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The Future of Global Ethics Forum

Thinking Ethically About the Global in 'Global Ethics'

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What is distinctive about Global Ethics, as opposed to Ethics as such or, more narrowly, Applied Ethics as such? What difference does the adjective 'global' make? Answers to this question have a tendency to hover between 'global' as signifying the purview of the kinds of judgments that those working in Global Ethics are concerned to make (for example, that they must be universally sustainable, applicable to all, impartial), and 'global' as signifying an aspect of the object of ethical inquiry (issues that arise out of a globalised condition or are international or transnational in scope). In what follows, I claim that the 'global' in 'Global Ethics' needs also to be thought about in a different way, not as the scope or object of ethical judgement but in relation to the worlds reproduced by the practice of ethical judgment itself. In summary, ethical reflection on the meaning of the 'global' in the practice of Global Ethics as a field of academic inquiry is what is required if the future of Global Ethics is to be something other than Ethics or Applied Ethics as traditionally conducted.

Ignatieff identifies 'Global Ethics' with the plurality of existing institutionalised evaluative frameworks for ethical judgment and prescription about global ethical issues such as regimes of state sovereignty and human rights (Ignatieff 2012). He contrasts this with the notion of a Global Ethic in the singular which he associates with universalist philosophical ethical theories. He argues that the 'Global Ethic' provides standards of judgment for assessing different Global Ethics and their implications. In apparent contrast, but with ultimately similar implications David Rodin and Heather Widdows both identify Global Ethics with an outcome oriented process of philosophical, theoretical and empirical inquiry in which different moral frameworks and empirical analyses and their implications for practice contest with one another and can be comparatively evaluated. As David Rodin puts it, Global Ethics means "the process of reflection, study and argumentation whose goal is the articulation of a global ethic", a set of moral reference points that can be action-guiding at a global level (Rodin 2012: 33). In Heather Widdows' words, those who work in the field of Global Ethics "are committed to discussing, and more importantly seeking solutions to, the most pressing contemporary ethical issues." (2011: 2) On both Rodin's and Widdows' accounts the purpose of Global Ethics is to find the right ethical answers (or if this is impossible the best possible compromise between different answers), which will then form the basis, directly or indirectly, of moral global policies, laws and institutions.

Rodin's and Widdows' accounts broadly represent the understanding of the majority of participants within the field of Global Ethics scholarship, including work that does not use the 'global' label but is regularly referenced as part of the field, such as work in just war theory, and international or cosmopolitan ethics that focuses on transnational issues, institutions and practices from war and peace to global trading in body parts. This field of academic inquiry is flourishing as more is found to be said about well-established global ethical issues in relation to distributive justice, development, war, peace, trade, migration, multiculturalism (particularly in relation to women's rights) and development, and as new objects of global ethical inquiry emerge such as humanitarian intervention, pornography on the internet, intellectual property rights, tourism, human trafficking and so on. However, in

spite of its continuing growth, it is noticeable that work in the field of Global Ethics has not generated much in the way of new frameworks and foundations for the justification of moral judgments. It is still the case that the vast majority of such work uses consequentialist, contractarian or deontological justificatory starting points, often cashed out in terms of a human rights framework, with only a dissident minority of work building on virtue, care, sentiment, deconstructive or other starting points.

The predominance of rationalist frameworks could be taken as confirmation of the fact that these are the moral vocabularies most appropriate to a branch of applied ethics with aspirations to be *globally* prescriptive. Many contributors to the field of Global Ethics make this argument on the grounds of the universalism inherent in rationalist ethical starting points. But the issue of universalism as such is not the one that crucially divides rationalist ethical theories from other approaches. Ethical theories based on virtue, care, sentiment, even deconstruction all make and rely on claims made in the register of universality. What they object to in rationalist moral theories is the identification of ethics with an epistemic model of judgment. Therefore it is not the 'Global' character of Global Ethics, the 'globally' in 'globally prescriptive', that is doing the theoretical work by linking the universalism of rationalist theories together with a global scope of application, but rather the task of application itself, in which the prescriptive implications of different versions of moral truth are extrapolated in relation to particular cases. Within this epistemic and technocratic framework, 'global' becomes equivalent to terms such as 'Medical', 'Professional' or 'Business' in much of the Applied Ethics literature, it is identified with the source of problems for which Ethics supplies the solution.

Is there anything wrong with this? Does it matter if we can essentially subsume Global Ethics under the heading of Applied Ethics? I think it does matter precisely because of the aspirations of this particular branch of Applied Ethics to be *globally* prescriptive. In this respect 'global' implies something over and above a formal universality or a particular model of truth, it implies an aspiration to mobilise constituencies across all kinds of divisions, exclusions and hierarchies of identity, power and wealth on a world-wide scale. This is an aspiration not necessarily towards agreement, but certainly towards inclusion both theoretically and practically. Which means that if there are to be, as Rodin puts it, processes of 'reflection, study and argumentation whose goal is the articulation of a global ethic', then Global Ethics has a future only to the extent that these processes of reflection, study and argumentation are not unreflectively reproducing old exclusions or introducing new ones. The point here is not to say that an epistemic and technocratic understanding of the project of Global Ethics is necessarily mistaken, this is something on which theorists will always differ. Rather, the point is to argue that the practice of Global Ethics should encompass not only making ethical arguments and evaluating the foundations and substantive claims of such arguments but also the evaluation of the global relations produced and reproduced by the theorist's practice in the light of the aims of that practice. It is an argument for the supplementation of one kind of ethical analysis with another, one that deliberately de-centres, or perhaps *globalizes*, the privileged position of the theorist.

What does it mean to suggest that practitioners of Global Ethics need to become more ethically reflective about the nature and effects of their own practices of judgment. Fundamentally it means thinking critically about the global ethical relations between the theorist and their audience reproduced in the various things that Global Ethicists do. One might sum up these 'various things that Global Ethicists do' as including: giving accounts of the grounds of moral judgment and employing modes of ethical argumentation; drawing on

experience and evidence to make decisions as to what counts as a global ethical issue about which to make judgments of right and wrong; allocating ethical agency and responsibility at ideal and non-ideal levels of analysis and argument; and prescribing for individual behaviour and/ or institutional change. Just in terms of the first of the above list, if one takes as one's starting point an epistemic model of moral truth, what is implied about the audience of the claims made and what kind of ethical relation does it set up between the theorist and his or her audience? Is this a global audience or an audience of experts? Is it an audience that shares the theorist's intuitions or opposes them? Is the relation between ethicist and audience like one between teacher and pupil or like one between fellow citizens? What kind of learning is made possible by this conversation and by whom? If one uses hypotheses, analogies and examples in the course of ethical argumentation, what are the relations of power reflected in these possible worlds? The purpose of these questions is not to undermine the work of the ethicist but to push her into testing out the levels of compatibility between her aspirations as a global ethical theorist and her own practice.

I have discussed some of these issues more fully elsewhere, and one of my biggest concerns about the future of global ethics is the extent to which the mode of Applied Ethics in which it is mostly carried out speaks only to the constituency of what one might call 'the beneficent powerful' and tends therefore to reproduce very familiar hierarchies of moral agency and victimhood in which Global Ethics ends up confined to three possible modes: educative; protective or punitive (Hutchings 2010; 2013). Another deep concern is the extent to which much work reproduces profound gulfs between ideal and non-ideal, theory and practice, morality and politics, all of which tend to trap the global ethicist into a world in which the truth is fundamentally untranslatable into the world as it is, and render the world as it is forever ethically second best. However, regardless of the accuracy or relevance of my particular concerns, my argument here is that any work in Global Ethics can only be enriched by taking the kind of ethical reflection I am recommending seriously. The emphasis of this kind of ethical work is not on establishing and applying moral truths, instead it is on identifying the features of an ethical practice in which ethical commitments are instantiated – in this case the commitment to an inclusive Global Ethics that destabilizes rather than reifies the multiple divisions, exclusions and hierarchies of identity, power and wealth of which the world is made up.

References

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