

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 8

Issue 12 *December Roundtable: An Annotation
of "The Activist" in Harper's Magazine*

Article 6

12-2008

Global Ethics and the Role of Academics

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Recommended Citation

van den Anker, Christien (2008) "Global Ethics and the Role of Academics," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 12, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss12/6>



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Global Ethics and the Role of Academics

Abstract

Academics have a social and professional responsibility that stems from their individual duties as global citizens. With their privileged position as lifelong learners they need to assess carefully where they direct their attention for research, their teaching and their exchange of knowledge with the wider public. This means that academic freedom does not only bring a range of rights, it also involves duties to develop and advocate ethical positions on real-life dilemmas and to engage in self-reflection on being in the role of contributing to oppression.

Keywords

Human rights, Sudan, Darfur

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Global Ethics and the Role of Academics

by Christien van den Anker

Academics have a social and professional responsibility that stems from their individual duties as global citizens. With their privileged position as lifelong learners they need to assess carefully where they direct their attention for research, their teaching and their exchange of knowledge with the wider public. This means that academic freedom does not only bring a range of rights, it also involves duties to develop and advocate ethical positions on real-life dilemmas and to engage in self-reflection on being in the role of contributing to oppression.

The article about de Waal shows that these are controversial statements on academic life, as the commitment to and engagement with the reality of current global politics will always present hard choices to be made. Academic publications can contribute to thinking by deconstructing perspectives and discourses, while remaining on the fence about the practical implications of such theorizing. Yet the urgency of political and ethical dilemmas in human interactions at all levels requires that reflection and exploration does not remain separate from practice.

In debates on the role of science (including social sciences and humanities) in society it was believed for a long time that the academic role was the opposite of being engaged. It was seen as necessary to abstract from reality and to take an impartial distance from real life problems. Engagement and commitment were seen as creating bias and interfering with the [scientific method](#). However, critics established that there is always bias. Our thinking is always partially determined by what we can see as important to research or teach. This also affects how we choose our methods and what we do with the results of our learning.

In the circumstances of inequality we currently live in, both globally and locally, we can usefully perceive of ourselves as global citizens. I do not use this concept in a political sense of being citizens in a global state but morally, as considering the world (and not the nation-state) as the relevant scope of justice. This moral stance on fundamental human equality has an effect on what institutions we support and what personal ethics we have as guidelines in our life decisions.

Our identity as a global citizen affects our professional ethics. We can view de Waal's involvement with Africa as a result of a global ethic valuing equality and justice. Academics have an influential position as knowledge producers and educators of future generations of graduates as well as intellectuals with a public role in society. Therefore they need to bring their global citizenship into their academic life decisions in the strongest sense.

The implications of doing so would be influential and cumulative. At first sight we can envisage the increased use of action research, involving research participants from the start and requiring that the agenda, the methods and the use of results of the research project are determined in partnership with the researched community. We can foresee the use of [participatory teaching methods](#) with priorities being given to making curriculum inclusive and multi-perspectival. An ethics of global citizenship would also increase the involvement in public debates for academics.

These are all more or less known and adhered to in many places in academia worldwide already. One innovative element of global citizenship in education would be to encourage personal

reflection and allowing for emotional release in higher education. This would free up thinking and create stronger bonds between learners. Individually educators can start to reflect on where they contribute to oppressive practices and assist their learners in doing the same.

The kind of controversy around de Waal's engagement would be much more usefully discussed in terms that would not attack him personally. An important barrier to reaching a global citizenship in education is the excessive use of criticism in academia and the hierarchy of knowledge creation adhered to. Then we could cooperate to get academia more inclusive, and encourage the supportive attitude to everyone's thinking rather than the current cultures of competition and criticism.

Dr Christien van den Anker is Reader in Politics at the University of the West of England. Her specialization is in Global Political Theory and Global Ethics. Her recent research has been on contemporary forms of slavery, migration and equality. Her most recent publications are "Human Rights in Iran." and "The Relevance of Ethnography of 'Others' for Global Political Theory" in the Journal of International Political Theory, (October 2008) and the cutting edge collection of essays W. J. Doornik (eds.) Trafficking and Women's Rights (Palgrave, 2006). Christien is founding co-editor of the Journal of Global Ethics (Taylor and Francis) and edits a book series on Global Ethics for Palgrave. More information can be found at her department website http://www.uwe.ac.uk/hlss/politics/staff_cVanDenAnker.shtml.