



The Ethical Challenges of Globalization

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Abstract: Globalization has transformed the world from a collection of discrete communities interacting occasionally to an overlapping community of fate. Thus culturally, politically and economically, communities across the world now operate in what is essentially a shared space albeit divided into artificial political condominiums called nation-states. This artificial division, notwithstanding, the intensification of transnational relations occasioned by globalizing forces and processes has opened up novel forms of social bonds and responsibilities. As nations, peoples and communities across the globe become economically, socially and politically connected, the distinction between the global and the local becomes increasingly blurred and events and actions in one locale carries with it the potential to generate transnational and trans-generational consequences. It is precisely because in a globalized world, events and actions are capable of giving rise to transnational consequences, that moral reflection about our responsibilities and obligations has become an imperative.

Taking the above observations as a point of departure, this paper seeks to highlight some of the plethora of normative issues and question which are becoming increasingly significant in the age of globalization. These, interestingly, includes the character of globalization itself. Critics have argued that the currently unfolding neoliberal globalization concentrates wealth in the hands of a few while it leaves the majority in the condition of poverty. Other questions relate to the environment, cultural imperialism, human rights, global poverty, the rise of powerful transnational corporations etc.*

Introduction

That globalization has transformed the world from a collection of discrete communities interacting occasionally to an overlapping community of fate is clearly indicated by the fact that the world is increasingly integrating along the cultural, political and economic spheres. Consequently, communities across the world in reality now coexist in a single, shared space albeit demarcated into artificial

political enclaves known as nation-states. The demarcation of the world into territorially bounded communities, however, is gradually coming under strain as the intensification of transnational relations occasioned by globalizing forces and processes opens up new forms of solidarities and responsibilities. With the increasing realization that our seemingly innocuous actions could potentially generate transnational and trans-

generational consequences, it has become imperative that we begin to reflect on our moral responsibilities and obligations in the globalizing world.

Interestingly about four decades ago, Hans Jonas (1974) argued that rapid technological advancement has transformed the effect of nature of human action from one that is confined to a bounded spatio-temporal horizon to one that extends into a boundless spatio-temporal frame. Based on this observation Jonas concludes that the transformed nature of human action cannot be adequately regulated by traditional ethics. He therefore advocated the need to develop a new ethic of responsibility that will govern human action in the technological age. Incidentally, the increasing integration of communities into a single global village has had the same transformative effect on human actions as the expansion of technology. Thus Jonas call for a new ethic has become even more urgent today.

While it is not the intention of this chapter to construct a new ethic, it will explore and clarify some of the novel moral questions that have been thrown up by the currently unfolding set of processes known as globalization. To facilitate a systematic approach to the developing discourse, this chapter is organized into three major segments. The first segment clarifies the concepts of “globalization” and “ethics”. The second provides an

analysis of the idea of (transnational) harm as general conceptual framework for understanding the ethical issues to which globalization has given rise. The third and final segment examines some of the ethical Implications of Globalization.

Definitions

Globalization is arguably the most prominent buzzword in contemporary times. Nowadays, it is so commonplace for persons within the academia, government and corporations to employ the term globalization uncritically. Given its popularity, globalization is a much deployed but loosely defined concept. To some globalization is the “latest stage of imperialism” (Sivanandan, 1999, p .5); to others, globalization is the spread of western modernity” (see Scholte, 2005, p.16). Globalization no doubt, is the ultimate essentially contested concept. That this is the case could be gleaned from the fact that globalization is at once employed to describe a phenomenon, a process and a philosophy (Khan, 2003). Globalization also has a multiplicity of dimensions, namely the political, the economic and the cultural. Beyond this, as a concept, globalization is not only prone to the “twin problems of rhetorical overload and analytical incoherence”, it is also an idea that is susceptible to being loaded with a lot of “moral and political garbage” (Holton 2005). This explains why Blieker (2004) declares that “globalization is an omnipresent and

unruly phenomenon; whose manifestations are diverse as its interpretations are contestable” (p. 127).

In spite of the complexity of the concept of globalization, we must arrive at a working definition. For our purposes in this presentation, we shall adopt Scholte’s conceptualization of the idea. It may be helpful, however, to examine a few of the attempts to define globalization in order to put Scholte’s conception of globalization in perspective. Political Scientist David Mittelman (1996) defines globalization as the compression of space and time. By this, he meant that the technologies of globalization have reduced the significance of the distance barrier and the salience of time in cross-border interactions. In a closely related definition, sociologist Roland Robertson (1992, p.8) refers to globalization as “the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole”. Another sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, p.3) defines globalization as intensification of worldwide relationships which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.

One interesting thing about the definitions presented above is that they do not place any particular emphasis on political, economic and the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon, even though these different aspects are implicit in the

definitions. The common theme that runs through the definitions is the emphasis on the trans nationalization of the connections taking place in the world today. This leads us to Scholte’s conceptualization of globalization. In her view, globalization is synonymous with deterritorialization. Thus she defines globalization “as the reconfiguration of social geography marked by the rise of supraterritorial spaces” (2009, p.9). Held *et al* (1999, p.16) capture this reading of globalization when they referred to it as a “process (or set processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions. Conceived as the rise of supraterritorial spaces, globalization spotlights the increasing trans-border or transnational relations, which are taking place in the contemporary world. The point of this perspective is that globalization is restructuring our social space or geography from one that is predominantly territorial to one that is increasingly “transnational”. In other words, whereas people normally have most of their interactions and affiliations in the past with others who share the same territorial space (e.g. the village, town and nation), there is massive burgeoning of interactions and affiliations across this territories. What emerges clearly from the foregoing analyses is that globalization has brought about the intensification of global relations.

Compared to globalization, ethics is a fairly straight forward concept.

Therefore, its meaning is easier to explicate. "Strictly speaking ethics is the investigation into how we ought to live" (Birsch, 2002, p.1). According to Luper (2002, p.15) ethics elucidates the nature of the good person and the good life in general. It specifies the nature our obligations and enables to identify the right course of action. In short ethics is a "wide ranging study of right and wrong, as well as the good and the bad in so far as these pertain to conduct and character"(Ibid, p.15). In the strict sense, ethics is an academic study. In the loose sense, however, we interchange ethics and morality in discussions that describes the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. Thus in the popular parlance, we label an action as "unethical" when we think it is morally wrong or "ethical" when we think otherwise. For the most part of this presentation, we employ the term ethics in the loose sense. Unless otherwise specified, references to "ethical issues" raised by globalization roughly translate to "moral issues".

Conceptual Framework

Having clarified the key concepts that will punctuate every point in this discourse, it will be expedient to outline a general conceptual framework that underpins and provides a basis for comprehending the connections between globalization and ethics. Before we proceed to that task, however, it is necessary to point out that the discourse here falls within the

purview of a young and growing discipline that may be described as global ethics. Global ethics according to Kimberly Hutchings (2010, p.1) *is a field of theoretical inquiry that addresses ethical questions and problems arising out of global interconnections and interdependence of the world's population.* Implicit in Hutchings' definition is the idea that interconnections between populations give rise to ethical question and problems. This observation leads to two useful ideas that could inform a conceptual framework that seeks to explain how globalization creates "shrinking distances and expanding obligations" (Nicole Hassoun, 2012). These are the notions of *expanding transnational relations* and the *rise of transnational harms.*

Globalization as we adumbrated earlier is diminishing geographical barriers to social relation and reconfiguring the interactions from one that largely territorially bounded to one that is increasingly trans-territorial. Simply put, globalization is deepening and broadening interactions across national borders. By collapsing the space of interaction into a global village, globalization literally shrinks the distance between us and others, even where the 'others' in question are thousands of miles away and reside in countries others than ours. Giddens(1990: 64) refer to this phenomenon when he describes globalization as a stretching process

that makes possible modes of connections, which transforms different social contexts or regions across the earth into a single networked system. Now, as globalization collapses the world into a single space, it creates greater interaction across national borders. Thus we associate globalization with the expansion of transnational relations.

Having explained how globalization leads to the burgeoning of transnational relations, we can now examine the idea of the rise of transnational harm. "Harm" as a concept is fundamental to ethics. Defined variously as "damage or loss caused by a person on an event" or "the violation of core interest in physical and mental wellbeing," harm defines the core of our obligation to the "other" (OED, 2000; Shapcott, 2008). Put differently, given that unjustifiable harm is considered as moral evil, there is general consensus that we have a negative ethical duty not to harm others. As Cicero (n.d) puts it, the first demand of justice is that we "do no harm to another unless provoked by injury". Interestingly, harm is a spatially situated phenomenon, i.e., if my actions harm people who are my compatriot, the harm will be labeled as domestic harm, but when the same action harm people outside my country, it becomes transnational harm. By expanding the transnational interactions, globalization increases the possibility of transnational harm

and consequently expands the scope of our obligation. To illustrate this point, imagine that Robinson Crusoe is the one person on planet earth. It is clear that he associates with no others and therefore cannot harm anyone*. But let us suppose that a small village moved from mars to planet earth, if interacts with them, the interaction put a moral demand on him to consider, or refrain from violating, the interest of this small population. Let us further suppose that for some reasons, the village multiplied into nations and populated the entire surface of the earth as is the case in today's world. The scope of his obligation literally expands to the entire planet, if his actions are capable of consequences that are transnational in scope.

The point of the above illustration is that globalization expands our obligations beyond our national borders because the shrinking of distances meant that our actions could potentially have consequences for populations outside our immediate political borders. In short, globalization has extended our primary moral obligation to refrain from harming others in our immediate environment to the global arena. In the age of globalization, we now have duty to ask ourselves whether our actions will harm, not only our conationals, but also distant foreigners. The upshot of this observation is that globalization expands our moral obligation by encouraging us to adopt a planetary or cosmopolitan vision. To borrow a

phrase from Loraine Elliot (2005, p.493), globalization creates a “cosmopolitan community of reciprocal rights and duties”.

Ethical issues in Globalization

From the foregoing analysis, it has been demonstrated that the intensification of the interconnection between persons and societies around the world has created the possibility that our actions could generate transnational or trans-border consequences. Some of these consequences in question raise some fundamental moral questions about human relations in contemporary society. In this segment, we will enumerate and discuss in some detail a list of selected normative or ethical issues arising out of global interconnections and interdependence of the world’s population. We begin with the debate over the nature and character the globalizing processes unfolding before our very eyes.

The first normative question elicited by globalization concerns the character of globalization itself. Critics have argued that the currently unfolding neoliberal globalization concentrates wealth in the hands of a few, while it leaves the majority in the condition of poverty (Colado, 2006). Although supporters of globalization paint a rosy picture of a globalised world characterized by the spread of liberal democracy, peace and prosperity, globalization has actually resulted in radical inequality, a deepening of exclusions “caused by inequalities that show the

world to be a fragmented space where some people benefit at the expense of others (Ibid, p.33.). It is for this reason that critics have described globalisation as a process driven by advanced capitalist countries to perpetuate their political and economic hegemony. In the words of the Ali

...globalization is seen as the aim of a new world order promoted by means of an identifiable geo-political, imperial strategy which corresponds to a global design to cement the position of dominant countries and to increase the affluence and promote the interests of the privileged minority of the world’s population, relegating the rest to a structurally dependent and subordinate situation. (2005, p.13)

To the extent that economic globalization or the spread of the laissez-faire capitalism deepen the inequalities within and between nations, it is morally condemnable from both the consequentialist and deontological perspectives. From the consequentialist perspective, the ethical argument against globalisation is that it fails to maximize happiness for the greatest number of people. (See Singer, 2000). From a deontological point of view, globalization will be condemned on the account that exploited populations are treated as “means to an end” and not as “end in themselves”(see Kant, 1948) Given this moral shortcoming of

globalization, critics of the presently existing globalization has advocated for a different form of globalization, employing terms such “alternative globalization”, “civilizing globalization”, “globalization from below” etc. (Sandbrook, 2003; Sousa Santos and Garavita, 2005). The World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, for instance, advocates a fairer globalization that would create opportunities for all.

We, the members of the World Commission.... have come to agreement on a common goal: a fair globalization which creates opportunities for all. We wish to make globalization a means to expand human well-being and freedom, and to bring democracy and development to local communities where people live. Our aim is to build a consensus for common action to realize this vision, and to foster a process of sustained engagement to this end by the actors themselves, including States, international organizations, business, labour and civil society. (TWCG, 2004, p.2)

Beyond the Commission and a community of scholars calling for a more egalitarian globalization, there is a network of global justice movement across the world engaged in active struggle for a globalization with human face.

The second prominent normative challenge arising out of globalization is the problem of managing the global environment in order to

forestall a global ecological collapse, a prospect that threatens humanity with the specter of annihilation. It is now common knowledge among environmentally literate persons that today the world is confronted by a host of environmental problems that carry with them potential planetary consequences. These include anthropogenic greenhouse effect that is allegedly producing global climate change, popularly known as ‘global warming’. Then there is the challenge of ozone layer depletion, which increasingly destroys the protective blanket that shields the world’s population from dangerous ultra violet rays being emitted from the sun. The global biosphere is also experiencing a rapid reduction in the diversity of ecosystems, in the number of species of life, and in the variety of genes that circulate within individual species (Scholte, 2005, p.72). Exacerbating the sundry global environmental problems enumerated above is the explosive population growth which threatens to exceed the earth’s carrying capacity and bust the biosphere (Mcleish, 2010).

Combined, these environmental problems practically illustrate the idea of transnational harm and the interdependent condition of human existence in the 21st century. Industrial capitalism, which has been taken to his apogee in the advanced countries, for instance, is primarily responsible for the destruction of the ozone layer and the rise of global warming, two major environmental

threats that faces the world today. While industrial activity is mostly confined to the West and more recently, to some part of Asia, the entire world stands to suffer the effects of climate change. Thus while the advanced capitalist countries enjoys the benefits of industrialization, the rest of the world is forced to share in the negative consequences or externalities thrown up by industrial activity. Another approach to understanding this glaring inequity in the expropriation of the earth resources is to focus on the concept of “ecological footprints

According to Mathis Wackernagel, ‘Ecological footprint analysis is an accounting tool that enables us to estimate the resource consumption and waste assimilation requirements of a defined human population or economy in terms of a corresponding productive land area’ (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996, p. 9). A measure of the ecological footprint of the US, for instance, indicates her disproportionate use of the world’s environmental resources. Estimates show that that the US with less than 5 % of the *global population*, consumes about a quarter of the *world’s fossil fuel resources* and 27 % of the world’s natural gas. (See www.worldwatch.org) Clearly, the reason for differential ecological footprints is explained by a dynamic described so vividly by Garrett Hardin(1968) in an influential *Science* essay entitled “the Tragedy of the Commons”. According to

Hardin when individuals have free access to some desirable resource, each will seek to maximize his or her take of the resource thereby precipitating its depletion, which consequently, makes everybody worse off. This is the dynamic at work at the global level. If the global atmosphere is considered as some kind of sink in which industrial pollution can be stored away, the fact that all nations have free access to the global atmosphere creates a negative incentive to dump as much pollution as possible in the sink.

This recklessness ultimately degrades the global atmosphere, leaving all nations worse off. To short-circuit this dynamic, Hardin suggests that the use of the global commons or environment must be regulated by coercion (Ibid, p.1243). Obviously the regulation of the global commons must be based on sound moral principles. Thus global environmental considerations create the need for global environmental ethics which is an aspect of global ethics.

Central to the increasing integration of the world community into a single interlinked community is economic globalization, i.e., the widening and deepening of international flows of trade, capital, and technology within a single integrated market (Petras, 2001) Following the collapse of Soviet socialism and the consequent triumph of capitalism, the International financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) through neoliberal policies of liberalization, deregulation and privatization have forcibly imposed the laissez-faire capitalist mode of economic organization on societies in different parts of the globe, especially in Sub-Saharan-Africa, Latin America and post-communist Eastern Europe. Interestingly, the forcible spread of capitalist ethos, what Stephen Gill (2008, p. 124) describes as the emergence of “market civilization” has brought to the front burner the question of democratic deficits in global economic management. The democratic deficit referred to here is generated by the fact that in the sphere of economic management, states are increasingly losing their sovereignty as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) takes over their traditional functions. For instance, the World Bank and the IMF often prescribes unpopular neoliberal policies such as currency devaluation, subsidy removal and the privatization of strategic public enterprise as conditionality for providing loans to financially distressed states. The unfortunate implication of this is that elected indigenous leaders cede their prerogative over economic management to unelected officials of international organizations. Thus, the insistence on political conditionality which demands liberalization, accountability and transparency from indebted nations, the IFIs tyrannically imposes their policies on

the same government. It is for this reason that Woods and Narlikar speaks of “the new intrusiveness of international economic organizations”. According to the duo:

International economic organizations now address issues which were previously dealt with at the level of national governments... decisions and policies taken at the international level are increasingly affecting groups and people within states. Where previously, these people could hold their national governments to account for policies, they must now look to international institutions where the decisions are being made. The question therefore arises: to whom are these institutions accountable and are they accountable to those to whom they directly affect? (2001, p.561)

Obviously, this lack of accountability to the people directly affected by the policies of the IFIs and the tendency to impose unbearable conditions on indebted governments is a fundamental moral defect in the operation of IFIs. Therefore, a number of influential political theorists have called for the democratization of global governance (Held, 1995; Kuper, 2004; Archibugi, 2008). Held, who has over the years argued for the institutionalization of global democracy has advocated for more accountable and transparent international institutions that are subject to public scrutiny and the

supervision of regional and global democratic fora (See Held, 2003).

Calls for a Global Ethic

From the discussion in the immediately preceding section, it is clear that there are quite a number of ethical questions and problems arising from global interdependence and interconnection. To manage these ethical problems, some scholars have suggested that the time has come for the world to develop a global ethic, i.e., a set of universally accepted principles that could provide the basis for regulating global interactions. According to Gephardt (2011) the global ethic perspective assumes that a set of shared ethical values and standards is indispensable for the cohesion of society and for global peace and justice. There is of course some merit in idea; a shared set of ethical values will make for peace and harmony at the global level. The philosophical challenge however as critics have pointed out, is that in our culturally diverse world, it impossible to identify or articulate normative principles that will be persuasive across cultures (Walzer, 2006).

While cultural diversity is fact that accurately describes the globalizing world, it may be argued that a variation of moral principles across communities does not necessarily establish the thesis of ethical relativism because in spite of these moral variations across communities, it is still possible that basic and fundamental values hold for every

society. This is precisely the argument of Charles Jones:

The supposed deep diversity of moral views around the world is put into question if we distinguish between specific rules followed by particular societies and general principles of which those rules are the manifestations. There may be different ways of protecting the very same values depending on the conditions specific to any given culture. Hence, cultural differences at the level of specific rules could be explained by differences of context of belief rather than differences in exclusive judgments (1999, p.174).

A second, related, argument against ethical relativism has been raised by Simon Caney(2000). Caney specifically demonstrates that the move from ethical disagreement across cultures does not necessarily or logically entail ethical relativism. According to him, the fact that people disagree with each other does not imply that there are no better answers and that ethical relativism is correct. One possibility that ethical relativists do not take into consideration is that some, or perhaps all the participants in a moral dispute, have mistaken moral beliefs. In Caney's views, unless we think that participants in a moral dispute are infallible, the ethical relativist must grant "that one possible explanation of a deep disagreement is not that there are no universal values but that people are

human, after all, and are capable of making mistakes (Ibid, p.530).

The implication of Jones' and Caney's observations is that global cultural complexity or diversity does not present an insuperable barrier to the construction of global ethics. In fact the more positive claim can be made that the societies and religions across the world exhibit a sufficiently robust commonality which can be a basis for constructing global ethics through the process of dialogue of cultures (Kung, 1998; Shapcott, 2004; Graness, 2002).

Conclusion

This central aim of this chapter is to elucidate the connection between ongoing integration of the world's community into a single space and the nature of our ethical obligations. From this perspective, it has been demonstrated that intensification of transnational relations and cross-border interactions has expanded our capacities to affect "distant others" for good or ill. Given that the potential reach of the consequences our action in the contemporary world is global, it argues that our ethical obligations are now equally global. To illustrate how extensive our ethical responsibilities have become in today's world, the chapter proceeds with a discussion of the major ethical challenges that have arisen out of the process of Globalization. Specifically, it examined how the character of the presently existing globalization have become a subject of moral evaluation; the problem of managing

trans-boundary environment problems which threatens to destroy the earth biological support systems; the democratic deficits that characterize global economic management, etc. Beyond these issues, this chapter also took up the debate over the possibility of developing universally acceptable principles, i.e., global ethics for managing transnational interactions. It concludes that in spite of the ethical relativists' charge that cultural diversity will prevent the formulation of global moral codes, it is possible to construct a genuine global ethic through the process of intercultural dialogue. What is instructive as kymlicka (2007) notes is that the dialogue in question is already afoot.

Notes

*It is nigh impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the possible normative issues thrown up by globalization within the confines of a single paper. Thus, the attempt here is to highlight some of the issues. This is by no means a definitively exhaustive treatment. I suppose that such a project will require a book-length essay.

*A potential objection to my assertion here is the argument that even if Crusoe could harm no one since he is the sole resident on the earth, his actions may harm the future generation. A simple response to this objection is that my objective in making the "Crusoe illustration" is better served, if we assume

hypothetically that there is no future

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