

SYMPOSIUM
PROBLEMS AND METHODS IN GLOBAL THINKING



WHAT IS ORIENTATION IN GLOBAL THINKING?
A KANTIAN INQUIRY
A PRÉCIS

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Katrin Flikschuh

As I say in the preface of the book, *WOT* (= Flikschuh 2017) seeks to bring together three seemingly disparate areas of inquiry: Kant’s practical (political) philosophy, Jonathan Lear’s analysis of conceptual loss as a “permanent human possibility,” and modern African philosophy. The background – or foreground, as the case may be – is the liberal global justice debate. That debate reached its high point somewhere between the late nineties and early to mid 2000s; since then, it has largely been superseded by more topical concerns, including the global environmental crisis. The transition from global distributive justice to global environmentalism has been fairly seamless within liberal normative theorizing: both times, liberal theorists are chiefly concerned with the plight of the marginalized ‘global poor’ who are said to be disproportionately excluded, in the first case, from the benefits of a massively expanded global economy and who are said to be bearing, in the second case, the brunt of the burden of the environmental fallout. These concerns are laudable, yet the way in which both issues are broached suggests a continued unquestioning presumption in favour of liberalism’s universalism. According to this presumption,

the exclusion of the global poor from the benefits of the liberal market system is adventitious and capable of being remedied, at least in principle, within the frame of liberal political morality; moreover, the ‘global poor’ are themselves presumed to endorse the values of liberalism and are presumed to aspire to be included within the liberal fold.

Liberalism’s universalist presumption is indicative of an absence of critical reflection on its own adequacy in the face of present global challenges. The tendency is to assume the adequacy of liberal political morality and to explore the actual world’s shortcomings in relation to it. But what if the theory were itself to fall short in relation to current global political realities? The problem would then not lie in bringing the world into conformity with liberal theory but would consist in the theory’s inability to get an adequate purchase on the world we live in. In *WOT*, I broach the problem of global justice from the perspective of this latter possibility: a gap seems to have opened up between our moral and political concepts and the global political reality we in fact face, such that the former can no longer guide us in relation to the latter. This is what, following Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope* (Lear 2006), I call the problem of conceptual loss.

One way in which one might characterize the problem of conceptual loss is by saying that political realities have outstripped or surpassed political theorizing. Global political developments after World War II changed the domain of politics so rapidly as to make it difficult for our tradition of political thinking – empirical as well as normative – to keep up with those developments. Consider just a handful of post-War developments: the East/West ideological divide, decolonization and the expansion of the state system, the growth of finance capital, the huge international debt crisis of the 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet system, the explosion of digital technology, the rise in international terrorism, and the

now acute global environmental crisis. How is the slow process of political theorizing to keep up with these enormously accelerated developments? A second, and I think largely independent reason may be a certain intellectual complacency and associated philosophical parochialism. The strong sense which Western philosophy and political theory has of its own unparalleled sophistication is a reflection in part of its Enlightenment legacies, when great strides in “the growth of knowledge” at virtually all levels of inquiry eventually came to go hand in hand with an imperialist political project and attendant denigration of non-Western cultures and traditions of thought. In the liberal global justice debate, this inherited parochialism is evident in the lack of engagement with non-Western theories and perspectives – somewhat ironic, given the debate’s avowed cosmopolitan outlook. The focus of *WOT* is on this second source for disorientation more than the first.

One way of overcoming intellectual parochialism is through engagement with others’ intellectual traditions. I engage modern African philosophy in part by way of its several contrast points with dominant liberal assumptions about personhood, statehood, and the rights and duties of individuals more generally. My concern is twofold: one is to show that the post-colonial African social and political context is sufficiently distinctive to make its contextual fit with the rather different history of liberal political morality unlikely – this is to query liberalism’s claim to universal validity. The second concern is to show that there is much that the Western tradition could learn from modern African philosophical thinking provided it lets go of its historically inherited image of African backwardness: modern African philosophy can be a source of theoretical regeneration. Indeed, given its conscientious engagement with the Western philosophical tradition whose overwhelmingly negative image of the continent it seeks to rectify, modern African thought is arguably best placed to identify those

aspects of Western political and philosophical thinking that urgently require rethinking and reform.

If my turn to African philosophy in *WOT* grows out of my diagnosis of conceptual loss or lack of proper orientation in global liberal thought, where does Kant fit into all of this? Kant provides a connecting element between the diagnosed predicament of liberal morality on the one hand – the predicament of conceptual loss – and the promise of engaging with African philosophy on the other hand, i.e. the promise of possible conceptual regeneration. Key in this respect is what I call Kant’s method of first-personal or recursive justification. The latter is a gloss on Kant’s distinctive method of arguing from an experiential first-personal premise – such as “I have experience of objects outside of me” to the a priori possibility conditions of that experience – in this case, the categories of the understanding. Crucial for the purposes of *WOT* is the relativity of identified a priori possibility conditions to the experiential premise itself. Otherwise put: a Kantian possibility condition holds valid for all and only those experiential premises to which it responds. Kantian universality claims are thus not claims made from nowhere – they are always made from specific experiential standpoints. In *WOT*, I use this insight in order to show that a Kantian duty of state entrance is unconditionally valid for all those and only those who endorse the experiential premise which the duty responds to. The point of the exercise is to show that Kantian practical reasoning is context-sensitive, so does not make blanket claims to universal validity. I believe this aspect of Kant’s philosophical thinking to be a contrast point with liberal theory’s typically unrestricted universality claims. Kantian contextual universalism is thus more responsive to differences in experiential background traditions than much mainstream liberal global thinking.

Summarizing the above, *WOT* diagnoses conceptual loss in current liberal global thinking and goes on to propose a contextually more informed approach to global political theorizing by way of engaging African theoretical perspectives through Kant's method of recursive practical reasoning. In the remainder of this précis I will sketch the main arguments of each chapter in the hope of giving the reader a clearer overall sense of the interplay between liberal conceptual loss, Kantian recursive reasoning, and modern African philosophy. The opening chapter picks up on Thomas Nagel's influential article, "The Problem of Global Justice," (Nagel 2005) in which Nagel suggests that given the liberal tradition's essentially state-bound and contractarian method of political justification, it may not be able to accommodate the very idea of obligations of global justice within its theoretical parameters. I elaborate on Nagel's thesis by way of drawing on Jonathan Lear's notion of conceptual loss, which Lear himself developed in relation to the Crow Indians' bearing witness to the demise of their own nomadic ways of life, including their ensuing sense of deep disorientation on reservation lands. Chapter 1 of *WOT* thus raises the possibility of conceptual loss within contemporary liberal theory: to the extent to which Nagel claims are accurate regarding the state-centric nature of liberal morality, liberal political morality may operate with concepts and attendant value conceptions that are inadequate to the increasingly global nature of contemporary politics. The challenge then is to ask how, if at all, one might rethink certain aspects of liberal political morality. Against the background of this challenge, chapters 2 and 3 turn to the political philosophy of Kant. The purpose of these two chapters is threefold: first, to introduce Kant's method of recursive justification; second, to show up a number of substantive differences between Kant's political thinking and contemporary liberal thought, and third to explore the ways in which Kant himself responded when his own political thinking came up short, in certain ways, in the unexpected

encounter between prospective European settlers and North America's nomadic peoples. My chief claim is that the encounter compelled Kant to rethink certain aspects of his philosophy of right – and that his method of recursive justification enabled him to do so. Chapters 4 and 5 return to the current liberal predicament, asking whether the lessons drawn from Kant may have any bearing on resolving that predicament. Chapter 4 is chiefly concerned with the historical process through which liberal political morality rose to preeminence culturally and philosophically; chapter 5 asks what it would be for liberal morality to abandon its historically acquired claims to intellectual superiority. I argue that if liberalism were to learn to see itself as one possible political morality among others, this would open up the possibility towards a more contextualized form of global political reasoning – one that acknowledges the equal intelligibility, in principle, of non-liberal moralities and forms of political organization. In a sense, therefore, the problem of conceptual loss – liberalism's lack of adequate theoretical grasp of contemporary global realities – may be a consequence of its blanket claims to universal validity. By the same token, a more contextualised understanding of its own values and principles may better enable liberal societies to coexist, on reciprocally equal terms, with alternative value conceptions and forms of political association. Chapters 6 and 7 explore some of the more concrete implications of the proposed contextualist universalism; it is at this point that the book engages most explicitly with modern African philosophy. In chapter 7, I consider the implications for human rights reasoning of taking African communal conceptions of personhood philosophically and politically seriously. I suggest that liberal human rights reasoning is deeply out of step with culturally different, less individualistic conceptions of the person and of the human good. There is generally no good reason for dismissing more communal conceptions as morally backward, politically oppressive, or historically outdated: to the contrary, reform is

needed at the level of human rights reasoning. Chapter 8 considers the liberal idea of statehood and its imposition, first through colonialisms and then through decolonization, on African peoples and communities. It is no secret that statehood has generally fared very poorly on the continent. Yet while African state failure is routinely explained as a consequence of poor leadership, weak civil society, and underdeveloped economies, it is possible that the idea itself is inadequate to the African context. Again, therefore, instead of insisting on the universal validity of an historically highly specific form of political association, a more contextualist approach to global political thinking might have to explore the possibility of alternatives to the statist form of political association for at least some regions and peoples. In sum, then, *WOT* argues that whilst much of the liberal global justice debate has shown laudable moral concern for the plight of the excluded global poor, relatively little effort has gone into asking whether liberal political morality is even adequate to the global challenge at hand (a notable exception of Nagel's article). While the relative lack of critical reflection on liberal assumptions and value commitments is concerning, my intention in *WOT* is not to reject liberal political morality so much as to bring it into contact with other, equally valuable and available alternative philosophical traditions and perspectives, thereby enabling possible theoretical rejuvenation and greater inclusiveness in what has to date remained a remarkably exclusive global justice debate.

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