IS IT REALLY ABOUT BEING BRITISH?

Hossein Dabbagh

In this short piece, I argue in favour of the practice of imagining 'others' in a global way and taking universal moral thinking seriously. We are in need of a sense of global identity which can then create global moral thinking. In this way, we can start to see and treat global challenges, such as the environment, social justice, poverty, racism and Covid-19, more effectively.

I was in a pharmacy in London amid the peak of Covid-19 anxiety. A man of South Asian descent was trying to take four boxes of paracetamol for himself. A white British man noticed this. 'What are you doing?', he asked. 'Think about other people, too'. 'You shouldn't be selfish'. 'Try being British!', he shouted at the end.

Being an immigrant myself, I was rather alert and watching. It wasn't new to me. You experience such incidents if you are an immigrant.

Of course, not all British people are like that. Nevertheless, I was amazed that the British man who started his moral argument with a well-reasoned premise, ended with an irrelevant claim about 'his' nationality! Without a doubt, we have a moral duty to empathize with others and put ourselves in their shoes, particularly those who are 'worst off'. Surely, being an egoist at all times is not morally right. But what struck me was how he connected morality to his culture. Starting wisely, why did he end his argument with an ethnicity or nation-based conclusion? How does being moral, for him, ultimately boil down to his nationality?

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What is actually happening here is that the British man understood morality in terms of being British. He might have some general moral teachings, such as 'the Golden Rule', in his mind that can be applied globally regardless of nation, ethnicity or gender. But he immediately climbs down from this to apply those teachings to a particular nation or ethnic group he desires, because he probably assumes moral and even cultural or national superiority for himself. The British man is indeed facing a tension between a universal and a parochial morality. At one level, his claim is that being British entails (at least during the Corona crisis) respecting the needs of others (universally). At another level, he implies that this is a mark of British superiority as being moral is about being British – that is a parochial morality, not a universal one.

Is it really the case that being moral is about being British? Well no. Moral principles have existed prior to the formation of nations, historically speaking. We had moral rules before knowing and discovering that there are ethnic groups other than our own.

How about religion? Try juxtaposing the above claims with this: being moral is about being religious, that is, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, etc. The problem is not only coupling morality with a particular ethnic group or nation, but it would also be odd to equate being moral with being, say, a Muslim. We don't need to become a religious person to become a moral person. No doubt one can be a moral person without being religious at all. Again, historically, moral rules precede religions.

However, even if there is no necessary link between religious belief and moral practice, we have to admit that if a country develops within a particular religious culture (such as the influence of Christianity and Anglicanism and Methodism on the UK, and especially institutions like the welfare state), then the exhortation to be Christian invites a certain morality. The moot point is whether this (or any) morality is then assumed to be exclusively a preserve of

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Christianity, hence leading us back to the aforementioned tension between universalism and parochialism.

But if we, being religious or not, all agree to some impartial global moral codes, why do we still tend to move from general and global moral teachings to a particular and local nation-based bias? Can we skip this local trap and think *only* globally? Is it at all possible for our mind *always* to think like that? Is it possible for our minds to think *completely* without bias? Tragically, it seems improbable.

Evolutionary psychologists would argue that our minds are not designed to think globally *all the time*. We have evolved locally in such a way that we are inclined to put *our* biases first, let alone thinking about *others* at all times. In fact, it is neither needed nor possible to think globally *all the time*. Put otherwise, from a cultural anthropology point of view, humans are cultural creatures, and culture can override much of the supposed hardwiring of evolution. While our brains may have been shaped by the African savannah some 500,000 to a million years ago, our minds are shaped by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with which we, as individuals, grew up and lived.

Having said that, does this entail that we *cannot* think globally at all? Well no. Borrowing from Henry Sidgwick, a nineteenth-century English moral philosopher, we have a 'dual-source' system of practical rationality which might sometimes come into conflict: a conflict between our local egoistic moral thinking and global codified moral obligation. How can we resolve this conflict? What should we do if thinking locally rather than globally makes difficulties for us? What if we tried to think of all divisions as artificial? What if we start from the assumption that all people are really just one thing?

Some thinkers would argue that what relieves us is 'wholeness'. They would say, for example, that the origin of the word 'health' is rooted in words like whole and holy. That's why, we think, we should get ourselves together to become healthy. Having this in mind, imagining the whole of humanity as a united entity is what we need to practise

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mentally. This can remove our differences and show that we are all the same.

Saadi Shīrāzī, the Persian poet and thinker of the medieval period, for example, was fond of this idea. If you ask what Saadi's response would be had he lived through our times and experienced our crisis, I imagine he would probably argue as follows: that all creatures originate from a single source. There would be no difference between us if we go back to our origins. In his famous poem, 'Bani Adam', Saadi writes:

> Human beings are members of a *whole*,
> since in their creation they are of one essence

But isn't this begging the question? Does it not assume that we come from one shared source, be it God or evolution, and by saying that it is claimed that the problem is solved? The whole point is to show how we can elevate from differences to commonalities when we're stuck with different genders, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and so on.

Even if it is begging the question, this is all we have to work on collectively. We need to enhance our moral imagination's capacity to look at *others* from 'the eye of the universe' as if we are all just one essence. It seems that being moral requires imagining ourselves together as a whole while we have endless differences in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. Despite those differences, we have a 'common life' in this world that needs to be attended to. Our global moral teachings never consider a particular ethnic group or nation above others. Imagining humanity as a whole provides a legitimate lens to practise those global moral teachings, impartially. Such a lens highlights our commonalities rather than our differences. Just as we can't escape from our differences, we shouldn't escape from our commonalities.

As many thinkers, from Cynic Diogenes to modern cosmopolitans, have argued, although we humans are

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embodied in particular ways, and our values and moral thinking are hence by default contextual and local, we also seem to be capable of rising above the present and the particular to identify *imagined* communities. To think as a nation then is to think beyond the immediate context. This sense of global identity which can then create global moral thinking can prepare us to start seeing and treating global challenges, such as the environment, social justice, racism, poverty and Covid-19, more effectively.

Hossein Dabbagh is a Philosophy Tutor at Cambridge University's Institute of Continuing Education and Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education. hd440@cam.ac.uk

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