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One World, Many Worlds:
Ethics in the Era of Globalisation

Surendra Munshi
Indian Institute of Management Calcutta

***Abstract*: This paper is concerned with the problems that arise in establishing common ethical standards in the present world. This is done through a critique of Peter Singer's thesis of one world. Appreciating that he has introduced a new dimension to the discussion on globalisation, certain limitations in his argument are analysed in the spirit of taking forward the discussion on an important theme. It is contended that we live in one world and at the same time in many worlds. Human beings as Singer argues are more connected today than ever before; we are at the same time divided by our partial views, interests, legacies and fears. This brings the agenda of a global ethic to the forefront with all the complexity that is involved. Some of the issues concerning this complexity are discussed.**

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contact: smunshi@iimcal.ac.in

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Surendra Munshi

Peter Singer has a clear concern in his *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*.[1] A changing world that is increasingly becoming one throws up a challenge to which we must respond. The basic unit for our ethical thinking should be this one world that is characterised by increasing interconnectedness. 'The thesis of this book is that how well we come through the era of globalization (perhaps whether we come through it at all)', he writes, 'will depend on how we respond ethically to the idea that we live in one world'. He develops his argument carefully through chapters on one atmosphere, one economy, one law and one community.

The impact of human activity on the atmosphere is a clear case for us to act globally. Starting with the awareness in the 1970s that the protective ozone layer of the planet was under threat that led to the signing of the Montreal Protocol in 1985, we are faced with a more difficult problem now. Scientific evidence is mounting on climate change or global warming. The Third Assessment Report released in 2001 by a working group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicates that our planet has been warming over the past century and temperatures are now rising at a higher rate. This is due to the presence of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere which has reached the highest level ever mostly due to human activities. Average global temperature will keep rising if we continue to emit increasing amounts of greenhouse gases. The consequences of this warming will be devastating for human beings. Sea levels will rise taking away land and less reliable rainfall patterns will affect agriculture involving millions of people. Hurricanes, storms and tropical diseases will become more widespread. The consequences for animals and biodiversity will be no less severe. This calls for a shift in perspective on ethics. With our atmosphere under threat and human actions in one part of the world having bearing on human lives elsewhere, ethical responsibilities need to be redefined. Here he finds rich nations at fault. Not only have they had high emissions during the past century that has led to the problem but their emission levels continue to be high today. The United States heads the list in per capita emissions going beyond the levels of Japan and West European nations. The present trend is discouraging. Carbon dioxide emissions in the United States, for example, were higher in 2000 than in 1990. It does not help when the United States which pollutes the most does not accept the 1997 Kyoto Protocol which is concerned with limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

Globalisation is creating one economy. Singer has two questions to ask here. Has inequality increased? Have the poor become worse off during this period? Crude facts that he begins with are revealing. Of more than 6 billion people in the world about one-fifth (1.2 billion) live on less than $1 per day and nearly half (2.8 billion) live on less than $2 per day. Of these 1.2 billion people, about 826 million people live in desperate poverty characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease and other deprivations. The world's richest three individuals command assets exceeding the combined gross national products of all the least developed countries claiming a total population of 600 million people. Even though the data on the issue of inequality are not clear, it can be safely said that there was an increase in the gap between the average income of the richest countries and the poorest countries, each containing a tenth of the world's population. On the issue of the poor becoming worse off during the era of globalisation, while there is some evidence that the number of people who are undernourished may have fallen, the condition of the world's poorest countries in terms of per capita income has deteriorated and the absolute number of people living below the poverty line has risen since 1987. It is possible, he concludes, that globalisation may have helped some to escape poverty while throwing some others deeper into it. It is in this context that he considers the role of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), an organisation hailed for its role in taking world trade forward and at the same time criticised by its critics as an enemy of mankind. His judgement on this organisation is clear. He finds that the WTO places economic considerations above other concerns and it curtails in practice national sovereignty. While he finds its operation undemocratic, it is not clear to him whether it makes the rich richer at the cost of the poor, for the available evidence is not conclusive on the point.

What can be done? His answer to the question operates at two levels. The first level may be identified as the individual level. It is important for all of us to realise that we share the same planet. Just as September 11 showed that no country is immune to deadly forces originating elsewhere, our threatened atmosphere and global economy show that human action in one part of the world has impact on other parts. It is important to realise that the emission of carbon dioxide from vehicles that use more fuel or the use of deodorant if an aerosol spray is used causes environmental damage that affects lives of people living far away. Just this realisation is not enough. People living in affluent nations have a duty towards those living in poverty in different parts of the world. The urgent issue is how rich nations can take care of more than one billion poor people in the world. Here he finds the record of rich nations not satisfactory. Against the development aid target set by the United Nations many years ago of 0.7 per cent of gross national product (GNP), only a small number of developed nations meet this modest target. Others fail to reach it. Official development assistance among the affluent nations, in fact, fell in terms of their combined GNP from 0.33 per cent in 1985 to 0.22 per cent in 2000. None performed as poorly as the United States which in 2000 gave 0.10 per cent of its GNP. When private aid was taken into account as well, it turned out that the total aid flow from the United States was not more than 0.14 per cent of its GNP, still one-fifth of the target set by the United Nations.

Individuals in rich nations have a role to play. Singer refers here to Peter Unger's book *Living High and Letting Die*.[2] By an imaginary account Unger shows that it appears

intuitively wrong for someone called Bob to save his prized Bugatti car and not a child in a situation when he could save only one of them. Similarly, individuals of rich nations have a choice to make in saving the lives of the children of the world. How much should be given? Donation of about $100 per adult per year for the next fifteen years would mean achieving the development goals set by the United Nations Millennium Summit. Singer's recommendation goes beyond it for eliminating global poverty, not just reducing it. All those who earn enough to indulge in frivolities common in affluent societies should donate at least one per cent of their income for the benefit of the poor of the world. This is their global responsibility. Not doing it would be morally wrong.

We may now identify another level at which Singer responds to the question on what needs to be done. Let us call it the institutional level. His suggestion here is less systematically developed than what he has to say on the responsibility of individuals living in rich nations. It is therefore necessary to put his position together from what he says at different places in the book. The example of the United States that refuses to commit itself to reducing harmful emissions leads him to consider the need for global institutions and principles of international law that will limit national sovereignty. The point is further developed when he considers the global economy. There is a need for global or transnational bodies which will operate democratically. The need to promote democracy is relevant at the national level as well. A new conception of legitimacy is needed which recognises that government as legitimate which has the support of the people. The example of the European Union is useful here. The conditions imposed by the European Union for membership already encourage democracy among those countries which desire to join it. The Warsaw Declaration of 2000 recognises 'the universality of democratic values' and commits governments to promote democratic governance. The need for global institutions extends to law and its administration. Singer supports the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. The United Nations should be further democratised and should have the right to intervene in instances of crime against humanity. A global ethic which can draw from the 'Golden Rule' that stipulates treat others as you would like them to treat you does not stop at national boundaries. He endorses the attempt to draw up a 'Declaration of a Global Ethic' of which different versions are in circulation at present. The task for our present century, then, is to develop a suitable form of government for this one world which could literally be seen for the first time as one from a point in space.

Singer has introduced a new dimension to the discussion on globalisation. He raises questions which cannot be ignored. He tries to grapple with contemporary problems in a manner that brings philosophy closer to everyday life. It is difficult as a concerned citizen of the world not to be touched by his commitment. This is the reason why it is important to examine his argument closely in the spirit of taking forward the discussion on an important theme. If one were to put his position in the form of a slogan it could be said his advice is: 'save the world, save the poor'. The world needs to be saved because the threatened world puts our lives across the planet in danger. The poor need to be saved, for not to save them would be immoral. Moreover, he quotes approvingly from a report issued by a United Nation panel: 'In the global village, someone else's poverty very soon becomes one's own problem: of lack of markets for one's products, illegal immigration,

pollution, contagious disease, insecurity, fanaticism, terrorism'. For the rich nations not to take a global ethical point of view is morally wrong and also a danger to their own security. In taking this position he accepts the forward march of market across the world. Marx is quoted on the handmill and the steam mill and it is believed that he would have added today that the internet and other developments in technology give us a global society with the transnational corporation. Here he overlooks the point that Marx talked of not only technology but also of relations of production. Marx clearly emhasised in his writings that technology has to be understood in the context of social relations which promote its progress and also put fetters on its further growth, depending on the manner in which these relations stand to technology at a given point in time. If global market forces impose in the words of Thomas Friedman[3] 'a Golden Straitjacket' on country after country, there is no reason to believe that scholars need to wear this straitjacket as well. Singer does not explore the possibility of an alternative to this mode of capitalism and the discredited mode of socialism that did not work. Even within this limitation his economic analysis could have gained by some additional considerations. His use of aggregate data from development reports, for instance, does not indicate the tragedy of world hunger in the midst of increasing food supplies. It is important to note here the role of agribusiness companies which control several sectors of exportable corps in poor countries with negative impact on traditional peasantry. To the cynical question from a person in a rich country, 'Why should I give?', it would make a stronger argument if it could be pointed out that the affluence of the person was in some ways at the cost of the poor. Buying cocoa or coffee in affluent societies does not principally benefit those who are engaged in producing it. To return to Bob and his Bugatti car, his choice would be more pressing if he knew that the possession of his prized car had something to do with the endangered condition of the child.

Yet another criticism that can be brought against Singer is that he writes from the perspective of 'we', 'citizens of the industrialized nations'. Even though this perspective altruistically considers the poor elsewhere it does not make his programme less partial. It could well be argued that there may be different voices from poor countries. If Marx could speak today so could, for example, Gandhi who does not find any mention in his book. Gandhi would reject the emerging world order which neglects need and promotes greed. He would tell the poor of his nation as indeed the poor everywhere to take responsibilities for their destinies. He would work for their upliftment against an unjust order not as a donor with some cash to spare but as a person performing a service. Towards the end of his life Gandhi presented a moving idea: ‘I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away’.[4] Gandhi was concerned with changing the people and their world, a concern that belongs to Singer's practical ethics as well. It is important to note as Keith Burgess-Jackson[5] has done that for Singer the point of ethical consideration is primarily to change the world.

Do we really live in one world? Singer seems to believe that we already live in one world, though there are times when he seems to indicate that the world we live in is in the process of becoming one. He talks of 'global community' as well as of 'the process of developing a global community'. In his review of Singer's book Meghnad Desai[6] points out that we are still divided by economic criteria, not to forget race, religion, ethnicity and gender. Moreover, to say that we live in a village is not to presume that harmony prevails among those who live in it. It would be nice if the world were like what Singer would like it to be. This is unhappily not the case. Desai concludes: 'Our World is not one World. Not yet'. It is possible to argue that we live in one world and at the same time in many worlds. As Singer argues human beings are more connected today than ever before. Human action in one part of the world has impact on other parts. This is the objective condition of human existence today made possible by technology and economy and the threat to our planet caused by these forces. Subjectively, though, we are divided by our partial views, interests, legacies and fears. It will be a mistake to underestimate these connections just as we will be poorly advised if we are unmindful of the different worlds that we continue to live in. September 11 is an apt metaphor for this connection as well as for the divisions that persist and the conflict that this condition can give rise to. Trade is an incentive for betterment as Desai notes, but this trade has to be mutually beneficial and seen as such so that resentments do not build up among any of the trading partners.

This brings the agenda of a global ethic to the forefront. Singer does well to be concerned with it. Against the possible charge that to intervene in other countries for protecting human rights amounts to cultural imperialism, he criticises moral relativists on the ground that if they are taken seriously there can be no ethical argument against cultural imperialism. If two persons speak in a manner that each forms judgements relative to the moral standard of that person's society then there will be no way for any one of them to get out of the trap for expressing transcultural or objective moral judgements on any matter of importance. A better case can be made against cultural imperialism by going beyond the boundaries of one's own culture. This involves accepting that it is possible to have rational argument in ethics between 'reasonable' people across cultures. Some aspects of ethics are universal, such as the notion of reciprocity. It is in this context that he welcomes the attempt to draw up a 'Declaration of a Global Ethic'. Our capacity to reason is seen as 'the universal solvent'.

This raises a number of issues. It is true that extreme relativism frustrates honest argument, but that is criticising relativism at its weakest. It is useful to remember Peter Winch's[7] criticism of Evans-Pritchard.[8] Winch wrote:' He did not take seriously enough the idea that the concepts used by primitive peoples can only be interpreted in the context of the way of life of these peoples'. There is no reason to consider only extreme relativism, nor is there any reason to believe that differences between cultures are absolute on all points. By taking this middle path it may be possible to avoid the problem of cultural imperialism as well as of extreme relativism. For a cross-cultural purpose what is involved is that we understand these varied concepts as well as we can and then we form concepts which bring different relevant concepts into meaningful unities. Their being meaningful presumes that they are formed with understanding and according to the rules of a language in which they have assigned functions. This is not an easy task. It is a

task that can be performed meaningfully in cooperation with each other. It provides a challenge to our intellect as well as to our capacity for empathy. Much harm has been done, for example, in our study of different religions by importing concepts that have their primary location in Christianity. Thus, it can be argued that the term 'religion' itself does not express well the religiosity of different people.[9] The Hindu concept of *dharma*, for example, is misleadingly translated as religion, for dharma means that which uphold or sustains and refers in more practical terms to qualities and duties. Further, who are these 'reasonable' people and how will they be identified from different cultures? Singer speaks as if all of us know and agree on what it is to be reasonable in different cultures. Even if broad principles across different cultures can be identified, this does not solve the problem. It is well known that principles that appear similar are applied differently. Singer recognises that to achieve consensus on a common ethic only a few broad principles can be formulated. Here is the problem of generality and along with it of plurality in formulating an ethical code for our times. What is general may prove inane and what is plural may prove divisive. The purpose of achieving unity may be frustrated in both cases. One may give up in despair at this stage and argue that let us first have one world that is less divided in different ways and then we can think of a global ethic.

This will be wrong. The complexity of the problem and other constraints should not make it difficult for us to see the reality of our connectedness. Our many worlds may indeed lead us to our one world if we could learn how to speak with each other. Polite agreements are not going to serve us. Unpleasant points of disagreement that are kept out of public discussion tend to fester and take vicious forms. One problem, for example, that will need to be sorted out is the problem of the disbeliever that is present in one or the other form in perhaps all religions. We need to speak with frankness on all points and at different levels. To have a global ethic we need a global public dialogue, not only at international conferences but also at every street corner. We need to understand each other. It is believed that Zeus gave human beings a moral sense so that they could live in cooperation with each other and protect themselves against stronger animals. We need to give ourselves a moral code for our times so that we can live in cooperation with each other and protect ourselves and other animals from the forces that we have ourselves unleashed. Let us turn to an ancient text for guidance. In *Chandogya Upanishad*[10] there is a telling passage: 'if there were no speech, neither right nor wrong would be known, neither the true nor the false, neither the good nor the bad, neither the pleasant nor the unpleasant. Speech makes us understand'.

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[1] Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002.
[2] Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996.
[3] Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, New York, 1999, p. 86.
[4] Raghavan Iyer (ed.), *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.418.
[5] Keith Burgess-Jackson, 'Singer and His Critics', *Ethics,* 110, 4, 2000, pp. 838-43.
[6] Meghnad Desai, Review of Peter Singer's 'One World'*, Times Higher Education Supplement*, February, 2003.

[7] Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', in Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1970, pp. 78-111.
[8] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1937.
[9] I have tried to develop this point elsewhere. See Surendra Munshi, 'Revisiting Max Weber on India', in Hartmut Lehmann and Jean Martin Ouedraogo (eds.), *Max Webers Religionssoziologie in interkultureller Perspektive*, Goettingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003, pp. 53-68.
[10] Max Mueller (ed.), *The Sacred Books of the East*, I, p.111.