Denis Goulet

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Overview

Denis Goulet (1931-2006) was an American philosopher and international development analyst, who became the leading English language proponent of 'development ethics'. His particular quality was to synthesise insights from anthropological observation, policy practice, and philosophy—humanist, religious and existentialist—and to bridge between Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone and Hispanic literatures. He articulated themes of human development and human security, well before and in some respects more deeply than Amartya Sen, Mahbub ul Haq and Martha Nussbaum (see e.g., Goulet, 1960, 1971). While viewing 'development ethics' within a global context, he insisted on the necessity of a combination of global-level and local-level focus and loyalties. His work offers suggestions for the study of global justice, including for its identity and ambitions as a field that aspires to combine theory and policy significance.

Outline of Goulet's work

After an education in philosophy in the USA, and periods living with a diversity of communities in Europe and North Africa, Goulet trained in a French tradition of humanistic socio-economics. His mentor was the social economist and theologian Louis Joseph Lebret (1897-1966), who had in 1941 founded the movement Économie et Humanisme, to contribute towards constructing more humane economic systems. Lebret's school of thought moved beyond pure academic philosophy and created a forerunner of the present day idea and practice of 'human development', to be interpreted and elaborated in dialogue between philosophy, economics, social sciences and theology. Goulet (1960) presented in this spirit a manifesto for "a practical ethics of development" that would transcend the rupture between explanatory theory that had no interest in ethics and utopian normative political theory that was not grounded in real life. He pursued this goal throughout his career, from his first book on development ethics, published in Spanish and Portuguese in 1965-6, to his final collection of papers in 2006.

Goulet prefigured much of later development thinking, notably on sustainability and human security. His most influential book, *The Cruel Choice* (1971), propounded and drew out the implications of two core concepts. First is "existence rationality": ethics must start from study of how people in a given setting think and seek to make sense of the world and their lives and the forces and choices that face them. "Every person and society wants to be treated by others as a being of worth, for its own sake and on its own terms, regardless of its utility or attractiveness to others" (Goulet 1975: 232). Grasp of people's "existence rationality" is essential if one is to offer relevant advice and not merely declare grand sounding ideals. His model of value systems and value change posited an existential core that must be respected and built from, and an outer zone of

flexibility where adaptation is possible; "mobilization strategies must protect the inner limits of old existence rationalities while expanding their outer boundaries" (1971: 190), finding and using their "latent potential for change" (p.192). The second core concept is "Vulnerability: the key to understanding and promoting development", as stated in the title of *The Cruel Choice*'s second chapter. Correspondingly, Goulet expounded and exemplified an anthropological style for development ethics: it must look at real cultural and historical settings, not some supposedly timeless 'everywhere', and must be grounded in intense observation of varied experience. He applied the approach in studies of a variety of issues, including technology transfer, incentives and indicators, and various countries, notably Brazil, Guinea-Bissau, Mexico, Spain and Sri Lanka (e.g., Goulet, 1977, 1989, 1995, 2006).

Constitution of a field of development ethics

Goulet took a broad view of development ethics, as social change ethics oriented to a core audience of those who see themselves as working in development policy. Development ethics considers, in his words, the "ethical and value questions posed by development theory, planning and practice" (1977: 5). This includes debates about: what is the human good (and bad), the contents of worthwhile development; the acceptable distribution of development's benefits, costs and risks; and the ethical quality of methods of development analysis and practice, including the questions of who should decide and who should act. The mission of development ethics, he proposed, is practical as well as theoretical: "to diagnose value conflicts, to assess policies (actual and possible), and to validate or refute valuations placed on development performance" (1997: 1168). Further, it must seek not merely to specify goals but to affect the processes and instruments through which, in the processes of application to determine and use policy means, goals are respecified and either marginalised or given real weight. Available, entrenched or habitual means often determine the ends that are actually pursued. Development ethics must present ideas that can pervade the world of means—of social movements and organisations, legislatures and courts, policy methods and procedures, education and training—and thereby influence events.

   The field of study and practice must combine an awareness of global interconnections—of linkages and costs that have been treated as 'externalities' in narrowly national, disciplinary or commercial calculations—with a locally based understanding of existence rationalities and vulnerabilities. Identification of the 'externalities', the real impacts, costs and benefits—ecological, medical, psychological, cultural—requires an openness to 'local' knowledge and values, which in turn requires routine 'local' participation and involvement.

"The Uncertain Promise – Value conflicts in technology transfer"

Goulet's 1977 book on international transfers of technology illustrates his approach, a combination of philosophical discussion, extensive multi-disciplinary exploration, and interviews and case studies in a range of countries and organizations. Technology in the modern world is shown as a mighty 'two-edged sword', a creator and destroyer. It brings new freedoms and imposes new determinisms. It creates a human-made nature which

individuals experience as externally given and overwhelming. It generates vested interests determined to market each of its possible products. Its instrumental approach, whereby everything is seen as a means towards ends which are themselves beyond reason, "has stripped societies and their members of their sources of meaning. Pretechnological societies derived their meaning from synthesis, whereas technology has destroyed the basis for any synthesis other than its own, which is dry and sterile. Technology need not have wrought this destruction, but historically it has. … [N]ew meanings must be created to counter alienation, the antithesis of meaningful living" (1977: 11-12). Instrumental norms of what should be done need to be inspired by an adequate "unifying vision of life's total meaning" (p.20). Premodern societies evolved such visions that "conferred patterns of meaning to birth, to daily routine, to change, to suffering, and even to death itself. Unfortunately, these wisdoms were…provincial, static, and naïve. … Hence a wisdom for our times calls for numerous creative dialogues in discourse and in social praxis … …'old' and 'new' mentalities must talk as equals" (pp. 239-40), in order to build a well rooted commitment to a sustainable meaningful future. The alternative future is: chaos (1977: Conclusion).

Goulet spoke of a 'vital nexus' for the guidance of technology, such as formulated in China: "Values command politics, politics commands economics, and economics commands technique". Markets are indispensable societal mechanisms but insufficient, in Karl Mannheim's terms, as a societal organizing principle. "[The required] organizing principle needs to be founded on a new global compact or social contract around priority values like survival, justice, equity, sufficiency for all, ecological integrity, and the elimination of large-scale systematic violence from human life." (Goulet, 1977: 230). In actuality, the guidance system for technological choice in the international market is dominated by consultancy firms and similar 'gatekeepers' who link scientific, technical, financial and political networks but who lack an adequate conception of relevant values, externalities and wider costs and benefits, and function instead as proselytisers of commercially attractive deals that serve the interests of groups with greater purchasing power—including themselves (1977, Ch.4).

In contrast to conceptions of freedom which consider it to increase whenever the possibilities for commodity consumption increase, Goulet endorsed different priorities (1971, Ch.6; 2006, Ch. 3). Freedom, including the freedom to live in a relatively equal and mutually respectful society with space for other concerns than production and consumption, requires an element of "Austerity, or the willingness to be content with a decent sufficiency of goods" (1977: 161). Otherwise people become prisoners of technology-driven consumption and the corresponding forms of social organization, perpetually chasing more consumption. The imprisonment by technology is more than an expression of vital 'animal spirits'—the compulsion to consume everything simply because we can, just as we climb Everest because it is there—but is driven by market competition and competition between nations (1977, Ch.7).

Visions of global order

Drawing on the work of Richard Falk (1975), Goulet contrasted market-driven and big-power nation-driven models of world order with a vision of a "global populism" that in diverse ways directly engages and supports the knowledge, needs and priorities of

ordinary people worldwide. "Paradoxically, few people can be enthusiastic global populists unless they also have strong local loyalties: in order to counter the abstract universalism of [managers of the existing world system], one needs experiential and existential roots. And one must be kept accountable to a living community of human need, not merely to some model, plan, discipline, profession or utopian vision. This kind of accountability helps place 'experts' in horizontal relationship with others, thereby facilitating their necessary apprenticeship in exercising their specialities in a horizontal mode. … [For] If one repudiates local accountabilities or takes elite peers as one's primary 'significant others'…it will transmute one's leadership roles into postures of rulership", as happened in really-existing socialism (1977: 223-4). Advancing global populism must rely in part on mobilizing the residual local "loyalties of those presently serving global elitist constituencies" (p.227).

The essential partners for analyses informed by development ethics concerns thus include social movements that represent or support the claims of the weakest groups in national and global society. Goulet's last major paper (2005) brought together longstanding themes of the distribution of the costs and benefits from major development activities such as dam construction, and the distribution of rights to be informed and be heard, with newer themes of the roles of global development organisations and globally linked social movements. He argued that Brazilian experiences in popular participation in decision-making around dam construction and in participatory municipal budgeting show the possibility of fulfilling some old ideals; partly through the involvement of global social movements which had their largest launching pad in Brazil. Fora of globalised resistance such as the World Social Forum have given new practical dimensions and theoretical clarification to the slogan that 'another globalization is possible'.

Practice-based methodology

Goulet called for ethical investigation and debate that are driven by experience, not secluded in academic philosophy and pre-set academic frameworks; and for field-based identification and reflection on values and value conflicts and societal, corporate and global responsibilities. He espoused a process-oriented, practice-centered, locality-specific approach not an elaborate generalized theoretical model. He thus advocated what others call 'practical ethics' rather than a theoretical ethics that will supposedly then be 'applied'. Only a practice-based development ethics could have adequate "regard for constraints, for human desires and limitations, and for the unpredictable vagaries of local conditions" (2006: 105) and avoid becoming entrapped in oversimple conceptual schemata (2006: Ch.10).

Goulet's type of field ethics is often deeply illuminating. Its limits arise from the time and skills it requires, and if it remains disconnected from communicable theory. Practically-oriented movements require systematically elaborated theoretical structures too, to sustain them and help them cohere and communicate. What we see in the most interesting development ethics work after Goulet are steps to combine case investigation and ethnographic insight with more structured philosophical thinking. At the same time, practical ethics that seek serious influence in systems of decision-making must move beyond specialist spaces in academic philosophy. The analyses required lie at the

interfaces of various branches of philosophy, social sciences, management and humanities, and of academic work and practical action.

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