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Global ethics: dimensions and prospects

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Global ethics: dimensions and prospects

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Global ethics is an emerging discipline which has not yet reached maturity. The main tasks before it to gain maturity are: first, to achieve a greater integration of various domains of enquiry all of which are concerned with global normative issues. At a general level this includes integrating global ethics with cosmopolitanism, global justice and human right discourse. At the level of areas of concern, there needs to be greater integration of various areas such as development, trade, environment and climate change. And it must grapple with the question of diversity within universality: how far can diversity of practices be accommodated within a culturally sensitive universal framework? Second, there is the question of finding a shared normative framework with respect to the diverse worldviews that may lie behind this: what degree and kind of convergence/consensus are worth working for? Third, there is the task of creating the conditions for its own wider acceptance, which should include taking the idea of global citizenship seriously.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism; development ethics; diversity; global citizenship; global justice; human rights; shared values; universalism; worldviews

Introduction

Global ethics is ethical enquiry into what the appropriate norms and values are that should apply to relationships between people all over the globe – that is a global ethic – and the application of these to various kinds of global issues, such as aid to poorer countries, international trade, global environmental problems, war and peace, and conflicts between different countries and cultures. A global ethicist, or someone who does global ethics, explores and usually assumes and defends a particular global normative framework which she then applies generally or to particular areas of concern (Hutchings 2010; Widdows 2011).

The outline above attempts to capture what is generally assumed about global ethics by most people who claim to be doing it. The term began to catch on at the end of the twentieth century, and it is now widely used by people advocating a global ethics approach. Before then amongst the few who were interested in the perspective other terms were sometimes used, such as international ethics (Elfstrom 1990) or world ethics (Dower 1998).

However, it has to recognise that not all those interested in global normative issues necessarily adopt the phrase 'global ethics' to describe their work. In fact there are a number of somewhat distinct discourses tackling broadly similar issues. Cosmopolitanism or cosmopolitan ethics has also become a well-established field, as indeed two other discourses to do with global justice and human rights, the latter two related but for many distinct. All these deal with global normative issues; thinkers using these terminologies may make normative claims

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about what ought to be done – by individuals, states or other institutions – and criticise many practices in international relations.

There have also evolved over the last 30 years or so other ethical discourses dealing with global issues, such as environmental ethics insofar as issues arise because of global finiteness, and development ethics which investigates both appropriate norms for authentic development (in a broadly universal way) and norms of international aid and trade that should facilitate good development.

How are these various domains of enquiry – global ethics, global justice, human rights, cosmopolitanism, development ethics and environmental ethics – related to one another? There is no simple answer since different thinkers will see the relationships in different ways. However, it seems perfectly possible that they can all be integrated into a coherent whole, given suitable understandings of what they involve. Whilst much of the article seeks to plot the wide range of perspectives and languages used to address global ethical issues, its main purpose is to advocate an integrationist approach as the main task for global ethics in the future, such that, whatever one's preferred language, they can all be seen as aspects of global ethics. This I suggest is what the inner moral logic of global ethics thinking requires, and insofar as moral progress can slowly be made in human thought, it is what is likely to happen as global ethics moves towards maturity.

The relationship between global ethics and cosmopolitanism

An exploration of this relationship will help to make clear what global ethics is about. Initially the pair can be seen as somewhat different.

First, global ethics is an open-textured enquiry and cosmopolitanism is a definite normative theory about what ought to be done from a global perspective. That is, global ethics is a kind of enquiry about global issues for a normative point of view. Someone doing global ethics may or may not have definite views about what ought to be done: she may be interested in understanding the various ways people ethically understand their relation to the world as a whole and in comparing these approaches, or be interested in the phenomenon of the 'globalisation of ethics'. That is, she might have a more sociological approach. But her interest might be more philosophical – but even that could be from the position of being sceptical about the possibility of a global ethic or being cautious about typical claims made by other global ethicists. By contrast cosmopolitanism is a theory about the world, partly about how the world is and partly how it ought to be.

Second, even if global ethics is seen as mainly about supporting/advocating certain norms and values, it is about the importance of shared norms widely supported by individuals and groups with diverse source stories, whereas cosmopolitanism is a specific ethical theory generating specific norms. A common theme in global ethics is exploring the possibility and desirability of a global ethic which has the merit of wide acceptance by people with different worldviews, philosophies or theologies – a reflection of post-modernism (Sen 2009). Cosmopolitanism is essentially part of the Enlightenment tradition – hence the immense respect for and extensive reference to Kant by many cosmopolitans – and, even if different cosmopolitans have different versions of cosmopolitan theory, each cosmopolitan theory is presented as correct and in potential conflict with other theories (and of course non-cosmopolitan theories).

Third, even if global ethics is seen as the formation and justification of a set of ethical norms and values from a global perspective, what is claimed about global or trans-boundary obligation may be either minimal or at least may be less demanding than what is proposed by cosmopolitanism. That is, a global ethic may be seen as essentially a universal ethic. Its advocates may agree that certain norms and values are either universally accepted or ought to be universally accepted but are not (for the approach see the Center for Global Ethics, Maine; globalethic.org).

Such an account may have very little to say about how far individuals should act for the sake of others elsewhere in the world, other than recognising that individuals should not harm one another or violate their rights at a distance or indirectly. But on the question of promoting well-being elsewhere or responding to those who thwart well-being elsewhere in the world, nothing need to be said. By contrast cosmopolitanism is essentially at least in the modern world a theory about membership of a global or world community (being cosmo-polities, i.e. world citizens) where that membership involves trans-boundary obligations. Indeed typically cosmopolitans present a very strong thesis about such obligations. If all human beings are equal, then in principle the well-being of people distant from me has as much practical relevance as those close to me or in my own society. (Pogge sees the three core elements to cosmopolitanism as: universality, individualism and generality, Pogge 2003, 169.)

Fourth, for those doing global ethics – insofar as see themselves as advocating certain norms and values – the norms and values are ones that apply to individuals, whereas cosmopolitanism applies as much to political institutions and international relations. That is, global ethics is, as ethics, about the relations that individuals have with other individuals across the world – for instance about duties to relieve distant suffering – it is not as such about political institutions. Cosmopolitanism is about *inter alia* creating 'cosmopolis', a world 'polis' in which world citizens (cosmopolites) would become (more) fully members. Certainly much work in recent years has been on thinking about what suitable cosmopolitan institutions should be advocated to promote cosmopolitan goals (human development, environmental protection, peace and security for all, respect for human rights), and about how far this goes beyond the current West-phalian model of an international order in a world whose primary members are states (Brown 2009; Beardsworth 2011).

None of these contrasts are however inevitable, and they illustrate more the different under-standings of global ethics and cosmopolitanism than those between global ethics and cosmopo-litanism as such.

There is no question that global ethics can be seen as a broad kind of enquiry with various kinds of approaches within it, so if cosmopolitanism is a specific theoretical position, it is more specific than global ethics. On the other hand if cosmopolitanism provides a claim about univer-sal values and trans-boundary norms, then it is clearly advocating a global ethic, and hence the defence, advocacy and application of a global ethic is an exercise in global ethics, whether or not it is called that (van Hooft 2009).

On the other hand, there may well be ways in which a global ethic is advocated which are not explicitly cosmopolitan in form and maybe are not compatible with the position of a cosmopo-litan. Is the acknowledgement of diverse source stories for common values one of these areas of significant disagreement? Not necessarily. There is nothing in the cosmopolitan position to rule our acknowledging the importance of finding common shared values each supported from differ-ent intellectual sources. Indeed she can support Parekh's idea that a global ethic should be one which is both assented to and consented to – assented to in virtue of one's own intellectual story and consented to as a product of inter-cultural dialogue (Parekh 2005, 27). Indeed the cosmopo-litan has every reason to welcome this if the search for convergence is an important part of build-ing peace and providing the bases of solidarity and cooperation. How far she 'respects' the other source stories beyond the pragmatic value of such mutual accommodation depends of course upon how far she has departed from the Enlightenment assumption about Truth. But modern cos-mopolitanism does not have to retain all the baggage of its Enlightenment past.

In respect to the issue of trans-boundary obligation, it is certainly true that global ethics could be presented as a thesis about universality only, whereas it is almost inconceivable that ethical cosmopolitanism is presented without significant commitment to promote well-being anywhere, at least in the modern world where so many problems are global in scale. (In the past this was not

necessarily so.) But generally global ethics is presented as about trans-boundary obligations as well, so the key question is: how extensive are these obligations? This is actually an issue debated within cosmopolitanism itself, partly depending on how one interprets the 'equality' claim; certainly most cosmopolitans will acknowledge the special status of obligations to family, friends, colleagues and local community, for various reasons. They are less keen to accord special status to compatriots just because they are compatriots. But generally, those interested in global ethics, if they see global ethics as about trans-boundary obligation at all, would feel the same way on these issues. The issue of the extent of obligation is not an issue between global ethicists and cosmopolitans but an issue within both (Tan 2004; Brock 2009).

In regard to political institutions particularly at the global level, it is certainly true that much cosmopolitan debate is about issues of global governance, international law including human rights law, etc., in a way that debate within global ethics which is not seen itself as cosmopolitan in self-understanding is not (Held 2010). However, many people interested in cosmopolitanism see it primarily as an ethical theory with a global ethic which can be applied as much to individuals as to institutions (states, business companies and international organisations), by way of both criticism and recommendations for improvement. But then again most global ethicists, except for those for whom trans-boundary obligation is not an issue, would do the same – apply their global ethics to themselves and other individuals, but also to states and so on.

Even if cosmopolitanism is presented as essentially an ethical cosmopolitanism, rather than a political/institutional theory, what is acknowledged is that people belong to a global ethical community as global citizens, whereas the simple idea of a global ethic is just that – an ethic for any individuals which may include trans-boundary obligations. It is true that an ethic could be accepted by a global ethicist whose meta-theory about the nature of ethics saw it as the position of an isolated individual without a framework of communal relations (local or global), but this is neither necessary nor as plausible as an ethic that includes this. Cosmopolitanism makes explicit what is implicit in most accounts of global ethics.

The relationship between global ethics and global justice and human rights discourses

This can be seen as a triangular relationship, in two senses. First, people who work in these three fields use different languages; some use the language of general ethics to articulate their normative concerns about the world, others the language of global justice (Caney 2006; Brock 2009) – either generally or within discrete areas within that field such as environmental justice, climate justice, economic justice and trade justice – and yet others use human rights as the lens through which to see all global problems (Freeman 2002). I am not claiming that these discourses are isolated from each other – there will be varying degrees of conceptual cross-over – but there remain the different primary normative foci. Second, the triangular relation may manifest itself in different assumptions about the subject-matter. Much of the content of global ethics, as with ethics more generally, may be about values and norms other than justice or (human) rights; conversely much of global justice discourse and human rights discourse is about international law not ethics as such (though of course the motives behind challenging and trying to improve international law may be ethical, but the ethics need not be in terms of justice or rights but rather in terms of a humanitarian concern for generally improving the human lot).

Nor are the foci of global justice and human right discourses necessarily the same. Human rights discourse is often focused on what practices specifically violate or undermine the particular rights of individuals, without necessarily focusing on or even acknowledging the wider structural issues to do with global justice. Conversely interest in global justice or some aspect of it may focus on macro changes to international institutions and so on, to do with things like trade rules, climate change agreements, or making the United Nation more democratic.

It is to be acknowledged that these differences can be emphasised, though they all deal with global normative issues. On the other hand, as I noted about global ethics and cosmopolitanism, they can be integrated together. After all if concern for human rights is about the realisation of human rights including socio-economic rights, and includes what promotes their realisation not just what impedes or violates them, then a concern for human rights is a concern for global justice (Pogge 2003; Caney 2006). Likewise the discourse of global justice insofar as it is an ethical discourse – about what global justice as an ethical claim requires in contrast to what currently legally instantiated international justice claims or achieves – is arguably simply a major part of a global ethic, and a global ethic, whilst it may have many other elements to it as well, is in major part a theory of global justice. Similarly a global ethic can either incorporate as a major part an ethical concern for human rights or it could be articulated as a rights theory as such.

The extent to which a global ethic starts with a simple intuition that we have a positive duty to help others anywhere is drawn into a wider consideration of global justice/human rights can be illustrated with the case of Fairtrade. Many individuals now try to be ethical consumers and for instance buy ethically sourced goods such as Fairtrade bananas or coffee. What generally lies behind any more than superficial engagement with Fairtrade is an acknowledgement that the alternative sources of food and other goods involve unfair or unjust practices. If individuals have a responsibility not merely to give aid but to reduce their dependence on unfair trade practices, then it is difficult not to bring ideas of justice and human rights into the picture.

Emphasising an ethical source for concern about things like the environment, climate change, promoting peace and reducing conflict, development, migration – all of which may be articulated in global justice terms – is likely to produce an integrated, holistic account of what global justice requires. Rather than have climate justice, economic justice, food justice or whatever, we have a simple theory of global justice that incorporates climate, trade, food, etc. Of course people will still work in particular fields like climate justice but it is to be hoped in the future that these will always be embedded in the wider global ethics/justice framework. If, as I remarked earlier, global ethics is still in its formative development, it is reasonable to predict that this is what will happen also.

The relationship between global ethics and development ethics

Often these are seen as going together: both are about creating the conditions of human flourishing/progress, one more universally/non-temporally, the other from the point of view of change in a particular time and place. Both are about what human well-being consists in and both grapple with the issue of how far a universal account can be given and to what extent sensitivity to cultural diversity is important. Global ethics additionally makes explicit what is more implicit in much development ethics, namely the global context in which development for a country or community occurs. Global ethics provides both the basis for possible action in the form of aid – by individuals or states – and also the basis for both criticising the practices or the accepted norms of international relations and international economic transactions and proposing improvements.

Clearly both development ethics and global ethics can be discussed in such ways that each includes the other, but equally they can be discussed in ways that make little explicit reference to the other. What is quite clear is that not all the concerns of global ethics – at least as generally understood – are included in development ethics, nor are all the concerns of development ethics covered by the concerns of global ethics.

To take the second point first. Insofar as development ethics is about the internal dynamics and processes of development occurring within a country or other unit of concern, rather than with the global context of aid and trade, the ethical issues raised can be raised in such a way that the reference to global ethics is non-existent, marginal or only implicit. It would be non-existent if the account of development appropriate for a country was seen as locally or regionally

specific and not universal. Often the search for an authentic development ethic is a rejection of the cultural imperialism of universal models of development emanating from the rich North (see the now classic *Development Dictionary*: Sachs 1992). Even if a broadly universal account of value and norms appropriate to development anywhere is accepted – maybe different from the western paradigm – the actual focus of ethical engagement facing a country in respect to development is particular to that country's situation and historical traditions. One of the interesting issues is working out a culturally sensitive universalism which places the limits to what is acceptable in the right places. (But it would be a mistake to reject universalism altogether since, if one did that, the baby of trans-boundary responsibility would go out with the bathwater of culturally insensitive universalism.)

Although global ethics and indeed global justice are linked in many people's minds with issues of aid, trade and development, global ethics and global justice are, as I have noted earlier, also about many other things, such as environmental issues – including global environmental justice – war and peace, human rights in general and inter-faith/inter-cultural relations. But space does not permit fuller discussion of these here.

Types of global ethic

One issue not yet discussed is the relationship between a global ethic as some person's or some group's norms and values in respect to the world, and a global ethic as shared norms widely or universally held. In the first sense a global ethic is global in respect to its content (which has been the main focus of the discussion so far), in the second sense it is global in respect to the scope of its acceptance. There has been a lot of interest in identifying a global ethic as a widely shared set of values and norms – consider Hans Küng's project reflected in the *Declaration Towards a Global Ethic* of the World Parliament of Religions (Küng 1993; Küng and Kuschel 1993), and what the Commission on Global Governance came up with (Commission on Global Governance 1995).

There are many motives for wanting to identify – by either finding or creating – a shared global ethic. It provides solidarity and a basis for co-operation. It is a basis for peace, especially if there is an acceptance of different source stories, as I noted earlier.

The issue arises: how far can or should the search for convergence go? The idea of a universally accepted set of norms/values is a chimera, given that there will always be ethical oddballs around. The idea of an ethic widely accepted by most people from all cultures is possible but is likely to be rather insubstantial. Perhaps the search for an ethic acceptable across the world by a large number of people is worthwhile, so long as it is sufficiently substantial as to mean something and maybe in opposition to what other groups think, but at the same time allows for diverse source stories, and also allows for a diversity of more local norms and values. An area where there appear to be genuine and serious differences in norms concerns the ethics of the means: terrorists and those who support them clearly are not part of a widespread consensus that rejects this way of promoting what one values.

If the search for consensus/convergence is the search for wide but not universal agreement, it is a kind of a 'meta' (normative) ethic of accommodating diversity of values themselves. There is much work to be done in global ethics sorting out the relationships between the different senses of a global ethic and in determining the kind and extent of accommodation/convergence that are appropriate.

Cultural expression of global ethics

We can see from what I have already said that global ethics is about articulating (and defending) certain global norms and values that are seen as applicable to the world as whole, but also

applying these to specific areas of concern. But another task for global ethics is working out and promoting the conditions for its own wider acceptance. What needs to be put in place so that more people come to accept a global ethic (or a well-informed and robust one)? How far is global ethics concerned with identifying and encouraging appropriate forms of expression of a global ethic?

Many things are relevant. In many countries in the North there is increasing interest in 'development education', particularly in schools, but 'global education' also includes other global issues such as the environment. Interestingly development education is often linked to global citizenship education or what Nussbaum called cosmopolitan education (Nussbaum 1996).

Of course global ethics could be taught and more widely promoted without any reference to global citizenship. But it is reasonable to claim that the more people accept their own status as global citizens, the more they are likely to adopt and take seriously a global ethic. This is not just an empirical claim. One could argue that a global ethic needs embodiment of some kind. Just as an ethic at a societal level can be seen as embedded in the idea of belonging to a community, so a global ethic is made more real by the idea of membership of a global community in some sense – hence global citizenship (Dower and Williams 2002).

Conclusion

Global ethics is a discipline that is still developing and has not yet reached maturity. The main tasks before it to gain maturity are: first, to achieve a greater integration of various domains of enquiry all of which are concerned with global normative issues. At a general level this includes integrating global ethics with cosmopolitanism, global justice and human right discourse. At the level of particular areas of global concern, there needs to be greater integration of various areas such as development, trade, environment and climate change. And it must grapple with the issue of diversity within universality: how far can diversity of practices be accommodated within a culturally sensitive universal framework? Second, there is the challenge of finding a shared normative framework with respect to the diverse worldviews that may lie behind this: what degree and kind of convergence/consensus are worth working for? Third, there is the task of creating the conditions for its own wider acceptance, which as I have argued must include taking the idea of global citizenship seriously.

These at least are the tasks I would like global ethics to tackle, and I believe will be tackled in the process of global ethics becoming more fully worked out.

Notes on contributor

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