

A GLOBAL APPROACH TO ETHICS

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A NEW WORLD

For most of the eons of human existence, people living only short distances apart might as well, for all the difference they made to each other's lives, have been living in separate worlds. A river, a mountain range, a stretch of forest or desert, a sea—those were enough to cut people off from each other. Over the past few centuries the isolation has dwindled, slowly at first, then with increasing rapidity. Now people living on opposite sides of the world are linked in ways previously unimaginable. This is not only because of the obvious technological changes that enable us to fly to the far side of the world in less than 24 hours, nor the instant communication made possible by the phone, television, and the Internet. It is, most significantly, because almost everything we do, from clearing forests and raising cattle to driving a car, affects the climate of the entire planet and is bringing changes that cause, in parts of the world far from us, crops to fail, sea levels to rise, hurricanes to form with greater frequency, and tropical diseases to spread beyond their previous ranges.

Unfortunately our ethics has not changed in keeping with this shrinking of distance. I will focus on two important aspects of this new closeness, where we most urgently need to take a more global ethical approach: climate change, and our obligations to the world's poor. Then I will conclude with some reflections on the need to develop a new global political system.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN ETHICAL ISSUE

If the world continues to increase the emission of greenhouse gases at its present rate, the consequences will be disastrous. The brunt of the impact will most likely be borne by the world's poor, who have less ability to adapt to change. They will have nowhere to go if rising sea levels inundate their land. If the rains on which they rely to grow their crops should fail, they will have nothing to eat.

The United States, with less than 5% of the world's population, emits about 25% percent of the world's greenhouse gases. Australia and Canada have similarly disproportionate emission levels. The nations of the European Union, taken as a whole, have per capita emission levels that are only about half those of the United States, but still much higher than the per capita emissions of developing nations.

What does ethics have to say about this? When a corporation pollutes a river, we expect the cor-

poration to pay to clean it up, and compensate those affected. If that is a fair principle—that the polluter should pay, that those who cause the problem are responsible for fixing it—then the developed nations should be paying the costs of global warming. They are not only the biggest polluters now, they have been for the past century or more. Most of the carbon dioxide emitted by the developed nations over that period is still up in the atmosphere. These countries are currently using far more than their fair share of the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb their waste gases. That statement holds true on any plausible criterion of fairness.

Suppose that instead of asking who is responsible for the problem of global warming, we forget about the past, and focus only on the present. (This is very generous to the developed nations, because it effectively wipes the slate clean, forgiving them for what they have done so far to cause the problem we all face. It allows them to make a fresh start from now on.) We might then compare the ethical problem of global warming to the familiar question of how we should divide a cake if, say, there are eight people and each one would enjoy eating a quarter of the cake. The most obviously fair way of dividing the cake would be to give everyone an equal share. By that rule, the US, Canada, and Australia take about five times as much cake as their fair share, and the European nations take more than twice their fair share. So on this principle too, it is the developed nations that need to cut their emissions most drastically.

We could also consider another possible criterion of fairness, one associated with the American philosopher John Rawls. Perhaps fairness requires that the better-off should sacrifice more to help the worst-off, and those who have the greatest capacity to help should do the most? If we accept that view, then because the North American and European nations, together with Japan and Australia, are among the richest nations in the world, they should be prepared to give up more in order to help those nations that are worse off.

When the United States, under President George W. Bush, and Australia, under Prime Minister John Howard, refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, they were—as the only two industrialized nations not to sign—making other nations bear the burden of taking the first steps toward dealing with the problem of global warming. (After a change of government, Australia subsequently signed the Protocol. As for the United

WHEN THE UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIA REFUSED TO SIGN THE KYOTO PROTOCOL, THEY WERE MAKING OTHER NATIONS BEAR THE BURDEN OF TAKING THE FIRST STEPS TOWARD DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF GLOBAL WARMING.

States, President Barack Obama has said that he accepts that the United States must be part of the solution to climate change, but at the time of writing the United States has still not signed the Protocol or set limits to its greenhouse gas emissions.¹

The Kyoto Protocol was not, in itself, enough. It was always intended as a first step, and did not bind China, India, or any developing nations. Eventually, these nations must also accept limits to their greenhouse gas emissions. But the developed nations must lead by example, acknowledging that they have very high per capita levels of greenhouse gas emissions, and that this is harmful to the entire world. They must make it clear that they are serious about changing that situation. In contrast, although China is now, by some calculations, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, its large population means that it still has relatively modest per capita emissions. India's per capita emissions are much lower still, although its large and growing population, together with its increasing prosperity, means that it also has the potential to become a very major emitter in coming decades.

There are many ways for the affluent nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Most of them are moving away from coal-based electricity generation, because burning coal releases vast quantities of carbon dioxide that, at least at present, we have no economical way of capturing. For this reason, some suggest a switch to nuclear power. But that carries significant risks in itself, since we still do not know how to safely store nuclear waste. Since September 11, 2001, the heightened risk of nuclear material falling into the hands of terrorists, or of a terrorist attack on a nuclear facility, makes building nuclear power stations even more hazardous.

There is a much simpler way in which the developed nations could reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Among those who have followed the debate about climate change, most now understand that rumination—which is involved in the digestive process of animals like cattle and sheep—produces methane, and that methane is a potent greenhouse gas. But few understand just how significant a role reducing the number of ruminant animals could play in helping us to avoid reaching the point of no return. This is largely because discussions about which human activities contribute most to climate change are usually framed in terms of the impact those activities will have over the next century. Taking that perspective, a ton of methane is generally

regarded as 25 times more potent, in causing global warming, than a ton of carbon dioxide. That makes methane highly potent, but this level of potency is heavily outweighed by the very much smaller quantities of methane produced by ruminants, when compared with the quantities of carbon dioxide produced by coal-burning power stations. Hence methane emissions from ruminants are widely seen as being of much less concern than burning coal to generate electricity.

The reason why, over the next century, methane will be only 25 times as potent as carbon dioxide in causing global warming is that it breaks down much more quickly. Unless we find new ways of taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere—something not economically feasible at present—about a quarter of every ton of carbon dioxide we emit now will still be up there warming the planet in 500 years. But with methane, two-thirds of it will be gone in ten years, and by the end of 20 years, 90 percent of it will have broken down. Suppose, however, that instead of taking 100 years as our time frame, we asked which emissions will contribute to climate change over the next 20 years. Then the difference in breakdown becomes less significant, and a ton of methane is not 25, but 72 times more potent than a ton of carbon dioxide in warming our planet. That dramatically changes the equation in terms of which gases should be the target of our drive to reduce emissions.

Which time frame should we use, 100 years or 20? There are compelling reasons to choose the shorter period. Many scientists warn that we are in danger of passing the “point of no return” after which the planet will continue to warm no matter what we do. This is because warming can create feedback loops that reinforce the warming trend. Snow and ice reflect back the sun's warming rays. As the arctic ice cap melts, there will be less reflection, and the sun will warm the earth more than it does now. Similarly, as the permafrost melts in Siberia, it releases methane—which in turn will cause more warming. If we are approaching the point of no return, at which catastrophe becomes inevitable, there is little point in focusing on what impact the gases we are emitting now will have in 2100. Twenty years is the right time frame because if we don't do something drastic by then it may well be too late.

Using the factor of 72 to convert methane to carbon dioxide equivalent dramatically changes the balance between the contributions to global

¹ The methane figures are taken from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fourth Assessment Report, 2007, Technical Summary, table TS.2 (see also Smith 2009).

warming made by ruminant animals and by coal-fired power stations. It means that for some countries, cattle and sheep are the most important source of global warming. Australia's livestock, for example, produce 3.1 megatonnes of methane. When we multiply that 3.1 megatonnes by 72, we get 223 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent—significantly more than the 180 megatonnes of carbon dioxide produced by Australia's coal-fired power stations (AGO 2006). Many other countries have very significant methane emissions from livestock, including Brazil, India, and the United States.

The importance of eating less meat, if we are to slow climate change, has been widely understood at least since 2006, when the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization produced its report, *Livestock's Long Shadow*, which said that livestock was responsible for more emissions than transport. In 2008 Rajendra Pachauri, the chair of the IPCC, made an explicit call to individuals, saying: "Please eat less meat—meat is a very carbon intensive commodity... this is something that the IPCC was afraid to say earlier, but now we have said it" (ABC News 2008).

I am not suggesting that traditional herding people who have no real alternatives to eating ruminant animals should abandon their way of living. But the numbers of animals they have is tiny compared to the vast hordes of cattle, and to a lesser degree sheep, raised in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Eliminating these animals could be a major step towards slowing climate change. Moreover it is something that is technically simple. Unlike phasing out coal-fired power stations, it does not require replacement by either a technology that already exists but is dangerous or a technology that still needs to be invented, like solar electricity generation efficient enough to replace coal. We can cease to eat ruminant animals right now, and it will not bring our way of life to a halt. In fact we'll be healthier for it. Of all the ways in which people in affluent nations could rapidly reduce their contribution to climate change, ceasing to raise ruminant animals—essentially, cattle and sheep—is the one we could most easily achieve within the next decade.

OUR OBLIGATIONS TO THE POOR

Let me now turn to the issue of global poverty. Consider this quotation, from Thomas Aquinas, more than 700 years ago:

...whatever a man has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance. So Ambrosius says, and it is also to be found in the *Decretum Gratiani*: "The bread which you withhold belongs to the hungry: the clothing you shut away, to the naked: and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless."

In the world today there are many people who "have in superabundance." By which I mean that, after satisfying all their needs—for food, shelter, warmth, clothing, health care, and education, for themselves and their children, and some provision for those needs to be met in the future as well—they have money left over for items that are not, by any stretch of the imagination, needs. If you have money to spare for good restaurants, concerts, vacation travel, books, CDs, DVDs, or clothing that you buy because you like it rather than because you need it, you are, in a word, rich. Aquinas could never have envisaged the kind of wealth many people have today—think only of central heating and air-conditioning, of exotic fresh fruits from both temperate and tropical lands delivered to your door, of being able to visit all the wonders of the world. Aquinas would have thought most middle-class citizens of industrialized nations today to be unimaginably rich, and the same goes for those able to live a comparable lifestyle in other countries.

We are very far from sharing our abundance with those in need. In the same world in which more than a billion people live at a level of affluence never previously known, 1.4 billion other people struggle to survive on the purchasing power equivalent of less than \$US1.25 per day. (That is, they actually live on much less than \$US1.25 a day. They live on what \$US1.25 would buy in their countries. At official rates of foreign exchange, it might be as little as 50 US cents a day.) Most of the world's poorest people are undernourished, lack access to safe drinking water or even the most basic health services, and cannot send their children to school. According to UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, nearly ten million children die every year—27,000 per day—from avoidable, poverty-related causes.²

In an article I wrote on this topic in 1972, at the time of a humanitarian emergency in what is now Bangladesh, I asked readers to imagine that they were walking by a shallow pond when they saw a small child who has fallen into the pond and appears to be in danger of drowning

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The poverty line is set by the World Bank, which also calculates the number of people living under it. For the UNICEF figure on the deaths of children under five, see <http://www.unicef.org/childsurvival>.

OUR OBLIGATION TO THE POOR IS NOT ONE OF PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO STRANGERS, BUT OF COMPENSATION FOR HARMS THAT WE HAVE CAUSED, AND ARE STILL CAUSING, TO THEM.

(Singer 1972). In this situation, even though we did nothing to cause the child to fall into the pond, almost everyone agrees that if we can save the child at minimal inconvenience or trouble to ourselves, we ought to do so. Anything else would be callous, indecent, and, in a word, wrong. The fact that in rescuing the child we may, for example, ruin a new pair of shoes, is not a good reason for allowing the child to drown. Similarly if for the cost of a pair of shoes, we can contribute to a health program in a developing country that stands a good chance of saving the life of a child, we ought to do so.

Perhaps, though, our obligation to help the poor is even stronger than this example implies, for we are less innocent than the passer-by who did nothing to cause the child to fall into the pond. Thomas Pogge of Yale University has argued that at least some of our affluence comes at the expense of the poor (Pogge 2004, 2008). He bases this claim, not simply on the usual critique of the barriers that Europe and the United States maintain against agricultural imports from developing countries, but also on less familiar aspects of our trade with developing countries. For example, he points out that international corporations are willing to make deals to buy natural resources from any government, no matter how it has come to power. This provides a huge financial incentive for groups to attempt to overthrow the existing government. For successful rebels are rewarded by being able to sell off the nation's oil, minerals, or timber. This gives them access to enormous wealth—truly incredible sums by the standards of ordinary people in developing countries. They can divert some of it into their personal accounts and use the rest for rewarding their supporters and strengthening their armed forces. The resources they are selling, however, belong to, and should be used for the benefit of, the people as a whole, not whatever thugs manage to seize control of the country.

In their dealings with corrupt dictators in developing countries, Pogge asserts, international corporations are morally no better than someone who knowingly buys stolen goods—with the difference that the international legal and political order recognizes the corporations, not as criminals in possession of stolen goods, but as the legal owners of the goods they have bought. This legal situation is, of course, beneficial for the industrial nations, because it enables us to obtain the raw materials we need to maintain our prosperity, but it is a disaster for resource-rich developing countries, turning the

wealth that should benefit them into a curse that leads to a cycle of coups, civil wars, and corruption. Research confirms that the more a developing country's economy depends on natural resources the less likely it is to be a stable democracy (Lam and Wantchkeon 2003; Jensen and Wantchkeon 2004).

In this light, our obligation to the poor is not one of providing assistance to strangers, but of compensation for harms that we have caused, and are still causing, to them. We need to stop the actions that harm them, and compensate them for the harm we have done up to now.

It might be argued that we do not owe the poor compensation, because our affluence actually benefits them. Living luxuriously, it is said, provides employment, and so wealth trickles down to the poor, helping them more effectively than aid does. When the poor receive money, however, they spend it too, and that is more likely to assist others who are poor. The rich in industrialized nations buy virtually nothing that is made by the very poor. During the past twenty years of economic globalization, although expanding trade has helped lift many of the world's poor out of poverty, it has failed to benefit the poorest 10% of the world's population. Some of the extremely poor, most of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa, have nothing to sell that rich people want, while others lack the infrastructure to get their goods to market. If they can get their crops to a port, European and US subsidies often mean that they cannot sell them, despite—as for example in the case of West African cotton growers who compete with vastly larger and richer US cotton producers—having a lower production cost than the subsidized producers in the rich nations.

The remedy to these problems, it might reasonably be suggested, should come from the state. When aid comes through the government, everyone who earns above the tax-free threshold contributes something, with more collected from those with greater ability to pay. But the amount of foreign aid given by the developed countries of the world is, despite some recent increases, extremely small. The rich nations—that is, the donor nations of the OECD—give on average only 0.43% of their gross national income, or 43 cents in every \$100 they earn.

In any case, the aid given by governments falls far short of the standard Aquinas has set. But we cannot only blame it on governments. What we ourselves do also falls far short of this standard. It falls short, too, of what we would do in the case of the drowning child in the pond.

What, then, should we be doing? The American investor Warren Buffett, one of the world's richest people—set an example when he pledged that he would give \$30 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and another \$7 billion to other charitable foundations. Earlier Bill and Melinda Gates had donated nearly \$30 billion to establish their foundation. This huge fortune is now at work primarily to reduce poverty, disease, and premature death in the developing world.

Philanthropy on this scale raises many ethical questions: Does it do any good? Should we praise people like Buffett and Gates for giving so much, or criticize them for not giving still more? Is it troubling that such momentous decisions are made by a few extremely wealthy individuals? And how do our judgments about them reflect on our own way of living?

Aid has always had its critics. Carefully planned and intelligently directed private philanthropy may be the best answer to the claim that aid doesn't work. Of course, as in any large-scale human enterprise, some aid can be ineffective. Aid organizations are increasingly accepting that they need more rigorous assessment of the efficacy of aid programs, and there are organizations that provide evaluations of aid programs.³ But provided that aid isn't actually counter-productive, even relatively inefficient assistance is likely to do more to advance human wellbeing than luxury spending by the wealthy.

People sometimes suggest that giving aid to the poor is a bottomless pit—we can pour in more and more money, but it will never make much of a difference. In fact, we have never really tried to give the kind of amounts that could truly transform poor countries. It might take less than we think. One way of calculating how much it would cost is to take as our target, at least for the next six years, the Millennium Development Goals, set by the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000. On that occasion the largest gathering of world leaders in history jointly pledged to meet, by 2015, a list of goals that include:

- To halve the proportion of the world's people in extreme poverty (defined as having less income than is required to meet their basic needs).
- To halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- To ensure that children everywhere are able to take a full course of primary schooling.
- To end gender disparity in education.
- To reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

- To reduce by three-quarters the rate of maternal mortality.
- To have halted and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and to have begun to reduce the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.
- To halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

A United Nations task force, headed by Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, estimated the annual cost of meeting these goals to be not more than \$189 billion per year.⁴ This is really quite a modest amount. It would not even require the affluent nations to double their existing aid—which is, as we have seen, on average less than 0.5% of gross national income. So increasing that to 1% would not make a dramatic difference to our lifestyle.

In *The Life You Can Save*, I tried to work out how much would be raised if the richest Americans gave away amounts that seemed easily affordable (Singer 2009, ch. 10). I started with the richest 0.01% of Americans, each of whom earn over \$5 million, and imagined that they would give away a third of their income. Then I scaled this percentage down for those who were still rich, but not quite as rich, until I got to 5% for all those in the richest 10% of Americans, who all earn around \$100,000 a year. Finally I added in an average donation of just 1% of income for the remaining 90% of US taxpayers—assuming that some would not be able to give anything, but others would be able to give more than 1%. When I added up the total this would yield, it came to \$510 billion a year—all just from Americans, with none of them giving amounts that would cause any serious hardship.

Obviously, the rich in Europe, Japan, Australia, Canada and other nations should share with Americans the burden of relieving global poverty. The US is responsible for roughly one-third of the gross domestic product of all OECD nations, so let's take that as its fair share. On that basis, extending the scheme I have suggested worldwide would provide \$1.5 trillion annually for development aid. That's eight times what the task force chaired by Sachs estimated would be required to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

I believe, with Thomas Aquinas, that, for anyone living in abundance, it is a serious moral failing to fail to do, at least, one's fair share of reducing global poverty. It would, in fact, be surprisingly easy for the world's rich to eliminate, or at least come much closer to eliminating, global

³ See, for example, www.GiveWell.net.

⁴ For the Millennium Development Goals, see www.un.org/millenniumgoals. For the UN task force cost estimates, see UN Millennium Development Project 2005, Report to the Secretary-General: Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Overview, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/overviewEngLowRes.pdf> tables 7 and 8, p. 57.

poverty. It has actually become easier over the last thirty years, as the rich have got significantly richer. Of course, wars, both international and civil, will always cause some poverty, and climate change, the other great challenge we must face, could cause much more. But measured against our capacity, the Millennium Development Goals are far too modest. If we fail to achieve them—as on present indications we well might—we have no excuses. The target we should be setting ourselves is not halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, and without enough to eat, but ending large-scale extreme poverty throughout the world. That is a worthy goal, and it is not beyond our reach.

A NEW GLOBAL ETHIC

In this final section I shall turn to the underlying issue of whether we can develop the new, global ethic needed for living in this new world. Although perhaps we can agree, in some theoretical sense, that the value of the life of an innocent human being does not vary according to nationality, it might be said that the abstract ethical idea that all humans are entitled to equal consideration cannot govern the duties of a political leader. Just as parents are expected to provide for the interests of their own children, rather than for the interests of strangers, so too in accepting the office of head of government, one takes on a specific role that makes it one's duty to protect and further the interests of those living in the country one is governing.

It is true that there is today no world political community, and as long as that situation prevails, we must have nation-states, and the leaders of those nation-states must give preference to the interests of their citizens. But is the division of the world's people into sovereign nations a dominant and unalterable fact of life? Here our thinking has been affected by the horrors of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. In Rwanda, a United Nations inquiry took the view that 2,500 military personnel, given the proper training and mandate, might have saved 800,000 lives (UN 1999). Kofi Annan was UN Secretary-General when the inquiry completed its report. As undersecretary-general for peacekeeping operations at the time, he must bear some responsibility for what the inquiry termed a "terrible and humiliating" paralysis. The experience changed his views. As Secretary-General, he urged that "the world cannot stand aside when gross and systematic violations of human rights are tak-

ing place." Yet such gross and systematic violations continue to take place in Darfur today. Annan has said that we need "legitimate and universal principles" on which we can base intervention (Annan 1999). That means a redefinition of state sovereignty, or more accurately, an abandonment of the absolute idea of state sovereignty that has prevailed in Europe since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

We have lived with the idea of sovereign states for so long that they have come to be part of the background not only of diplomacy and public policy but also of ethics. Implicit in the term "globalization" rather than the older "internationalization" is the idea that we are moving beyond the era of growing ties between nations and are beginning to contemplate something beyond the existing conception of the nation-state. But this change needs to be reflected in all levels of our thought, and especially in our thinking about ethics.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Karl Marx gave a one-sentence summary of his theory of history: "The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist" (Marx 1977). Today he could have added: "The jet plane, the telephone, and the Internet give you a global society with the transnational corporation and the World Trade Organization." Technology changes everything—that was Marx's claim, and if it was a dangerous half-truth, it was still an illuminating one. As technology has overcome distance, economic and social globalization has followed, for good and for bad. In European supermarkets, fresh vegetables flown in from Kenya are offered for sale alongside those grown locally. Instant digital communication spreads the nature of international trade from actual goods to skilled services. When I need help with my computer, my call is answered by someone in India.

The increasing degree to which there is a single world economy is reflected in the development of new forms of global governance, the most controversial of which has been the World Trade Organization, but the WTO is not itself the creator of the global economy. At the same time, the greater movement of people means that infectious diseases spread more rapidly around the world, and of course terrorism can also extend its reach globally, causing us minor annoyance every time we travel by air, but leading some nations to much greater intervention in the affairs of other countries. Indeed, from the broad acceptance of the US attack on Afghanistan after September 11, 2005, we can con-

clude that world opinion and international law now accept that every nation has an obligation to every other nation of the world to suppress activities within its borders that might lead to terrorist attacks carried out in other countries, and that it is reasonable to go to war with a nation that does not do so. If the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser Franz Joseph could see this, he might well feel that the world has come round to his view. For what the US did to the government of Afghanistan is difficult to justify without also justifying the ultimatum that Austria-Hungary made to Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914—an ultimatum that, at the time, was regarded by Great Britain, Russia, and France as an attack on the sovereignty of the state of Serbia.

Marx argued that in the long run we never reject advances in the ease with which we satisfy our material needs. Hence history is driven by the growth of productive forces. He would have been contemptuous of the suggestion that globalization is something foisted on the world by a conspiracy of corporate executives meeting at the World Economic Forum, and he might have agreed with Thomas Friedman's remark that the most basic truth about globalization is, "No one is in charge" (Friedman 2000). For Marx that is a statement that epitomizes humanity in a state of alienation, living in a world in which, instead of ruling ourselves, we are ruled by our own creation, the global economy.

Marx also believed that a society's ethic is a reflection of the economic structure to which its technology has given rise. Thus a feudal economy in which serfs are tied to their lord's land gives you the ethic of feudal chivalry based on the loyalty of knights and vassals to their lord, and the obligations of the lord to protect them in time of war. A capitalist economy requires a mobile labor force able to meet the needs of the market, so it breaks the tie between lord and

vassal, substituting an ethic in which the right to buy and sell labor is paramount.

Our newly interdependent global society, with its remarkable possibilities for linking people around the planet, gives us the material basis for a new ethic. Marx would have thought that such an ethic would serve the interests of the ruling class, that is, the rich nations and the transnational corporations they have spawned. But the rich nations do have an interest in the development of a more global ethical viewpoint. They need this because a poor, undeveloped world poses many risks to their security—from the spread of diseases, from terrorism, and from waves of tens of millions of refugees whose livelihoods could be destroyed by climate change.

I have argued that as more and more issues increasingly demand global solutions, the extent to which any state can independently determine its future diminishes. We therefore need to strengthen institutions for global decision-making and make them more responsible to the people they affect. That line of thought leads in the direction of a world community with its own directly elected legislature, perhaps slowly evolving along the lines of the European Union.

There is little political support for such ideas at present. Apart from the threat that the idea poses to the self-interest of the citizens of the rich nations, many would say it puts too much at risk, for gains that are too uncertain. It is widely believed that a world government would be, at best, an unchecked bureaucratic behemoth, and at worst, a global tyranny, unchecked and unchallengeable. Those thoughts have to be taken seriously. They present a challenge that should not be beyond the best minds in the fields of political science and public administration, once those people adjust to the new reality of the global community and turn their attention to issues of government beyond national boundaries.

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