

## GLOBAL ETHICS

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### Summary

This article examines the role of global ethics in the pursuit of the Encyclopedia's goals, and defends a particular kind of global ethic that supports these goals but only given a non-standard interpretation of them. Arguments for the rejection of a cosmopolitan or global ethic both for individuals (relativism and communitarianism) and for states (skeptical realism and internationalism) are critically considered. Kantianism and human rights theories are examined as bases for a global ethic; if they are otherwise

acceptable they need supplementing with a non-anthropocentric principle of respect for nature.

## 1. Introduction

A global ethic can be defined as an ethical perspective according to which there are significant ethical relations between states and between individuals living in different societies. Such an ethic generally combines claims about the existence of some universal values and norms and claims about responsibilities or obligations that are global in scope.

Global ethics (with an “s”) is an area of critical ethical *enquiry* into the nature and justification of values and norms that are global in kind and into the various issues that arise such as world poverty and international aid, environmental problems, peace and security, intervention, and human rights. Although someone interested in global ethics as an area of philosophical enquiry could be *skeptical* about the acceptability of a global ethic, generally an interest in it, as in this article, stems from a desire to defend and articulate some form of global ethic. Apart from the question “Should we accept a global ethic?” there is the question “Does the acceptance of a global ethic (backed by the critical enquiry of global ethics) play a significant role in promoting the goals of the Encyclopedia?” The answers in brief will be: yes, we need to accept a global ethic; yes, without the acceptance of some form of global ethic by a large number of agents the goals are not likely to be achieved; *but*, given that there can be different global ethics and different understanding of the goals, some global ethics will be more successful than others. I tackle the second question first.

The aim of the Encyclopedia is to provide a “source of knowledge for sustainable development and global security to lead to fulfillment of human needs through simultaneous socioeconomic and technological progress and conservation of the Earth’s natural systems.” In what follows I shall take the main aim or goal to be the fulfillment of human needs and the two chief means (or sub-goals) to be sustainable development and global security, which are further implemented through socioeconomic progress, technological progress and conservation. I shall refer to these collectively as the goals of the Encyclopedia. Strictly the aim/goal is to provide *knowledge* of these things, but this is formally subordinate in having these goals as its formal object and intended outcome. I do not consider the issue whether ethical values constitute *knowledge* in the strict sense. From the point of view of the Encyclopedia, the awareness of, or acceptance of, relevant ethical values is what is significant, irrespective of whether this is objectively valid knowledge, expression of subjective preference, or product of collective agreement. Whilst this knowledge about ethics may be valuable for its own sake, the assumption here is that this knowledge will further the goals.

## 2. The Role of Global Ethics

What then is the contribution that global ethics makes to promoting these goals? This is distinct from the contribution that *ethics as such* makes. None of the goals of fulfilling human needs and achieving security, sustainable development, and conservation can

occur effectively without mutual restraint and cooperation based on moral norms in an ordinary social setting.

What then is the distinctive contribution of *global* ethics to these goals? The short answer is simple: the goals of the Encyclopedia, reflecting the goals of United Nations (U.N.) declarations and most international agencies, are *global* goals. Human needs are to be met everywhere; socioeconomic and technological progress are to occur everywhere; it is the global environment that needs protecting; it is really, parallel to global security, *global* sustainable development that is the target (or at least the win-win scenario of the sustainable development of all countries simultaneously being achieved).

This immediately poses the challenge: how can all these commendable goals be achieved? Not arguably by relying on ordinary ethical norms applied at a societal level. This would be the ethical equivalent of Adam Smith's hidden hand and equally suspect (i.e. the thesis that commitments to ethical norms within each society happens to serve global goals adequately without anyone actually attending to global ethical issues as such). Why not? Briefly, because of three challenges: non-violation; cooperation/coordination; and positive intervention.

The interests of one country may involve violation of the interests of another (and thus implicitly all the goals above), for example through military intervention, economic aggression, setting rules and agendas unfavorable to weaker countries, or exporting environmental problems, so there needs to be avoidance of this if the Encyclopedia's goals are to be achieved. Cooperation and coordination between states is essential if many global common goods are to be effectively achieved; whether it is in the area of "peace and security," environmental regulations (ensuring sufficient compliance), or technology transfer (and the avoidance of excessive patenting, which disadvantages poorer countries as with genetically modified (G.M.) foods). Third, assistance or positive intervention may be needed when conditions in other countries are such that governments either will not or cannot address natural and human-made evils properly. Thus there is the need for international aid and for intervention for the sake of human rights.

None of these three types of response to global problems could occur without some kind of commitment to global goals as an *ethical* requirement or acceptance of global responsibilities. Of course there may be many different motivations involved in these policies, but it is hard not to believe (despite what some skeptics might say—see below) that (a) ethical norms do *apply* in all these domains and (b) that the acceptance by relevant actors of global ethical norms do play a significant part in motivating these three types of behavior.

This argument applies both at the level of states and at the level of individuals. States, or rather those actors formally acting as agents of the state (politicians, civil servants, diplomats), need to act within some kind of ethical framework in assessing the rightness of their "foreign policy" decisions. But at the same time the kind of global ethical framework that is necessary for realizing adequately the goals of the Encyclopedia must involve *individuals* (and indeed collections of individuals such as associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business companies) as well. Broadly

speaking, the extent to which and the manner in which governments generally pursue such global goals is a function of what their citizens regard as morally important or desirable. (Similarly economic actors such as transnationals are potentially susceptible to the consumer preferences of those who buy their products.) But at another level, individuals, especially those with resources and skills, can act in ways that promote these goals—encouraging international cooperation or coming to the aid of those who suffer (through aid agencies like Oxfam or Amnesty International).

Global goals then require a global ethic. There may be disagreement about what exactly this global ethic should be; there are significant variations on offer. However, it is almost inconceivable that anyone could advocate *these* goals and see them as global goals and not accept the importance of an ethic to support these goals that is global in scope and conception.

### **3. The Implications of a Particular Global Ethic**

What kind of global ethic should we adopt? In what follows I formulate a global ethic that, if accepted, leads to a somewhat non-standard interpretation of the goals specified. In other words, the goals specified may need to be qualified or supplemented in some ways. The function of ethical reflection is in any case not that of uncritically endorsing such a set of goals (or indeed any set of goals issued by or on behalf of international organizations), but that of providing an ethical framework in which such statements, declarations, and so on can be constructively criticized.

Starting with the fulfillment of human needs as the hinge on which to develop my point, in many ways this as the central goal is clearly acceptable. However, there are two points of contention.

#### **3.1. Whose Needs? The Relevance of Non-Humans**

First, are human needs the only needs that ought to be objects of ethical attention? At the very least, the life conditions of animals reared on farms have ethical relevance. More generally, our attitude towards the natural world needs to be thought of in a less “exploitative” way than the language suggests. “Conservation” of the natural world and sustaining the environmental basis, which are generally taken to underlie sustainable development, are both capable of being interpreted in very anthropocentric terms, and given the typical thrust of U.N. documentation, that is probably the interpretation usually given to these ideas. But this from an environmentalist point of view may be precisely what is at issue (see *Environmental Justice; Biodiversity and Social Well-Being: The Case of South America; Health Security Issues; Food Security Issues; and Ethics and Justice Information for Decision Making*).

#### **3.2. What Needs?**

Second, just what are the human needs that are supposed to be the object of international commitment? The same issue arises over the famous Brundtland Report (*Our Common Future*) definition of sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without thereby compromising the ability of future generations to meet their

needs.” That basic needs for food, health, clothing, shelter, and basic security are needs to be met universally hardly anyone would dispute, but what other needs are to be included? What is needed for human beings to fulfill themselves? Clearly there is a wide range of intellectual, social, cultural, and spiritual needs that can be specified, not to mention the need for autonomy, freedom, or choice. There is room for much interpretation here. Two issues stand out.

What is the relationship between needs and material wealth? Very different views are held about how much affluence matters beyond a reasonable level. Those who question it do so for various reasons: for instance, a life based on the right values does not require excessive wealth; accepting the need for less wealth will increase one’s willingness to share wealth with those less fortunate; accepting less affluent life styles is necessary if one is to play one’s part in having a less damaging impact on the natural environment.

My point here is not to say that such a view is right (though I do think it is right) but to say that such a view of what we really need for a full life will have importantly different effects (compared with more standard views of the “good life”) on how one views the nature of development or relation to the natural world. On such a view the commitment to socioeconomic progress will be tempered at least in regard to the economic part of it, because economic growth will not be seen as such an important engine of positive change.

The other thing to note about centering international commitment on needs is that it conceals a cause of considerable conflict, namely conflict over the specificity of that goal. If one stresses that needs are not merely basic needs but include a range of sophisticated often culturally mediated needs, and one essentially links the idea of needs to whatever is needed for a full human life, are there are a wide variety of ways in which such a good life can be realized, given the differences between individuals and cultures? Many will say yes.

However, the global ethics of many other people are not as open ended as this suggests. A particular vision of the good life and of the moral norms and the social order that go with it may be accepted—for example, as part of a religious or political creed—where the promotion of those values and norms is seen as an important part of the global agenda.

This has several consequences: first, even if the commitment to universal basic needs is seen as important, it may be given less priority in the light of these other values; second, it may be subordinate in that the selection of target groups for aiding may be determined by considerations such as whether the target group are already “of the faith” or are likely to be won over to it; third, to the extent that there is disagreement between different societies or countries or groups of them promoting rival ideals, the potential for conflict exists—at best a drain on energies, at worst an undermining of security through violence and war (see *Ethics and Justice Needs for Sustainable Development; Combating Poverty; and Women and Development*).

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### Biographical Sketch

**Nigel Dower** is a senior lecturer in philosophy in University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Since the early 1980s, Dr. Dower's research and teaching interests have focused on the ethics of international relations, development and the environment, and related issues. His publications include *World Poverty Challenge and Response* (1983), *World Ethics—The New Agenda* (1998), and *Introduction to Global Citizenship* (2003). Dr. Dower has edited *Ethics and Environmental Responsibility* (1989) and the *Edinburgh Studies in World Ethics* and co-edited *Global Citizenship A Critical Reader* (2002). He is currently president of the International Development Ethics Association.