Comment on Asuncion Lera St Clair’s paper ‘Third Stage Development Ethics: Global Institutions, Scientific Uncertainty and the Politicization of Moral Worth’

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This is a rich paper and I am sympathetic to its main thrust. I will only comment on some of the issues raised.

1. Some claims about development ethics

This is an interesting contribution to the nature and scope of development ethics, and amongst the distinctive claims she makes are the following points:

(a) Using Des Gasper’s three ‘stages’ of development ethics she develops his third stage (that of policy formation) by suggesting that there is or at least there should be a continuous interplay between the three stages;

(b) She advocates an approach which she calls, following Dewey, ‘methodological pragmatism’ – and in so doing she rejects any kind of foundationalism;

(c) She argues that values and epistemologies are partly constructed/contested; and so we need to recognise diversity within the discourse and the contestability of what she calls ‘borders’;

(d) She argues that we need greater interdisciplinarity, and not just either an economics approach or an ethics approach (which often don’t interconnect properly anyway);

(e) She points out that a strength of the ‘capabilities approach’ of Sen, Nussbaum and many others is that it fits this conception of development ethics which she has outlined.

2. Some comments

(a) She is right that there is a complex interplay between what Gasper calls the three stages: these are not really stages (if that term has temporal implications) or indeed levels (implying higher and lower), but really aspects/dimensions. Gasper himself notes that stages are to be understood as stage in a theatre rather than temporal stages, but there may be good pragmatic reasons for finding other terminologies because of the ambiguity and natural tendency to interpret the term in a temporal way.

I like to think of these aspects in the following way: there are the subjects of development (those whose lives go better or worse in the process of development); there are the initiators or instigators of development, that is the planners whose goal is the improvement of the lives of the subjects of development; and there are those who reflect on the process but do so neither qua subjects nor qua initiators.

Put like this, the three are necessarily interdependent: if development is not merely some process of change that happens (well or badly) but is to some extent under the direction of those who want it to happen in certain ways, then the perspective of the planner is necessary; but if planning is directed to the good of others (particular group or the population as a whole) whose improvements constitute the rationale of development, then how they see what is done to them or they are enabled to do is crucial (though in practice it is often not attended to). But the perspective of those who are in reflective mode not engagement mode is also vital, both to get a proper understanding of what the development process is and what values underlie it, and more specifically to integrate the other two perspectives into a coherent whole. These remarks help to demonstrate that Gasper three stages are not accidental, they are necessary and necessarily interconnected.

(b) Whilst I commend the motivation behind methodological pragmatism (trying to find areas of agreement despite thinkers coming from different backgrounds), the interplay between the three stages/aspects cannot avoid making the picture more complex.

The parallel with environmental issues following Light is indeed useful. Too much energy may be spent on rival value theories in both environmental and developmental areas. Seeking areas of agreement for action, policy or
shared norms (or limited global ethic) is vital, as I have argued myself elsewhere. However we need to note complexity in the following respects:

(i) The negotiation of agreement is always in the context of the reasoning of the parties and this reasoning reflects their worldviews. Writers like Pogge, whom Asun quotes with approval, for instance do not hesitate, and are right not to hesitate, to present a particular worldview or theory of global justice. It may well be that others with different worldviews will agree nevertheless with a lot of what Pogge recommends. My point is that the way consensus or convergence on what can be agreed by way of norms or policies is achieved is not by trying only to talk in terms of what is agreed. The agreements occur in the context of one’s awareness of the arguments which are not accepted. Anything else would not be genuinely intellectual debate, dialogue or discourse, but an abnegation of responsibility for critical ethical exchange. We need then to recognise this diversity of these worldviews or source stories, and in agreeing on what we can agree on, accept that diverse theories exist about which we do not agree.

(ii) Developmentalists no less than environmentalists will not in any case speak with one voice. Some will speak ‘with the grain’ in trying to influence directly policy formation by operating in the space of what is here and now politically possible, others will speak ‘against the grain’ as prophets, speakers of truth to power, or as visionaries imagining a better world which is not politically possible here and now. But the latter perspective is actually important, because even if only minorities now accept it, it actually makes the next stages which are possible now and in the short term more likely to occur. So both are important, and development discourse requires both – discourse about what ought prescriptively to be done here and now and discourse about what ought ideally to be the case. We must resist the temptation to apply a ‘one size/shape fits all’ model to development ethics itself (just as development ethicists are quick to condemn ‘one size fits all’ models of development applied anywhere by powerful agencies like the IMF). This tension is exhibited even in stage three development ethics.

(c) The idea of values and epistemologies being partly constructed needs unpacking more.

On one level it seems fine and is the recognition that much of the way we see the world is shaped by our particular culture etc., and that any acceptable global ethic needs to be sensitive to this; this is what I tried to express via my idea of ‘solidarity pluralism’.

On another level I wonder if there is a danger that this could lead to a kind of relativism and worry about universalism. Asun herself is unhappy about any such interpretation of her position but there are things she says (e.g. that development ethics not about applying right ethical theories to traditions) that at least suggest this. There are in any case different kinds of universalism (based on revelation; rationality; what would be agreed; actual agreement etc.). I am not sure about this, but there may be a tension between her position here and what she rightly insists on, the perspective of global justice or appeal to human rights – which may be a reflection of her position on ethics qua social scientist and her position on global ethics/justice qua ethicist/philosopher!

I couldn’t agree more about the need for interdisciplinarity: certainly ethics isn’t the domain of philosophy as such, and many discourses contribute to ethical discourse such as sociology, politics, international relations, economics (and it may be that we should talk of transdisciplinarity to imply that there is an intellectual space developing here (as elsewhere) which does not belong to any one discipline).

(d) Capabilities Approach

Although she sees the Capabilities Approach as fitting in with her methodological pragmatism, she also sees three possible dangers/weaknesses in the approach:

(i) She notes a one-sided-ness in that there are other approaches which are important such as human rights, which is also I think capable of fitting the methodological pragmatism approach as well. Certainly development ethics does not equal capabilities approach.
(ii) She notes that the capabilities approach has no distinctive contribution to make on issues of social justice, especially global social justice. That is, though CA thinkers may have views on these questions, the CA approach does not as such provide the basis for a developed analysis of these ideas, especially at the global level.

(iii) She notes that there is a danger of co-option or misappropriation by dominant institutions leading to no change to the system.

(iv) Comments on these difficulties

I think Asun is broadly right about (i) and (ii). I like myself to classify development ethics as normatively engaged ethics into three different sets of questions (though it also covers meta-ethical concerns and covers descriptive ethics as well):

1. what is the good/well being?
2. what processes should govern society (justice/democracy)?
3. what normative international framework is needed?

CA is very strong on (1) (though it is not the whole story, as there are other respective theories of the good/well-being around as well), it is OK on (2), but weak on (3).

In regard to (2) the rights approach which Asun favours is important, though I don’t think we should equate rights with social justice. It is of course possible to construct a theory of social justice around the duty to respect and realise rights, but it should be noted that this is controversial, in that it is not necessary to see the correlative duties as duties of justice, and it also possible for others to construct theories of justice which are not based on rights. But I agree with the thrust of Asun’s concerns that there is a danger (though not an inevitability if care is taken) that the CA gets used to motivate a theory of relief/charity and post eventum correction to what has gone wrong, as opposed to a more robust requirement of rights/justice which if understood properly leads to policies which do not lead to the situation needing correction in the first place.

The global dimension under (3) is vital, both in theory and in practice for international diplomacy/negotiation. Many issues of aid, trade, investment, immigration, debt relief, global governance need to be tackled, not least because the normative assumptions underlying these make a big difference to the prospects of the poor and the possibility for them to escape their poverty (this is a major theme in my public MSU lecture ‘Development and Globalisation: some ethical challenges’). Indeed insofar as what happens at a global level is subject to the attempts to influence it by key actors (governments, companies, NGOs), we need to question the assumption that the obvious siting of development discourse is in the nation-state. Many wider regions and indeed the world as a whole are becoming sites of development as well.

On (iii) the co-option issue, I agree that there are risks and dilemmas, but we need to add that this is so for this no more than for any richer ethical accounts of development ethics. The danger of co-option needs to be supplemented with the opportunity for change. So we need to be ‘in there’ negotiating what is real knowledge, what the norms really mean etc., otherwise there will be marginalization or misuse. In short we need to be vigilant. I am inclined to think that Sen’s use of freedom in Development as Freedom is partly motivated by the pragmatic wish to take the opposition on on their own terms. Pogge is doing a similar thing, it is arguable, by taking the negative duties associated with liberty and by his radical analysis taking the libertarian on and subverting their position. One can do a similar thing too with the idea of security, showing it to mean something much richer than what is often done in the name of security.

Plato once said that for good rule either philosophers must become kinds or kings must become philosophers. In an analogous way, the development planners must either become genuine ethicists, or genuine ethicists must either become planners or at least join forces with the planners. The first is unlikely to occur on its own, but the second is perfectly possible: development ethicists must enter this stage and engage, whatever the risks of misuse of their ideas. The alternative has a much greater risk – that planners will use the ethical ideas they come across anyway, and will, whether consciously or unconsciously, water down, distort or sanitise the ethics of development, which can and should be both powerful and radical. That is the challenge of stage three development ethics.