Toward a Global Ethic

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We are one humanity, but seven billion humans. This is the essential challenge of global ethics: how to accommodate the tension between our universal and particular natures. This tension is, of course, age-old and runs through all moral and political philosophy. But in the world of the early twenty-first century it plays out in distinctive new ways. Ethics has always engaged twin capacities inherent in every human: the capacity to harm and the capacity to help. But the profound set of transformations commonly referred to as globalization—the increasing mobility of goods, labor, and capital; the increasing interconnectedness of political, economic, and financial systems; and the radical empowerment of groups and individuals through technology—have enabled us to harm and to help others in ways that our forebears could not have imagined. What we require from a global ethic is shaped by these transformative forces; and global ethics—the success or failure of that project—will substantially shape the course of the twenty-first century.

In this essay I will not address the content of a global ethic—that is, the particular rights and responsibilities it assigns—but shall instead comment on several essential preliminaries. First, I will reflect on what defines a global ethic. Second, I will consider two important objections to global ethics. Finally, I will suggest the appropriate attitude to adopt toward its pursuit. I will use the term "global ethic" to refer to a substantive ethical framework with the characteristics I discuss in this paper. "Global ethics" I shall take to mean the process of reflection, study, and argumentation whose goal is the articulation of a global ethic.[1]

What, then, is a global ethic? What is its distinctive domain, and how should it be distinguished from other aspects of moral and political life? I believe that it is best defined by two distinct but complementary forces. We are "pushed" toward a global ethic by the need to address urgent issues that are increasingly global in nature, and we are "pulled" toward a global ethic by a universal core implicit in

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the very idea of ethics—a core articulated most powerfully by the idea of human rights.

To develop the first of these themes: a global ethic contains the principles, rules, institutional arrangements, attitudes, and virtues required to address global issues. Issues are "global" either because they are global in scope, which means they affect all or almost all of humanity, thus giving all persons a stake in how they are resolved; or because they have distinctive features such that they cannot be adequately addressed solely at more local or regional levels of governance.

This immediately tells us that the domain of global ethics is profoundly affected by societal, technological, and political change. In the past, management of fisheries was a local issue. But when factory ships can fish a species to extinction on the far side of the world, it becomes a paradigmatic issue of global ethics. The emission of pollutants was in the past largely a local issue. But when driving a car in Adelaide is causally connected to increased risk of flooding in Bangladesh, it becomes a global issue. We have always required ethical principles to inform a fair allocation of costs and benefits and to provide authoritative mechanisms of dispute resolution. But whereas in the past these were primarily required within local or national communities, global issues require us to resolve conflicts and distribute costs and benefits between and across diverse communities.

It should be obvious that as the world globalizes, more and more issues that were once local or regional come within the domain of global ethics. Today many of our most urgent policy issues are global in this way: climate change and environmental degradation; management of the trade and financial systems; management of the food, water, agricultural, and forestry systems; preventing and treating infectious diseases, including pandemics; preventing the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction; preventing armed conflict and genocide; eliminating poverty; management of the oceans; and ensuring the security of cyberspace. This is an overwhelming (yet still incomplete) catalogue of quite devilish problems. It vividly demonstrates why the development of effective principles of global ethics is among the most important intellectual tasks of our time.

I have said that it is a defining feature of many global issues that they cannot be adequately addressed in a solely local or regional manner. But it would be a mistake to think that global issues must therefore be addressed exclusively at the global or international level. Some global issues have been successfully managed primarily at the level of formal international coordination (think, for example, of the framework of principles that constitute the laws of the sea). But many global

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issues require coordinated action at the international, regional, national, and indeed individual level.

Climate change is a good example of this latter category. Much attention has been focused on the attempt to produce a legally binding accord among the world's 193 states to limit emissions. This is the paradigm of a truly global governance mechanism. But even if such a binding universal accord is both possible and necessary, it will not in itself exhaust responsibilities for action over climate change. Ancillary action will be required by numerous actors who are not themselves parties to an international agreement and whose responsibilities cannot be fully specified there. These actors will include regional groupings of states, municipal and local authorities, civil society groups, and individuals. Unless action is taken across all these domains, the problem of global warming is unlikely to be resolved.

Most global issues are like this. They must be addressed through differing combinations of the global and local. The point of global ethics is not that the management of global issues should always be pushed upward, to global mechanisms. The point is rather that identifying the right balance between global and local responsibilities (and doing so in the complex circumstances of partial compliance or noncompliance by other actors) is itself a key function of global ethics.

A further function of global ethics is to determine the appropriate balance between local interests and global obligations. For example, when acting in a way that bears on global issues, how much partiality am I permitted to show to my own welfare, and the welfare of those close to me, as against the collective interests of mankind? I take this issue of balance to be a core question of global ethics. But in this I differ from Michael Ignatieff. He identifies the global ethic wholly with an impartial morality. On this view the global ethic stands in stark contrast to all partiality and exists precisely to hold particular interests to the standard of what he calls (following Thomas Nagel) "the view from nowhere."[2]

While impartiality clearly has an important role to play in the global ethic, I think that it is a mistake to equate the two. This is because, first, partial interests often present themselves in deeply moralized forms. Concern for, and commitment to, family, friends, colleagues, or compatriots generate real moral obligations, and these may sometimes demand extraordinary self-sacrifice. The phenomenon of what we might call "altruistic partiality" is real and must be figured into any plausible ethic, including the global ethic.

Second, we require an account of how the conflicts that inevitably arise between the view from nowhere and local interests can be navigated. If these conflicts are

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not resolved within the framework of a global ethic, then they will have to be resolved outside it. In particular, they will be pushed into a domain of politics that is stripped of substantive moral content: politics as a messy amalgam of persuasion, horse-trading, and naked power. Ignatieff rightly emphasizes that there is often a tension between the localism of politics and the ambitions of global ethics. But we should also remember that it is a function of ethics to provide a context for politics. Ethics confronts us with an inescapable question that presents itself in the first person: how, morally, ought I to engage in this process of politics? This, in turn, must include the question of balancing: to what extent should my political action be guided by impartial concerns and to what extent am I permitted (or perhaps even required) to defend the interests of family, neighbors, or state against those of the world as a whole? If global politics is not to be artificially divorced from ethics, then these questions of balance must be addressed squarely within the global ethic and not pushed outside.

To see how these tensions between the partial and the impartial might be navigated within a global ethic, we may consider the way that they are treated within the conception of human rights. Human rights contain exquisite mechanisms for balancing the particular and the universal. On the one hand, human rights protect certain basic interests of all persons universally. In this respect they are exemplars of the impartial view from nowhere. On the other hand, possessing a right provides a normative ground to protect particular interests even against, and above, the common interest. To say that I have the right to life is to say that my life cannot be taken by others (without infringing my rights), even if that were necessary to prevent some global catastrophe. Human rights thus provide one way (though not the only way) of navigating between partial and impartial interests. To the extent that human rights figure within the global ethic, then a moral appraisal of the tension between the partial and impartial will be hardwired into it.

We have seen that one way of marking the domain of global ethics is that it aspires to provide the moral resources to effectively address global issues. We are pushed toward a global ethic by the urgency of the world's problems. But there is an equally important way of thinking about global ethics that gains its impetus from commitments internal to our moral thought. The global ethic in this sense contains the universal core of morality—those centrally important moral considerations that are applicable to all people everywhere.

We may think about the distinction between the two components of global ethics in the following way. If a man is tortured in a secret prison cell, this

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does not constitute a global issue in the manner discussed above. It is not a matter that affects almost all humans, and its resolution requires nothing more than restraint by the particular individuals and institutions involved. Yet we properly think of torture as a matter of global rather than local ethics. Designating it as such signifies two things: First, we affirm that it is true of all people everywhere that they have the right not to be tortured. Second, we affirm that any violation of this right—even a single violation against a single individual—is of proper concern to everyone, everywhere: it is everyone's business when universal rights and values are violated.

The idea that certain central moral truths have universal application is found in many moral traditions, but nowhere has it been articulated more powerfully and with broader appeal than in the conception of universal human rights. For this reason, rights have a special role to play in the global ethic. Human rights also capture an important additional feature of the universal global ethic: its minimalism. The global ethic is not a full account of human flourishing. Rather, it articulates a bare minimum standard that is the precondition of moral decency for all people everywhere.

What is contained within this universal moral minimum? That is a significant controversy within global ethics. Certainly, the core negative rights will fall within it: the right to life, the right against torture, the right against slavery, the right against rape and sexual abuse, the right not to have one's liberty arbitrarily curtailed or one's property arbitrarily seized. That is a minimal list indeed, and many would insist on the inclusion of such positive rights as basic welfare rights, including the right to a minimum of sustenance, health care, shelter, and education. There are powerful reasons to include welfare rights, though there are also well-known problems with how to allocate the correlative duties implied by these rights. The boundary may be drawn more expansively still to include democratic rights and basic tenets of distributive justice. This debate will not be settled easily. But I will argue below that global ethics must include a conception of moral progress. If that is right, then there is reason to hope that universal global ethics may develop over time from a minimal core to a more ambitiously maximalist conception.

If the global ethic has two components in the way I have suggested, then one may fairly ask how they are related to one another. One hopeful hypothesis is that the universal rights articulated by the global ethic are themselves necessary features of the ethic required to address global issues. There is some reason to believe that this is true. Most global issues involve the violation or infringement

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of rights on a massive scale (global warming, war, and atrocity are paradigmatic in this respect). The framework of rights contains sophisticated internal mechanisms for addressing such violations and infringements. In particular, infringing or threatening a right triggers specific liabilities in others to safeguard that right. These liabilities come in three fundamental forms: those responsible for infringing a right can be liable to harmful defensive action; they can be liable to claims for compensation or redress for infringing the right; and they can be liable to punishment for wrongfully infringing the right. These are powerful mechanisms, but much more work needs to be done on how this internal "logic of rights" can be applied to complex global issues. In particular, we need a much better understanding of how unintended externality harms that cross borders (such as those that arise from carbon emissions) generate defensive, compensatory, and punitive liabilities.

While there are clear synergies between the two components of a global ethic, we must recognize that there is also a potential conflict. Universal rights belong first and foremost to individuals. They contain fundamental protections that ought not be simply disregarded even if it would be highly advantageous to do so in order to address an urgent global issue. Thus, while universal rights provide significant resources to address global issues, they also generate substantial constraints on what the solution to those issues can be.

If it is correct that global ethics aspires to articulate a minimal moral truth applicable to all persons, then global ethics stands squarely opposed to moral skepticism, which, in its various forms, denies that there can be such universal moral truth. In particular, global ethics opposes moral relativism and political realism, both of which have exerted a powerful influence on contemporary debate.

Relativism begins from the undeniable fact that moral beliefs differ significantly, both between communities and within particular communities over time. Relativism posits an explanation of this: variations in moral commitment are not disagreements about moral facts; rather, they simply reflect the different preferences that social groups happen to have at a particular time. If there are no culture-independent moral facts, then there can be no universal moral truths. As many authors have pointed out, however, relativism is not entailed simply by differences in belief. In the past, most humans believed the world was flat, whereas now most believe it to be round. This does not imply that there is no matter of fact about the shape of the world. We must look at the nature of the disagreement and whether there are persuasive explanations for why it exists.

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The contention that there is a universal core to morality is more plausible when one makes the obvious observation that much of morality does not fall within it. As I observed above, the universal global ethic is minimal. There are many rules, norms, and values that are undoubtedly moral, but for which it is entirely appropriate that there exist substantial variations between different communities. This is often the case when the moral considerations concern trade-offs between generalized risks and benefits within a community's population. Think, for example, of different regimes of health and safety in different countries, or the differing ways that the interests of the employed and unemployed are balanced in employment regulation, or of different speed limits, consumer protection, or gun ownership regulations. It would be foolish to suggest that there is one universally right form of these norms. In all of these cases it is morally appropriate for different communities to decide these issues in different ways according to their own distinctive preferences (within certain limits).

In contrast, the basic rights that are plausible candidates for a universal global ethic do not present themselves as discretionary in this way. First, there is considerable global agreement on the existence of these basic rights.[3] Second, though there certainly exist groups who deny each of these rights, we do not regard this denial as reasonable variation; rather, we see it as evidence of ignorance or iniquity.

This brings us to the second weakness in the relativist's position. We have an alternative explanation for the differences in moral belief that motivate relativism. That explanation is progress. There are clear cases in which variations in moral belief over time and between communities are best explained not as shifts in simple cultural preferences, but as progress toward a more morally perfect state of affairs. The prohibition of slavery, the establishment of universal suffrage, and the recognition of the rights of women, children, racial minorities, and homosexuals are all clear examples of genuine moral progress.

Conceptions of moral progress are deeply unfashionable because they have become associated with a smug view of history as an inevitable ascent toward a moral apex represented by Western culture. Herbert Butterfield immortalized this objectionable view as the "Whig interpretation of history."[4] In fact, the possibility of moral progress implies the opposite attitude. While it is right to feel pride in the progress we have made, this must be tempered by humility at the progress we have yet to achieve. After all, who can say which of our current moral assumptions will, a century from now, be viewed in the same way that we now view

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Victorian attitudes toward women, nonwhites, and homosexuals? We should always be alive to the fact that the corollary of progress is the possibility of error. There is thus a grain of truth in the relativist's position: parochial prejudice often masquerades as universal truth. This requires caution and a constant readiness to engage in serious and systematic interrogation of even our most basic moral beliefs. However, it does not entail abandoning conceptions of moral truth and progress (indeed, the confusion of prejudice with moral truth only matters if there *is* a truth).

Different problems beset political realism. There are many nuanced and sophisticated forms of realism, but the variant that has most influenced popular discourse has been naïve realism that holds that the pursuit of national self-interest always precludes the possibility of international morality. The weakness of this view is that it is ambiguous between two different claims, one of which is descriptive and the other prescriptive. In its descriptive form, realism holds that, as a matter of fact, state action is determined solely by national self-interest. But that view is clearly wrong. There have been many cases in which states have taken dangerous and costly actions that cannot be explained other than by reference to moral beliefs and motivations. Britain's intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000, America's ill-fated intervention in Somalia in 1993, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 cannot be explained in terms of the rational pursuit of national self-interest alone, and each was arguably influenced by underlying moral commitments (albeit, as in the case of Iraq, sometimes tragically misconceived).

There is also something charmingly innocent about the realist's view of the officials who shape state action. One is required to believe that officials always act from fidelity to a shining conception of the national interest, rather than the more prosaic motives of career, interagency rivalry, or personal jealously. One suspects that realists cannot have spent much time within ordinary office environments. For better or for worse, states and state officials often do act for reasons other than national self-interest.

The second interpretation of realism explicitly recognizes this. It holds not that states always *do* act from national self-interest, but that they *ought* to. Realists contend that when states act for moral reasons they often create tragically counterproductive effects, generating significant danger for themselves and others. Everyone will be better off if states put aside moral considerations and act only from self-interest.

Notice, however, that realism in its prescriptive form is not a denial of ethics in international affairs. It is a particular account of what states ought to do. In other

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words, it is itself a species of international ethics, and must be assessed as such. As with relativism, there is a grain of truth in the realist's position. That grain is that there are significant ethical risks to excessive moral zeal. Idealistic moralism that ignores the constraints on effective action, including political constraints, is a recipe for disaster. But once one has absorbed that modest truth, the implausibility of the prescriptive realist position becomes obvious. It would be strange indeed if the best way for states to do what is right were to ignore all considerations of right and wrong and instead to do what is in their own self-interest. Much more plausible is that for states to act well they (like persons) must think seriously about their moral obligations, but they must do so with a cautionary awareness of the constraints and limitations upon their moral agency.

All of this points to the importance of developing the correct attitude to orient our engagement in the project of global ethics. Aspects of that attitude have already emerged clearly from our discussion. It is an attitude of humility and caution expressed through a readiness to ruthlessly interrogate our own deepest moral assumptions. It contains a commitment to rigor and seriousness. The tools of many disciplines must be brought to bear (not just philosophy, though philosophy has a central role). It is an explicitly progressive attitude. Our engagement in global ethics should be energized by the very real moral progress we have already made. But it is also an attitude made steely vigilant by the equally real possibilities of error and moral regress. The social and political expression of rights and values must be constantly nurtured and maintained if they are not to wither or collapse.

Most of all we must adopt what we might call the "internal attitude." I mean by this that we come to global ethics already inhabiting morality. Our task is to interpret, develop, and apply it to the best of our abilities. Relativism, realism, and egoism fail as objections to global ethics not so much because they are false as because they are irrelevant. Just as we do not need to refute the skeptical hypothesis that we might be brains in a vat in order to make progress in physics, so we do not need to refute moral skepticism in order to make progress on the ethical issues that matter. The questions of metaethics are valid, but they are not our questions. As I observed above, the serious questions of morality are mostly presented in the first person: what should I do (given my resources and my role as a voting citizen, official, soldier, head of state, family member, educator, civil society advocate, and so forth)? The metaphor of the "view from nowhere" is helpful in some respects, but it misleads in others. What is required is the view—surveyed with moral honesty and rigor—from exactly where we are.

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NOTES

[1] Note that this usage differs from Michael Ignatieff's in "Reimagining a Global Ethic," in this issue.
[2] Ignatieff, "Reimagining a Global Ethic."
[3] To be sure, each of these rights has fuzzy edges. For example, different jurisdictions draw the distinction between self-defense and culpable homicide in slightly different ways. But we are much less inclined to view these differences as morally discretionary, as opposed to disagreements over moral facts. In any case, the prohibition of paradigm cases of murder, rape, torture, slavery, and the like is nonnegotiable.
[4] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

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