



Basic Goods: A Philosophical Approach to Debt and Latin American Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper asks how the basic goods approach to international development directs developed nations to respond to the needs of moderately well-off developing democratic nations that are undergoing or threatened by a debt crisis. The basic goods approach to international development holds that we should see the level of development of a society as a function of whether the society provides its members with those characteristics both that it would be rational for them to seek in whomever they will be interacting with and they would be willing to have imposed upon themselves. This approach yields a principle of sustained minimization which allows for—indeed recommends—increasing indebtedness when doing so is an effective means to reducing overall indebtedness. The approach also shows that some loans—such as those made to illegitimate governments—ought to be forgiven. The examples of Uruguay and Argentina are used to illustrate these points.

INTRODUCTION

By Canadian (or Western) standards, most Latin American nations count as heavily indebted. Yet when compared with, say, African nations they are relatively lightly indebted. Similarly, when we compare most African nations with most South American ones we find that the latter are highly productive societies—but not so when compared along this measure with Canada. Again, in terms of how secure and well-functioning democracy is, South American nations fall between the successful and well-established western democracies and those new weak ones found in most parts of Africa. The same can be said regarding levels of corruption, quality of education and health care, press freedom, judicial independence and competence, and a host of other elements which we all take to be signs of, or constituent of, a highly developed society. In this paper I examine the debt crises in Uruguay and in Argentina and show how thinking about international development and global justice from a basic goods perspective helps both to illuminate the nature of these problems and to provide policy makers—in both aid giving and aid receiving nations—with the tools for making wise choices in difficult and complex circumstances.

I begin with a short account which demonstrates that what we decide to measure in such cases is an extremely important decision. I then review how the two dominant approaches to international development and global justice influence the way such problems are traditionally structured. I then turn to the basic goods approach and show that it makes more central and salient certain features which can easily be obscured when alternative approaches are adopted. Furthermore, it provides us with both a principle for dealing with such issues as indebtedness—the principle of sustained minimization—and a guide to increasing our chances of avoiding the most common mistakes that are easy to make when sorting through these complex matters. These advantages of the basic goods approach are nicely illustrated by the present situations found in Uruguay and Argentina.

MEASURING DEVELOPMENT

Traditional measures of development sometimes do a very good job of measuring development - but on other occasions they clearly get things very wrong. Thus, certain historical societies, such as ancient Greece, which we all intuitively think of as being highly developed would perform poorly on standard development indices. And some contemporary societies, which we all know to be underdeveloped, do very well on development indices. In the latter case, I am thinking of those contemporary societies where, because of abundant and much-sought-after natural resources, the population is relatively wealthy but where, because of tyranny and the use of religion as a weapon of oppression, the population remains relatively uneducated, without freedom, and ignorant. The reason for the mismatch between what we know about these societies and what our development indices say about them has to do, I suggest, primarily with the fact that none of the standard indices take into account how “civilized” a society is when its level of development is measured. This is at odds with the conception of development most of us intuitively adopt. We all think that, other things being equal, a more civilized society is more developed than a less civilized society. The lesson to be learned is that somehow we need to include indicators of how civilized a society is when we measure how developed it is.

But this raises a serious problem of cultural bias. We all grew up in a particular culture and it is to some degree inevitable that the particular features of that culture are going to influence us when we try to assess how civilized another culture actually is. So the obvious remedy to our present problem—adding a level-of-civilization component to one of our present development indices—simply is not going to work. It will run afoul of the so-called cultural imperialism objection.

BASIC GOODS AS A MEASURE

The remedy for these difficulties—the combined facts, that we need to include how civilized a society is if we are going to accurately measure how developed it is, and the fact that estimates of how civilized a society is are likely to suffer

from cultural bias—is, I suggest, to adopt “basic goods” as a measure of international development.

In *A Theory of Justice*, possibly the twentieth century’s most influential work in political theory, John Rawls, developing ideas first explored by Rousseau and Kant, argues that we should think of society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage. The basic goods approach takes Rawls’s observation seriously and puts at the core of what makes a society developed the extent to which cooperative arrangements are available to people. Put roughly, the basic goods approach holds that a society is developed just to the extent that its members have basic goods, and basic goods are defined in terms of capacities and abilities to cooperate with others when their cooperation is contingent on the others’ cooperation. Rawls, of course, used primary goods—things it is rational to want no matter what else one wants—as his favoured measure (Rawls, 1999: Chapter 14). The basic goods approach takes Rawls’s initial insight and uses advances made by David Gauthier to provide the basis for a measure of international development that takes seriously the essential idea that development occurs when humans are able to coordinate their behaviour so that everyone benefits from mutual interaction (Gauthier, 1986).

On this view, wealth is not directly a component of development. Nor need it be seen as a cause of development. Consequently, the basic goods approach does very well at explaining the intuition we all have that some resource-rich tyrannical societies, which by traditional measures (life-span, average level of income, cars per person) are quite well off, are in fact still highly underdeveloped and why some relatively impoverished but highly cultured societies which traditional measures would count as underdeveloped are in reality quite highly developed. This is because the basic goods approach takes civility—not in the trite sense used in matters of etiquette but in the deep and powerful sense of doing one’s bit to promote and protect civilization—as the core value.

Basic goods avoids the problem of cultural bias by giving us an objective measure which is not tied to any particular form of life—namely, to what extent does the society we are measuring provide its citizens with those characteristics they would be willing to have themselves and would rationally want in those they are going to be interacting with? If we can measure the basic goods a society provides its members, we will have a fairly accurate measure of how civilized that society is and, consequently, how developed it is.

Of course, it is assumed that the serious absence of wealth makes social cooperation much more difficult and perhaps even practically impossible. Consequently, increases in wealth in a society will in general count as increases in the basic goods the society has available to it, or will at least make its basic goods more secure. Given this, a crushing burden of debt—at the levels faced by the heavily indebted poor countries—is a real impediment to maintaining or increasing levels of social cooperation. The question is how should we understand high levels of indebtedness: As obstacles to people satisfying their

preferences? As making it more difficult for them to develop and exercise their natural capacities? Or as an impediment and threat to the forms of cooperation necessary for ensuring that the cooperative venture we call civilized society endures so that all may flourish? The first answer is that given by utilitarianism, the moral and political theory which has long dominated both economic and development theory (see Singer, 2002 for an excellent non-technical statement of utilitarianism applied to issues of international development). The second answer is the one favoured by those, including the United Nations Development Program, who have come to accept Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (Sen, 1999). The third answer—that a society is developed not to the extent its people are happy or to the extent that they can exercise their natural capacities but to the extent that they have the capacities, opportunities, and willingness to contribute to those cooperative activities which promote and protect civilized society—is the one we are exploring here.

The basic goods approach to international development is itself underdeveloped. The most unfortunate feature of the approach being still in its infancy is that, as yet, no one has been able to construct and defend a list of those easily measured things which count as basic goods (in this respect, the basic goods approach is today in the same situation that Amartya Sen's capabilities approach was a decade ago, before the construction of the UNDP's development index, and that utilitarianism was in about a century ago). Consequently, for present purposes we will have to proceed on an ad hoc basis. Against this background we are ready to turn to the task of seeing how the basic goods approach can be applied to our responsibilities to heavily indebted nations. Here I will not focus on the most pressing cases, those of heavily indebted poor countries, but on two instances from South America: Argentina and Uruguay.

INTERNATIONAL BORROWING AS A BASIC GOOD

Since basic goods are things it is rational to want in those one is going to interact with and would be willing to accept as constraints on one's own freedom, and since the capacity and willingness to repay debts is a basic good, the basic goods approach would seem to recommend a fairly tough line on debt repayment. The economic and social benefits that result from a system where we trust those who borrow to repay are, though difficult to calculate, obviously enormous. Defaulting on one's debts—something Argentina seems to make a habit of at least saying it is going to do—would appear to be an unnecessary threat both to the current international system of finance and to trust in general. Thus, the basic goods approach, which gives central place to each doing her part to ensure that the system of mutual cooperative activities remains viable (at least when she has good reason to suppose that others will do their part also) would seem to demand that debtors always repay their debts. But it turns out that this assumption is too facile.

Consider first the case of personal indebtedness. Allowing individuals to go into debt and then repay their debts is an important activity for human society. To

support such a system, penalties for failing to repay one's debts needed to be developed. An early attempt was the infamous Poor Laws, which sent those who would not or could not repay their debts to debtors' prisons. We all know what truly cruel places debtors' prisons were, and we all know that the introduction of comprehensive bankruptcy laws was a vast improvement over the system of prisons which preceded it. It is important to see why this is so. Part of the reason—something learned from Dickens—is that debtors' prisons were unfit for humans of any sort, let alone for those who simply (sometimes through no fault of their own) could not pay their debts. But another reason is that overly cruel sanctions for indebtedness stifle economic activity. People who face dire consequences should they be unable to pay their debts are especially reluctant to engage in those risky entrepreneurial ventures which, occasionally, are of substantial benefit to borrower, lender, and society at large. Overly tight restrictions on lending reduces positive externalities, inhibits wealth formation, and unnecessarily restricts our opportunities.

Of course, excessive indebtedness by individuals within a society can also stunt economic growth in a host of ways. Fortunately, economists have devoted a great deal of attention to providing us with guidance on what the optimal level of indebtedness in a society is and policy makers and political theorists have developed a broad array of sophisticated devices enabling us to move towards the optimum level of borrowing. Of course, economists do not always agree on precisely when a particular society has the optimal level of indebtedness or on which measures are the most appropriate for correcting any particular situation. Nonetheless, there is broad and rough agreement on some issues. Clearly, the move from having criminal sanctions to having bankruptcy provisions available for those unable to pay their debts was an advance both in economic efficiency and in basic goods. Societies which criminalize those who default on their debts are not just economically inefficient, they are also less civilized than those with mechanisms for having such matters dealt with in civil courts.

Almost all economists agree that both Uruguay and Argentina are too heavily indebted. Yet one must be careful not to overstate this problem, for neither of these countries has a level of indebtedness that completely cripples opportunities for economic growth. Both countries have been able to maintain their middle-classes, and the working class in each society remains better off than those in many other parts of the world. But nor should we understate the problem. The middle classes in both countries are threatened and *feel* threatened. Both countries face out-migration of talented young people. And the working classes in both countries have been particularly hard hit by inflation, job losses, and insecurity. Given these facts, the broad consensus among economic and political experts from all parts of the political spectrum is that something needs to be done because (at least in part) excessive indebtedness is holding back development in both nations. Furthermore, there are signs in both countries that the debt crisis is doing more than just stifling economic growth; rather, it is starting to threaten the conception people have of their society as a cooperative venture for mutual benefit. Consequently, people are becoming less willing to cooperate to create what has—at times at least—worked so well

for so many people. In the long term, reducing the level of indebtedness is recommended both by economics and by the basic goods approach.

SUSTAINED MINIMIZATION

In seeking ways to reduce the level of indebtedness in heavily indebted nations, policymakers, corporations, and individuals need to be especially careful to avoid the *zero-tolerance fallacy*, an approach which supposes that, by refusing to tolerate an activity, we are doing all that we should to eradicate that activity. But this is not so. Indeed, sometimes the zero-tolerance approach actually encourages or entrenches the very activity for which we (allegedly) have zero tolerance. As Montaigne observed:

“We thought we were tying our marriage-knots more tightly by removing all means of undoing them; but the tighter we pulled the knot of constraint the looser and slacker became the knot of our will and affection. In Rome, on the contrary, what made marriages honoured and secure for so long a period was the freedom to break them at will.” (*Essays* 2:15.)

Those who advocate the zero-tolerance approach are all too frequently urging us to make the very mistake Montaigne describes. Thus it may be that increasing debt temporarily is the best way to decrease debt in the long term. If the best economic theories tell us that this is so, there is no objection on the grounds of morality or justice (at least as conceived of in terms of basic goods) to temporarily increasing the levels of debt.

The *principle of sustained minimization* is the appropriate principle for dealing with cases where we want to reduce something—in this case excessive debt—but where we want to ensure that we do so in ways that are compassionate and compatible with the maintenance of basic goods (on this principle, see Barthelemy & Wein, 1996). The principle of sustained minimization holds that we will engage in morally repugnant actions only when our doing so has a substantial probability of reducing the overall instances of such morally repugnant behaviour and where everything feasible has been done to minimize that adverse impact on those who bear the burdens of our participating in such immoral behaviour. Increasing debt in heavily indebted countries is permissible, then, only when it is reasonable to suppose that this is the best way to reduce the debt that future generations will have to bear. Decisions about such matters are difficult and are best made by democratically elected governments in the indebted countries. Thus, the primary decisions about how to handle debt are best left to those countries which are indebted. As long as *their governments* choose an approach within the acceptable range specified by the principle of sustained minimization—even if that level differs from the one we would recommend for them—we should respect their decisions and follow their lead in managing the debt. Economists have learned that having developed countries micro-manage developing countries economies does not work very well. Fortunately, justice recommends avoiding such activity anyway.

DEBT AND SUSTAINED MINIMIZATION

We are at the point where we can begin looking at moderately heavy indebtedness in moderately developed relatively new democracies such as Argentina and Uruguay.

Uruguay is sometimes thought to stand to Argentina as Canada stands to the United States of America, and there are many respects in which this is so. In both cases we have one country about a tenth the size of the other: Argentina has at least 38 million people and Uruguay just over 3.5 million. And the smaller country's politics tend to be somewhat more in favour of a welfare state than those of the larger one. In both cases, both the median and average income levels are slightly higher in the larger country than in the smaller. The larger nation is both more religious and ethnically more diverse in both cases, and immigration patterns have historically been quite similar. Threats to the larger nation tend to be threats to the smaller nation also. Finally, in economic policy and politics in general, where the larger nation leads the smaller nation tends to follow—though it usually does so to a lesser degree and not until a while later. Thus, Argentina's debt crisis both came on earlier than and is more severe than Uruguay's.

The relevant aspects of the two country's histories are, for our purposes, the fact that both countries were democracies throughout most of the last century and that today both are again moderately stable democracies. The relevant period of each country's history concerns the military dictatorships (Argentina taking the lead and having a more repressive dictatorship than Uruguay) during the late seventies and early eighties. During these military dictatorships both countries acquired debts. Democracy returned to both countries in the early to mid-eighties (Argentina's dictatorship ended in 1983 and Uruguay's in 1985) and both initially suffered from high inflation and problems with political stability (though, again, Argentina's case was more spectacular than Uruguay's). Due to the work of many fine citizens in both nations, the new democracies dealt with their economic problems and entered periods of rapid economic growth (though this was more pronounced in Argentina than in Uruguay). And when, during the Clinton Administration, the United States acted to deal with its mounting indebtedness, turning regular deficits into regular and dramatic surpluses and, consequently, creating the conditions for the rapid rise in the U.S. dollar, neither Argentina nor Uruguay took the sort of steps Canada took to follow in kind. Rather, their debts grew. All this was complicated by the fact that steps had been taken (dramatic ones in Argentina's case) to regulate the local currency. After a period of democratic instability and several changes of government, in early 2002 the Argentinean peso collapsed. In Uruguay the political scene was much quieter, but that country's peso quickly began to follow Argentina's (though, again, the collapse was not as quick; nor was the fall as far).

Of course, Uruguayans argue that, whereas Argentina's debt crisis was precipitated to a large extent by specific policy measures such as the convertibility plan tying the peso to the U.S. dollar, as well as external factors

such as Brazil's devaluation in January of 1999, Uruguay's crisis was primarily caused by expectations that the problems in Argentina would eventually spill over into Uruguay. Even if Argentina was the primary cause of its own debt crisis and Uruguay did all that could reasonably be expected to avoid the same problems—this fact will make little difference when applying the basic goods approach.

We should note here that the view of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and of most of their critics, is that all debts are alike. It is the amount of debt, not its origins, that matter. There is a good reason for this. If governments did not inherit the debts of previous governments, then, lenders knowing what they do about the longevity of governments, would refuse to lend or would do so only at very high rates of interest. This would have—both critics and defenders of the current arrangements agree—devastating economic consequences. It might not seem that some of the more left-leaning critics of the World Bank have this attitude, but a moment's reflection reveals that they must, for this is the best argument in favour of their view that the high cost of servicing existing debts is crushing the best hopes heavily indebted nations have for economic development.

To what extent should countries like Uruguay and Argentina be held responsible for their national debts? To what extent does the basic goods approach argue in favour of forgiving their debts, and to what extent does it advocate assisting these countries in restructuring the debts they now have?

I begin by observing that there can be no argument from compassion in favour of forgiving these debts. On the basic goods approach, debts that rise to the level where their repayment threatens the viability of civil society—debts so crushing they make cooperative endeavours to pay them consume the vast bulk of a society's capacity to remain civilized—are prime candidates for debt forgiveness. No doubt many African states fit into this category, but neither Argentina nor Uruguay does. In both cases the national debts are a real burden but to think that they are real threats to civil society in either country is, in my view, to insult the people of these nations, people who have, throughout their recent economic difficulties, shown a commendable commitment to democratic processes and the rule of law. Furthermore, assuming, that there is only so much money available for debt forgiveness, these nations could not plausibly be construed as being on the list of most-needy nations. And even if, for some reason, Africa did not consume all the funds available for compassionate debt relief and some funds were left for Latin America, surely countries such as Bolivia, Columbia, and Nicaragua have a much stronger claim to those funds. Thus, neither compassion nor the need to preserve civil society provides grounds for forgiving any of Argentina's or Uruguay's debt. Fortunately, there are other grounds to consider.

The basic goods approach distinguishes between three aspects of public debt. First, there is debt which a state now has and which was incurred by a non-democratic government—debt that the people had no say in whether it should

be incurred. Indeed, in some cases the debt was incurred precisely to enable the government to oppress people and to ensure that they would have no say in how their own country was governed. Second, there is debt which was incurred by a democratically elected government but which was corruptly used by that government (perhaps even stolen from the government by the people who were themselves democratically elected). Finally, there is debt which was incurred in legitimate ways by a democratically elected government. This latter category might be divided into debts incurred and wisely used versus those incurred for foolish public projects, but I will not make such a distinction here, for it would be of only limited use within the basic goods approach. The basic goods approach assigns a different level of responsibility for each of these three types of debt.

All three kinds of debt are currently present in both Uruguay and Argentina. In both countries, when democracy returned after the military dictatorships, the new governments inherited debts (of about \$5 billion and \$40 billion U.S. respectively). The basic goods approach sees debt in this category as being quite different from that found in the other two categories, and does so for several reasons.

First, a non-democratic system of governing developing countries is not a basic good; it is, if anything is, a basic evil - a basic evil being anything that undermines existing cooperation or makes new cooperative ventures more difficult. Some have thought, and continue to think, that there are circumstances—usually characterized as emergencies such as during a “Cold War” or a “War on Terrorism”—when supporting anti-democratic military dictatorships in developing countries is a prudent policy for those of us in the highly developed western democracies to follow. But long experience has taught us that such tactics are almost always both unwise and inept. Even if we allow that there are rare circumstances in which it might be in our interests to fund an anti-democratic military dictatorship, the basic goods approach condemns such a strategy.

Furthermore, the military dictatorships which Uruguay and Argentina suffered through were never ones that plausibly could have been thought to have been justified by extreme circumstances, the problems that Argentina and Uruguay faced prior to the rise of military governments could not have come close to warranting the mass “disappearances” and other serious abuses which continue to haunt both societies. Insofar as lenders contributed to the rise and endurance of such dictatorships, they do not deserve to be repaid. They spent their money making the world a place where cooperation was more difficult and oppression easier and more frequent, and they have no claim to be rewarded for such actions. The basic goods approach condemns such debts and seeks to establish an international system that makes it difficult for any military dictatorship (or other anti-democratic form of government) to sustain itself. Lending money to such immoral entities does not achieve this.

Ideally then, the world community would adopt a principle of international law which made it impossible to lend money to any non-democratic government

which replaced a democratic one. Since we do not want to encourage anyone to make such loans in the future we should not now require the very peoples who suffered (or whose parents and grandparents suffered) under such regimes to have to repay loans of the same type made in the recent past. Until such a principle is in place, we should act to forgive loans such as those made to the military dictatorships which ruled Uruguayans and Argentineans just two short decades ago.

Loans in the second category—and here it is believed that Argentina has many more of these, even on a per capita basis, than Uruguay does—are more problematic. Many Argentineans believe that vast sums were stolen from them during the regime of Carlos Menem. During the same period it is likely that some public funds were stolen in Uruguay. But for several reasons it does not follow that the basic goods approach advocates even partial nullification of loans made during these periods. This is so because lenders will not be encouraged to lend to governments if they know that loans will not be repaid if the funds they lend are stolen by the officials of such governments. Citizens and honest public servants will have less motivation to take those steps needed to reduce the probability of such theft. Since the basic goods approach discourages uncooperative behaviour and encourages cooperative ones, reducing responsibility in these cases would run counter to the basic tenets of the basic goods approach. However, whenever there is a borrower, there is a lender. If lenders did not take adequate precautions to ensure that the funds they loan go to the entity they loaned them to and are used for the purpose specified, then they must bear partial responsibility. Of course, just what counts as adequate precautions in such circumstances is a difficult and vexing issue. But, fortunately, there is a large body of judicial precedent to rely upon in such areas in order to begin developing reasonable standards with which all international lenders ought to be made to comply.

Concerning loans that fall into the last category, the basic goods approach recommends that the lending country be held responsible for them. Assigning responsibility for such loans encourages democratically elected governments and good citizens in the developing country to be very vigilant about public expenditures, for they know that they—and their children and grandchildren—will be, and *should* be, held responsible for the repayment of such loans. Of course, this practice also encourages us to help such nations restructure their loans so that—compatible with the principle of sustained minimization—the burden on Argentineans and Uruguayans is as light as possible. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should reward the many sacrifices ordinary Uruguayans and Argentineans have made, and continue to make, to ensure that the democracies they have constructed remain stable, civilized places, and these organizations should do this by restructuring loans in whatever way would best serve to spur growth and relieve suffering in these societies. Of course, there are real concerns about moral hazards that may result from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund being perceived as being too soft on Uruguay and Argentina, but this is a surmountable problem. Anyone worried about the moral hazards in this case would do well to remember that, had we been concerned with moral hazard in an earlier period, we would never have moved

from debtors' prisons to bankruptcy provisions. Just as ignoring it completely, overemphasis on moral hazard can be both an economic and a moral failing.

CONCLUSION

The burden of debt borne by the people of Uruguay and Argentina is substantial. It impedes the best attempts of the good citizens of those countries to build highly developed liberal democracies which are respectful of human rights, committed to the rule of law, and capable of providing all their citizens with peace, order, and good government. In an ideal world where there were no negative externalities or moral hazards attached to our actions, we would undoubtedly want to relieve the citizens of those countries of this burden. Yet ours is not an ideal world but the actual one. What we can do, and what we should do, is to ensure that we have a system of international lending that encourages the sorts of cooperation between peoples that has done so much to improve the lives of so many on this planet over the past century.

The basic goods approach to international development provides us with general principles to guide us in developing specific policies for dealing with heavily indebted nations. It retains—albeit in modified form—the core idea that has guided and made possible international lending, namely, the idea that loans to nations are inherited by new governments of that nation so that borrowers are responsible for all their debts. It also shows us how to modify that principle in cases where the lenders, through their actions, have undermined the system of cooperative ventures which allow us to build societies that are mutually advantageous to all. While the basic goods approach does call for a radical overhaul in the way we think about heavily indebted nations, that call is made in order to ensure that we have a system that encourages, enhances, and elevates cooperation between nations and their peoples. It is the approach most appropriate for our new century.

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