

IS THERE A GLOBAL ETHIC?

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That there is a global ethic, at least in the area of human rights, was agreed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 in its Declaration of Universal Human Rights. The term used was universal human rights, not a universal ethic, but presumably universal human rights implies at least an element within a global ethic. The term global ethic was introduced a generation ago by the German Catholic theologian Hans Kung - a theologian who has long been at odds with the Vatican because of his rejection of the idea of papal infallibility and his participation in inter-religious dialogue beyond mere gestures of good will. He meant an ethic which is common to the different civilizations, cultures and religions of world. This connects with the Preamble to the United Nations Declaration, which says, 'Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind'. I shall return to that phrase 'the conscience of mankind' later.

Prior to the foundation of our Birmingham Centre in 2002 the Global Ethic Foundation, inspired by Hans Kung, held major international conferences in Germany, addressed by Tony Blair, and in Chicago addressed by Kofi Annan, whose speeches can be read on the internet, and the Foundation has produced a draft of a Declaration of a Global Ethic, to which I shall come to later. I don't know whether or not it was the original intention that the Birmingham Centre should engage in this project.

Is there any universal, or near universal, human ethic? We have to distinguish various levels of moral principles. All of the long-lived cultures have thus far been

religiously based. Within the world religions, at the most general level, there is the universality of what in Christianity is called the Golden Rule. In either its positive form, Treat others as you would wish them to treat you, or its negative form, Do not treat others as you would not wish them to treat you, this occurs in the teachings of all the great religions. Starting in India, in the Hindu *Mahabharata*, ‘One should never do that to another which one would regard as injurious if done to one’s own self. This, in brief, is the rule of Righteousness’. In the Jain *Kritanga Sutra* we are told that one should go about ‘treating all creatures in the world as he would himself be treated’. In the Buddhist scriptures there are many sayings such as this: ‘As a mother cares for her son, all her days, so towards all living things a man’s mind should be all-embracing’ (*Sutta Nipata*); and for Buddhism the key virtues are *karuna*, compassion, and *metta*, usually translated as loving-kindness. Moving to China, Confucius taught ‘Do not do to others what you would not like yourself’, and in a Taoist scripture (*Tai Shang*) we read that the good man will ‘regard [others] gains as if they were his own, and their losses in the same way’. In ancient Persia (including today’s Iran) a Zoroastrian scripture declares, ‘That nature only is good when it shall not do to another whatever is not good for its own self’. Jesus taught, ‘As ye would that men shall do to you, do ye also to them likewise’ (Luke 6:31). In the Jewish *Talmud*, ‘What is hateful to yourself do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah’. And in the Hadith of Islam we read the Prophet Muhammad’s words, ‘No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself’. So this general principle of benevolence is enshrined in the teachings that have shaped all civilizations since the axial age around the mid-first millennium BCE.

The Golden Rule seems to rest on a basic human moral sense which is presupposed by all ethical theories. This is the ‘conscience of mankind’ referred to in the preamble to the United Nations’ Declaration of Universal Human Rights. The moral philosophers from Kant to Mill to Rawls to today, whether appealing to duties or to calculation of consequences or to virtues or to human nature, are all trying to spell out the logical structure of an insight or feeling that is already there and is shared by us all. One cannot prove such a fundamental principle. It is too basic to be derived from prior premises, but the whole of our moral discourse hinges upon it. The Confucian teacher Mencius in the fourth and third centuries BCE expressed this basic insight: ‘I say that every man has a heart that pities others, for the heart of every man is moved by fear or horror, tenderness and mercy, if he sees a child about to fall into a well. And this is not because he wishes to make friends with the child’s father and mother or to win praise from his countryfolk and friends, nor because the child’s cries hurt him. This shows that no man . . . is without a heart for right and wrong’. There are in fact some who lack this heart, who are gratuitously cruel and who take pleasure in causing pain and distress, and they usually end up in prison or in an institution for the insane. Either such psychopaths have always lacked the capacity for consideration of others, or have been so circumstanced from birth that this capacity has never been developed, my guess being the latter.

We are talking so far about the most general moral principle, which I shall call the principle of benevolence, a principle that seems to be virtually universally recognised and accepted in theory. But when we look at the world around us both locally and globally it is very evident that the Golden Rule is, in Hamlet’s phrase, more honoured in the breach than the observance. At least, this is true on the large scale of national policies. Locally, among ourselves and our neighbours and friends,

there is a good deal of mutual kindness and consideration, though we are also well aware of the all-too-familiar psychological conditions which run counter to the Golden Rule, selfishness, greed, lust, envy, and so on.

Is it also the case that seriously held beliefs have interpreted the basic principle in their own way so as in effect to nullify it? I presume that Hitler and the Nazi leadership and a part of the then German population sincerely believed that the Jews were responsible for most of Europe's problems and were an evil who ought to be exterminated. For centuries white people believed that black people were a lower, more primitive species, and that it was accordingly morally permissible to exploit and enslave them. This has remained true in our own lifetimes. I was for a while in South Africa during the apartheid era, with Desmond Tutu and others who were opposing apartheid, and there were then theologians of the largest Christian church, the Dutch Reformed, who seriously defended apartheid on biblical grounds. They sincerely believed that it was God's will that the white man should rule and black Africans serve. In Britain today presumably the BNP leaders and their supporters sincerely believe that the native white population has a higher priority on all social issues than black and brown immigrants and their descendants.

I said that *presumably* all these people are sincere in their various racist beliefs. In fact I am inclined to think that, paradoxically, the most sincere have also been the most evil, the Nazis. But in South Africa I thought at the time and still think that most whites who benefited from apartheid were wilfully deceiving themselves. The Bible can be used selectively, as by the Dutch Reformed Church, to justify almost anything. And I think that most of those who support the BNP are supporting what they think is in the own private interests, reinforced by an irrational racism.

However it remains true that there does seem to be a universal moral sense, however often this is overridden by individual and group interests.

Richard Dawkins, in his widely read book *The God Delusion* speaks of ‘our feelings of morality, decency, empathy and pity . . . the wrenching compassion we feel when we see an orphaned child weeping, an old widow in despair from loneliness, or an animal whimpering in pain’ and ‘the powerful urge to send an anonymous gift of money or clothes to tsunami victims on the other side of the world whom we shall never meet’ (215); and he has his own biological explanation of this. He lists four Darwinian sources of morality. One depends on what he calls ‘the selfish gene’. He says that ‘a gene that programs individual organisms to favour their genetic kin is statistically likely to benefit copies of itself. Such a gene frequency can increase in the gene pool to the point where kin altruism becomes the norm’ (216). Hence, he thinks, parents’ care for their children, both in humans and other animals. This care is undoubtedly the case. But whether an individual ‘selfish gene’ wants to benefit itself by making unconscious statistical calculations about how best to do this, seems to me to be suspiciously like an anthropomorphic fairy tale. And indeed how does it benefit an individual gene that there exist many copies or near copies of itself? The second Darwinian source of morality, according to Dawkins, is reciprocal altruism: ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’. This occurs not only within but between species. ‘The bee needs nectar and the flower needs pollinating. Flowers can’t fly so they pay bees, in the currency of nectar, for the hire of their wings’ (216-7). This is the basis of all barter, and ultimately of the invention of money.

So, according to Dawkins, ‘kinship and reciprocation’ are ‘the twin pillars of altruism in a Darwinian world’ (218). Secondary sources are reputation, including a reputation for kindness and generosity, which may motivate altruistic behaviour; and

as another secondary source, generosity as ‘an advertisement of dominance or superiority’ (218). Dawkins points out that in the early days of humanity our ancestors lived in small villages or roving bands. In these circumstances many of your group would be relatives, and others would be people you met frequently. If relatives, kin altruism would operate. If non-kin but familiar acquaintances, the principle of reciprocity would operate. And in a small group there would be ample scope for the motivations of reputation and superiority-advertisement. All this, he thinks, evolved in us a general rule of thumb: be nice to people you have to do with. ‘What natural selection favours’, he says, ‘is rules of thumb, which work in practice to promote the genes that built them’ (220). And today, when so many live in towns and cities, this rule of thumb continues to operate as the Golden Rule long after the original conditions which produced it have ended. The Golden Rule is thus a by-product or, as Dawkins says, a misfiring of an originally biologically useful rule of thumb. Birds have a rule of thumb to feed the young in their nest. ‘Could it be’, Dawkins asks, ‘that our Good Samaritan urges are misfirings, analogous to a reed warbler’s parental instinct when it works itself to the bone for a young cuckoo?’ ‘An even closer analogy’, he adds, ‘is the human urge to adopt a child’ (220-1).

To summarise Dawkins’ theory, the moral sense embodied in the Golden Rule is a left-over by-product of a biologically useful rule of thumb developed in the earliest period when life was lived in small closed communities. As another example of a biological by-product he points out that sexual lust continues when there is no prospect or intention to conceive; and he says, ‘There is no reason why the same should not be true of the lust to be generous and compassionate, if this is the misfired consequence of ancestral village life’ (222). ‘Both’, he says, ‘are misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes’ (221). So he values morality

highly, whilst giving a purely naturalistic account of it. But do we have a *lust* to be generous and compassionate that is any way comparable in its immediacy and intensity with sexual lust? This seems to me a rhetorical exaggeration.

Is Dawkins' theory acceptable? It is highly speculative, and is not a scientific hypothesis since it is not capable of empirical verification or falsification. But is it nevertheless a plausible speculation? Not very, I think. It is of course true that we are social animals and that the early humans lived in small groups in which kinship and reciprocity would be important factors. But that this situation should have bred into our genes the rule of thumb, Be nice to everyone you meet, and that this has been inherited in our genes today, does not seem to me very plausible. The earliest anatomically modern humans, *homo sapiens sapiens*, appear in Africa in the fossil records approximately two hundred thousand years ago, though the dateings differ between 130 and 250 thousand years. In evolutionary time this is the blink of an eye. Is it credible that 'the powerful urge to send an anonymous gift of money or clothes to tsunami victims on the other side of the world whom we shall never meet', or our feelings when we see 'an animal whimpering in pain', to quote two of Dawkins' own examples of altruism, are expressions of the rule of thumb developed in small enclosed societies, 'Be nice to everyone you meet'? This seems to me highly implausible. These examples – and many others - conform to none of the four sources of morality that he recognises, kinship, reciprocity, reputation, and assertion of superiority. On the contrary, it seems that we have an innate sense of sympathy or empathy with others, 'the conscience of mankind', which is formalised in the Golden Rule.

Where does this innate sense come from?

Let me now offer a tentative suggestion about the origin of altruism. The Golden Rule, as a consciously held principle, came about in the axial period, usually dated as between about 800 and 200 BCE. It was in this period that remarkable individuals appeared across the world, standing out from their societies and proclaiming momentous new insights. In China there were Confucius, Mencius, Lao-Tzu (or the anonymous author of the *Tao Te Ching*) and Mo-Tze. In India there were Gautama the Buddha, Mahavira the founder of the Jain tradition, the writers of the Upanishads and later of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In Palestine there were the great Hebrew prophets – Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, the Isaiahs, Ezekial. And in Greece there were Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. It used to be thought that Zoroaster also lived in this period, but he is now thought to have lived much earlier, around 1200 BCE. But if we see Christianity as presupposing Judaism, and Islam as presupposing both Judaism and Christianity, then all the ‘great world religions’ have either their origins or their roots in the axial age.

Pre-axial peoples generally lived in small village communities in which the members thought of themselves as cells in the social organism, rather than as fully autonomous individuals. But during the axial period cities developed, specialised production and exchange of goods, and the development of writing, and in the relatively peaceful environments of large empires the dawning sense of individual personality emerged from the communal consciousness of the tribe, spreading beyond kings, emperors and high priests to ordinary people. This meant that whereas previously the gods were the god of a particular place or group, the great axial sages and prophets could speak to the individual with a message that was potentially of universal significance, not confined to any one particular area or community. And it was in this new situation that the Golden Rule was taught within each of the emerging

traditions. All of the versions of it that I quoted earlier come from this period, including the one from the Zoroastrian scriptures, which are later than Zoroaster himself.

So whereas kinship and reciprocity may well have been the basis of village and small group morality in the long pre-axial era, my suggestion is that the more universal principle of the Golden Rule came with the new religious insights of the axial age. We would not respond to the needs of tsunami victims, or victims of extreme poverty in Africa, or of oppression and torture, thousands of miles away, on the basis of kinship or reciprocity, but we do respond on the basis of the open ended sympathy and empathy taught for the first time in the axial age by the great prophets and sages and formalised in the Golden Rule. Where did they get it from? From a religious point of view, they had an enhanced awareness of an ultimate transcendent reality, some being conscious of this as personal and some as beyond the distinction between the personal and the impersonal. This enhanced awareness of the Transcendent carried with it a moral imperative. We probably see the logic of this most clearly in Buddhism, where liberation (or in western terms salvation) is liberation *from* the self-centred ego, which is the source of all selfishness and unhappiness, and liberation *for* an impartial concern for all, self and other. Ego-transcendence is also central to each of the other world faiths.

But from a naturalistic, or non-religious, point of view, how did this universal sense come about? Not, I have suggested from human biology, which does not differ through the short period of human existence? How then? That is a question for naturalistic thinkers to answer.

But however it came about, it remains a fact that the Golden Rule is universally acknowledged, in principle if by no means also in practice. But it is a

very general principle. It is when we try to spell out its implications in specific circumstances that the problems arise. Here we have to distinguish between two levels of specificity, between what we can call intermediate principles and specific rules. An example of an intermediate principle might be 'Order society in such a way as to treat everyone fairly', whilst an example of a specific rule might be 'To treat everyone fairly requires one person one vote democracy'.

The Global Ethic Foundation has published a Declaration to which people of all cultures and religions are invited to subscribe. This a very long document, and I shall use instead a shorter version proposed by one of the leading figures in this movement, Professor Leonard Swidler of Philadelphia. He offers nine what he calls Middle Principles. I will mention them all but comment only on some.

The first concerns legal rights and responsibilities: 'Because all human beings have an inherent equal dignity, all should be treated equally before the law and provided with its equal protection'. The only comment I would make here is possibly only a niggle, namely that much depends on what the law is. Some laws contain discrimination within them. For example, there is currently a proposed law in the USA to allow illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the country for five years to apply for citizenship, discriminating between these and those others settled there for less than five years. There is thus discrimination between the two groups. But the law makers could argue that all the immigrants are being treated equally according to the law, and that the law was justified as being in the interests of the USA. It is the law, not people's treatment in accordance with it, that is discriminatory. The question that this formulation of the first Middle Principle leaves unanswered is, how should we distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable discriminatory laws?

The second Middle Principle is that ‘because humans are thinking, and therefore essentially free-deciding beings, all have the right to freedom of thought, speech, conscience and religion or belief’. And there is the rider, ‘At the same time, all humans should exercise [this right] in ways that will respect themselves and all others and strive to produce maximum benefits, broadly understood, for both themselves and their fellow human beings’. Again, the general principle seems right, but it does not help us to decide particular cases, such as the Danish cartoons showing the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, associating him with today’s suicide bombers, or the protests against a play in the Birmingham Rep. about Sikhs. My own personal view is that the Danish cartoon was misleading and irresponsible, but that the Sikh protesters were mistaken in thinking that their actions were justified. The difference between the two cases is, in my view, that whilst both were offensive to Muslims and Sikhs respectively, the Danish cartoon was also misleading – because for Islam suicide is a sin, and also because Muhammad forbade attacks on non-combatants and on enemy property, – and misleading in a way that stirred up hatred and prejudice against Muslims; whereas the play at the Rep. was in internal critique by a Sikh writer of an aspect, or an alleged aspect, of life in some Sikh gurdwaras. Others may well judge differently in each case or both. But either way, the Middle Principle itself does not help us in practice. So much depends on the particular circumstances.

The third Middle Principle is that ‘Because humans are thinking beings with the ability to perceive reality and express it, all individuals and communities have both the right and the responsibility, as far as possible, to learn the truth and express it honestly’. Once again, this seems right, but leaves unanswered the difficult questions. In some areas the principle seems uncontroversial: in the public arena, the

truth concerning straightforward matters of fact – Did Iraq have weapons of mass destruction? What are the U.K. immigration figures? etc. But in the private arena of family and neighbourhood life, is it always best to tell the truth – for example, to spread the knowledge of some scandal or misbehaviour? But there is certainly an important message here for the press and other media. If they always tried to ‘learn the truth and express it honestly’, without headline exaggerations, without spin and bias, society would undoubtedly be in a better state. But when we come to matters about which there is no agreement, and is never likely to be, such as questions concerning religion and ideology, this Middle Principle does not seem to apply.

The fourth Middle Principle is that ‘Because human beings are free-deciding beings, all adults have the right to a voice, direct or indirect, in all decisions that affect them, including a meaningful participation in choosing their leaders and holding them accountable, as well as access to all leadership positions for which their talents qualify them’ – in short the claim is that democracy is inherent in a global ethic. Personally, I agree with this. But I wonder whether it is as self-evident as we in our culture think. There are some very important things that democracy does not do well. Because rulers are elected for a limited period they generally do not tackle long term problems that require presently unpopular decisions. The obvious example is global warming. If our government, and other European governments, and the US government, were drastically to curtail air travel for pleasure, tax heavily the use of private cars for pleasure or convenience, and any unnecessary use of electricity and gas, they would lose the next election. On the other hand, an enlightened despot, Plato’s philosopher king, could do such things. But the problem here, of course, is the impossible one of ensuring that the despot is genuinely enlightened. Because this is impossible, democracy still seems the least bad system.

The fifth Middle Principle is that ‘Because women and men are inherently equal and all men and all women have an equal right to the full development of all their talents as well as freedom to marry, with equal rights for all women and men in dissolving marriage or living outside marriage’. I note that nothing is said here, or elsewhere, about homosexual relationships, or civil partnerships.

The sixth Middle Principle is that ‘Because humans are free, bodily and social in nature, all individual humans and communities have the right to own property of various sorts’. The phrase ‘property of various sorts’ is very vague. Does it include industries, owned by an individual or small group? To newspapers and other media owned by individuals, like Berlusconi or Murdoch?

The seventh Principle is that ‘All humans should normally have both meaningful work and recreative leisure’. By way of comment, there is at present a lot of work that is necessary but that is not otherwise meaningful, but dull, repetitive and uninteresting. Is it possible for everyone everywhere to have what they regard as meaningful work? How many today have such work? Leisure is easier to legislate for. A case could be made for saying that the less meaningful the work, the greater the leisure time that should be available. But the Principle itself does not help us to settle such questions.

The eighth Principle is that ‘Because peace as both the absence of violence and the presence of justice for all humans is the necessary condition for the complete development of the full humanity of all humans, all should strive to further the growth of peace on all levels’. And the proviso which the document adds is that ‘violence is to be vigorously avoided, being resorted to only when its absence would cause a greater evil’. But questions will always arise at the time about which is the greater evil. It may be only in hindsight that we can be sure.

And the ninth and last Principle is that we should all respect the eco-sphere on which we depend. This, I imagine, is something to which everyone everywhere will subscribe in theory. But we all violate it in practice. And the Principle does not help us to determine what specific measures are practicable in a property owning democracy.

Now a general comment on these principles taken as a whole. We are all conscious today that our world has become a virtual communicational unity, that its nations and regions are increasingly economically interdependent, and that war is insanely destructive. The survival and flourishing of the human family requires at this point in history the articulation of at least a basic ethical outlook, and if possible a set of ethical principles, on which all the major streams of human culture concur and which can be used to influence their behaviour. We need to uncover and cultivate the ground of human unity beneath the multiplicity of nations, cultures, social systems, religions and ideologies among which and between which conflicts occur.

Since the European Enlightenment culminating in the eighteenth century the West has been increasingly suffused with the individualistic, democratic, liberal, science-oriented, historically-minded outlook of the Enlightenment, an ethos that can comprehensively be called modernity. During this period the West has also been basically Christian, or today largely post-Christian. Indeed Christianity, as a cultural influence, is identified in the minds of many Christians, particularly when they make comparisons with other religions, with these liberal ideals of modernity. From an historical point of view this is incorrect. For what has happened is that secular modernity has transformed the outlook of the Christian world, at least in the West, rather than that Christianity has out of its own distinctive religious resources introduced these modern liberal values into Western culture. During much the greater

part of its history Christianity has been neither democratic, nor liberal, nor science-oriented, nor historically-minded. At any rate, these Intermediate Principles clearly come out of contemporary Western post-Enlightenment culture. Anyone reading them can readily identify their provenance, reflecting as it does the concerns and presuppositions of modernity.

Now most of us, or probably all of us, as ourselves products of modern Western culture, are likely to be in favour of these Intermediate Principles, though perhaps improved in certain details. And we would like them, or something like them, to become a truly global ethic. For this reason it is important to note the contrast between Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment culture. Both, as we have seen, are linked in the West with a Christian, including post-Christian, mind-set. But there is no prospect whatever of modern Christianity becoming the global religion, displacing Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism. . . . But perhaps there is a prospect of the Enlightenment values, which Christianity has largely adopted, becoming globally accepted. For it may well be that some of the same influences are at work throughout our increasingly unified world, transforming other cultures and religions in ways parallel to that in which they have transformed Christianity – or rather, much of Christianity, for there is still, and is likely to continue to be, a large fundamentalist block which remains pre-Enlightenment.

But on the other hand this may prove to be only partially the case. Some, but not all, of the influences that have formed the Western version of modernity are affecting the other cultures. But there may well be yet other influences upon them that have not affected the West, but in due course will. There are Chinese and African and Indian and other ways of thinking and feeling that perhaps the West needs to assimilate. For example, there is the African concept of *ubuntu* in the Nguni group of languages or *botho*

in the Sotho languages. As Desmond Tutu explains it, ‘It is to say “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours”. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, A person is a person through other persons A person with *ubuntu* . . . has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than they are.’ (*No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 31). This outlook, which is not based on duties and obligations, is not only concerned with the relations between individuals, but had huge political significance because it lay behind Nelson Mandela’s policy of reconciliation rather than revenge, and was expressed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when apartheid had ended. This *ubuntu* outlook might introduce another distinctive element into the idea of a global, that is a human, ethic. Again, the same outlook lay behind Mahatma Gandhi’s principle of non-violence. He accepted the traditional Hindu belief that the *atman*, or soul, in each of us is ultimately one. To injure someone else is to injure part of oneself. ‘To be true to such religion’, he said, ‘one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life’. Again, this had huge political significance because it lay behind his ultimately successful non-violent campaign for Indian independence. And there may be distinctive Chinese and other ways of thinking that should likewise contribute to a genuinely global ethic. The different ways of being human that are the great civilisations and cultures of the earth may in some respects take different forms within a global modernity, thus affecting any future global ethic.

So my conclusion is that a global ethic remains to be uncovered, and that to do this requires world-wide consultation going beyond the present Western versions.