Our present age has witnessed the growth of a commitment to greater justice on the world scale. Through the United Nations and elsewhere, we try to realize a more balanced distribution of economic resources and incomes between nations. Merely humanitarian purposes are being transformed, in this field, into a search for structural change, as is shown by the use of concepts such as the "new international economic order". A new and more objective dimension comes in: the dimension of specifying aims in the name of justice. But what, precisely, does "justice" ask for? One could object that we do not need to know – that we do know enough when being able to tell what cannot, surely, be accepted any more by the international community, such as massive illiteracy or hunger, or plainly disadvantageous terms of trade. And isn't it much easier, in general, to identify injustice, than to define what should be considered to be a perfectly "just" situation? This is fully apparent, already, on the national level; so how could we ever hope to achieve a common definition of "justice" in international relations?

This objection certainly is a strong one. One does not need to speculate about perfect justice in order to identify forms of help, or even structural changes, which can make a positive contribution to world equilibrium. There is no need for an Utopia in order to fill the agenda for many years to come. However, one may feel all the same that exploring the conceptual resources we have for the construction of an "ideal theory" is no gratuitous exercise. Long-range planning may already call for positive standards of justice, however vaguely defined. And it may well be that some present developments already point in directions which are best understood in terms of basic principles for an "ideal" distribution of economic resources. This article merely wishes to draw attention to the ideas developed in this field by Charles R. Beitz, who himself discusses possible applications on the international level of John Rawls' "A theory of justice" (Harvard U.P. 1972).

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In his theory of justice, John Rawls considers human society to be a cooperative endeavour, the advantages of which should be distributed according to just criteria. These criteria he presents as being the outcome of an idealized meeting of minds between fully impartial agents: the so-called “original position”. The features of that “original position” are dictated by our intuition of what is meant by moral objectivity. Nobody in the “original position” has any information (for instance, concerning his own talents) which may lead him to expect, in actual society, a certain social status or level of income: Rawls stipulates a “veil of ignorance”. Thus, when choosing the fundamental arrangements for human society, nobody can reason on the basis of his own particular interests. The only knowledge allowed to participants in the “original position” is knowledge of a general nature concerning human psychology.

What choices will be made according to Rawls in the idealized circumstances? The participants in the “original position” have to define principles for the distribution of so-called “primary goods”, such as liberty, social and economic opportunities, or incomes. It will be enough, for our present purposes, to consider one such principle, which Rawls thinks will be agreed upon. This principle – the now famous “difference principle” – states that economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest advantage of the least advantaged. What does that mean? Let us recall the stipulations which Rawls makes for the “original position”. The fictional agents who are deciding upon the fundamental arrangements of society are in no position to guess what their actual role, income position etc. in society is going to be. They do know, however, that most people will not show economic enterprise, or invest in their own talents, when unable to expect special income rewards. Insofar, allowing inequalities is in the general interest: there is a good reason for tolerating those unequal arrangements “which are to the greatest advantage of the least advantaged” i.e. which most advance the position of the least advantaged as compared with an initial position of equality. Rawls thinks that his fictional agents will stipulate accordingly when drawing up their blueprint for society.

Now, we have the following main elements:

a) society as a cooperative enterprise,

b) the fruits of which should be distributed according to principles acceptable to all, whatever their social and economic situation may be,

c) one such principle being that inequalities must prove to be a condition for better economic standards, the measure of this improvement being related to the lowest income levels.

The latter element of Rawls’ theory, though giving us a good starting point for