

One world: the ethics of globalization

By Peter Singer

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Behind much of the discussion about globalization is a deep ethical concern. People are rightly worried about the impact of globalization on human well-being and the natural environment. And people who work in public health are especially worried about its impact on the health of those who are least advantaged, who often have the shortest life expectancies and the greatest burden of disease. In his new book, Peter Singer examines some of the ethical issues involved.

He devotes one chapter to climate change, first summarizing, in a very concise and fair way, the scientific evidence on global warming. He then notes some of the probable consequences: sea levels will rise and inundate areas of human habitation; weather patterns will become more volatile; food production will fall at some latitudes, though it may rise at others; and tropical diseases will spread. Rich nations will be better able than poor nations to deal with these changes.

At present, Americans emit about 5 tonnes of carbon per person, while Chinese emit 0.76, and Indians 0.29. Singer finds no ethical justification for the present system that allows some people to emit a large share of the greenhouse gases, and others to bear more of the costs. So he asks what a fair distribution would be. He argues in favour of allocating "equal per capita future entitlements to a share of the capacity of the atmospheric sink."

In the chapter devoted to economic globalization, Singer poses questions about environmental protection, national sovereignty, democratic practices, and the well-being of the poorest people in the world. Then he sorts through the evidence to answer these questions. Although World Trade Organization (WTO) rules allow member countries to take measures to protect human health and the natural environment, WTO practices often invoke a "product-versus-process" distinction that has the effect

of limiting the measures that members can adopt. Singer finds that the use of this argument tends to devalue environmental protection, national sovereignty, and democratic control.

How has economic globalization affected the poorest people in the world? Singer considers the effect on both inequality in relative terms and well-being in absolute terms. He reviews the methods people have used to assess inequality, measure poverty, and determine causality. His conclusion is sceptical: without better data on household incomes, we cannot know what the overall impact has been.

Since the Second World War, a kind of legal globalization has been taking place. Ideas about human rights, crimes against humanity, and international courts have begun to limit the old idea of national sovereignty. We have come to see that there must be ethical and legal limits to what nations can do, even to their own citizens. In a chapter entitled "One Law," Singer focuses attention on this development and tries to specify guidelines for military interventions for humanitarian reasons. When do outsiders have a right and a responsibility to intervene? Singer believes that humanitarian intervention "is justified when it is a response (with reasonable expectations of success) to acts that kill or inflict serious bodily or mental harm on large numbers of people," though of course this answer raises further questions.

One of the most interesting parts of this book is his discussion of foreign aid. Singer has lectured and written about this issue for over 30 years. During this time, he has changed some of the policies he advocates, but he has not changed his ethical view: when we can help people in great need without sacrificing something of comparable moral worth, we have a moral duty to do so. Not to help in such circumstances is wrong.

Singer sees no reason for assigning much moral weight to national boundaries. Although he recognizes impartial reasons for giving some preference to family members and close friends, he argues that the strong preference we often give to fellow citizens is unjustified, especially when we consider the pressing needs of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty. He thinks that wealthy countries are morally required to give more aid to

low-income countries. And he thinks "that anyone who has enough money to spend on the luxuries and frivolities so common in affluent societies should give at least 1 cent in every dollar of their income to those who have trouble getting enough to eat, clean water to drink, shelter from the elements, and basic health care."

There are points where I disagreed with Singer, but my disagreements are more about emphasis than policy. I would place more emphasis on the importance of face-to-face communities. Families, neighbourhoods, and local associations are settings in which people develop dispositions that are vital for ethical life and civil society. I realize that local associations can also foster hatred, racism, and indifference, but I'm concerned that social changes are disrupting the good as well as the bad. We need to combine caring local communities with ideals of global justice.

More than Singer does, I would emphasize two important roles for moral philosophers. The first, in which Singer excels, is formulating, analysing, and evaluating ethical arguments. In doing this, he very usefully exposes confusions and double standards. But there is a second role: good philosophy can capture its time in thought, interpreting historical change in ways that show what is at stake. Others can then make practical use of that interpretation as they strive to fashion a more just and liveable world. ■

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