

## Globalization and the Ethics of Care

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What are the implications of economic globalization on individuals' morality? Drawing on 'care ethicists' from David Hume to Michael Slote, as well as theories from social psychology, I argue that the scale and complexity of the global economy discourages ethical behavior at the level of the individual.

*As markets become more efficient and more global, we get further away from the things we consume every day to the point we don't even think about where they come from.*

Pietra Rivoli (2007)

Many definitions of 'globalization' have been put forth over the past few decades. Perhaps one of the simplest comes from the World Bank: "the most common or core sense of economic globalization ... refers to the observation that in recent years a quickly rising share of economic activity in the world seems to be taking place between people who live in different countries..." (Westerfield, 2004: 181). While international trade has been going on for centuries, globalization marks the dramatic acceleration of economic integration via major advances in information, transportation, and communication technologies, as well as the trend toward trade liberalization between states (Fischer, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Stiglitz, 2003).

Economist Pietra Rivoli finds the entire story of globalization writ in a single T-shirt she pulled out of a discount bin at a New York City Walgreens. The shirt's cotton, she discovers, was grown and harvested in Lubbock, Texas, before being sent to Shanghai, China to be spun, woven and sewn. From Shanghai the shirt was shipped to Miami, Florida, to be imprinted with graphics and logos, and

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finally trucked up the coast to be sold in New York City (Rivoli, 2009). In his essay “Follow the thing: Papaya” geographer Ian Cook undertakes a similar project, tracing the life of a papaya from the farm in Jamaica through intermediaries in Israel to a grocery store in London. Ricocheting between snapshots of real workers' lives along the chain, he shows how the most unpredictable minutia - from disease on the farm to the whims of British taste - can yield serious consequences on the other side of the globe (Cook, 2004).

Through our global ecosystem, which nests continental, regional, and micro ecologies, people have always been connected. But now, via technology, our social, economic and political systems are growing, multiplying the ways in which (and speed at which) our behavior effects others. Through websites like Facebook and Twitter our opportunities to make and maintain social connections are greatly expanded, and through global institutions like the IMF and IWW, and transnational corporations like GE and Coca-Cola, the consequences of individuals' political and economic decisions extend far beyond the borders of their communities.

This heightened state of ecological, social, economic and political connectivity may be understood in terms of *complexity*. Archaeologist Joseph Tainter explains:

Complexity is generally understood to refer to such things as the size of a society, the number and distinctiveness of its parts, the variety of specialized social roles that it incorporates, the number of distinct social personalities present, and the variety of mechanisms for organizing these into a coherent, functioning whole. Augmenting any of these dimensions increases the complexity of a society. (Tainter, 1988: 23)

It is the first two “dimensions” with which we are most concerned here: size (in terms of geographic range of activity) and the number of parts (i.e. persons) incorporated. What, we might ask, are the implications for individual morality of increasing societal complexity? Drawing on the moral writings of capitalism's ideological father, Adam Smith, as well as contemporary moral theorists, we will look at some (though surely not the only) mechanisms by which complexity may actually discourage ethical behavior at the level of the individual.

## **Our Story**

In order to render concrete what might otherwise remain abstract and inaccessible, let us refer to the fictional life of a typical American college student, Maria. Maria drives about 38 miles per day (what the average American drives

daily) (Reuters, 2006) to commute from the suburbs to work, the mall, the grocery store, and school. Every few days she fills her car with gasoline at the local Texaco station. One October morning, on her way to the gas station, she heard a news report on the radio that Chevron Texaco had been taken to court on behalf of 30,000 Ecuadoreans for allegedly dumping “more than 18 billion gallons of toxic materials into unlined pits and Amazon rivers from 1972 to 1992.” As a result, according to the plaintiff, farmland was irreparably blighted, animals were killed, and cancer rates have risen in the local population (BBC News, 2003). Upon processing this news, Maria’s heart sank for a moment, and she felt uneasy about filling her tank that morning. Within a few weeks, though, the incident had passed from the media spotlight and no longer came to mind while she waited at the pump.

This story is not unusual to most of us, who have in some way or another done exactly as Maria. Perhaps we read about animal rights violations on behalf of food companies we patronize, or heard of a clothing store we support employing sweatshop labor. But why, like Maria, were we ignorant of our role in these abuses until long *after* they had been committed? And why, once informed, were we so reluctant to take action against them?

### **Our Capacity to Know and Care**

It would be absurd to ask anyone in today’s economy to assure that the processes behind every product they buy is in accord with their moral ideals; they are simply too complex (and constantly changing) for anyone to know.

But beyond the epistemic barriers to moral decision-making, how realistic is it to expect someone like Maria to actually *care* enough about the plight of Ecuadorian farmers to act in solidarity with their cause? She has never met any of the victims, and has likely never met any of their friends or family either. In fact, the only thing she may ever know of them is from a short, dispassionate report she heard on the radio. And for the amount she gives to Texaco relative to its total funding, how responsible can she really feel? Nevertheless, it is the quiet complicity of thousands of persons just like her that makes the injustices of companies like Texaco possible. The argument that investors, government officials in the U.S. and Ecuador, corporate executives, and members of the media shoulder the brunt of the responsibility need not be contested to still ask the question: why are we not moved enough, angry enough about these atrocities to join with others in acting against them?

We may thus identify (at least cursorily) three factors which engender amoral behavior in Maria's long-distance social interactions: (1) dim knowledge of corporate/political crimes due to proximity to victims, (2) weak affective

connection with the consequences of her participation in various systems due to proximity, and (3) weak sense of responsibility for the consequences of her actions in complex organizations due to the large number of others also participating in them.

### **Proximity and Care**

While most people know Adam Smith as the father of capitalism, one of the first to map the workings of the modern market, few also know him as the “social psychologist describing how humans actually employ that market”<sup>1</sup> (Giridharadas, 2010). With his 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith placed himself alongside philosopher David Hume in the Scottish sentimentalist tradition. Hume’s work on the subject was *A Treatise of Human Nature*, first published in 1739. Both Smith and Hume argued that the basis for morality in humans was an innate sense of sympathy, empathy, or care. Hume wrote in *Treatise*:

Thus it appears, that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature, that it has a great influence on our taste of beauty, and that it produces our sentiment of morals in all the artificial virtues. From thence we may presume, that it also gives rise to many of the other virtues...Now we have no such extensive concern for society but from sympathy; and consequently `tis that principle, which takes us so far out of ourselves, as to give us the same pleasure or uneasiness in the characters of others, as if they had a tendency to our own advantage or loss. (Hume, 2010: 316)

Smith writes in his *Theory* 20 years later:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. (Smith, 2009: 8)

Empathy may thus be understood as *the feeling of caring about others' well-being to the extent that we hold it in conscious consideration when making decisions*. Today, the moral arguments put forth by Smith and Hume are being further

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<sup>1</sup> According to Google, people search for “Wealth of Nations,” Smith’s economic opus, some 120 times more than they do “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” (Giridharadas, 2010).

developed by philosopher Michael A. Slote. In his 2007 *Ethics of Care and Empathy*, he provides a treatment of “Immediacy and Distance” with regard to empathy. Drawing on recent scholarship in developmental psychology<sup>2</sup>, Slote concludes that physical proximity is key to triggering our innate empathic response:

[When near to us] someone’s danger or plight has a salience, conspicuousness, vividness, and immediacy...that engages normal human empathy (and consequently arouses sympathy and caring concern) in a way that similar dangers we merely know about – dangers, we might say, we only know by description - do not.<sup>3</sup>  
(Slote, 2007: 23)

To illustrate this theory, Slote observes the difference in moral significance we tend to attribute to incidents like the My Lai massacre, in which a battalion of American soldiers killed hundreds of civilians in a Vietnamese village, versus air strikes on civilian villages throughout the war. “We...tend to believe there is something morally worse about killing innocents in cold blood than about killing them (without actually seeing them) from a plane.” (Slote, 2007: 25). Drawing on his experience as a U.S. bombardier during World War II, historian Howard Zinn affirms this view:

Remember this. When you're bombing, you bomb from 30,000 feet. And six miles up, you don't see any people. You don't hear screams. You don't see blood. You don't-- you know-- see limbs being torn from people. You just see a target. And you're aiming for that target and you've done this again and again. You've dropped bombs on targets where you never saw human beings-- this is the nature of modern warfare. (Zinn, 2003)

According to Slote, not only spatial distance, but also *temporal* distance plays a role in empathic response. He refers to an example of miners trapped in a cave, stating that there is naturally a more heightened sense of urgency and resonance with the plight of the miners *at that moment* than there is beforehand when preventive measures ought to be taken. Although the imperative to mitigate the situation is presumably the same at both points in time, it is naturally felt stronger when closer to the present.

Similarly, Princeton psychologist Emily Pronin found in a study that those who can more easily identify, or empathize, with their future selves were more

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<sup>2</sup> Slote cites Martin Hoffman’s work in empathy and moral psychology as influential to his theory.

<sup>3</sup> We do not, as Slote does, need to commit to the idea that our moral obligations are greater to those to whom we are physically or socially closest in order to accept his theory of empathy.

likely to save money for retirement. “People in the study often shied away from doing something helpful but unpleasant when they had to do it right at that moment. But when their help was needed a few months or a year down the line, they were more likely to sign up—just as likely as they were to suggest that someone else should help out” (Ross, 2010).

The above data, then, suggests that the more space and time two persons have between them the less chance they have of empathizing with each other. What this means for Maria: the proportion of those affected by her involvement in various systems (economic, political, etc.) with whom she will *also* empathize is lower than it has ever been.

### **Scale and Responsibility**

“Diffusion of responsibility” is a term used by social psychologists to describe the phenomena whereby individuals feel less responsible for behavior carried out jointly with others. Death by firing squad is a popular example of diffusion of responsibility. Rather than one person executing a prisoner, which would be most efficient, four or five simultaneously carry out the action in order to lift the burden of responsibility from each executioner (Grossman, 1996: 225). Diffusion of responsibility has also been used to partially explain the psychological behavior of soldiers who have committed atrocities, including Nazi officers during the Holocaust (Keltcher, D., Marsh, J., 2007) and U.S. soldiers during the My Lai massacre in Vietnam (Bandura, 2002).

Furthermore, there is evidence to show that the greater the number of individuals participating in a given action, the less responsible each of them feels:

In one study, 240 subjects read scenarios for an event with a negative outcome involving one, two, three, or four individuals. As predicted, there was a significant inverse relationship between the number of participants and the degree of attributed responsibility. (Feldman, R., Rosen, F., 1978).

Writing in 1917, Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung reported similar observations:

It is a notorious fact that the morality of society as a whole is in inverse ratio to its size; for, the greater the aggregation of individuals the more the individual factors are blotted out, and with them morality, which rests entirely on the moral sense of the individual and the freedom necessary for this... Any large company composed of wholly admirable persons has the morality and intelligence of an unwieldy, stupid and violent animal. The

bigger the organization, the more unavoidable is its immorality and blind stupidity... (Hitchens, 2007: 12)

Thus when Maria finally discovers that she is involved in organizations which exploit people, it is not only spatial and temporal proximity to the victims that will determine her moral response. According to the psychological principle of diffusion of responsibility, the number of persons in the organization of which she is a part also matters. It may be a rather unfortunate coincidence that at the same time an organization increases its capacity to do good and harm in the world, it also diminishes its members' capacity to feel responsible for it. But the converse also holds true: the smaller an organization becomes, the less good and harm it can do but also the more responsibility its members claim<sup>4</sup>.

### **A “Triple Bottom Line” Economy?**

Global capitalism has been accused of promoting greed at all levels of the system, from window shopping on Main to bonus bonanzas on Wall Street. While many critics claim it was built into Smith's theory itself, we can see how largeness may play a crucial role.

In the summer of 2000, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan developed a “Global Compact to help companies understand the rising expectations of global corporate responsibility in three critical areas of greatest external pressure: human rights, labour standards and environmental practices.” This global compact has been described as a resolution to encourage a “triple” bottom line in business. If profit is typically the “bottom line,” the “triple bottom line” consists of people, planet, and profit (Topfer, 2000).

While Smith in *Wealth of Nations* advocated appealing to others' (and one's own) self-interest, in reading *Sentiments* he certainly did not advocate a “single bottom line.” He viewed empathy to be as integral to the human experience as self-interest, and expected both would be present in economic transactions. The infamous “invisible hand” may be very well be endowed with this meaning in the passage below:

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<sup>4</sup> While the conclusions drawn here may generally hold true, they do not provide us specific thresholds at which empathic connection or perceived responsibility are minimized. In other words, there is likely a point at which two persons are so far apart that any additional distance will not dramatically change their probability of empathizing with each other. Likewise, the degree of perceived responsibility by members in an organization is likely to level off when their numbers climb to certain quantities. Where these thresholds lie have yet to be determined. While they are ultimately relevant to ensuring that our economies operate within their boundaries, for our purposes it is enough to know that they exist, and that the principles established here apply within them.

in spite of their [the rich] natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own convenience, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants... (Smith, 2009: 145-46)

In the global economy, however, one's economic reach extends beyond the sphere of normal human empathy. In its absence (and the absence of a strong sense of responsibility), one's "own convenience" moves to the fore in motivating action. The effects of Maria's sponsoring Texaco, for example, simply do not register as they would if 18 billion gallons of toxic waste water were being dumped in her own community. Because "people" and "planet" are too far in time and space to really know or care about, quality and price become the most immediate factors in economic decision-making. From one angle this may be seem like an overwhelming drive for personal gain (greed and selfishness), from another it is simply a privation of transpersonal empathy.

### **The Virtues of Smallness**

*While many theoreticians – who may not be too closely in touch with real life – are still engaging in the idolatry of large size, with practical people in the actual world there is a tremendous longing and striving to profit, if at all possible, from the convenience, humanity, and manageability of smallness.- economist E.F. Schumacher (1973: 47)*

The idea of localized economic networks comprised of smaller firms is not new, but has won increasing vogue over the past fifty years. This may be partly due to higher public awareness of the twin crises of global warming and overdependence on fossil fuels. As fossil fuels are hitherto the inimitable lifeblood of the global economy, the less kilometers goods and people have to travel, the less fuel is burned and CO2 emitted (Hopkins, 2008; Hirsch, Bezdek, and Wendling, 2005).

Also, due to the drain on Main Street economies by footloose multinationals<sup>5</sup> and in light of the painful effects of the "boom and bust" cycle in an increasingly global, deregulated, and precarious economy, many citizens have

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<sup>5</sup> For information about deindustrialization from the 1970s and the resulting "Rust Belt" across the U.S., see Andrews, H., Ullmann, J.E., Wallace, D., and Wallace, R. (1999) and Harvey (2005).

come to value the stability of smaller, community-owned enterprises (Hess, 2009). One study by the National Conference on Citizenship found in 2009 that small businesses were Americans' most trusted institution (the least trusted was large corporations, just after government) (National Conference on Citizenship, 2009). Local organizations<sup>6</sup> “tend to sink their roots deeply into the regional economy, and they are unlikely to pull up stakes and move away” writes ecological economist David Hess (Hess, 2009: 71). They are also less subject to speculative risks than those corporations publicly traded on Wall Street. In an investigation of local banks in 2008 (during the height of the subprime mortgage crisis), NPR’s Frank Langfitt finds that “[m]any community banks are largely insulated from the financial crisis. They take deposits and lend them to local businesses and home buyers. That model is looking quite stable right now” (Langfitt, 2008).

A 2004 study conducted by Civic Economics in Chicago has shown that locally-owned, independent businesses actually anchor more capital in local economies. Taking retail, restaurant, and service sectors together, they found that 58% more money remains in the local economy if spent at a local business as opposed to a chain. They attribute this to the greater amount spent by local businesses on labor in combination with greater reliance on other local businesses for goods and services. Furthermore, as ownership is local, the profits remain in the community (Civic Economics, 2004).

While Civic Economics focused mainly on the economic benefits of strengthening local networks, we may also infer moral benefits based on the psychological principles discussed above. The more local customers and workers build wealth directly with each other rather than through complex global networks, the more manageable, visible, and weighted with moral significance become their social and economic lives.

A skeptic of localization would be quick to point out that most communities cannot produce every commodity for themselves. Frying pans and high-tech electronics, for example, cannot be made anywhere. According to author and activist Rob Hopkins, however

...there are a lot of things we could produce locally: a wide range of seasonal fruit and vegetables, fresh fish, timber, mushrooms, dyes, many medicines, furniture, ceramics, insulation materials, soap, bread, glass, dairy products, wool and leather products,

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<sup>6</sup> These include cooperatives, family-owned enterprises, locally-owned non-profits, local government, and local privately owned businesses. What is “local” continues to be debated, ranging from the town/city to county and bioregion (Hess, 2009).

paper, building materials, perfumes and fresh flowers – to name but a few. (Hopkins, 2008: 68)

Hess would also add to the list “banking, retail, construction, services, food and agriculture, and energy” (Hess, 2009: 71). Most of our basic needs, then, may be met locally. The goal, however, is not “to create a ‘nothing in, nothing out’ economy, but rather to close economic loops where possible and to produce locally what we can” (Hopkins, 2008: 68). While this is not the place for a full analysis of the potential problems and promises of localism,<sup>7</sup> we can at least see that there are a number of arguments which point toward it as a way to begin addressing the many moral questions and injustices of our time.

The idea introduced here may be summarized as follows: As humans we have natural limitations on how much we can *know, care about and feel responsible for the consequences of our actions*. While the potential forms and expressions of human nature are by no means determined, we can see that the ongoing dialectic between capitalism and technology has spun us into systems – social, economic, and political – which extend far beyond our *current* empathic capacity to participate in them responsibly. If we are operating upon the premise of individual responsibility, then, it would seem wise to scale our economies to accommodate these limits.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more full analyses see Hess (2009), Hines (2000), Mitchell (2006), and Shuman (2000).

<sup>8</sup> On the psychological side, it has been argued that there are methods for increasing individual capacity (both spatial and temporal) for empathy and perceived responsibility. These include a variety of psychotherapeutic practices (see Wilber, 2000). While this will not be discussed here, it is important to note that if our goal is to bring individual care and social scale into healthy balance, expanding the former is complimentary to shrinking the latter.

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