



On global ethics: factual and normative ¹

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1. The issues at stake

In January 1988 Javier Perez de Cuellar, Secretary-General of the United Nations joined Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, in launching the *World Decade for Cultural Development* (1988-1997). In its 26th session in 1991 the General Conference of UNESCO requested its Director-General to co-operate with the Secretary-General of the UN, in order to “establish an independent World Commission on Culture and Development”. The aim was to prepare for a *World Report on Culture and Development*. It was one of the take-offs of a conceptual and theoretical process in which a new post-Cold War signifying discourse was looked forward to and generated, in which expressions were used such as: ‘development ethics’, ‘new world agenda for human development’, ‘human development’, ‘global ethics’, ‘global ethic’, ‘transcending economic development’. The history of this ‘global ethic’ process is still to be carried out. I only wish to draw some lines of its evolution, of which not few refer to the endeavors of the UN within the period 1980-2000. The afore

¹ The paper has been presented at the Saint-Petersburg University 2007 Conference on ‘Global Ethics & Education’, and will be published in the *Journal of Education, Economy, Society*, National Open Institute of Russia, 2007, and in a book, *Ethical foundation of civic society and adult education*. With gratitude towards my interlocutor Ekaterina Dvoretzskaya, for the kind support and the comments.

mentioned former UN Secretary-General already gave a summary of it, which I go after in the next paragraphs.

In 1980 the report *North-South: a Programme for Survival* was published as the outcome of the *Brandt Commission*, formerly known as the *Independent Commission on International Development Issues*, which had started its activities in 1977. The commission put an end to its work in 1983 after the publication of yet another report, *Common Crisis: North-South. Co-operation for World Recovery*, which held recommendations about the acceleration of the development of poor countries (including the transfer of resources from the rich countries).

The *South Commission* initiated by former president of Tanzania, Julius K. Nyerere, continued research and discussion on the ‘North-South Dialogue’, resulting in the publication in 1990 of a report, *The Challenge to the South*.

From 1990 onwards, the *United Nations Development Program* started the publications of its annual reports, with the primary focus on ‘human development’, emphasizing the view that “people are the wealth of nations”. It continued along the track of the 1983 *Brundtland Commission*, formerly known as the *World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)*, with its 1987 report, *Our Common Future*. The same commission launched the idea of an ‘Earth Summit’, which in 1992 yielded the *Agenda 21, Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development*. In 1995 it was complemented by the *Commission on Global Governance*, which published its report, *Our Global Neighborhood*. By the turn of the century further international efforts under the lead of the UN produced the 2000 *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, outlining the ‘Millennium Goals’ to be reached in 2015. Another ‘Earth Summit’ was held in Johannesburg, with the *Johannesburg Declaration*, published in 2002, and in 2005 the report of the UN 58th DPI / NGO Conference, organized in New York, was published under the title: *Our*

Challenge: Voices for Peace, Partnerships and Renewal, based on the idea of “a civil society taking action”.

2. The concepts used

It will become clear how the signifying concept of a ‘global ethic’ steadily matured within these ‘human development’ action-oriented undertakings. It will also prove how a promising idea of a scholarly research was linked with it, which was worked out under the title ‘global ethics’. The *UNDP* is the UN global network that seeks solutions to global and national development challenges, giving priority to ‘democratic governance’, ‘poverty reduction’, ‘crisis prevention and recovery’, ‘sustainable growth’ ‘respect and concern for the environment’, ‘empowerment of local communities, of the urban poor, of women’, and ‘world health concerns’. It encourages the ‘protection of human rights’, which is considered to be crucial for the fulfillment of a people-based ‘human development’. The foregoing enumeration gives an example of what the potential content of a global ethics research might be. At the same time it suggests what a global ethic is to give values, principles, goals, norms, rules, etc. about.

The people-based ‘human development’ is the normative signifying concept repeatedly referred to in the various UN and UNESCO ‘Reports’ and ‘Declarations’. Without any exception it is opposed to a narrow conception of economic development, which was the focus of attention of much of the Post-War development programs in the ‘South’. This also is the case with the 1995 UNESCO/UN Report *Our Creative Diversity of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, which in its ‘Introduction’ mentions ‘two views of development’. The first global UN development report, 1990, addressed as its main issue “the question of how economic growth translates –or fails to translate– the human development.” The latter is conceived off as the way people are progressively enabled to make their own choices. The

report suggested ways to measure this progression in choice enlargement. The 1993 report on ‘people’s participation’ looked at means to improve the ways in which “people-friendly markets, decentralized governance and community organizations, especially non-governmental organizations (NGO’s)” contribute to setting free people’s individual and social self-determination. In 1996 the UNDP organization published its report on *Economic growth and human development*, in which it was argued that “if not properly managed” economic growth may equal a “jobless, voiceless, rootless and futureless” outcome for the many worldwide. ‘Growth’ is considered to be dependent on poverty reduction and sustainability, which implies the use of human development in stead of merely economic indicators of expansion. From then onwards, the annual global reports kept emphasizing the weight of the ‘human face’ of growth and development indicators, advancing subjects such as: the importance of a human rights based approach to social and economic accountability, the establishment and “deepening” of democratic political structures “at all levels of society”, a singular conception of wealth in stating that human well-being is far more important than income and financial means, the significance of multicultural policies, the recognition of cultural differences, the potentialities of cultural diversity for human development, and the importance for religious freedom and tolerance. In the mean time the “Millennium Development Goals” had been launched, with the purpose to function as a global horizon for human development, and the prospering of the global order.

‘Human Development’, such as it was defined by the UNDP, consequently should be put alongside economic development. ‘Human development’ is “about more than the rise and fall of national incomes” (UNDP, 2006). It bears reference to the creation of a material, an economic, and a cultural environment in which people can develop their capabilities, in able to lead a productive and creative life in harmony with their needs and interests

(UNDP, 2006). The ‘Human Development Reports’ of the UN concentrate on the enlargement of people’s choices by protecting, supporting, and encouraging ‘human capabilities’, the latter broadly defined as “the range of things that people can do or be in life”. Health, access to knowledge through education, opportunity to participate in community-life, cultural and political self-determination, they are all equally important for human development (*Agenda 21*, 1991). It was stated from the very start that this view of development was in accordance with ‘human rights’ concerns, because they both secure the “well-being and dignity of all people, building self-respect and the respect of others” (UNDP, 2006).

From the eighties of the 20th century onwards, it became clear that the sole attention paid to the economic side of development in the poor countries – and even in the rest of the world– was wrong at the root. Not only had many people paid with their lives, their health and well-being –with their self-determination and political sovereignty ruined or nullified– but even economic development was harmed and misdirected by this one sidedness, as it produced some negative inverse mechanisms. One can call this the fatal and damaging paradox of early Post Second World-War development programs. Both Immanuel Wallerstein (1983, 1995) and David Korten (1995), through their work in poor countries in Africa and South-East Asia, experienced the insufficiency or inefficiency of western views on post-colonial development of the Southern hemisphere countries. But they were far from alone in their sudden conversion from this ‘developmentalist’ post-war ideology. All of these critical voices agreed with the idea expressed by former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali:

As development becomes imperative, as we approach the turn of this century, we are faced with the necessity of giving new meaning to the word. Reflecting on development is thus the most important

intellectual challenge in the coming years. (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1995, 23)

The view of ‘human development’, therefore, emphasizes other value-goal-norm sets. For our global ethics concerns it is of importance to study them closely, to look after their factual presuppositions and their action implied regulative principles. It ranges over signifying concepts such as follows: lack of opportunities, democratic institutions, participatory governance and management, quality of life, well-being, longevity, health, adequate nutrition, reasonable consumption, education, access to knowledge and to ICT, gender-based equality, decent labor conditions, child protection, dignity, human rights, justice and equity, cultural diversity, social and individual empowerment, human capabilities, sustainability, community duties, solidarity, caring, general –social– responsibility, public accountability, religious tolerance, intergenerational equity.

Human development signifiers (Source: UNDP Reports)	Economic development signifiers (Source: P. Samuelson & W. Nordhaus, 2005, 555-579)
Reasonableness	Rationality
Human capabilities	Rational choice (social choice / public choice)
Opportunity enlargement: social, cultural, political	Self-interest
Care & solidarity	Individual preferences
Self-determination in civil society and community life	Free trade & trade policies
Life experience at grass roots levels	Trade adjustments
Creative responsiveness	Competitiveness
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	GDP & GNP output per capita
Stakeholder ship	PPF (production-possibility frontier)
Human Rights	Income
Embedding of market regulation	Human ‘resources’
Sustainability	Natural ‘resources’
Common good	Capital
Health	Technology
Education	Productivity

Knowledge access	Profitability (in terms of rates of return)
Social securisation	Externalities
Well-being	Diseconomies of scale
Social & environment economy	Free market
Duty centered	Exchange rates & trade balance
Open source information	Financial & monetary accountability
Contextual adaptability	Equilibrium
Horizontal governance conception	Vertical governance conception

In the quote the signifying concepts and expressions are: ‘open economy’, ‘business attractive for investors’, ‘foreign & domestic investors’ (as actors), ‘investment opportunities’, ‘stable macroeconomic climate’ (meaning: a stable social and political situation in the investment region), ‘dependable property rights’, ‘tangible investments’, ‘tangible intellectual property’, ‘exchange-rate convertibility’. This certainly is not the discourse of a ‘human development’ report. No reference is made to the risks of this investment-biased approach for the social and political stability in the business solicited country, nor is there any concern for the freedom and the quality of life of the people who are supposed to work for the profitability of the investment. What does it mean to set “a stable macroeconomic climate” in terms of human empowerment, gender-equality, child protection against labor exploitation, avoidance of forced labor practices, health, sustainability and environmental protection, human rights defense and support, participatory governance, quality of life, etc.? All of these ‘human development’ items are ignored, for the ‘limited’ economic view of growth urges the economist only to focus on the allowance “to take home” profits, and on the assurance that both stability and profitability in the investment countries are guaranteed.

One of the deciding signifying differences bears on the assumed and underlying governance conception of the two views of development. In a ‘human development’ view, governance is conceived to be chiefly horizontal and decentralized, whereas a ‘economic development’ view is mainly based on a vertical and centralized governance conception. The role of ‘civil

society’, of grass roots organizations, and of NGO’s, is highlighted in ‘human development, whereas in ‘economic development’ governance the key agencies are multinationals, transnational professional organizations, international capitalist institutions, ceo’s, etc.

Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to think about the feasible relationships between the two views of development and about the reconcilability of their signifying conceptual bases. In the UNDP reports, but recently also in the World Bank reports, the idea that ‘human development’ and ‘economic development’ are only opposite and conflicting, has been dropped, a point of view to which the work of Amartya Sen (1999, 35-54; 2005) has contributed in a substantial way. I can see at least six possible relationships between the ‘human development’ and the ‘economic development’ view.

Table 2: Relationships between ‘human development’ and ‘economic development’

‘Human Development’ (HD)	‘Economic Development’ (ED)
1. Opposing and conflicting, without any opportunity of mediation	
2. ‘HD’ enhances ‘ED’	
3. ‘HD’ is enhanced by ‘ED’	
4. The economic impact of ‘HD’ beyond doubt	
5. The humanizing range of ‘ED’ should be endorsed and supported	
6. Extended economy (Karl Polanyi, 1944; 1957) / social economy conceptions (Amitai Etzioni, 1988; 1999) are meaningful for the proper understanding of ‘ED’	

Within the ranges offered by the cases 2, 3, 4, and 5, a global ethical conception on humanity’s future might be worked out. The economic impact of ‘human development’ regarded to be beyond doubt, a realistic and pragmatic endorsement of the humanizing force of economic development will be of great significance to improve the material and spiritual conditions of humankind. By following this pathway, we may transcend the narrow-minded economist inclinations to classify countries exclusively in ‘low-risk’ and ‘high-risk’ units for interest rates and capital investment, and we might

be able to surpass both the ‘limits to competition’ (Riccardo Petrella, 1994/1995) and the pitfalls of a ‘limited’ conception of the economy of human life.

3. The normative perspectives implied

In the UNESCO 1995 report on humanity’s creative diversity, mainly addressing the subject of “a new global ethics”, the expression ‘global ethics’ appears 33 times, all of which suggest a different content. The first definition is a normative one for it states:

We should develop a global ethics that applies equally to all those involved in world affairs. Its efficacy will depend on the ability of people and governments to transcend narrow self-interests and agree that the interests of humanity as a whole will be best served by acceptance of a set of common rights and responsibilities (35)

What global ethics is about can easily be grasped in rereading this definition, although its content remains far from clear. The aim is to reach shared points of reference to provide a minimal moral guidance, a purpose to which the endorsed values and principles should contribute. Beyond doubt global issues of concern have a say in these endeavors. Although it remains a difficult task to define the content of global ethics as a discipline – fortunately facilitated by the undertakings of Nigel Dower in order to clarify the subject-matter (Nigel Dower, 1998)– it is not impossible to suggest the major themes of the ethical research.

Strikingly the 1995 Report rests somewhat confuse about the difference between ‘global ethics’ –as a particular research discipline– and ‘global ethic’. The latter intended to be a private and public agencies centered agenda for action, in which sets of value-goals-norms-principles are explicitly stated and explained from the central belief that they might have a

practical significance for the future of humankind under further conditions of globalization. The meaning of ‘global ethics’ is confused with ‘global ethic’ at many instances in the text. Nevertheless the discourse is instructive about what the experts of the UNESCO and the UN considered as vital issues: “the deeply human urge to avoid avoidable suffering and some notion of the basic moral equality of all human beings together form an indispensable point of reference and a strong pillar of support for any attempt to work out a global ethics.” (*Our Creative Diversity*, 1995, 36). The idea of human vulnerability and the purpose to alleviate suffering is of great inspiration to the writers of the report. Mankind should combat an age-old illness of western culture, namely its “contempt for weakness” (Harald Ofstad, 1989), and it should attempt to accept man’s limitations and helplessness. Furthermore, the idea of human rights easily can be brought back to the concern for weakness and exposure, the way it was analyzed by 20th century ethicists (E. Levinas, 1961; Z. Bauman, 1993).

From this general valuational stand the UNESCO Commission suggested five principal ideas to form the core of what I think they meant to be a ‘global ethic’ (although continually the writers kept using the expression ‘global ethics’): human rights and global responsibilities, democratic legitimacy linked with political autonomy and human empowerment, protection of minorities, commitment to peaceful conflict-resolution and fair negotiation, intergenerational equity. Be this as it may, it hardly seems concluding for a reflection on the relationship between global ethical research produced by globalization, and the feasible content of a global ethic, which although neither universally accepted, nor generally applied to concrete practical matters of concern, may function as a suitable benchmark for action and policies.

In our view, a ‘global ethic’ covers numerous domains of diverse goal applications. It reaches from the spelling out of regulative principles to the prescription of rules and norms. It ranges, among other concerns:

- from the spelling out of caring principles to the advice to empower local communities and individuals
- from the defense of countervailing power in order to impede the negative results of a limited —and therefore inadequate— globalized economy to the safeguarding of men, women and children against the still ongoing re-introduction of forced labor relationships
- from the detection of agencies of judgment and decision to the recognition of audiences to which one appeals for the appliance of the rules of conduct
- from the demand of cosmopolitan citizenship to the request of local participatory democracy

The global ethical inquiry —‘global ethics’— should be guided by an action and life experience oriented research of the possible regulative principles, rules and norms. From a methodological point of view it ought to be conceived of as a ‘deweyian’ pragmatically oriented discipline (John Dewey, 1972/1939) answering to the radical dialogical outlook (Martin Buber, 1997; Mikhaïl Bakhtin, 1970) on human interpretation and signification of man’s existence:

The core of dialogue is always a-thematic, even when the dialogue is thematically well fixed and tightened... (M. Bakhtin, 1970, 345)

In what has been said earlier, the regulative principle of care and respect of human vulnerability —reproving ‘our contempt for weakness’— has a central place in ‘global ethic’ proposals. In the global ethical inquiry, such as I imagine it should be, this regulative principle has to be theoretically highlighted. To my knowledge of the matter it can be done using Vladimir Jankélévitch’s moral philosophical analysis (V. Jankélévitch, 1981, 151-188)

of the a-symmetrical relationship between rights and obligations. Roughly stated this a-symmetry of rights and obligations (‘droits’ and ‘devoirs’) runs as follows:

Table 3 Rights and obligations: their a-symmetrical relationship in global ethical inquiry

Rights (‘droits’)	Obligations (‘devoirs’)
Everyone has rights, also do ‘I’ (revenge)	
Everyone has rights, but not ‘me’ To ‘you’ nothing but rights	‘I’ have only obligations To ‘me’ nothing but obligations
Reification of rights Objectivity of rights	Non-parity of obligations Irreversibility of obligations
The ‘first person’ (‘I’ / ‘We’) goes the last, whereas the ‘second’ (‘Thou’ / ‘You’) goes the first ‘I’ am the defender of ‘thy’ rights ‘We’ are the defenders of ‘your’ rights	The ‘first person’ (‘I’ / ‘We’) goes the last, whereas the ‘second’ (‘Thou’ / ‘You’) goes the first ‘I’ am not the custodian of ‘thy’ obligations ‘We’ are not the custodians of ‘your’ obligations
‘My’ rights are not the basis of ‘your’ obligations	‘Your’ obligations are not the basis of ‘my’ rights
The opening of the eyes —for instance in understanding the challenge of world poverty and world citizenship— implies the loss of our blamelessness The loss of one’s blamelessness is the price one has to pay for keeping one’s dignity	

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There is much realism in the statement of the fundamental regulative principle of the a-symmetry between rights and obligations, for the French moral philosopher acknowledged that man’s assumed original incorruptibility —to use another word for ‘blamelessness’— has to be laid down to conquer and to keep one’s dignity. Dignity is what human rights and human freedom stand for.