

Globethics Repository



Who needs ethics? An apology

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	Book chapter
Authors	Howe Lopez, Lucy
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-07-15 18:01:31
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4011262

WHO NEEDS ETHICS? AN APOLOGY

Lucy Howe López⁶

Ethics Has No Victims

“The problem with trying to raise money for an organisation like Globethics.net is that there are no victims.” This was the conclusion that one of our colleagues at Globethics.net, a fundraising specialist with decades of experience in particular in the humanitarian field, came to as we worked together on how we could best appeal to our supporters.

It is true, by and large, that in many fundraising campaigns, especially for humanitarian causes, you can clearly identify those who are in need and hold them up for all to see. They are, among others, the vulnerable, hungry, sick, differently abled, children, the elderly, poor, abandoned, stateless, oppressed, uneducated, excluded, survivors of disaster, conflict or war and/or abused or deprived or discriminated against in any number of ways. We can add to the list of causes the environment, oceans, animal and plant life depleted and extinguished at an alarming rate, and cultural heritage and historical monuments, threatened and crumbling. You can put a face or an image to the campaign, a person or a group, a place, or an animal, that represents those and that which, without the help of the wider community, will probably not survive or at best will fail to thrive.

⁶ Lucy Howe López, Deputy Executive Director, Globethics.net.

The call is for those who have to share with those who do not have, so that basic needs are met to live in dignity without fear of want. The appeal is ultimately based upon the Golden Rule, common to all religions, to do unto others as you would have done unto you. Also on the premise that we are only as strong as the weakest among us; if one among us falls then in a real and important sense we all fall. The call for aid recognises that what is done to the least of us is done to all, that we are interconnected and care for the other is tantamount to self-care. As an old Irish priest friend of mine would say, “What goes around, comes around”, whether it be generosity or hate, compassion or neglect, extending hospitality or closing the door on your neighbour, or perhaps more simply standing a round of drinks when it’s your turn or not at all.

When talking about ethics, as a cause to be fought for, who and/or what are the needy, how do they suffer, are their lives under threat, do they struggle to survive or fail to thrive in the absence of ethics, and if so, what can be done to help them?

This article is not an apology in the sense of asking for forgiveness for something; it is an apology in the sense of making a case for something. In this instance the argument is that there most certainly are victims who suffer from the absence of ethics. Faces and images can be put to this appeal and the needy can be found; in many cases only one look in the bathroom mirror will suffice, i.e. when it comes to ethics the vast majority of us have or are likely to suffer the lack of ethics. We, in fact, are the needy.

What Happened to You? The Worst We Can Be

A question that often touches a person who is suffering or hurt, is not, “What’s wrong with you?” but rather, “What happened to you?” Each one of us has been wronged, at some point(s) in our lives; by another person or people, by an institution or a system, directly or indirectly, deliberately or otherwise. Such wrongs leave marks and

scars. Dig a little and we have plenty to be angry about, and anger that is not expressed often ends in depression and feelings of worthlessness, futility and bewilderment, and/or in the re-enactment of that which has been done to us being done to others in turn, repeating the cycle. This pattern can recur over generations accompanied at the best of times by an equivalent struggle and desire for redress, balance and wholeness, for a fixing of the brokenness.

I have come to the conclusion over the last half century of observation and reflection that whenever a subject becomes an object, invariably harm tends to and actually does happen. As soon as a human or non-human subject is perceived to be and actually is objectified, then that opens the door for 'it' to be treated in a way that is less than human or humane. This act of objectification in and of itself may well be a necessary step for the one or several who are engaged as perpetrators to be able to do what is done and to erect an emotional and psychological shield from the reality of what is or has taken place. A break, divorce, disconnect, a conscious effort to dehumanise, often coupled with a real or perceived threat to and overriding desire for personal survival, and perhaps for the survival of a group or people might be made to rationalise, justify and cope.

Objectification is often referred to in the context of the (mis)treatment of women, in those instances when women and girls are seen in particular as sexual objects or as servants to be used and abused. This objectification is often internalised with the consequence that women gradually become disempowered, weakened, brought low and dehumanised through an exercise of might. What are the effects on those men and women who objectify women and girls (and in some cases also men and boys)? The perpetrators or promoters of such a narrow view of their fellow human beings surely lose some of their own humanity in the process, at least when you look at such practices from a 'do as you would be done by' perspective.

Conflict situations are also occasions for objectification; soldiers belonging to an opposing armed force become ‘the enemy’, demonised, abstracted and faceless. Bombs and drones are aimed at military and non-military ‘targets’, including civilians. The accidental killing of non-army personnel is termed ‘collateral damage’ and military forces are casualties of (not so) ‘friendly fire’. The kill or be killed exigency on the battlefield leaves its mark, it has a cost; soldiers know that if they do not shoot, they themselves will in all likelihood die. They shoot and at that moment a part of themselves does die, is sacrificed in the killing of the other, especially non-military casualties, in order to survive.

Among civilians in conflict settings there are unfortunately numerous examples of ethnic minorities or religious groups that are treated as less than human, including the segregation and genocide of the Jewish population in Europe during the Second World War, and the exile and killings of the Muslim Rohingya people more recently in Myanmar.

Much closer to home, we have all thought, said and done things that are morally wrong, that has caused harm and the chances are that we will continue to do so, either intentionally or not. To err is human so the saying goes; we are none of us blameless.

The Best We Can Be

As our Globethics.net Executive Director, Prof. Dr Obiora Ike, often says, “Ethics is where life is” demonstrating by bringing his fingertips and thumbs of each hand together that ethics touches life, it does not exist in a vacuum, unrelated to and distinct from our day-to-day lives and concerns. We talk then about the ethics of something, of artificial intelligence, of education, of warfare, of journalism, of politics, of health, of business, of the environment, of law enforcement, of humanitarian aid, of culture and so on. When applying ethics, we bring our rich and diverse principles, values, virtues and moral consciousness

and experience to bear in a reflective and dynamic way on specific situations and fields of study and action.

In my view, ethics is foundational; it is universal and transversal, it underpins the rule of law and human rights. Common ethical values can be identified, agreed and called upon to serve as common ground when those of differing worldviews, religious beliefs or traditional or cultural practices cannot agree. Ethics and ethical dialogue and reflection have the potential to reconcile, build consensus and unite and bring peace.

The exercise of ethical reflection does not give us easy, black and white or either/or answers, but rather answers that correspond to every shade of the entire spectrum of colours, as many answers as there are people on this earth. The trick then is to arrive at individual and collective, ideally consensual judgements that respond in as adequate a way as possible in the circumstances to the moral demands of particular moments and situations, bound by time and place and the political will and resources at hand. Then we have to choose, decide and act, or not, in the full knowledge that we, and others, have to live with the consequences. What can be soul crushing and yet at the same time a potential source of self-reconciliation and peace, is that there is no perfect decision; optimally it will be only as much as, though no less than, the best we can do and be when all things are considered.

There are ample grounds for humility and little for smugness when decisions are taken in the interests of trying to make them as close to being ‘right’ or ‘good’ or ‘correct’ as possible. Then, of course, our received and tried and tested ideas of what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ may well not be ‘right’ or ‘good’ at all for others – most parents can tell you this – then the cry goes out, ‘I didn’t know that that would happen, that they would feel or react that way’. This position might be described as one of doing the least harm rather than a strict or absolute adherence to the no harm principle.

Conclusion

To go back to the question asked at the beginning – “When talking about ethics... who and/or what are the needy...?” I would argue that the needy, quite simply, are all those who have a responsibility, all those who hold or are given power over something or somebody, all who have ever had or ever will have to take a decision or undertake an action that affects another living being, common property or cultural artefact. How can these people – all people in fact – be helped?

Can the consequences of applying or not applying ethics be quantified; can a price be put upon it? One could argue that ethics is priceless, that it is of such great value that our very survival and that of our environment ultimately depend upon the exercise of ethics, individually and as a collective. At the same time, attempts have been made to quantify the absence of ethics, often in the business sector or in the political arena. For example, unethical practices such as negligence, fraud, corruption and insider trading within companies can not only bring a business into disrepute but can cause its downfall. The cost in terms of lost assets and livelihoods can run to millions.

When we start looking at what happens when ethics is not applied, we might well see that the occasions for wrongdoing, for objectification, for forgetting the preciousness and dignity of the self and the other in our societies are embedded, systemic and frankly overwhelming. With a more positive outlook, however, the daily opportunities to shoulder and exercise our individual and collective responsibilities, to recognise and call out injustice, to speak with and for those who have forgotten how and with compassion understand that those who harm are also harmed, can bring healing and wholeness.

Opening our eyes and ears and paying attention means that we cannot not engage. In our modern interconnected world we can touch so many, our power for right action is great indeed. We cannot do it alone though. We are each other's mirrors, we reflect each other and in our

way through life cannot often see what others see, that there are other and better ways if we would only stop and listen and look.

One of the most effective and sustainable ways to help is to actively encourage, enable and empower, i.e. to love, each other and thereby ourselves. This is what we try to do at Globethics.net. We strive to be an organisation and a global network of individuals and institutions that mutually contributes to, promotes and reinforces a positive cycle of ethical reflection, dialogue and action, starting from where we are with a focus on education. As our former Board of Foundation member and Senior Advisor Prof. Dr Heidi Hadsell put it rather more succinctly and profoundly in answer to the question “Why are we here (at Globethics.net)?”, “We are here because we care”. We care about and recognise that there is a need for ethics in the world and the benefits of investing in it for the common good are manifold, not least of which is peace of mind and a life well-lived.⁷

⁷ Acknowledgements: With thanks to Carlos López Hurtado, husband and friend, and to our three best critics, our sons, Martin, Adrian and Gabriel, for their thoughts and contributions.