

The Earth Charter and Global Ethics

Nigel Dower

Global Ethics

Global ethics is the critical enquiry into the nature and justification of one's ethical positions in respect to the relations between human beings across the world. It is concerned with these relations both generally with respect to the possibility and extent of universal values and the ethical bases of international and transnational relations, and specifically in respect to particular issues like world poverty, the environment or human rights. Such ethical enquiry is conducted by moral philosophers, social scientists or indeed anyone willing to think systemically about ethical issues. Generally speaking, though not always, a person interested in global ethics supports, and sees as part of her task as a global ethicist to support, a global ethic of some kind. I say 'not always' because a person doing global ethics could be interested precisely because she wants to deny the possibility of their being a global ethic, as we shall note later on.

A global ethic may be defined in a number of ways, both (1) in respect to its *content*, and (2) in respect to the *scope* of its acceptance.

A global ethic as an ethic with a universal content

First, in respect to its content (1), it may be seen (a) as a 'set' of norms and values take to be applicable to (even though not actually accepted by) all human beings; and (b) a worldview, philosophy or theology which *includes* a set of norms and values (as above) but also the rationale of the thinker or social group for these values and norms in which they are embedded and get their meaning and justification. Generally (but not necessarily) a global ethic in sense 1(a) will include not just a claim about universal values and norms but also a claim about transnational obligations as being amongst the universal norms to be accepted e.g. that the rich in one country should help the very poor in another country.

This distinction is not a distinction between those who have a worldview and those who do not – in a sense we all have a worldview implicitly – or between those who have a worldview explicitly and/or take their worldview seriously and those who do not. It is rather the distinction between those for whom it is important to assert and promote a global ethic without promoting the 'source story' which they accept for it (e.g. because they want to find common cause with others with different source stories), and those who feel that the whole package 'source story plus set of values and norms' is what is important to them as their 'global ethic' (For the distinction and use of 'source story' see Dower 1998). Thus one Christian might have an ethic based on her religious beliefs but present it as something a non-Christian could accept, but another Christian might present her ethic as a *Christian* ethic which can only be accepted if one is a Christian. Similarly, a liberal could endorse a range of core values including liberty which he believes is acceptable to other people with many different backgrounds, or he could be a liberal in the sense that he want people to accept a complete intellectual package derived from Locke, Kant and so on.

A global ethic as widely shared

Second, a global ethic may be thought of as an ethic which is global in respect to the scope of its acceptance, that is as an ethic which is shared by adherents across the world. There is a significant distinction to be noted between those who see a global ethic as (a) something universally shared – so 'global' essentially means 'universal' – or as (b) something which is *widely* shared by many across

the world. Although there are those who want to interpret the superficial diversity of values and norms as expressing a core of universal values and norms, there are others who may say that whether or not there is such a minimal core of shared values everywhere, it is the conflict of various global ethics (in the plural) that is more significant, that the world has various global ethics on offer (e.g. the ethics of the free market and various fundamentalisms as well as the kind of global ethic in the Earth Charter) and that the issue is identifying which is to be endorsed and supported.

A global ethic's globalness then in sense (2) resides in its being *shared*. But this 'being shared' can be either (weak sense) coincidentally or (strong sense) consciously/deliberately. Thus Küng (Küng 1990) has argued that there is a core (the golden rule) that has always been shared by all the major religions (independent of and prior to recognition of this shared-ness), whereas others have argued that a global ethic is a modern phenomenon – a response to and an expression of globalisation – in which common values and norms are developed, forged, constructed and negotiated through consensus-building, international meetings, declarations and so on (see e.g. Commission on Global Governance 1995)

What kind of global ethic is the Earth Charter?

In terms of these definitions and distinction I can now set out my case quickly. The Earth Charter is a global ethic in senses 1(a) and 2(b) but not in senses 1(b) and 2(a).

That is, the Earth Charter is a set (and a rich set at that) of universally applicable values and norms but it is not in itself a *worldview*, though I as indicate below it may play that role to some extent for some. This role is fine so long as it recognises that the Earth Charter's *primary function* is (or rather should be regarded as being) to act as a common core of values accessible to people from a wide range of cultural, theological or philosophical backgrounds.

Its adequacy as a global ethic with a suitable content can be briefly indicated by noting both its value-comprehensiveness and its emphasis on transnational responsibility. I see its combination of the core principles of respect for nature, social justice and commitment to human rights, democracy, peace and respect for diversity as representing the core values which are needed in the modern world. Likewise it makes much of the idea of common but differentiated responsibilities and of our global responsibility as citizens of the world acting through global civil society (cf. the 'solidarist pluralism' model in Dower 1998).

The Earth Charter is also a global ethic in the sense that it is widely shared across the world, but it is not a universally shared ethic. It is widely shared because it was formed as a result of extensive consultation across the world and because now that it is disseminated, it is endorsed by many others. There remains the issue whether its principles are based on values which are either timelessly valid and/or which are already embedded in all major ethical systems, or whether they are rather emergent from current consensus-building and our modern global predicament. Even if one took the former approaches, one would have to acknowledge that the detailed prescriptions of the Earth Charter are the product of a particular time and place of negotiated agreement. Furthermore insofar as the usefulness of the Earth Charter resides in its being a concrete formulation of ethical norms which individuals can sign up to in the *conscious knowledge* that they are signing up to something shared with hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of other people, its *created* nature is important. On the other hand insofar as its detailed prescriptions reflect more general values which are endorsed for reasons independent of their being in the Charter, then those reasons may hail from many different views about the nature and origins of ethics (some objectivist, some constructivist, etc.) and they may be reasons which some may prefer to act on without their being mediated through the Earth Charter or indeed any other 'public' medium, as I explain more fully later on.

Whilst it may generally be acknowledged by Earth Charter advocates that the Earth Charter is not at present a universally shared global ethic – indeed if it were there would be no significant role for advocacy except in relation to compliance – it may be argued that it should become universally shared. This however is neither feasible nor desirable. It is not feasible because a set of principles as rich and as specific as the Earth Charter is not likely to be accepted by all cultural groups or sub-cultures (putting on one side individuals who have odd-ball ethical views). This is not to be sceptical about the possibility or about the value of their being some minimal core of values and norms which could be universally adopted (by all except the odd-balls). This is indeed possible if it is very bland and capable of diverse interpretation. It is valuable because the acceptance of a common core signifies *agreement* which, whatever cynics may say, is a step forward in creating the conditions for global peace. But the Earth Charter's value lies in its richness and specificity. It is not a minimal core, but a tool for challenge. Its *universal* acceptance should not be our goal, though its *wider* acceptance should be. These are not the same. What matters (on the bottom line) is, as I implied in the previous paragraph, is that people change their ways of thinking and acting vis a vis the natural world and fellow human beings, and this can come from many styles of ethical thought (which may or may not accept the Earth Charter formulation as the best), including those who simply reject the idea that ethics has to be expressed through anything publicly agreed like a charter.

On the other hand, there are plenty of good reasons for wanting the Earth Charter to become *more widely accepted* as an instrument of moral change, and in the second half of this paper I address various forms of resistance to the Earth Charter with a view to making its acceptance more widespread. This discussion will serve a second purpose of illustrating some of the distinctions and moves I have already made so far.

The relevance of the Earth Charter to global ethics

But before turning to that second task, we need to return to the idea of global ethics as an intellectual enquiry and ask what relevance the Earth Charter has to this as well. After all the Earth Charter as a set of values and norms might as a global ethic seem to have little to do with global *ethics* as a critical reflective enquiry – and even be seen as antithetical to it if the Earth Charter was seen somehow as holy writ or as a package of values and norms which you either endorse in its entirety and then get on with promoting or had nothing to do with.

On the contrary, as I hope my discussion so far has implicitly illustrated, thinking about the Earth Charter is of central relevance to global ethics as intellectual enquiry, because the attitude one adopts towards it illustrates many of the key issues in global ethics. (I am not suggesting that one could not do global ethics properly without talking about the Earth Charter – clearly an absurd claim – but rather that any serious engagement with the Earth Charter and how to use it or understand it takes you right into the heartland of ethics.) First, the nature of a global ethic has to be clarified and the different possible senses applied to the Earth Charter, as I have done. Second, the question of justification needs to be examined, both in respect to the possibility and desirability of endorsement coming from diverse intellectual sources and in respect to the extent that the process of consultation through which the Earth Charter came to be formulated and the factor of its being widely and consciously shared both contribute to its justification as a genuine 'global ethic'. Third, it provides a framework of cosmopolitan values in which particular ethical issues can be put in context and therefore more informed and critically tested decisions can be made. Fourth, more generally, it provides a critical tool for thinking globally in an effective way. This of course depends on our seeing it not as holy writ but as a tool for testing our moral thinking, not as something complete and beyond criticism, but as something capable of interpretation and contestation and maybe as time goes on modification.

Promoting the Earth Charter

I now turn to the second question I want to address: in getting people to accept the Earth Charter, what kinds of resistance are we likely to meet, and in the light of this, what ways of presenting the Earth Charter as a global ethic are to be stressed? Of course there is a connection between the answers to this question and our earlier answer to the question 'In what sense is the Earth Charter a global ethic?', since the way we understand it will affect the way we present it and since our understanding should ideally constrain what we say in the interests of intellectual integrity.

What we stress about the Earth Charter in promoting it as a global ethic depends upon the audience we are addressing. What we say to politicians and diplomats and their supporters who take a realist view of international relations may be different to what we say to business people, to people in churches and others with well-formed belief-systems, to those who are hostile to universal values, to people who are lost and looking for some anchorage in a confused world, to children in schools and so on. To take these in turn:

Realism in international relations

The Earth Charter as a kind of global ethic (in content) is a form of cosmopolitanism and as such conflicts with two traditions in international relations, first hard-nosed realism (international scepticism) which denies that ethical norms apply to international relations, and second internationalism which postulates a morality of states stressing sovereignty and limited international obligations and the dominance of the society of states in world affairs.

Hard-nosed realism has various sources which need opposing: (a) scepticism about global morality altogether (Hobbesian anarchism, deep relativism); but more to the point nowadays (b) a prioritisation of national interests especially security interests in an insecure or fragile world: thus post Sept 11th there has been a re-assertion of militarism and priorities in national defence. (a) directly confronts the presupposition of a global ethic in the Earth Charter (for general arguments against sceptical realism see e.g. Beitz 1979 and Dower 1998), whilst (b) goes against the acceptance of the *priorities* of the Earth Charter. This prioritisation needs opposing e.g. by stressing wider senses of security (to include economic, environmental and health security and so on), the counter-productivity of military responses in actually stimulating future terrorism, and the fact that a consistent promotion of the full range of human goods in the world is inconsistent with typical national priorities (see Dower 2002). *Here the issue is bluntly the relevance of a global ethic in the current world, either in principle or in the form that the Earth Charter represents.*

The internationalist paradigm has in recent years shown signs of becoming more interested in global ethical agendas (such as environmental protection, world poverty and human rights), but it is also resistant to the Earth Charter paradigm because it seeks to retain the central role of states as *the* determinants of these agendas. This has to be challenged, because of traditional cosmopolitan arguments about universal responsibility as 'citizens of the world', because modern global problems require collective responses of ordinary agents not just governments, and because the processes of globalisation have opened up a transnational social space in which agency in global civil society (as global citizens) is now available and essential. (See e.g. Scholte 2000 on globalisation, and Heater 2002 and Dower 2003 on global citizenship.) *Here the issue is whether to acknowledge a dynamic global social space in which Earth Charter agency can be expressed.*

Adherents to neoliberalism or other substantive norms at odds with the Earth Charter

Another group of agents which supporters of the Earth Charter will need to grapple with are those involved in the global economy – particularly those with influence in the large transnational corporations. Here I am referring to the typical assumptions of neoliberalism. This illustrates a

different kind of challenge to the Earth Charter, which is not to the idea of a workable global ethic as such, but to the *substance* of the Earth Charter's values. For instance, is someone committed to unregulated capitalism likely to subscribe to the view that 'when basic human needs are met, human development is more about being more than having more' (Earth Charter 2000, Preamble)? (Perhaps some might but surely not most.) There are of course other conflicts of this kind. Religious fundamentalists might well reject other aspects of the Earth Charter's content – e.g. its 'liberal' emphasis upon respect for diversity of culture and belief. *So the issue here is over the defence of particular core values in the Charter versus challenges from rival global ethics.*

Integration with pre-existing beliefs systems

Apart from various forms of fundamentalism or dogmatic adherence to values which are different, there is a different kind of challenge which arises in connection with selling the Earth Charter to those who already have well formed belief systems. For such thinkers in contemplating the Earth Charter as something they might endorse (or something their children might be encouraged to endorse in respect to what kinds of education they will accept for their children), the question is: is the Earth Charter something which she can endorse as compatible with or supported by her worldview or belief system? Here, as I see it, the task is to present the Earth Charter as something which can be supported by many different positions (though not all) – e.g. religious and non-religious, anthropocentric and biocentric.

It is striking that although there are several references to spiritual values, these are not so central as to make the Charter as a whole unacceptable to someone with a secular outlook, whilst the tone of the document makes it suitable for endorsement by someone with a religious outlook. (Of course many others with a religious outlook and a secular outlook will not be happy to endorse it.) Likewise the language of the Earth Charter is such that it can be endorsed both by a biocentrist or ecocentrist who does not go so far as to be misanthropic as well as by an anthropocentrist who is willing to accept that for the long-term interests of human beings we need to accept ecological integrity as a systems constraint, rather than being indicative of intrinsic value. Even the most explicitly biocentric clause 1(a) 'recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings' (Earth Charter 2000) is capable of being interpreted as showing that every form of life has *value for the interdependent whole* upon which we depend rather than a directly *intrinsic* value regardless of its worth to human beings. (This is not how I would take it but it is how it has been taken by an anthropocentrist in a discussion I was a party to.)

Given the diversity of the sources of support, we need to accept the corollary to this that, given where people may be coming from, there has to be 'give-and take' both ways, in that someone from a particular background may accept the *spirit* of the Earth Charter without necessarily adopting its language or function, or endorse it because she accepts most of it whilst having reservations about parts of it. *So the issue here is how to render compatible the Earth Charter with the pre-existing belief-systems in the eyes of those who hold these belief-systems.*

Answering a need for an anchorage / worldview

In contrast we have another group of people who are essentially searching for something to endorse because they are confused or disturbed by the condition of the world and feel that we need something we can unite behind. Here the Earth Charter can be presented as some kind of anchor. One of its anchorage points is the fact that it has evolved as a public and widely shared document; its being a global ethic in this 'public embodiment sense' can be stressed. Another anchor point may be the perception of the Earth Charter as a sufficiently rich document to capture a vision or worldview itself which people can make their own. In a sense it can be presented as a 21st century 'mythos' or grand narrative.

Is there however a conflict between seeing the Earth Charter as a worldview and seeing it as a statement which can be supported by many worldviews? There is no contradiction of course in saying that it is regarded as one by some and as the other by others. But is it possible for a particular person (for instance myself as the current writer) to say that it is both a worldview and a statement supported by many worldviews, or to recommend its being presented as one to some and as the other to others? If someone said that what is stated in the four pages of the Earth Charter constituted a *complete* worldview, then there would indeed be a contradiction. Could it be that? If so, such a statement would have to contain *all* the metaphysics, philosophy, theology or other meaning-conferring narrative that was necessary to constitute a full worldview. I find it difficult to construe the Earth Charter as that or to believe that others could so construe it.

On the other hand the Earth Charter is not merely a set of moral values and norms. It clearly contains at least *part* of a worldview or metaphysics insofar as it presupposes a certain view (or range of views) of human beings and their place in the natural world, and constitutes not merely a moral ideal – of how people could ideally live with one another and in relation to the natural world – but a broad vision of human relatedness in a global social-and-biotic community. But such a view of the world is at least consistent with a wide range of philosophical, religious and cultural stories of which it would be a *part*. So long then as this consistency is accepted by someone who chooses to call the Earth Charter his worldview or wants to call the Earth Charter statement *plus* a fuller story his ‘Earth Charter worldview’, then there is no tension between what I have said about the Earth Charter being affirmed from many sources and these claims. If on the other hand the Earth Charter itself or an enlarged ‘Earth Charter worldview’ were presented as *the correct worldview*, then my earlier ‘multiple source’ story is in contradiction to this. *So the issues here are how seeing the Earth Charter itself as answering a need for a source of hope in a confused world can be reconciled with seeing the Earth Charter as supportable from many worldviews.*

What are we to say to children?

This leads to another important category of potential recipients of the Earth Charter and that is children to be educated. Although children are not entirely tabulae rasae (and in any case their parents’ wishes are crucial as I implied above) they do present a different challenge: just what story do we tell about the Earth Charter to children? Here I think a dilemma may exist amongst advocates of the Earth Charter – a dilemma inherent in the contrast between the previous two groups discussed above. Should you present the Earth Charter as new grand narrative, mythos or worldview to replace or sit side-by-side whatever worldview the children would or will have from their parents or culture? Or should you avoid representing it as a grand narrative but rather give it as an *interpretation* in the face of our global necessities of whatever worldviews are appropriate to the culture and family background of children? (Personally I favour the second approach since I do not think of the Earth Charter as itself a worldview, but I realise others may take a different view.) *So the issue raised by the educational challenge is just how to present the Earth Charter in ways which combine effectiveness with intellectual integrity.*

Scepticism about universalist ethics

Last, in my survey of different audiences, I want to look at that group of people who may loosely be called global sceptics, sceptics not about international relations in particular but about the possibility or propriety of global ethics as such. In my experience many people have this view (implicitly if not explicitly) and it is a major source of resistance to anything like the Earth Charter, so the sources of that resistance have to be exposed and confronted. One of the sources of this is a deep distrust of universalism in ethics (and the Earth Charter is clearly universalist), a distrust deriving both from a general relativism in principle and, more commonly, a pragmatic rejection of cultural imperialism and the projection of values. For me an important part of the defusing of this distrust must come from clarity about the relationship between the Earth Charter and global ethics. This can be done

either by giving the historical context of the emergence of global ethics, or analytically by distinguishing just what senses the Earth Charter is and what senses it is not a global ethic.

Historically, the discourse of global ethics (fairly recent) has come out of earlier thinking about cosmopolitanism, universalist ethics and international ethics. Prior to the mid-20th century on the whole ethical thinking, in so far as it was *universalist*, was something came out of a particular tradition (Christianity, the Enlightenment) and its values and norms were assumed to be applicable to everyone – hence suspicions of cultural imperialism by people from elsewhere. In the second half of 20th century serious attempts were made to create and/or discover shared ethical norms and values by having meetings of people from a wide range of different cultural backgrounds. A landmark was the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations 1948). More recent products have been the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* of the Parliament of the World's Religions (Küng & Kuschel 1993), The attempt by the Commission on Global Governance in *Our Global Neighbourhood* (1995) to set out a *global civic ethic*, and the *Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities*, proposed by the Interaction Council in 1997. The Earth Charter is the latest manifestation of attempts at agreement and arguably it is the most complex. This could represent a movement towards greater convergence on a trajectory towards a future universal consensus. But such a teleology cannot be assumed. Different summaries of ethical norms (e.g. the *Declaration toward a Global Ethic*) may appeal to different groups; some people may prefer not to sign up to anything like this, and there are always likely to be others with contrary views. Nevertheless the Earth Charter, whether it is seen as the latest culmination or merely one of a number of such public embodiments of global ethics, illustrates the emergence of a new phenomenon – a global ethic as a widely (but not universally) shared ethic, as opposed to the worldview of a thinker or particular group.

A similar picture emerges if we approach it analytically. Briefly, the Earth Charter can be thought of as a global ethic in two senses as I indicated earlier: as a set of values and norms which adherents to it believe are universally applicable, and as an emerging social construct – part of the globalisation of ethics or what is emerging in the global civil society which the Earth Charter itself stresses. On the other hand it should not be seen as a global ethic in two other senses: a set of norms and values which are now universally accepted or with any reasonable prospect of being universally accepted, and as a complete global ethic where a global ethic is a set of norms and values *plus* the worldview which generates it which has to replace all the existing worldviews that people already have. Any attempt to construe it as one or other of the latter two will fail, and lead to unnecessary resistance from many who might otherwise accept it.

That a common core can be supported by a diversity of source stories (the latter making up people's *complete* global ethics) is not a weakness. It is a strength and an aspect of the respect for diversity which the Earth Charter stresses. That it is not compatible with all source stories is not a weakness either. It would not be the prescriptive document it is (whose adoption will make a *difference*) or have any critical bite, if it were. A global ethic does not have to be universally *accepted* ethic but a widely accepted ethic with the promise of wider acceptance. And in this qualified sense of a global ethic, the Earth Charter represents the best bet in town. *So the issue here is how to understand the Earth Charter as a global ethic so as to defuse various forms of scepticism.*

Concluding theoretical point

In identifying what should be said to different target audiences, some coming with deep resistances, I have identified what I see as a number of elements of the Earth Charter as a global ethic, its presuppositions as a global ethic and the arguments needed to defend it against resistance: arguments against realism in international relations, against internationalist assumptions, against alternative norms such as neoliberalism, against scepticism of universalism in ethics; and arguments for its compatibility with many other belief systems, for seeing it as providing a narrative, perhaps a grand narrative, for some people looking for mental anchorage, and the issue of how to present it to

children. Apart from the issue I have just referred to, all these strategies for responding to different target audiences reflect different aspects of a consistent multi-faceted view of what kind of global ethic the Earth Charter is. The practical interest therefore satisfied the requirement of intellectual integrity. Of course I do not expect all advocates of the Earth Charter to agree with me on just what kind of global ethic the Earth Charter really is, and my recommended strategy for responding to different target audiences might or might not be consistent with different views on what the theoretical truth is. But I assume we agree that consonance between theory and practice is what is needed, and that the best possible use of the Earth Charter is not as something settled, definitive or clear-cut, but as something which we can use as a tool for advocating our global ethic and use in a spirit of critical loyalty.

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