

Global Ethics: Increasing our Positive Impact

Abstract

Global ethics is no ordinary subject. It includes some of the most urgent and momentous issues the world faces, such as extreme poverty and climate change. Given this, any adequate review of that subject should, I suggest, ask some questions about the relation between what those working in that subject do, and the real-world phenomena that are the object of their study. The main question I focus on in this essay is this: should academics and others working in the field of global ethics take new measures aimed at having more real-world positive impact on the phenomena they study? Should they take new measures, that is, aimed at bringing about more improvements in those phenomena, improvements such as reductions in extreme poverty and in emissions of greenhouse gases? I defend a positive answer to this question against some objections, and also discuss some of the kinds of measure we might take in an attempt to have more positive impact.

Keywords

global ethics; impact; poverty; climate change; philosophers

Global ethics is no ordinary subject. It includes some of the most urgent and momentous issues the world faces, such as extreme poverty, climate change, and war.¹ Given this, any adequate review of that subject should, I suggest, ask some questions about the relation between what those working in that subject do, and the real-world phenomena that are the object of their study. One such question is this: do the community of academics and others working in the field of global ethics (henceforth ‘we’, since this essay is addressed mainly to that community) have any positive impact on those phenomena? That is (as I shall understand that phrase), does anything we do lead to improvements in those phenomena, improvements such as reductions in extreme poverty and in emissions of greenhouse gases?

Although the causal chains are inevitably hard to disentangle, it is surely the case that we have some positive impact by performing the kinds of activities that academics in every discipline perform, such as teaching and supervising students, conducting research, publishing that research in academic journals and in books, and so on. Is performing such standard academic activities enough? Or should we go beyond such activities and take special measures aimed at increasing our positive impact, given the urgency and importance of some issues in global ethics?

That question raises another: what ‘special measures’ might enable us to increase our positive impact? The kinds of measure I have in mind include directing more research towards issues where more research seems relatively likely to lead to more positive impact; attempting to disseminate such research beyond standard academic audiences more effectively; joining or setting up organisations that seek to enable academics to have more

¹ I shall take ‘global ethics’ to be the study of ethical issues (in a broad sense of that term that includes questions of justice) that have global or near-global dimensions.

positive impact in particular areas of global ethics; and setting up closer links with parties beyond academia who have similar aims such as certain NGOs and think-tanks.²

As many readers of this paper will know, some scholars working in global ethics are already taking such measures. (I give a few examples towards the end of this paper, where I also discuss these measures in a little more detail.) So that raises another question, my main topic in this essay: should we take additional measures beyond those we are already taking, in an attempt to have more positive impact than we are currently having?³

My main aims here are to defend a positive answer to this question against certain objections, and more broadly to stimulate discussion about this question and related questions. The main reason for saying that we should try to have more positive impact is simply how important such impact is:⁴ how important it is that people get out of extreme poverty, that climate change does not run completely out of control, and so on. This reason is so obviously a strong one that I assume I don't need to say any more about it here. If people disagree with the claim that we should try to have more positive impact, it won't be because they don't think that having such positive impact is important, but for other reasons. I put some of those reasons in the form of objections in the next paragraph.

² The distinction between standard academic activities and special measures aimed at increasing one's positive impact is of course a fuzzy one.

³ Such additional measures may be new *kinds* of measure not used before, or more of the same kinds of measure that have already been used.

⁴ So to reiterate: the claim that 'we should try to have more positive impact' is my shorthand for the claim that 'we, the community of academics and others working in the field of global ethics, should take additional measures beyond those we are already taking, in an attempt to bringing about more improvements in the phenomena we study in the real world than we are currently bringing about' (improvements such as reductions in extreme poverty and in emissions of greenhouse gases).

The notion of a collective effort by the community of academics and others working in the field of global ethics to have more positive impact only makes sense if we agree about the ethical issues. Otherwise we would be pulling in different directions, recommending different actions, advocating different policies. Even a cursory look at the literature on global ethics reveals, however, that there are deep and persistent disagreements about many issues in global ethics. Even if this point were put aside, moreover, there is a division of labour between academics and other groups in society such as NGOs, activists, and policy makers. The primary roles of academics working in the field of practical ethics are educating students, and putting forward and assessing arguments concerning the various substantive issues that field raises in an impartial, independent way. Some of the resulting work should of course feed in to the deliberations of other parties, ideally in ways that lead to real-world improvements. It is not a good idea for academics to take on more activist roles, however. In part this is because doing so would compromise our independence and impartiality. In part it is because such efforts are unlikely to be successful, given the different skill-sets that academia and activism demand. Better to stick with what we are trained to do and are good at and leave it to others to do what they are trained to do and are good at.

I'll consider these objections in turn. First, how much disagreement is there among scholars of global ethics about the key issues in the field? To my knowledge, no one researches such questions systematically,⁵ and so the best one can hope for is an informed estimate. The main background point I would make is that there are a number of reasons why

⁵ Perhaps this is a task the Journal of Global Ethics might take on? (David Bourget and David Chalmers conducted a survey of professional philosophers and others on their philosophical views on behalf of PhilPapers in November 2009 (see <http://philpapers.org/surveys/> and Bourget and Chalmers 2013). The questions in the survey were extremely coarse-grained, however, and so of no help to us here.)

the literature on global ethics may give one the impression that there is more disagreement in that field than there is in fact. As Jonathan Glover writes, ‘in philosophy . . . reputations are not made by agreeing with other people’ (Glover 1995: 118).⁶ Philosophers are generally trained to respond to the work of others with objections, and to tease out points of disagreement even in work with which they broadly agree. Indeed, many philosophers would consider it rather dull to argue for conclusions already widely accepted by other philosophers, at least unless they had an interesting new argument for those conclusions. They would also find it hard to publish such work (at least in the refereed journals academics tend to be rewarded for publishing in), for journal editors too tend to seek work in areas where there are active controversies.

When one takes such factors into account, it is far from clear that there is too much disagreement among scholars of global ethics for a collective effort to have more positive impact to be feasible.⁷ And in fact it seems to me that there is quite a lot of consensus in global ethics, especially about recommendations for action or policy as opposed to reasons for those recommendations, and about what would constitute improvements to current practices, policies, and institutions as opposed to ideal solutions. In the case of global poverty, for example, there is very broad agreement among moral and political philosophers

⁶ I focus mainly on philosophers because I take it that a large proportion of writing on global ethics is by philosophers (broadly conceived) and because I understand the culture of academic philosophy better than that of other disciplines.

⁷ When I talk about a ‘collective effort’ among scholars of global ethics to have more positive impact I do not of course mean one centrally organised enterprise. I mean lots of individual and group efforts that are to a lesser or greater degree autonomous. The term ‘collective effort’ will still be appropriate to the degree that all these separate efforts are (a) motivated by a common desire to have more positive impact, and (b) sensitive to similar efforts by others (so that people are careful to avoid unproductive duplication, for example, and seek synergistic opportunities).

that tackling extreme poverty globally should be given a much higher priority by a wide range of actors than it currently receives.⁸ Admittedly, there is a lot of disagreement about how to specify this claim more precisely. Nonetheless, there is a lot of agreement about certain policy changes that should be implemented. To give a few familiar examples: rich countries should cease dumping heavily subsidised products in poor countries in ways that undercut local producers; far greater resources should be dedicated to diseases such as malaria and schistosomiasis that mainly affect the global poor; tough new measures should be taken to prevent (or at least reduce) illicit financial flows from poor countries; and a tiny ‘Robin Hood’ tax should be imposed on international transactions with at least a large proportion of the money raised going to support poverty reduction.

Indeed, the degree of consensus on such matters is remarkable given the points made above about the culture of disagreement within the discipline of philosophy, and the fact that philosophers and others tackle these issues using many contrasting moral theories and outlooks. I think it also fairly clear what the explanation for such broad agreement is: given certain very basic and widely shared values, a reasonably open, fair-minded look at the facts, and some moderate argumentation skills, the space for reasonable disagreement about many of these issues is quite narrow. There is of course room for reasonable disagreement about what exactly should be done in response to climate change (to alter the example). There is little if any argument that stands up to serious scrutiny against the claim that rich countries should reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases much more quickly than is currently projected, however, and that they should also contribute far more to help poor countries adapt to climate change.

⁸ I use poverty and (to a lesser extent) climate change as examples mainly because I am relatively well-acquainted with those areas. I imagine that much of what I say would apply to at least some other areas of global ethics too, though of course the terrain will be different in each case.

If this is roughly correct, academics working in global ethics are not prevented from making a collective effort to have more positive impact because they disagree too much among themselves. Now let's turn to the points related to the idea of a division of labour between academics and other groups in society. I am happy to accept the claim that at least in certain circumstances the primary roles of academics working in practical ethics (in general) are educating students, and putting forward and assessing arguments concerning the various substantive issues that the field raises in an impartial, independent way. If one has performed those roles, however, and comes to the conclusion that many current practices, policies, and institutions related to a particular area of practical ethics (such as global ethics) are morally indefensible, and that the results include suffering and death on massive scales, there is surely a strong case that special measures are called for. And that case is made even stronger if the overwhelming majority of those working in that field of ethics have come to similar conclusions.

To be sure, if the division of labour between academics and other groups in society were working well, it might be unnecessary for academics to take special measures in an attempt to have more positive impact. I take it that no one thinks that division of labour is working well, though. It has become a truism that much academic work is now carried out in disciplinary (and even subdisciplinary) silos. Little of the work done in global ethics, in particular, appears to be read even by people in other academic disciplines, and still less is taken up by other parties such as NGOs and policy makers in ways that lead to real-world improvements.⁹ Surely it is not satisfactory to remain within an academic cocoon taking part

⁹ There are some philosophers working on poverty who have broken through to wider audiences, such as Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, Thomas Pogge, and the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen. However, in part this is precisely because these individuals have taken the kinds of measure I am advocating here (such as focusing on issues where more research seems relatively likely to lead to more positive impact and attempting to disseminate such research beyond standard academic audiences effectively). My suggestion is that more people

in debates (even ever more sophisticated debates) that seldom engage with anything or anyone beyond ourselves and our students, while all the time the terrible consequences of the wrongful practices, policies, and institutions we study continue unabated. Indeed, doing so seems better classified as one of the pathologies of the academy than as an index of professional virtue.

In response one might say that academics may (and perhaps should) do something aimed at contributing to real-world improvements in the areas global ethics covers, but that they should do so as citizens rather than as academics. If one has reached one's conclusions in one's work as an academic, however, and one is more likely to be able to have an influence as an academic, it seems appropriate to contribute as an academic. Indeed, for these and related reasons, one can make a strong case that academics can have 'duties of engagement', as Thomas Pogge and Luis Cabrera call them (2012: 165). Many academics are trained at least in part at public expense, and so if they reach conclusions relevant to important public matters it seems reasonable to expect them to share those conclusions publicly, especially if those conclusions are not widely acknowledged. Once this expectation is current, moreover, the failure to speak out might 'reasonably be interpreted as academic acceptance that the main views represented in the public debate are credible and consistent with the available evidence' (Cabrera and Pogge 2012: 168). In circumstances in which those views are not credible and consistent with the available evidence, the duty to speak out seems especially strong. Cabrera and Pogge also point out that some academics already involved in public debates are paid or rewarded in other ways to do so by corporations and other interested

working in the field of global ethics do so. Of course, we haven't all got the abilities that these philosophers have. It doesn't follow that we aren't able to contribute usefully to such efforts, however, in part for a reason I give shortly in the main text.

parties. When that is so, ‘silence will merely concede the terrain to academics for hire’ (Cabrera and Pogge 2012: 165).

Would speaking out (or attempting to have more positive impact in other ways) mean compromising one’s independence or impartiality? No; one might have reached the views one advocates through a process of impartial, independent research. Admittedly, if one becomes engaged, impartiality may become harder to achieve, and one may also be tempted to sacrifice some measure of independence for the greater good. (One may choose not to criticise a certain view, for example, because that view is strongly held by many of those with whom one wants to make common cause on other matters.) These matters are difficult, and I shall just make one or two brief comments on them here. On the one hand, one may resist such temptations (if that is the right word for them) if one considers it right to do so. In addition, as an academic one may choose a style of advocacy that reflects certain intellectual values important in academia, such as norms of truth-seeking and truth-telling, and of intellectual fairness, openness, and integrity. And so one may choose not to use whatever argument is likely to be most convincing to one’s audience, for example, if it is not the argument one believes to be strongest; not to attack any objections to one’s conclusions with any means to hand, even if one believes that one or more of those objections has some force; and so on. On the other hand, one may feel that the momentous importance of some issues in global ethics makes it appropriate to put positive impact ahead of other values, especially when those issues are also urgent. In the case of climate change, in particular, we now appear to have a rapidly diminishing window of opportunity to avoid a catastrophe of barely imaginable proportions. If it is ever appropriate to put positive impact first, surely it is in this case.

Of course, this assumes that we may be able to have (more) positive impact. And that leads us onto the final worry sketched above, that efforts by academics to have positive

impact are unlikely to be successful given the different skills that academia and activism demand. In response, I agree that some, perhaps many academics will lack some of the skills that may be useful in measures aimed at having more positive impact.¹⁰ Other academics will have those skills, though, and those who lack those skills can either develop them or collaborate with others (whether academics or not) who have them. In relation to the former, many academics have developed other new skills in recent years, such as grant writing, the use of online teaching methods, and industry liaison. If many academics can learn these skills, many should also be able to learn new skills relevant to increasing one's positive impact. In relation to the latter (collaborating with others), there are many roles that academics might play in activities aimed at having positive impact, not all of which require special skills. Conducting some appropriate forms of research may not require special skills, for example, and organising usually involves a number of unglamorous background tasks (contacting relevant people, responding to inquiries of various kinds, organising and attending meetings, writing grant applications, managing projects, and so on) that most academics could do.¹¹

It's hard to predict the probability of success of efforts to have more positive impact, especially given the wide variety of activities that might come under that heading and the wide range of areas global ethics covers. It seems a little pusillanimous, though, to take such uncertainty as a decisive reason to give up before even trying. Certainly, the claim that academics can't have more real-world positive impact on the areas global ethics covers than they are currently having is extremely implausible. For one thing, that claim implies that academics already happen to be acting in just the way that has the maximum possible positive impact, which is highly implausible a priori. In addition, one can point to a number of kinds

¹⁰ I also do not object to using the word 'activist' to describe some of those measures.

¹¹ This is my main response to the concern raised in n. 9 above.

of measure that look promising. I mentioned four of those in the second paragraph of this essay, and will finish by saying a little more about each of them.

The first is directing more research effort towards what one might call ‘strategic’ issues in global ethics; issues, that is, where there seems a relatively high probability that more research (suitably disseminated) would lead to real-world improvements. ‘Directing’ more research effort towards such issues would be constituted by academics choosing to focus on those issues rather than on less strategic issues; academics advising students to do so; journal and book editors encouraging and incentivising people to do so; and so on. Note that certain issues that would count as ‘important’ or even ‘very important in practice’ on some perfectly reasonable interpretations of those terms may not count as ‘strategic’. They would not do so if researching those issues and disseminating the findings suitably wouldn’t be likely to change anyone’s behaviour, or enough people’s behaviour, or the right people’s behaviour.

Which issues are (the most) strategic? That is a crucial question, and one that I think there should be far more discussion about. For now, I will just list a few general types of issue that might provide good places to look. One is currently under-researched issues that people need to understand better in order to make important decisions related to global ethics wisely.¹² Another is what Des Gasper calls ‘descriptive global ethics’: ‘the close investigation of the ethical stances of publics, politicians, policy analysts, economists, environmentalists, lawyers, businessmen, etc., and not only fellow ethicists’ (Gasper 2014:

¹² For more on this theme and on the need for better dissemination of already existing research relevant to such decisions see Horton 2012.

xx)). And a third is issues where innovative new policies are needed to tackle major structural problems related to global ethics.¹³

The second kind of measure is attempting to disseminate such research beyond standard academic audiences more effectively. Again, the focus should be on research that seems relatively likely to have a positive impact when disseminated. Active efforts at dissemination are necessary because there is unfortunately no invisible hand directing research that might make a difference to those to whom it is relevant. Indeed, there are often forces actively seeking to deter or distract people from taking note of ethically informed research.¹⁴

The third category is joining or setting up organisations or networks that seek to enable academics to have more positive impact in particular areas of global ethics such as climate change, international trade, migration, and poverty. These organisations might be mainly for academics specialising in global ethics, or for academics from many different disciplines.¹⁵ One important task for organisations of the latter type is fostering strategic inter-disciplinary research. Another is supporting and building up the capacities of academia

¹³ Current examples of such research by philosophers working in the field of global ethics include Thomas Pogge's Health Impact Fund (<http://healthpositiveimpactfund.org/>) and Leif Wenar's Clean Trade Initiative (http://www.cleantrade.org/policy_brief.pdf).

¹⁴ Examples in the case of climate change would include many fossil fuel companies and the media organisations, think-tanks, lobbyists, politicians, and political parties they fund.

¹⁵ In the poverty field (broadly construed) one such organisation that puts having positive impact (understood as bringing about real-world improvements) explicitly into the official statement of its aims is the International Development Ethics Association (IDEA), which is 'committed to bringing about improvements in development and environmental policies, institutions and projects' (<http://developmentethics.org/about-2/>). Another is Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP), whose overarching aim is 'helping scholars, teachers and students enhance their positive impact on global poverty' (<http://academicsstand.org/about/mission/>). (Full disclosure: I'm a co-founder and board member of ASAP.)

in developing countries.¹⁶ Such organisations might also encourage academics in other disciplines to take some of the measures I've already suggested, such as directing more research effort towards strategic issues and disseminating such research beyond standard academic audiences more effectively.¹⁷

Finally, one might try working more closely with parties beyond academia who have similar aims (such as certain NGOs, think-tanks, practitioners, and activists) in ways that enhance the capacities of all parties. Researchers in global ethics may be able to enrich the research capacities of certain NGOs, for example, and those NGOs may be useful in disseminating the work of those researchers, suggesting how academics themselves might reach and persuade new audiences, and advising on what issues are strategic (in the sense given above). Academics and practitioners might also work together on more projects.

As the examples I have given indicate, some academics working on global poverty are already taking such measures. Still, there is certainly no shortage of promising activities for those willing to add to this effort to do. And I imagine that the same will be true of many other areas of global ethics. No doubt there are other kinds of measure not listed here, moreover, that might enable us to increase our positive impact. It would be helpful if there were an inventory of measures aimed at positive impact already taken by academics in the different areas of global ethics, ideally with notes on whether they seemed to be successful or not and why. It would also be helpful if there were an inventory of promising measures that have not yet been tried, and of measures that have been used successfully that could be scaled up.¹⁸ Those wishing to contribute to such efforts could then try those measures.

¹⁶ For more on this see Kapur 2010, esp. 280-1.

¹⁷ For a helpful taxonomy of the kinds of contribution academics (in general) might make to reducing poverty in particular, see Caney 2012. The same article also contains a useful list of norms that Caney suggests academics should follow when making such contributions, an important topic that I do not have space to pursue here.

¹⁸ Might this too be a set of tasks that the Journal of Global Ethics could take on?

I have of course barely scratched the surface of these issues here. But I hope I have said enough to show that the claim that we should try to have more positive impact at least merits more discussion. Surely we shouldn't discuss the future of global ethics without explicitly discussing whether we should try to have more positive impact and if so how.¹⁹

¹⁹ I'd like to thank Sirkku Hellsten, Eric Palmer, and Emma Rooksby for many helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper. Any remaining errors or misjudgements are of course entirely my responsibility.

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