Understanding the Global Ethic Project

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Abstract. There are various global problems we find ourselves faced with and those problems necessitate a new kind of ethic, a global one. I will argue that while there are several ways of understanding it one is more adequate than others. That claim has implications for the kind of basis suitable for global ethic, namely that we need a political ethic, such as liberalism. I will also take up some general objections which this kind of global ethic is able to give good replies.

Key words: global ethic, foundation for global ethic, institutional approach.

One would need to be living in complete isolation to be ignorant of various issues that haunt our world on a global scale, some examples being the state of the environment and world poverty. Also one would need to be blind-folded not to be aware of the vast range of interconnections in our current world on a global scale, three obvious examples being the internet, trade relations, and tourism.[1] It has been argued (Nussbaum 1994, Parekh 2005) that due to these two reasons–existence of global problems and global relations–we find ourselves in a wholly new situation, and thus there is a need for a new kind of ethic, a global ethic.[2]

The existence of global problems, like the declining state of the environment and poverty, points to two reasons why we should adopt a new kind of ethical reasoning. First, humans (whether individually or collectively) have the power to influence things on a global scale (as demonstrated by the mark our economic endeavours have left on the environment), thus we should think about what ought to be our responsibilities concerning those things (e.g. What should we do to remedy the situation, if anything? or How ought we curb our activities, if we are unable to remedy the situation?). Second, these issues have a direct influence on our well-being and since ethics is, at least partly, about how to live well, we should think about what we ought to do about these issues.

Also it is fair to say that in more ways than one every person in the world is now connected to other persons unlike ever before, whether the contact is direct by meeting face to face or indirect by being linked to the same chain of trade. Since ethics is also in the business of giving guidance on how we ought to conduct our relations with other people this new situation of interconnectedness indicates that a certain change (an addition to or

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1] It might be argued that concerning trade there is nothing new, but given the degree of change it is not a huge exaggeration to say that we find ourselves in a new situation.

2] I take questions of socio-economic justice on a global scale, i.e. global justice, to be part of the global ethic project.

a revision of) in our ethical thinking is needed to meet the demands of our complicated relations. This is what could broadly be called the global ethic project.

And within that project of global ethic we can distinguish four subfields: *the conceptual* (e.g. What do we mean by "global ethic"?), *the justificatory* (e.g. What is the proper basis for a global ethic?), *the substantive* (e.g. What kind of principles/rules should be in a global ethic?) and *the sceptical* (e.g. What might be the reasons this whole project does not work?).

This paper explores some questions in three of those fields, remaining relatively general and abstaining from making any very specific substantive claims. I will begin first by looking at the conceptual background of the global ethic project, more specifically I try to spell out what is the nature of a global ethic, as well as what kind of understanding of global ethic I think to be the most adequate. I will then take up some of the justificatory basis of the project by exploring what kind of normative ethical theory is needed for a global ethic. I will conclude by looking at some problems the global ethic project faces and needs to solve before any kind of meaningful work can be done and I will argue that the kind of global ethic put forth here is able to give good replies to those problems.

Before I go on with the discussion, couple of remarks. First, I will not say anything about the kind of character people ought to have or the kind of virtues they ought to possess for them to accept a global ethic. I am taking what might be called a pessimist's approach, i.e. I assume that most people most of the time will not have the 'right kind' of character or possess the 'right kind' of virtues, and therefore I will lean towards (local) institutions to do the job. Second, whenever I talk of principles, rules, duties, rights and so on, then they should be taken as placeholders for whatever are the proper elements of an ethical theory. The points I make in this paper should be general enough that they hold irrespective of the fact whether an ethic is made up of principles or rules, whether it prescribes duties or gives rights.

I. WHAT IS A "GLOBAL ETHIC"?

In this section I will take up the question of what I mean by global ethic. I assume that the *ethic* part needs no deep explanation, it simply refers to the fact that we are talking about a certain set of ethical principles, so it needs to be distinguished from ethic*s*, which I take to be the discipline of thinking about such principles.[3] At the same time the *global* part does require some discussion. It should be asked "Global in what sense?", and it seems to me that there are three possible ways of understanding it:

(1) Global in the sense of content;

(2) Global in the sense of application;

3] The same point applies more or less to justice, as Thomas Nagel (2005, 113) has noted: on the domestic arena justice is fairly well understood with "multiple highly developed theories offering alternative solutions to well-defined problems."

(3) Global in the sense of status.

As the following discussion will show satisfying the first two conditions are the minimum requirements for something to count as a global ethic.

An ethic can be considered to be global in the sense of content when its principles concern the globe, so to speak. In other words, the wider the scope of moral significance the more global an ethic would be and within a properly global ethic the set of morally significant beings would be maximally large. It should be noted here that, first, this enlargement of morally significant beings is not restricted only to humans, meaning it could also include non-human persons or ecosystems or cultural entities and so on. Secondly, the enlargement does not apply only to space but also to time, meaning that including future generations would make an ethic more global. The point here is that nothing is said about who is required to follow these norms. In this sense the kind of utilitarianism Peter Singer presented in his famous 1972 (231–32) article is a great example of an ethic with global content: "It makes no difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards away from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away." As example of an ethic with non-global content we might think of some kind of nationalistic or patriotic ethic according to which there are certain duties owed to only one's compatriots.

An ethic can be considered to be global in the sense of application when its principles apply to the globe, so to speak. In other words, if the ethic includes principles which irrespective of their content apply to all moral agents irrespective of their location or relation to the object of moral significance, then the ethic is properly global in its application. The point here is just the reverse from the previous one: nothing is said about what follows from the norms. So for example we can imagine some kind of familial ethic which prescribes a norm to honour one's parents: it applies to all (or at least in principle to all) but its content only concerns two very close persons (one's parents) rather than all the people in the world who happen to be parents.

An ethic can be considered to be global in the sense of status when it is acceptance is global. If we were to read this statement in the strictest possible sense, that is: accepted by *every single* moral agent, then it would be very hard to find an ethic which has global status or which could be reasonably expected to achieve it. Because this criterion is more empirical it is harder to give good examples, but there is some evidence (Hauser 2006, 32) suggesting that there are some very general moral principles which seem to be shared by all cultures:

(1) People judge intended harms worse than merely foreseeable harms;

(2) People judge actions leading to harm worse than omissions leading to harm;

(3) People judge harms with physical contact worse than those with no contact.

Given that the study involved thousands of subjects from over one hundred different countries and the demographical characteristics were "insignificant" in relation to the principles above, we could view them as one, albeit not perfect, example of a global ethic.

But once we allow a more looser reading we are faced with a version of the problem of the heap: having defined a certain number or percentage of people who need to accept the ethic, someone could easily propose that one person less could not possibly have impact on an ethic not being global in its status anymore. Eventually we would be left with just one person and that clearly would no longer count as global acceptance. So it seems that the only possible way of reading the global acceptance would be a vague one. That is by leaving the issue open where the exact line should be drawn. Ideally, of course any global ethic should strive for being global in its status, but the global content and global application seem to be primary and thus merit more of our attention.

Beyond this very broad description, I think it is worth considering the reasonable expectations of any global ethic project. When we look at a modern liberal democratic society it is very easy to recognize what John Rawls (1996, 3–4) called the fact of pluralism: "a diversity of opposing and irreconcilable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines." But Rawls (37–38) did not think this is a contingent fact about the democratic societies, he thought it is necessary due to "free practical reason within the framework of free institutions" and so the only way we could get rid of it is by consistent and pervasive state coercion (this is the fact of oppression). Thus we must be prepared to meet diversity of different comprehensive doctrines also on the global level, probably even more so. This is an important point to keep in mind when starting to construct a global ethic which strives for global acceptance. If anything close to that is ever to be achieved then it has to focus on certain kind of content and making claims of a certain status.

In other words, I think we should focus on issues we have real chance of agreeing upon due to their general status or due to their practical immediacy. Thus the problems I referred to in the introduction–the environmental degradation and poverty–were not chosen randomly: I, as do many others (e.g. Sen 2009), believe the latter to be something which is clearly unjust, the former on the other hand will have very serious consequences if no agreement or consensus is reached on how to best deal with the issue.

So based on the discussion so far I take global ethic to mean a set of ethical principles which are (1) global in their content and (2) application, and (3) have a realistic aspiration to be global in their acceptance.

But further clarification is now needed on what kind of principles ought we to look for when starting to construct a global ethic (or a theory of global justice). Building on

the work of Nigel Dower (2010, 4) it seems that there are three dimensions we should be looking at when we talk of global ethic:

(1) To which kind of agents it applies;

(2) To which sphere of our lives it applies;

(3) Who is the unit of concern.

All of these dimensions have two options. First, global ethic can be viewed as prescribing individual or state actions. Granted, both approaches will have implications for the other: in many cases I will be unable to discharge my personal duties without trying to make my state to act in a certain way, but the distinction here is on *primary focus*. Second, global ethic can also be viewed as prescribing ethical or political actions: guidance concerning either individual acts or specific proposals for institutions. Third, global ethic can be concerned with individual persons or with collectives, groups of persons (states). This results in an eight-fold division.

Since some of these understandings of global ethic rule out the use of others, and at the same time some seem to have certain overlap with at least one other. Our aim would be to determine which best capture what it is we are trying to do and/or what it is we ought to be trying to do. And I think that there are considerations which give us reason to think that some understandings are more adequate than others.

First, when it comes to the second dimension then I would claim that a global ethic prescribing political actions, i.e. how institutions ought to be organized, is superior to ones which prescribe individual acts. Especially when we are talking about social justice. This is because justice is a political matter, and while charity is a good thing, it is unable to adequately address the problems which motivate the global ethic project in the first place. Suppose that there is an affluent state which citizens always come to the aid of tsunami victims across the globe, this is certainly laudable, but if it turned out that the cause of all the tsunamis in the world is that same state's offshore oil platforms then the more appropriate action would be to redesign the oil platforms to be safe or stop the drilling all together. In other words individual contributions to various charity organizations to provide aid for impoverished countries is a very nice thing to do, but if at the same time the contributors have the power to redesign the institutions that are the cause of the impoverishment, then that would surely be the better thing to do.

There is also a second reason to think that any global ethic project should be focused on political institutions rather than individual actions: efficacy. Any global ethic will have some view of a life worth living and presumably it would be better to have more rather than less people achieve that kind of life. Given the scale of the contributions that would have to be made in order to achieve that aim, it seems that any ethic prescribing certain political institutions will be more effective since states are actors who are more able to change the situation of people than individuals. For example individual decisions in energy conservation might turn out to be of little value if the state does not change its

policy on energy production. Or as Sen discusses the ability of private charities to relieve famine is outweighed by the power of states to do the same (2009, 341).

A further reason in favour of political rather than individual approach in the global ethic project could be found in our psychology and the evolution of morality. People normally have the kind of psychological attitudes and reactions which lead them to care more (or care only) about their immediate surroundings and intimate relations. It has been suggested (Hauser and Singer 2005) that this is due to the evolutionary nature of morality: it evolved at a time when each person's world included at most few hundred people and has not changed since. Since people, for whatever reason, do not perceive the world in general or other people across the globe as part of one's immediate relations or surroundings then they do not tend to consider others within their ethical deliberations. It cannot be denied that there have been cases where people on a mass scale do get engaged and emotionally invested in issues across the globe, but that is usually after they have been brought into some kind of contact with the issue. Just think of Nick Ut's famous photo of taken in Trang Bang during the Vietnam War or Kevin Carter's photo of the starving Sudanese child, or more recently Jason Russell's Kony 2012 film. But it is not feasible to use such aids in every single case, meaning that any individual approach would likely be unconvincing for many of us.

Furthermore, even if we take an individual based approach, in order for those kinds of theories to work people ought to have an individual relation with other individuals across the entire world or at least think of themselves as having one. But Thomas Scanlon (2008, 139) has made a conceptual point that when we think of relationships we usually think of some kind of *particular* (personal) relationship and this not something we seem not to have nor be able to have in any meaningful sense with all the people, given that the world's population is over 7 billion.

This leaves us with only four of the original eight senses to consider further:

(1) Global ethic with norms applying to individuals prescribing political action concerned with other individuals;

(2) Global ethic with norms applying to individuals prescribing political action concerned with collectives (states);

(3) Global ethic with norms applying to states prescribing political action concerned with individuals;

(4) Global ethic with norms applying to states prescribing political action concerned with collectives (other states).

Now it seems that the fourth sense of global ethic is something that, if taken seriously, is likely to lead to a pursuit of a world state. What else could come out of a set of norms which tell states how to organize political institutions where states are the smallest actors. Whether this is a worthy project, with some reasonable probability of success and something we should devote our time to, is an open question, although I doubt that it is,

given the state-centred approach of today's politics. But this is the kind of project that we are not interested in when we think of global justice and the problems that motivate us to take up a search for principles of a global ethic. Also in addition to the feasibility we should consider its desirability: is a world state something we want? Without a straightforward obvious "yes" answer to that question we have even more reason to bench that kind of understanding of global ethic.

Next, considering whether to focus on individuals or collectives as our units of concern then the first instinct is probably to lean towards individuals. This is because within the domestic justice we are concerned with individuals rather than collectives: a theory of justice usually describes what is the just lot for each person and if that is achieved then the state as a whole is just, rather than trying to conceive the big picture from the start. The same is true for non-global ethics, which usually concentrate on how we ought to act concerning this or that particular moral agent. But I feel that this move would not be justified.

First, because the context is very different: in the domestic case all the individuals under consideration form a single community (usually a state), but this is not the case on a global scale. There is no one single set of political institutions of which every person is a member of and which would give us a frame of reference about justice. And second, the issue of efficacy comes into play once more: it would be much harder to make an effective change in the state of impoverished persons when we would try to engage with them on an individual basis. As I explain in section 3 of the paper, this is required to reply to the worry of pervasiveness: how is it possible for agents to live up to the moral demands put on them by global ethics with individuals as units of concern.

This would leave us to conclude that the most adequate understanding of the global ethic project must be one which sees it as a set of norms which apply to individuals prescribe norms on how to organize political institutions with the primary unit of concern being collectives or groups of people.

II. WHAT KIND OF BASIS IS NEEDED FOR A GLOBAL ETHIC?

Having established which is the most adequate understanding of a global ethic project it would be prudent to ask how we could construct a global ethic. Given the previous discussion it seems to follow that some kind of political ethic is needed. What I mean by a political ethic is a theory that does not prescribe norms about specific individual acts (e.g. Under what circumstances is it acceptable not to keep promises?), but how we should organize our political institutions (e.g. What are the legitimate limits of state authority?).

An individual ethic is ethical theory which is *primarily* concerned with individual actions and has implications for political institutions only derivatively, as a means for achieving the individual aims. A political ethic on the other hand is ethical theory which is *primarily* concerned with organization of political institutions and has implications for individual actions only derivatively, as a result of certain political arrangements. So

for example an individual ethic might prescribe a norm to care for and of one's family and one can deduce from that a certain individual act (choosing to spend weekend with one's family rather than working) is the right thing to do. A political ethic with the same norm would more likely lead one to deduce that certain arrangement of social securities is preferable to another. While the end result, having cared for and of one's family, will be the same in both cases, the focus of the choice will be different: individual act versus political institutions.

Of course there are such ethics which do not neatly fall under either category: utilitarianism is one example of an ethic that has been applied both to individual actions and to the design of institutions. But the crucial difference here is that for utilitarianism a certain set of institutions is just a means for achieving an end (e.g. increase of happiness or satisfaction of preferences in the society). But a political ethic, such as liberalism, has political institutions as its aim: according to liberalism certain things are of value (e.g. individual liberty) and our political institutions ought to be organized such that they take that fact into account.

This idea of focusing on institutions embodies the spirit of the saying "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Namely that fostering certain kind of institutions can be a more effective way of providing assistance than the direct supply of resources.

III. REPLIES TO COMMON OBJECTIONS

There are several objections to the whole global ethic project, but I think that the kind of global ethic proposed here is able to give good replies to at least two of them.

The first is the *problem of pervasiveness*. Any global ethic will be a very demanding theory: the duties it puts on us take over our everyday life. If there truly are moral responsibilities, which stretch across the globe, and if those duties include positive duties (such as providing help to the extremely needy at low or little cost) then, the consequences of that to an individual's psychology are devastating. How can I justify sitting here and writing this paper, if there are billions of people out there who would need my help and who I could in principle help? One of these options seems to follow:

(1) I would spend most of my time trying to justify why my specific action directly or indirectly counts as a discharging of my duties, which, while in some cases wholly reasonable (writing a book like *The Life You Can Save* helps to draw attention to various issues and gets more people involved), would lead in most cases to absurd results (by buying groceries I can feed myself, so I can study to finish school, so that I would get a degree, which allows me to get a good job, so I can make money to help those in need of helping);

(2) I would live in large part unethical life (because I would not be engaging in discharging my ethical responsibilities);

(3) I would do my best to discharge my responsibilities towards others and end up spreading myself out too thin.

In other words, assuming that ought implies can, any global ethic would need to show how we can actually follow the norms with global content or, failing that, give up the particular global ethic.

Under the understanding of global ethic proposed here there is a simple reply to this issue. Since the norms of global ethic would concern individuals and their relation to political institutions, they would not need to conceive any relation beyond their local political institutions. In other words nothing more of them would be required than under any other non-global (nationalistic?) ethic.

On the other hand the problem of pervasiveness could be taken to mean the pervasive interference into local communities and the way they operate, causing a backlash, because people feel that outsiders are telling them what to do and how to live. But that would also not be a problem, because under the understanding of global ethic described here there would be much less direct involvement by people than under a more individual centred approach.

The second is the *problem of efficacy*, and I touched upon this earlier. Given the way people are used to act and think global ethic does not seem to be able to motivate people properly. Often there is such a huge distance, both geographically and culturally, between those in need and those who are able to help them that it is very hard for people to actually get something done. Another side to this is that there just seems too much that needs to be done, the overwhelmingness is very demotivating, "I will never be able to get this done or make a real difference" might be a common reaction to the environmental and poverty issues.

The reply to this problem is very similar to the previous one: when we think of global ethic in the individual political sense then it is as easy to motivate people for action as it is in the case of non-global ethics concerning their local political institutions. Also, while the job that would need to be done might still be great, it should be much lesser than trying to solve the whole of the world.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this final section I just want to recap the points made in the paper. I began first by noting that the current situation in which we find ourselves necessitates certain ethical developments, namely a new kind of ethic, a global one. After discussing the general notion of global ethic, I explored it further by noting that there are various dimensions along which different global ethic projects could differ. I argued that the most adequate version is one which applies to individuals and prescribes political action with collectives as its units of concern.

I then moved on to the question of how we might construct or arrive at such global ethic. Given the previous discussion some ethical theory which is primarily political would be needed, such as liberalism.

Finally I looked at two very general possible objections to the global ethic project– the problem of pervasiveness and problem of efficacy–first of these claims that a global ethic pervades too much of our lives, second of these claims that a global ethic is unable to effectively achieve its aims. Based on previous discussion I showed how the kind of global ethic put forth here is able to give good replies to both worries: since the main focus is on one's political institutions rather than the whole world it would be much more manageable to be follow the principles of a global ethic in both respects.

While I certainly do not feel that the whole of the global ethic project was somehow finished, I do think that some steps were made in the direction of arriving at a coherent and practically applicable idea of global ethic.

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