

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Review of: Ismail Serageldin and Joan Martin-Brown (Eds.), Ethics and Values: A Global Perspective

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Guptara, Prabhu
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-03 15:03:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173488

Published in *Business Ethics: A European Review* (journal published by Blackwells, Oxford, UK)

Ismail Serageldin and Joan Martin-Brown (Eds.), *Ethics and Values: A Global Perspective*, The World Bank, Washington DC, USA, 1998, price not mentioned

Though this volume brings together presentations which were not originally given in the context of business, it is startling to consider the volume in that context.

Texts and discussions on business ethics are, in my experience, curiously self-limited. The subject is too often confined to questions of narrow choices for individual and corporate action, ignoring entirely the fact that business as a whole activity enriches the few. While business may or may not further impoverish, in an absolute sense, those who are already poor, business does often (if not always) increase the gap between the rich and poor. At the same time, business activity has usually impoverished the environment and played at least a substantial role in eliminating whole species. (It is true that the elimination of species also happens for „natural“ reasons, but that is no defence of business in this context, just as the fact that all human beings die „naturally“ does not give me a licence to eliminate any or many individual's lives by specific actions on my part.) So this book reflects a fine sense of purpose, and voices the moral outrage necessary to tackle the enormous and growing inequalities that lie at the nexus of environmental protection in the interest of future generations, current patterns of production and consumption, and related questions of food security, poverty and the abuse of power.

The volume contains some startling facts and figures in each of the areas it touches. For example, in the field of environmental concern, it reminds us that the US emits 24 times as much per capita as India does (historically, the rich have been responsible for by far the greatest quantity of greenhouse gases and continue to make this remarkable contribution to the depletion of the environment). Regarding patterns of consumption, it reminds us that the top 20 per cent of the world population consumes 83% of world income, while the remaining 80% live on 17% (the bottom 20% actually live on 1.4%). More important, these gaps have been growing; a generation ago, the top 20% was only 30 times as rich as the bottom 20%, today it is 60 times as rich.

However, it is not merely a matter of relative contribution to environmental degradation or relative poverty. There are shocking issues of absolute poverty as well: it is unbelievable that there should be some 800 million people going hungry in a world that can easily provide for that most basic of human needs; it is obscene that 3,500 children actually die of starvation every day.

While issues of relative and absolute poverty are clearly related to the question of justice, environmental issues do not immediately appear to be related to that subject. It requires some thought and a willingness to extend one's sensibility to accept that environmental issues have to do with the rights of generations yet unborn. Some contributors to this volume go further, ascribing „rights“ to every species on earth – presumably they mean animal species but, if so, it is difficult to see on what basis they would then not extend such „rights“ to plant species, to minerals, and so on. Their argument arises principally from an apprehension of biodiversity and ecosystems: „This is the first time that the activity of a particular species – us human beings –

could truly destroy the ecosystems on which we and other species depend for our continued existence. We are also, by our actions, irreversibly destroying biodiversity. The new moral dilemma is that we are the first species to be able to do so and to be conscious of it. This has happened on our watch, that of our generation. Thus there is no ducking the issue. We must consider human activity in terms of what it could mean for other species, for we do deny them the very right to exist“ (p. 4).

The issue of what sort of theory of justice we hold is very much at the heart of economic development and business ethics. In the last century, people such as William Wilberforce looked at slavery and pronounced it monstrous and unconscionable. „They did not argue this from economic self-interest, or on an economic basis, but from moral outrage. Today the existence of hunger and starvation in a world of over-abundance is equally monstrous and unconscionable and must be abolished. We must with the same zeal and moral outrage attack the complacency that would turn a blind eye to the silent holocaust which claims some 40,000 lives every day“, as Ethics and Values stirringly puts it (p. 3).

What have such facts and figures and ideas and appeals to do with business?

Everything. Because it is essentially business that has brought about that explosion in income differentials. It is business interests which at least in part create and perpetuate the legal and trade environment that allows if not forces people to become relatively poorer and poorer, and indeed to starve. It is legislative arrangements which businesses help create and support that determine the speed of environmental degradation or restoration.

Ethics and Values constitutes the proceedings of an Associated Event at the Fifth Annual World Bank Conference on Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development. It was published to „inform other explorations of ethics and values, and support policies to implement environmentally and socially sustainable development“ (page iv). The event was principally organised, and the publication of the volume masterminded, by Mr Ismail Serageldin, Vice-President, Special Programs, at The World Bank. That he continues to organise such events and publish such proceedings proves Serageldin to be an unusual optimist, because he continues to do so while being quite aware of the absurd extremity of our situation.

The Event was in two parts and the papers here are organised accordingly. The first part was divided into five themes: Reflections on the 21st Century; Global Survival: a Convergence of Faith and Science; Global Patrimony and Local Justice; Ethics and Biotechnology: Realities and Uncertainties; Global Values: Requirements for a Humane Future. Part Two focused on the issues that link the requirements of human settlements, viable communities and healthy and diverse ecosystems. Papers were presented from many different points of view (American, post-modern, Christian, African, and so on) though the overall thrust was similar. The Event was designed as an occasion where „we can deliberate and learn from each other, where we can identify the areas where we must act, and where we can build a consensus on the core set of values that should guide our actions“ (p. 6). ... „If we fail to reach a consensus and modify our behavior – from consumerism in the North to high fertility in the South, from „short-termism“ in decision-making to the lack of a holistic perspective in integrating full costs and real prices into our evaluations – if we fail to make these changes, then our own future and that of our children and grandchildren will be bleak

indeed. We will be doomed to a future of misery and wretchedness if we survive at all. Our civilization will have been shown to be shallow and meaningless“, writes Mr Serageldin (p. 7).

However, the strongest challenge is not in relation to the *questions* regarding which human beings may not yet have clarity; the strongest challenge is in relation to the *answers* regarding which there is complete or at least sufficient clarity - but regarding which we have no will, as a global community, to undertake definitive or significant action.

The volume has some instances of flawed analysis, for example: „our behavior toward each other, toward the earth, and toward the myriad other species with which we share the world’s bounty is not foreordained – in these matters we are indeed the masters of our fate“ (p. 7). What the author probably means is that human beings are free to choose actions and approaches different from those that we are committed to currently. He probably does not mean (because it would be patently untrue) that we are free to choose the consequences of our actions (in that sense, we are not masters of our fate, for the consequences of our actions are written into the structure of the universe, and we have the choice only of following our current destructive course of behaviour or amending our ways).

Another contributor argues persuasively that there should be fair compensation from companies (which wish to patent genes from plants) to the people of the area from which the plants are taken, and suggests a sort of licence arrangement, with the

market varying the value of the licence; but he then goes on to suggest that the resulting money be given to CGIAR (an international body)!

Other contributors make the entirely false assumption that there is an undersupply of essential resources, when the fact is that we are, for the first time in history, living with over-abundance of every conceivable resource whether agricultural or high-tech; over-capacity and over-production is what is depressing prices worldwide. The problem is not under-supply; it is skewed distribution and continued governance of countries by a sort of kleptocracy.

However, the book is excellent at raising the profile of important issues, for example regarding how science affirms belief systems in some realms, yet denies them in other realms; or, regarding the commercialisation of education so that we have a generation of people highly educated technically but quite under-educated morally. This is probably the first time that such „old“ questions have been raised at the level of The World Bank.

But the book also poses new questions: Do we have the right to create totally new life forms by inserting the genes of an animal into a plant, for example? Is it proper, just and acceptable that a life form should be patentable? Do we have the alternative of not accepting some or all of the developments in biotech?

However, though there are some thought-provoking facts and figures, some good rhetoric reflecting the passion of the participants, and some excellent questions, there is little analysis of the reasons for the increasing gap between verbiage and

performance in ethical and environmental matters in our world. So the book has little by way of solutions either to the ethical dilemmas or to the practical problems delineated.

My own questions on reading this volume are: What is it that has produced the runaway consumerism of our time, the insatiable desire for more and more? Why is the human race in thrall to such inordinate greed and lust for power as are likely to destroy the ecosystems on which we all depend? What can be done to check these? What stops people seeing the increasing concentration of wealth and increasing incidence of poverty? Why is that the requirements of most belief systems conflict so profoundly with the march of technology (as Jacques Ellul demonstrated even in the Sixties)? It is obvious that any economy wholly oriented towards the market will inevitably seek to serve people who can pay, thus ignoring the needs of the majority of the world population; the idealism of the Sixties which produced much of the desire to eliminate the real problems of the injustices of our world seems to have been overtaken by a naïve and wholly false belief in the efficacy of the market to eliminate such injustices: why has this happened and what can be done about it? Social as well as economic influences shape technology; business needs to draw upon social values in setting agendas for scientists and engineers: what system changes are needed before business can in fact do so?

These are large and unpopular questions, and we must be grateful to Serageldin and his brave band for raising them.

Prabhu Gupta

Professor Prabhu Gupta is Director, Executive & Organisational Development, Wolfsberg Executive Development Centre (Switzerland); he is also non-executive Chairman of ADVANCE: Management Training Ltd (UK), and continues as Visiting Professor at universities and business schools round the world.