Global Ethics

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Introduction

Over the last decade global ethics has emerged as a recognisable discipline in its own right there is now a Journal of Global Ethics, an International Association of Global Ethics and in 2006 even Walmart advertised for a Director of Global Ethics. In an exceptionally short time global ethics has become established as a discipline, and students from many different backgrounds, including philosophy, politics and law, take modules in global ethics and are familiar with its concerns. However, despite this explosion there has been little reflection on what constitutes global ethics as a field of study. For example, are there distinctive global ethics approaches and/or methodologies? Are there identifiable ‘global ethics dilemmas’ rather than just ethical concerns which move beyond national borders? Are there typical global ethical solutions to such dilemmas?
This paper will speak directly to such questions. The first section of the paper will chart the emergence of global ethics as a discipline and consider some of the factors which led to its emergence. The second section will suggest that there is an emerging global ethics approach which is distinctive and which demarcates global ethics from simply ethics which includes some elements of international concern. It proposes that global ethics is distinguished by three characteristics: first, it is global in scope; second it is fundamentally multidisciplinary; and third, it connects theory and practice. These three-fold components taken together result in a particular politico-ethical stance: one which is justice-orientated and foregrounds the needs of those who are disadvantaged, economically, socially or politically and is engaged in the endeavour of creating a more just world.

The emergence of global ethics

The emergence of global ethics as a ‘new ethical discipline’ can be seen as part of a larger trend of the emergence of applied ethical disciplines which are specialised in their particular fields (Widdows, 2005). This proliferation of new ethical disciplines is evident in the growth of parallel disciplines such as bioethics, medical ethics, research ethics, business ethics, corporate social responsibility, development ethics, environmental ethics and professional ethics. One rationale for this rise of applied ethics in these parallel, but discrete, areas is that each ethical discipline is a response to ‘new ethical dilemmas’: bioethics a response to new dilemmas emerging from scientific and technological advances; environmental ethics a response to climate change; and corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics a response to the globalisation of business, organisations and IT. If this is
correct then what are the new ethical dilemmas that global ethics is evolving as a response to? Of the possible answers two are prominent in the literature: first that global ethics is a response to globalisation, and second that ethics provides a cross cultural language of value which spans religious differences.

Globalisation

The first reason, that globalisation creates new global ethical dilemmas, has been most often cited as engendering the need for global ethics. This seems relatively uncontroversial. The claim here is that globalisation – the increasing interdependence of global society economically, socially, culturally and politically – has created truly global dilemmas which require global solutions. Certainly the growth in global ethical issues – issues which cannot be addressed within individual nation states or single jurisdictions – has grown phenomenally in the last two decades. Global ethical dilemmas are at the heart of many pressing contemporary political issues, be it the war on terror, climate change, humanitarian intervention or economic development. As a result of globalisation individuals and institutions have connections and duties which are not contained within borders. As Nigel Dower states,

Individuals have active responsibilities, responsibilities in practice not merely in theory, towards people in other parts of the world. These include duties of giving aid and opposing practices which undermine well-being, but also, perhaps even more significantly, duties not to be beneficiaries of economic processes which either exploit the poor elsewhere or damage the environment. Likewise states can be seen as having in practice responsibility for human beings everywhere, and responsibility not to continue practices which either damage the environment elsewhere or contribute to negative global impacts on the environment. (Dower, 2007, p7-8)
If this reading is correct then global ethics has emerged directly to address such global challenges and to provide an overarching ethical framework capable of addressing the ethical dilemmas of globalisation. Without a doubt there is much interest in these issues manifested within academia in the burgeoning courses and research in the subject and in the political and policy arenas with the increased attention to the ethical dimensions and requirements of global dilemmas. Clearly globalisation is a factor in the rise of global ethics and many of the most pressing ethical issues of our time, such as war on terror and the environmental crisis, are global.

*Global language of value*

The second claim is that in a pluralistic global context ethics provides a shared language of value which is inclusive and can be understood and utilised by all. This derives from two claims; first that ethics addresses ‘moral uncertainty’ and second that it provides a cross-cultural global language.

First the argument that global ethics (and ethics in general) offers a construction of value which is capable of challenging the moral uncertainty said to characterise liberal, pluralistic Western societies is based on the assumption that traditional forms of moral authority (particularly religious authority) are no longer adequate as carriers of shared value and a new value framework is required (Widdows, 2004). In the West this has been linked to processes of secularisation and the decline of religious belief, “the argument from the moral crisis perspective is that
Christianity can no longer function as a shared moral source within the pluralistic context of liberal democracies” (Widdows, 2005, p77).

This erosion of a shared moral framework is now widely touted and the ‘moral uncertainty’ or ‘moral perplexity’ entailed is described:

“Moral perplexity is sometimes called ‘bewilderment’ (Morris Ginzburg), ‘indeterminacy’ (Abraham Edel) or even ‘crisis’ (Emmanuel Levinas). The specificity of the ‘moral perplexity of our period’ lies with the growing sense of discontent and unease with post-industrial society, a scientist ideology and a strict utilitarian obsession of narrow material progress, all of these unaccompanied by a spiritual evolution and a moral development of humankind. The social and political evolutions during the current era of globalization are giving rise to a moral disarray and cynicism, as can be heard in phrases and laments like ‘the end of modernity,’ ‘against ethics’, ‘the closing down of humanism” (Commers, Vandekerckhove and Verlinden, 2008, p2)

Global ethics then is proposed as a means of addressing such moral uncertainty as it provides a shared language and understanding of value which does not require a shared foundational belief system.

The claim that ethics offers a value framework which crosses religious divides is not unique to the discipline of global ethics and it is a wish to find a shared language which in part lies behind Hans Küng’s attempts to establish ‘A Global Ethic’. (Küng, 1993,) In his Declaration Toward a Global Ethic Küng presents a list of principles which he believes are evident in all religions. There have been many criticisms of this ethic, not least that it fails to consider those who are non-religious as well as making controversial and contested claims, for example, that religions support the equality of men and women.
However, despite the fact that Küng is seeking some shared ground in his ‘ethic’ this is a very different approach from that of global ethics. The claiming of a particular set of values or a global ethic is emphatically not what the discipline of global ethics is doing. Global ethics as a discipline is not advocating a single ‘ethic’ or set of prescribed values. To construe global ethics in this way is to wrongly suggest that what “we are seeking is a single ethics for everyone in the entire world…global ethics should not be interpreted as requiring worldwide agreement on a single set of norms or principles” (Gould, 2008, p13). This is true not only of a religious ethic of a single faith, or a religious ethic of derived from many faiths (as Küng proposes), but also a dogmatic univocal understanding of a secular ethic such as extreme neo-liberal individualist ethic (Widdows, 2007; Widdows, 2008). However, while not seeking a single ethic to impose globally, global ethics provides a means of cross-cultural communicating about issues of value and therefore a platform for instituting more just practices. Yet, though not endorsing a single ethic, global ethics is also not advocating a relativist understanding. To take such a culturally relativist stance would be to abandon a core commitment of global ethics – to the global scope of ethics, something we will return to – thus “relativism… is not an option for global ethics because a view which regards the value frameworks of different cultures to be distinct and separate denies the possibility of real communication which can result in agreement and compromise about moral matters across cultures” (Widdows, 2005, p84). The hope is that “ethics can operate as an inclusive language which enables those of different perspectives to enter the debate, as all positions can use the familiar language of ethics to frame their positions and so engage in the public moral debate.” (Widdows, 2005, p 83)
The discipline of global ethics

Whether or not one is convinced by these reasons for the emergence of global ethics what is indisputable is that there are now many academics working in a field which corresponds to the claim that they are responding to global dilemmas and using ‘ethics’ to do so. For example, in the last ten years numerous monographs, textbooks and edited collections have been published on themes which fall within the broad field of global ethics, such as human rights, global justice, research ethics and environmental ethics.

Within these fields there has been some explicit attention to global ethics – for example in an increasing emphasis on cosmopolitan theories in political philosophy and in policy and practice these concerns are manifest in the global ethical codes and guidelines for instance in bioethics and human rights. However, as yet and despite the growing interest in this area there has been little exploration and analysis of the discipline and methodology of global ethics itself. For example, does ‘global ethics’ simply demarcate an area of inquiry? Is one doing global ethics as soon as one addresses ethical issues which move beyond the nation state? This paper argues that global ethics is more than this and that while it includes traditional issues within political and moral philosophy, such as theories of justice, conceptions of wellbeing and human rights, it is not exhausted by these areas, but is evolving into a distinctive discipline with its own unique approach and methodology which although drawing on previous and related areas is yet distinct.
This paper contends that although global ethics is a broad discipline it is not simply any form of ethics which is international or goes beyond national borders. It matters not just that one considers global issues, but how one approaches these issues and the methodology, the ethical framework and the assumptions one adopts. Increasingly those who work in this field share very broad but identifiable premises and concerns. This paper will claim that a distinctive global ethics approach and methodology is emerging which embodies an indefinable politico-ethical conviction which serves to demarcate it from other varieties of international ethics. This paper will suggest that this ethical and political commitment emerges from the three key elements of global ethics: first, that it is global in scope, second, that it is fundamentally multidisciplinary, and third, that it approaches theory and practice as inherently interdependent.

Global in scope

The claim of this paper then is that global ethics is not simply ethical analysis which considers ethical aspects which stretch beyond borders but that it is global in scope. Therefore in any ethical assessment the needs of all are ethically significant. Its frame is the global frame and its ethical loci ‘the global’. Thus in any ethical analysis it is the global which provides the sphere of concern and thus the needs and perspectives of all global actors (whether individuals or institutions) are relevant. Thus, global ethics is concerned with the actions and obligations of individuals, associations, institutions and states, all of which are relevant to global ethics. As Onora O’Neill explicitly states “economic or material justice cannot be achieved without avoiding institutionalized as well as individual forms of coercion.” (O’Neill, 2008, p153).
This commitment to the global scope is perhaps most obvious in the rise of cosmopolitan political theories which consider the globe the proper unit of ethical concern. For cosmopolitans, as for global ethicists, the moral sphere is global for at least some obligations. Although there are many varieties of cosmopolitanism all agree that there are some duties which go beyond national borders, that all individuals are of ethically significant and they emphasise that each individual has equal moral worth. (Caney, 2005, p3-4) The rise of cosmopolitan theories in the political sphere parallels the rise of global ethics and this is not surprising as it is hard to imagine a global ethicist who did not endorse some form of cosmopolitanism (however weak). At the very least given that the ethical loci is global and that all individuals are of moral worth the global ethicist must believe that ethical reasoning must take into account those beyond borders even in theories or policies which still recognise and utilise borders.

This shift in focus to the global – while arguably inherent in the prominent ethical theories of utilitarianism and Kantianism (something to which we will return) – expands the concern of applied ethics and requires a reorientation. Entailed in this reorientation are the following:

to move from a focus on the rights of citizens within nation states that are implicated in a given situation to the human rights involved…traditional considerations of just distribution…need to take account of global justice issues…the idea of care for particular individuals who are close to one needs to be extended in new ways to modes of empathy and solidarity. (Gould, 2008, p18)
Therefore, no matter what theory, policy or practice is ultimately recommended what the global ethics methodology requires is that the global needs are factored into the analysis.

\textit{Multidisciplinary}

In addition to adopting the globe as the ethical loci for global ethics, global ethics is also fundamentally multidisciplinary. This claim is substantial in that the commitment to multidisciplinarity is not merely contingent on the types of issues global ethics addresses, rather it is methodological. It is a belief that not only is it pragmatic to approach global ethics taking account of the insights of different disciplines, but that this is the only effective way to do global ethics. Global ethics then, is inherently multidisciplinary, connecting moral and political philosophy with other disciplines such as political science, international relations, law, religious studies, medical ethics and sociology. This methodological distinction again distinguishes global ethics from other forms of applied ethics, which may be multidisciplinary by accident but are not committed to seeking out relevant information from other disciplines.

Moreover, by requiring that global ethics is multidisciplinary it is possible to escape some of the disciplinary definitions and classifications. For example, political theory has often classified ‘ethics’ as distinct from ‘justice’, with ethics concerned with individual obligations and ‘justice’ those of institutions (Caney, 2005, p2; Pogge and Horton, 2008). However, both ‘ethics’ and ‘justice’ are fundamental to the global ethics project and a multidisciplinary understanding of global ethics which draws on different theoretical and empirical disciplines is able to escape this narrow distinction.
A multidisciplinary reading therefore allows global ethics to include both duties of individuals and those of institutions, indeed not do so would be to ignore ethically significant actors; something ruled out by the global in scope criteria.

“Global ethics cannot be limited to principles or other sorts of ethical guidelines that apply only to individuals in their specific interactions with other individuals. Thus, global ethics includes also social ethics, which implicates the relations among associations or groups as well as individuals. In addition to the transformations in moral principles and moral reasoning for individuals that may be required then, global ethics centrally deals with global justice, cosmopolitan democracy, and other more social, political and normative concepts” (Gould, 2008, p14)

Thus the commitment to multidisciplinarity further enhances the scope of global ethics, as not only is it global in scope but it is fundamentally multidisciplinary and thus requires that attention is paid to all ethically-significant factors and actors.

*Theory and Practice*

The third and final constituent of global ethics is the insistence that theory and practice are interrelated. Global ethics connects academic debates with the real world work of policy-makers, practitioners and activists. Accordingly global ethics combines the analysis of practical case studies with rigorous theoretical examination. Theory and practice are regarded as fundamentally interconnected and are both necessary parts of the same pursuit rather than separable endeavours to be conducted in separate spheres and disciplines.
The interrelatedness of theory and practice is seen clearly in archetypal global ethics thinkers, such as Thomas Pogge and Darrel Mollendorf, as well as those we have already discussed, who are engaged not only in using empirical evidence for their claims, but who actively wish to influence practice and policy. (Pogee 2002, Mollendorf, 2002) For example, Pogge has long engaged with the injustice caused by the current global intellectual property regime and has sought to reform the patent system. This has culminated in his championing of the Health Impact Fund which seeks to provide an alternative to the patent system which would both increase the research, development and production of medicines which address the health needs of the majority of the world’s population and make these drugs affordable. (Hollis and Pogge, 2008). Pogge has also addressed the issue of the eradication of poverty both theoretically and again with suggestions for policy and practice, for example, in his proposal of a Global Resources Dividend. (Pogge, 2001) Global ethics is therefore both, and importantly at the same time, “a theoretical method to debate philosophical positions and …a form of engaged activism for social transformation” (van den Anker, 2008, p47) Thus, the intention is not only to theorise about a more just world but to find ways to theoretically and practically move towards one.

In sum then global ethics adopts a comprehensive approach which take the globe as its ethical loci and is fundamentally multidisciplinary and is based on the premise that theory is necessary for successful practice and practice necessary for accurate theory. Thus global ethics is both normative and applied and emerges from and influences policy and practice.
The global ethics approach

Taken together these three elements define the emerging discipline of global ethics. Thus, unlike more traditional branches of applied ethics it does not simply seek to apply already established theories, but revise theories and construct new theories in response to practice as well as guide practice with relevant and accessible theorising. Accordingly, global ethics is able to span both micro and macro issues and link questions about individual goodness and justice to political questions about governance.

Moreover, taken together this threefold analysis implies a particular construction regarding the proper remit of ethics. As a result of these elements the discipline of global ethics is one which embodies a practical, ethical and even political (depending on how that term is defined) commitment to a more just world. This practical commitment means that global ethics is not, in contrast to other forms of applied ethics, merely the examination of particular issues through the prism of ethics or moral philosophy, but a discipline which has adopted an ethical bias which foregrounds the needs of those who are disadvantaged, economically, socially or politically. This ethical bias towards the poor, oppressed and underprivileged can be regarded as a function of the global in scope criterion, strengthened by the comprehensiveness of the multidisciplinary and the theory and practice criteria. The bias towards the worst off can be seen if we consider different global ethics approaches, for example, this bias is manifest in both the utilitarian approach of Peter Singer and the Kantian approach of Onora O’Neill.
In brief, Singer argues from the utilitarian premise of impartiality of persons to the conclusion that it is a moral duty for all affluent people to give to causes such as famine relief (although equally to all those who are suffering) to the point where oneself or one’s dependants would be likely to suffer. (Singer, 2008) Such actions he argues are not “charitable, or generous…we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so”. (Singer, 2008, p7). What we have termed ‘the global in scope’ criterion, the conviction that it is all individuals and institutions which should be considered in an ethical assessment, results in a weight being given to those who are worse off. For Singer, this is required by the principle of impartiality, thus he argues that: “If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalisablity, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him).” (Singer, 2008, p4) Thus, taken seriously impartiality will result in the politico-ethical commitment of global ethics.

O’Neill, like Singer, rejects a model of charity, she argues:

Such a view of help for the needy may be comfortable for the “haves” of this world, since it suggests that they go beyond duty and do something especially good if they help others at all. But it is depressing for the “have nots” who cannot claim help of anybody, since it is not a matter of right. They can just hope help will happen; and usually what happens will be witheringly inadequate. (O’Neill, 2008, p148).

O’Neill does not appeal to impartiality but invokes the Kantian criteria of universalisabilty: a criteria which is again results in a ‘global in scope’ ethical criterion. O’Neill follows the Kantian conviction that “human obligations are obligations never to act in ways in which others in principle cannot also act” (O’Neill,
From this principle, she argues that “one obligation of justice which emerges… is that of noncoercion” (O’Neill, 2008, p151), as coercion cannot be universalised. O’Neill argues that this ethical conclusion is directly relevant to the plight of the poor, as it rules out not only obvious immoral acts, such as killing and assaulting, but also acts where poverty precludes the possibility of real choice and thus results in coercion. She argues that the poor,

…are so easily coerced. We can make them “offers they cannot refuse” with the greatest of ease. What might be genuine offers among equals, which others can respect or reject, can be threatening and unrefusable for the needy and the vulnerable. (O’Neill, 2008, p151)

Accordingly the principle of non-coercion requires the reduction and even the eradication of poverty. Again the result of this argument is a bias towards the poor and oppressed as justice requires the removing conditions of coercion: again the politico-ethical stance of global ethics.

Arguably, this bias should be evident in all ethics which adopt utilitarian and Kantian approaches, as it is derived from central tenets of each theory, that of impartiality and universalisability respectively. However, this focus is often not evident and other ethical principles prioritised, such as autonomy, therefore at the very least this bias is often underemployed in applied ethics. In global ethics the implications of impartiality and universalisability are taken seriously and in the global context lead to a bias for the poor and oppressed. Thus the global in scope criteria, coupled with the multidisciplinary and theory and practice requirements again results with a bias towards the underprivileged.
Conclusion

This paper has argued that global ethics has evolved in a short space of time and is becoming a discipline with a distinctive approach and methodology. Reasons for this emergence have been considered, including as a response to ‘new dilemmas’, in particular to moral uncertainty and processes of globalisation. The defining characteristics of global ethics were outlined, namely, that it is global in scope, multidisciplinary and interrelates theory and practice. The paper concluded with the claim that taken together these criteria lead to an ethical political approach of bias for the poor, underprivileged and oppressed. Whether or not this approach, which combines academia and activism, will continue to characterise global ethics remains to be seen. However as long as it stays true to its current methodology global ethics may indeed turn out to be of use to the oppressed and dispossessed, as its current proponents hope.

Bibliography


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