently.

Summing up, the universal component leaves several practical problems unsolved and fails to answer *whom* of the equally vulnerable individuals Paul should help first. If geographical distance is not a relevant criterion, what other criteria are available? Furthermore, the individual approach does not address global inequality issues satisfactorily. If rectifying global inequality requires collective and coordinated actions, it is inappropriate to direct a large amount of attention to the moral obligations of individuals.

### **Individual, collective, and national responsibilities**

Having presented the general cosmopolitan claim and examined the universal and individual component of cosmopolitanism let us now consider the concept of responsibility. In doing so, my aim is to evaluate the importance of distinguishing between individual and collective responsibility and to provide support for national responsibility. This section considers an alternative perspective, which is also concerned with global inequality, but which, unlike the preceding cosmopolitan argument, stresses the importance of what is often referred to as “the ethics of national responsibilities”. Elevating the discussion of global inequality and justice from the individual to the collective level, I critically discuss Miller’s *non-individualistic* argument about the moral significance of national responsibility. The notion of national responsibility represents an innovation in liberal political theory.

Miller’s key claim is that nations should be held accountable for actions, events, and their consequences that can be ascribed to a particular nation. Holding nations accountable, presupposes that nations are collective agents. When speaking of nations a broad empirical assumption is made that there exists “a sufficient degree of convergence in attitude and beliefs” for the great majority of national fellows (Miller 2007, 126). One argument justifies this by stressing that members share an identity and a public culture, and individual members’ practices and behaviour can be seen as expressions of that “common identity and culture” (Miller 2007, 126). This argument is expressed in length in Miller’s *On Nationality* (1995). Accordingly, it is assumed that the nation – as a numerically identical entity over time – is “partially constitutive of the identity of each member” (Miller 2007, 124).<sup>3</sup> According to this identification of national identity communities, it is important that nations are subscribed to the nations’ actions and events in the past, present and future (Miller 2007, chapter 6). Similar to the idea of individual responsibility, we are urged to understand nations as accountable and responsible

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<sup>3</sup> As some have noted, it is unclear why *diachronic* identity communities (such as nations) justify a greater importance than *synchronic* identity communities (such as ideological or other cross border solidarity) (Lippert-Rasmussen 2009, 124).

collective agents. In the following I bracket out the discussion of the plausibility of presenting nations as collective agents. Instead I critically consider the concept of national responsibilities. If we accept the idea of national responsibility, it has implications for the above-mentioned discussion of global inequality. First, I attempt to outline the differences between individual and collective responsibility. Why is it relevant to speak of collective responsibility? Second, I discuss the justification of the idea of national responsibility. What is special about nations?

### Individual and collective responsibility

Is collective responsibility a persuasive concept and if so, in what way is it relevant? Is it more appropriate to hold a specific individual responsible for a specific action or event she has caused? Individual responsibility can be defined in several ways. As Virginia Held and Philip Pettit argues, one option is that agent A is responsible for action Q if A has knowledge about the action's condemnable outcome (O) but nonetheless performed the action (Held 1970; Pettit 2007, 174). Suppose agent A drives a narrow street with high speed. In this situation agent A should know that the action 'to drive a narrow street with high speed' could have the outcome O: 'to kill someone'. Assuming that agent A knew the possible outcome of action Q, we can hold agent A accountable and responsible for the condemnable consequences of action Q.<sup>4</sup>

To gain an idea of the relevance of collective responsibility we have to pay attention to the question pointing at *where* and *from whom* agent A has knowledge about the (moral) consequences of specific actions. According to Miller, our judgements about whether a particular person is responsible for what he did involve holding him to "certain normative standards" (Miller 2007, 95). In other words, we expect a certain amount of "normal powers of agents" (Miller 2007, 93), for example, their ability to see the possible outcome of driving too fast. Building on the idea of national convergence of identities Miller opens up for the notion that normative standards are influenced by nationality and cultural differences. An agent's knowledge about the possible moral content of specific outcomes is thus in control of the national standards. But even if we accept the idea of national standards, it does not satisfactorily identify the scope of knowledge about actions' outcomes. There is one main area of uncertainty. An adequate theory of responsibility needs to take into consideration the instances in which

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, it is possible to hold everyone driving with a high speed accountable for the action as a *collective group*. The argument goes like this: Everyone who is driving too fast on a narrow street has put herself in a situation where the chance of killing someone is high. Therefore, it is random who is actually killing the person. Morally arbitrary is who by chance kills the person (Feinberg 1968, 674-688).

the moral condemnable consequences of specific and individual actions are not easily *foreseeable*. Here, one key category is the *indirect* and *complex* causal courses of events. Suppose Susanne buys a litre of milk in the local supermarket. Straightforwardly, there should not be any moral condemnable content in this action. However, the situation looks different if we include the indirect implications of buying the milk. Consider this situation: by buying the milk the consumerist Susanne benefits by the fact that European milk producers can sell her subsidized, cheap milk in Europe. The milk producer sells powder milk in Africa that let us say, – on a collective and aggregated level – participates in destabilising and outmatching local African milk production. In this case, by buying the milk in Europe Susanne is a component in the causal explanation of the economic situation in Africa. Nonetheless, the question remains to whom it is fair to distribute responsibility for the aggregated outcome: an outmatched African milk production. Is it fair to subscribe co-responsibility to single individuals for their part in providing an outcome that only on an aggregated and collective level has an effect? Or is it more appropriate to identify a collective responsibility on an aggregated level to which different characteristics apply?

The idea of collective responsibility affirms subscription of responsibility to *several* persons, i.e. to a *broader* audience than the single individual in action. Individuals who are indirectly involved in an event or benefiting by others' actions can as well be held accountable for their share in the aggregated outcome (Miller 2007, 103-104). This applies for Susanne who, in the milk-example, is benefiting from the subsidized milk producer selling powder milk in Africa and at the same time cheap milk in Europe. Another example is a community that helps to sustain a certain climate of opinion in which the actions in question take place (Miller 2007, 118). The same pertains for those who have voiced their opposition to the actions (Miller 2007, 118; 121). Although this might be plausible, ambiguity depicts the argument. Looking at an extreme example, we may ask whether the Jews were co-responsible for the Holocaust against the Jews and others. Miller of course denies that the Jews were co-responsible for Holocaust and that the Kurds were co-responsible for the attacks initiated by Saddam Hussein (Miller 2007, 132). Nevertheless, if Miller maintains that critics and dissidents can sustain or affirm a climate of opinion, and thereby be subscribed responsibility, the explanation is unclear.

Does it intuitively make sense to address responsibility without identifying a single individual actor to whom we can connect the action or event in question? If we accept this “externalist view” (Lippert-Rasmussen 2009, 111), the model of liberal-individualism in which only an individual can be held accountable for single actions or events is challenged. In that way, the

idea of collective responsibility questions the correlation between responsibility and punishment. In liberal and democratic states the judicial system and courts only recognise individuals as subject for responsibility and punishment (Pierik 2008, 465). Consider for example a situation where agent A insults agent B with infringing utterances. Speaking of collective responsibility agent A might not be the only relevant person to claim. Several circumstances and numerous persons can as well be held responsible for that agent A insults B. Suppose the climate of opinion in the community in question made agent A feel comfortable, a good fellow, prude, etc. by infringing B. Involving the circumstances and the, let us say, racist community we can assume that agent A acted in good faith because he thought it was legitimate and reasonable to infringe agent B.

However, as I understand Miller's point of interest, Miller is not interested in distributing individual shares of responsibility to single individuals. Rather, Miller is interested in what kind of responsibility for instance the *German people* as a collective group can be charged with. What political environment and culture enabled or facilitated that Eichmann could accomplish the transportation of Jews and others to concentration camps? Although we might agree that Eichmann should be ascribed a greater share of responsibility than ordinary Germans, that does not answer the crucial question of exactly what kind of responsibility we can subscribe to those who constituted a certain political environment and sustained a specific cultural praxis which indirectly enabled Eichmann's actions.

### **National responsibility**

Arguing for the idea of national responsibility, Miller uses the model for collective responsibility. However, as I read Miller, he distinguishes himself from the traditional models for collective responsibility in which different kind of groups consisting of several persons is discussed. Instead Miller moves the discussion in a different direction by including the collective community, culture and nation as relevant co-responsible agents. The ambition is to capture both human and non-human conditions that in a broader sense are causally responsible for the event in question (Miller 2007, 87). The proposal of national responsibility is an interesting endeavour to modify the idea of individual and collective responsibility. Miller does not argue for an abandonment of individual responsibility. Rather, the idea is to hold the nation or the culture accountable for situations to which individuals cannot be ascribed responsibility (Miller 2007, 129). Exemplifying, "if after democratic debate [...] a policy is rejected, then we can legitimately say that the nation in question is collectively responsible for the consequences of

population growth: its culture is such that it prefers large families to, let us say, less crowded roads and cities” (Miller 2007, 128). Miller distinguishes between democratic and non-democratic societies, but for both it applies that events or lack of events partly can be explained by “beliefs and values that are common national property” (Miller 2007, 128). If nation A has large families instead of a good infrastructure, this prioritisation can partly be subscribed to the cultural preferences and values of the nation (The idea of cultural preferences is discussed in a later section).

If we are not only interested in the *causal* connection between nation A, action Q and outcome O, following Miller’s terminology, we can talk of “outcome-responsibility”. Outcome-responsibility identifies a situation where an agent can be *credited* or *debited* with a particular outcome, but where the *gains* and *loses* that fall upon A should stay where they are (Miller 2007, 87, 90). Taking the example of nation A which has large families, but bad infrastructure, we can credit or debit nation A with that situation. However, this does not imply that we can assess nation A as a good or bad society and thereby subscribe the nation “moral responsibility” (Miller 2007, 89). Answering the question of whether nation B and C ought to remedy nation A, because nation A has a bad infrastructure and therefore, let us say, a bad economy compared to nation B and C which have prioritised infrastructure over large families, we cannot merely by the fact of economic inequality argue for financial distribution from nation B and C to nation A. The vital reason is that nation A holds responsibility for the consequences of their political and cultural prioritisations (Miller 2007, 100-101).<sup>5</sup> On this backdrop, Miller suggests that nations are politically and morally relevant agents. Nations are due to their cultural impact on politics, norms and choices co-responsible for the present circumstances of the nation. Although Miller emphasises that western nations are obliged to remedy nations suffering from famines and nature catastrophes, it is Miller’s basic idea that we shall not consider every (poor) nation “simply as victims” (Miller 2007, 236). Rather the particular (poor) nation is an equal collective agent making individual choices (at a collective level) capable of holding responsibility for their own actions and outcomes. Therefore, nations can be held responsible not only for the benefits and burdens created for their own members, but also for the impact that their actions have on outsiders (Miller 2007, 134).

Despite the pivotal and innovative character of the argument for national responsibility, at least one question remains unsolved: *how* do you hold a nation or a culture responsible? Is

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<sup>5</sup> A crucial aspect of Miller’s theory of collective and national responsibility is the concept of “remedial responsibility”. Remedial responsibility identifies the obligations of wealthy nations towards needy nations (Miller 2007). This aspect is in here set aside.

holding nation A accountable *de facto* to hold the members of the nation responsible for e.g. the economic state of nation A – and not nation A as such? If this is the case, we hold members of the nation responsible for an outcome despite the fact (i) that the individuals may not have knowledge about the long-termed and indirect consequences of, let us say, prioritising large families; (ii) did not have control over the prioritisation; or (iii) even actively opposed the prioritisation (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2009, 111). Miller puts it this way: "we find that the pattern of family relations in a particular country, and the number children who are on average produced, corresponds to the religious or other cultural values of the nation in question. Here there is no deliberate decision to behave in a particular way or to adopt a particular practice, but nevertheless what happens reflects the national culture in a fairly direct sense" (Miller 2007, 126).

Regardless of the challenges relating to the individual area of responsibility, I view Miller's ambition as an interesting theoretical suggestion on how we can broaden the scope of *whom* and *what* are suitable for holding responsibility. Enhancing the importance of the national responsibility, we are encouraged to discuss and test the potential implications for concepts such as liberal-individualism, rationality and democracy that in the view of national responsibility might overestimate the individuals' capacities. In other words, national responsibility may imply an unavoidable causal sequence that diminishes the scope of individual choices and the scope of the possibility of participation or non-participation in the collective culture and nation (Arendt 2003, 150). However, it may exactly be that non-individualistic theory of responsibility Miller is alluding at. *If* the national culture constitutes the individual's knowledge about what is morally blameable and appraisable, it does not make sense to hold the individual responsible for an event the individual did not have an independent knowledge about would lead to a blameable outcome. *If* the postulate that individual identity is constituted by the national culture is accepted, we need to take the argument for national responsibility seriously. Nonetheless, ambiguity remains. First, why should we accept that it is exactly the *national* communities – opposed to religious, ideological and kinship relations – to which vital political and moral importance are attributed (Shue 1980, 137-138; Pierik 2008, 489-491; Lippert-Rasmussen 2009, 117)? The significance of national communities compared to other forms of communities is ultimately an empirical question. Speaking of nationality in cultural and identity political terms leave national responsibility in competition with other group-defined affiliations such as religion, ethnicity and sexuality.

Secondly, even if national and cultural identities have political and sociological significance in terms of their influence on member's empirical identity and the political community's historical foundation (Miller 2007, 58-60), it does not follow that this influence constitutes any sustainable legitimisation of the moral and political roles of culture. As discussed elsewhere, we are therefore not forced to underpin that national and cultural identities are to be considered *eo ipso* as morally significant entities even if we accept Miller's empirical premise (Scavenius 2009). In other words, Miller is vulnerable to the same critique as he himself rises against cosmopolitanism. Miller emphasises that cosmopolitans need a further premise in order to justify the equivalence between moral principles and political principles. The same critic applies for the national-theoretical argument as Miller presents it. As mentioned earlier, some cosmopolitans presume an ambiguous equivalence between moral and political principles. In a similar way, Miller explains politics by cultural factors and values specifying partiality to members of the nationhood (Miller 2007, 34). Doubt concerns the cultural aspect, rather than the concept of national responsibility. The cultural factors are neither a necessary nor sufficient basis for politics.

#### National culture or institutions

Aiming at avoiding this ambiguity, which surrounds the cultural aspect of national responsibility, an idea is to detach this cultural aspect from the general concept of national responsibility. By doing so, I argue for a substitution of the *cultural* foundation with an *institutional* framework. Even if we accept the empirical importance of cultural attachment, we are not forced to take politics entirely to the cultural level. Instead of focusing on the cultural and national constraints of global justice I – inspired by the late Rawls – attempt to draw attention to the institutional constraints of politics (Rawls 1993).<sup>6</sup> This approach argues against both cosmopolitanism and nationalism as political doctrines. Both cosmopolitanism and nationalism as political theories provide a basis for a crucial insight into the development of the international society. They suffer, however, from an inadequate treatment if seen from an institutional and state-

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<sup>6</sup> Rawls argues for a two-stage-model as explanation of political developments. The first stage ends with “a constitutional consensus”, the second with “an overlapping consensus” (Rawls 1993, 158). The later presupposes the former. The constitutional consensus is not grounded in certain ideas of society or political conception. Instead constitutional consensus establishes certain basic principles and “electoral procedures for moderating political rivalry within society” (Rawls 1993, 158). Opposed to the constitutional consensus, the overlapping consensus is “deep”. Its depth requires that the political principles and ideals are founded on a political conception of justice (Rawls 1993, 164). The key idea is that the first stage of constitutional consensus constitutes the historical and institutional preconditions for a later development of the political *modus vivendi*. Developing over time the overlapping and deep consensus initiates a broader and more comprehensive political understanding and moral psychological capacity (Rawls 1993, 163).

based perspective. Defenders of cosmopolitanism and nationalism provide what we could call a “post-state” analysis. Although quite intriguing, I believe that there are several shortcomings in this over-emphasis on the post-state national-theoretical and cosmopolitan theory. In the same vein, D. Held & Hervey have recently addressed the lack of research on the institutional and democratic state within cosmopolitan theory and emphasised the need for a stronger and more consistent theorisation of the current dilemmas between national and transnational policy levels (Held & Hervey 2010, 15). My main intuition is this: If we challenge the institutional and state-centred approach, we simultaneously contest the constitutional foundation of rights and justice. Here the late Rawls offers a fruitful suggestion. By focusing on the institutional constraints and developments of political structures, Rawls’ model represents an alternative understanding of the political society than the national-theoretical argument’s cultural foundation. Rather than presuming equivalence between the cultural and the political levels, Rawls argues that it is only *as* citizens within a political society the individuals are capable of considering ideas of justice and responsibility. Taking this argument seriously, it is “only within the constitutional democratic culture” political and liberal principles of justice make sense (Freeman 2003, 34-35).<sup>7</sup>

If we accept the institutionalised concept of national responsibility, there is no tension between universal and special obligations because responsibilities are justified *within* the framework of cosmopolitan egalitarianism and moral universalism (Abizadeh & Gilibert 2008, 351). The justification of the institutional frameworks is dependent on the universal and cosmopolitan moral principles. Or differently considered the value of special relationships is “derivative” in the sense they are justified by reference to the value of human well-being (Abizadeh & Gilibert, 2008, 356). Therefore, national responsibilities are justifiable as *positive* duties as long they at the same time satisfy a *negative* duty to avoid practices causing others’ life-threatening poverty (Abizadeh & Gilibert 2008, 362). Morally, in this case there is no asymmetry between killing and letting die. However, given special relationships and special responsibilities must be granted some moral and political significance as well, an asymmetry between killing and letting die is arising from the recognition that special responsibilities under certain conditions can be weighted against universal obligations. This does not only imply that the special responsibilities are not “unconditionally valuable” (Abizadeh & Gilibert 2008, 351). But that a reasonable way

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<sup>7</sup> Defining the political society as a historical political society which slowly develops, Rawls distinguishes himself from the idea of a hypothetical contract founding the legitimate political society which he endorsed in Political Theory (1971). The late Rawls does not approve methodological communitarianism or methodological individualism. The political society cannot comprehensively be explained by referring to aggregated cultural norms or an individual behavioristic level (Pettit 2005, 165).

to identify a legitimate difference between positive and negative responsibilities could be institutional frameworks with considerable strengths and capabilities on national and global levels respectively (cf. Held & Hervey 2010).

In this sense, we endorse national responsibility – not because of the cultural affiliations between the members of the nation state, but because the nation represents an institutional framework in which special responsibilities apply for the members. Arguing for an institutionalised concept of national responsibility, justice and responsibility are something we owe to people with whom we have strong political relationships through shared institutions. Or, as Thomas Nagel puts the point: justice is a politically associative obligation within institutions (Nagel 2005, 121).

### **Conclusion**

The tendency in the literature is to frame debates in global inequality and national responsibility in terms of a conflict between universal moral principles and national special concerns. This way of framing the discussion misconstrues the role of political institutions. I have tried in this article to steer a position on national responsibility that is not in contrast to universal moral principles. An adequate analysis of how to rectify global inequality thus impresses on us the importance of constructing political institutions. Speaking of political institutions, we shift the debate from individual obligations to collective responsibilities. By pointing to the distinction between killing and letting die, I have endeavoured to show: first, cosmopolitan moral principles do not contain any practical guidelines enabling a prioritisation of equally vulnerable people. Secondly, the individual obligations, which several cosmopolitans establish, are unsatisfactory in order to address global inequality. Third, Miller's account of the national influence on personal identity and governmental policy restates the importance of national constraints. By giving Miller's approach some plausibility, we pay attention to the practical and political level of global inequality. However, the underlying cultural assumption blurs the debate. Therefore, in this article I have argued for an institutional approach to national constraints and responsibilities, instead of sustaining a cultural definition of nationality.

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