Chapter 8

Conclusion: Toward a Global Ethics for the Twenty-First Century

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This volume set out to demonstrate that moral concerns and ethical arguments can and have affected the behavior of important and powerful actors in contemporary global politics—including states and global corporations—but powerful forces pulling in the opposite direction ensure that the struggle for global ethics must continue. Accordingly, there is much work to be done to reveal and alleviate global injustices, ensure an environmentally sustainable future, and defend human security. Three main questions, collectively addressed by the contributors to this volume, animated this broad claim: How are we to think about global justice in the twenty-first century in light of “unknown” global injustices and the complex social and moral impacts of global corporations? What is the contribution of the sustainability discourse to the ethics and practice of contemporary global environmentalism and how should we move forward toward a new agenda for climate ethics? To what extent is moral progress being made in the ongoing struggle for human security? This concluding chapter will recount how each of the contributions to this volume have addressed these questions, and will suggest three broad lessons that these chapters collectively teach us about how to move forward to advance global ethics in light of the moral challenges that confront global society in the twenty-first century.

What Have We Learned?

First, how are we to think about global justice in light of “unknown” global injustices and the complex impacts of global corporations? One way that the chapters by Ackerly and Bader answer this question
would be to say that we need to think about global justice empirically or inductively, or, as a philosopher might say, "casuistically." In other words, we need to address these ethical problems in a way that is empirical and case-based, wherein the specific circumstances of the case at hand are what are important for evaluating moral responsibility, ethical desirability, and in determining proper responses. Brooke Ackerly’s (chapter 2 in this volume) use of nonideal theory to reveal the hardest cases of injustice is an example of such a case-based, empirical approach to investigating and responding to global injustice. By examining illustrations of the “hardest cases”—namely the gender dimensions of natural disasters and other environmental harms—Ackerly sought to “[observe] the agentially and structurally diffuse forces that contribute to harms [in order to] determine if a particular harm is a function of injustice or misfortune alone.” This empirical observation thus informs the nature and extent of any alleged moral obligation that those in advantaged societies have to those suffering the injustice. Likewise, Bader’s chapter arrived at ethical observations and prescriptions regarding the moral responsibilities of global corporations in a highly inductive fashion though her detailed empirical description and analysis of BP’s activities from China and Indonesia, to its London headquarters. Bader’s chapter suggests that locating the exact moral responsibilities of corporate entities is a highly complex question, given the myriad actors involved and somewhat laissez-faire regulatory schemes. Accordingly, what obligations corporations like BP have may vary from case to case, based on specific circumstances.

Another way that the chapters by Ackerly and Bader address this concern is to suggest that discussions about global justice should consider the distributive dimension to be at least important as the procedural one—at least for the specific concerns of “hardest cases” and the moral responsibilities of corporations such as BP. In these chapters, the cases under analysis indicate that procedural concerns about fairness in processes—such as abiding by rules in a consistent, impartial, and transparent way—do not necessarily result in just outcomes, and may even lead to more injustice. For instance, Ackerly’s observation that women in impoverished areas of the world are eight times more likely to die from natural disasters than men in these same regions tells us something very important about the moral content of the socioeconomic institutions that lead to this gender-specific vulnerability. Yet the “responsibility to inquire” about this injustice leads firstly to the observation of a certain unjust outcome, which leads to the conclusion that the unjust and unethical socioeconomic