

SYMPOSIUM
PROBLEMS AND METHODS IN GLOBAL THINKING



WHOSE GLOBAL THINKING?

BY

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Whose (Global) Thinking?

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Flikschuh's book *What is Orientation in Global Thinking?* is a highly unusual and intriguing one. It takes her readers on an intellectual journey across bodies of literature, which are rarely brought together, in a self-critical quest for orientation. Starting from the idea of conceptual loss, that is, an inability to conceptualize a globalized world within liberal normative theorizing, Flikschuh seeks reorientation and immediately concedes that it cannot be taken for granted that she knows what this would even mean. Drawing on Kant as her methodological guide, she develops a first-personal reflexive contextualism that finds orientation in the acknowledgement that human thinking is inescapably thinking from a particular point of view. This point of view is the starting point for a reflexive inquiry into the presuppositions of the questions one asks, for developing an awareness of the finitude of one's own perspective and for the realization that given my contingent contextual position, reasons that are unconditionally valid for me might not therefore be valid reasons for everyone. Having found the methodological means for intellectual flexibility from within one's own normative point of view, Flikschuh turns to modern African Philosophy in order to show that there are indeed normative reasons and frameworks that are different for others and that call on 'us' to acknowledge this.

And thus, her journey ends with the appeal to seek intellectual engagement with others in order to overcome the exclusive nature of global justice debates.

This daring intellectual journey is, ultimately, Flikschuh's own search for orientation in a philosophical landscape that she experiences as deeply unsatisfactory. It is characterized by a somewhat unusual openness and tentativeness that is owed both to her acknowledgement of a sense of disorientation and to her focus on a methodological inquiry into what it would mean to think globally rather than a substantive account of how to do so. It invites her readers to think along, to raise questions and leave them open, indeed learning to leave them open in order to pose them in a different way. And yet, despite this openness, despite her persuasive critique of the "obsessively inwardly turned engagement" (Flikschuh 2017, xi) of the global justice debate, despite her passionate call for inclusivity and despite her subtle engagement with African philosophers, Flikschuh's search for orientation remains peculiarly centred on an inwardly-turned critical engagement with liberalism.

I

What is 'global' thinking – and who are 'global' theorists?

Flikschuh raises a timely and intriguing philosophical question: "What is global normative thinking, or perhaps, what might it be – what general form would it have to take to count as such?" (*ibid.*, 7) Her interest in this question stems from dissatisfaction with existing global normative thinking; indeed, she starts from the sweeping claim that "we do not currently reason globally" (*ibid.*, ix). Hence, the core question of the book becomes: "how we would have to learn *to think* in order to think more globally" (*ibid.*, 7 [original emphasis]). To what, however, does the qualifier 'global'

refer? And whom does Flikschuh address in using the first-person plural: Who are ‘we’, the global theorists who fail to reason globally?

A first way of understanding the term ‘global theorists’ refers to theorists who think about problems, which are global in scope and thus refer to a global political context that is distinct from a purely domestic one. Climate change or global social inequality would be examples of such global issues. Flikschuh’s suspicion that “much of our current theorizing conflates global reasoning with globalizing particular, domestically favoured moral and political principles” (*ibid.*, ix) and thus “takes the global political context to be the domestic liberal one writ large” (*ibid.*, x) expresses this understanding of the qualifier ‘global’: it challenges theorists to question received statist frameworks of thinking about justice and politics in the face of challenges that are global in scope.

A second, practical way of understanding the term ‘global theorists’ takes the qualifier ‘global’ to specify the theorists rather than the object of their inquiry. It refers to theorizing that is global in the sense of constituting a debate between scholars from across the globe, where the object of thought is, in principle, open. It could be global challenges, but it could also be metaphysical questions such as the meaning of life. Flikschuh’s call to “learn seriously to engage, on equal terms, with the moral views and philosophical concerns of those whose thinking and ways of life differ from ours, often quite markedly so” (*ibid.*, x) speaks to this interpretation. It calls on theorists to seek genuine philosophical exchange with scholars who think from within different philosophical frameworks.

Finally, one might understand ‘global’ in the broad sense of referring to the philosophical aspiration for general or universal validity rather than to an object of inquiry that calls for suitable philosophical frameworks or to a group of theorists that spans

different social contexts. Flikschuh's Kantian strategy of recursive justification as well as her engagement with Hountondji's inquiry into the philosophical means to overcome philosophy's rootedness in cultural constants through seeing philosophy as a wager of communication (*ibid.*, 135-146; see Hountondji 2002, 207) address this third, methodological sense of 'global' thinking: how can philosophy make valid general claims given that theorists can only start from their first-personal perspective which is situated in particular socio-historico-cultural contexts – and to what extent is global philosophical discourse necessary to generate valid philosophical propositions?

Flikschuh does not distinguish the three senses of 'global' thinking; she plays on the equivocation when asking why the (empirically speaking) global justice debate, which is “nominally *global*” (Flikschuh 2017, 5) is so parochial, i.e. not global, practically speaking. Neither does she address the issue of who the global theorists are – and thus who she takes to be the audience of her book. For her, the answer seems obvious: her point of reference is the global justice debate that has largely dominated Anglo-American political philosophy over the past 25 years. Throughout the book, Flikschuh uses the terms “global practical reasoning” (*ibid.*, ix) and “global normative theorists” (*ibid.*, 5) interchangeably with “liberal global theorizing” (*ibid.*, 21) and “Western theorists' global thinking” (*ibid.*, 200), thus suggesting that global theorists are 'Western' theorists and 'Western' theory can be reduced to liberalism.

Thinking of 'global' theorists as ('Western') liberal theorists reflects Flikschuh's first-personal starting point. Her quest for reorientation in global thinking is a reflexive self-critique from a liberal, 'Western' point of view. However, the implicit identification of global theorists with liberal theorists, of global theorists and 'us', risks reproducing the very intellectual

demeanour that Flikschuh persuasively criticizes. To be sure, Flikschuh is deeply critical of liberal claims to superior access to universal validity. Her very project is motivated by an uneasiness with “the unquestioned underlying dominance of liberal political values, principles and methodological starting points within the parameters of these nominally *global* debates” (*ibid.*, 5 [original emphasis]). Yet, it is precisely because of Flikschuh’s critical stance towards liberal self-righteousness that the use of the generic ‘we’ seems troubling. It suggests that the (albeit failed) attempt at global theorizing happens in the (largely Anglophone) liberal Euro-American context while the Other, who is distinct from ‘us’, stands for the local, the particular, the non-liberal, the radically different. Such a view risks collapsing the critique of presumptuous universalism into a simplifying essentialism that addresses a ‘we’, assumed to be a liberal, ‘Western’ audience engaged in the attempt to think globally, while casting ‘non-Western’ theorists as ‘our’ opposite.

II

Why Re-orient Liberal Global Thought?

Flikschuh, however, is genuinely irritated by the self-centredness of liberal debates on global justice. Why are debates on global political issues so parochial in their underlying and unquestioned assumption that liberal political values, principles and philosophical methods will provide answers to the complex questions that arise in the global realm? This question motivates and drives her inquiry. Her answer is tentative and bold at the same time. She proposes to consider the idea that global normative theorists may suffer from conceptual loss.

II.1. The Idea of Conceptual Loss

Flikschuh borrows the notion of conceptual loss from Jonathan Lear's analysis of the Crow's response to the challenge of finding a new, Crow way of life following their negotiated settlement on reservation land. It captures the conceptual breakdown the Crow experienced when the concepts that would create meaning for them no longer applied to the world they lived in. Conceptual loss refers to "a loss that is not itself a happening but is the breakdown of that in terms of which happenings occur" (Lear 2006, 38). Such "a breakdown in intelligibility" (*ibid.*, 34) expresses a general vulnerability that "marks us as human" (*ibid.*, 9). As Flikschuh herself suggests, the idea of a breakdown in meaning resonates with the experience of African philosophers' struggle to reconstitute their thinking in the wake of colonial epistemicide (Flikschuh 2017, 26). However, she does not explore this line of thought. Her core claim is that "we may be facing something similar in the context of liberal global theorizing" (*ibid.*, 21).

Flikschuh is aware that it might seem an extreme stretch to compare the predicament of liberal theorists thinking about global issues with the Crow or Africans facing cultural devastation of entire forms of life. She acknowledges that breakdown in meaning in theoretical approaches, unsettling as it may be, is "hardly comparable to practical crises of the kind suffered by the Crow" (*ibid.*, 102). It does not amount to leading a life one does not understand but merely to theorizing in a theoretical framework that does not make sense anymore. Theories, after all, are not forms of life, however tight their connection may be. As Flikschuh concedes, the global normative context may be "better thought of as ... a theorized moral possibility more than an actual way of life" (*ibid.*, 102). She also indicates that the experience of cultural devastation in the wake of colonization is quite different from that of a conceptual loss of fit with the world from within a hegemonial

normative position (see *ibid.*, 23). Flikschuh is, however, more interested in what unites these experiences as the idea of conceptual loss allows her to engage in a first-personal reflection on her own predicament as a philosopher rooted in the liberal tradition, trying to come to terms with global realities that seem to question this very tradition.

Following Lear, Flikschuh understands conceptual loss not in terms of an “ideologically motivated *unwillingness*” but rather as “a conceptually based *inability* to broaden or change dominant terms of global debate” (*ibid.*, 5-6 [original emphasis]). The problem that philosophers thinking about global predicaments face is not that they do not want to think differently or that they have a “vested political interest in not doing so”; Flikschuh suggests the real issue is that “we may not know *how* to think globally; we may lack the relevant concepts” (*ibid.*, 6 [original emphasis]). And this inability to genuinely question the received normative framework of liberalism in order to think differently about global issues is, following Flikschuh, rooted in a loss of fit between conceptual resources to make sense of the world and actual living circumstances.

Conceptual loss occurs whenever something that from within a given framework should be impossible becomes actual. It can be induced by any “impingement of framework-external states of affairs upon a given form of life, where these impingements are experienced as logical impossibilities from within that form of life” (*ibid.*, 26). The encounter of colonialists with nomads that lead Kant to relativize the duty of state entrance constitutes one example of such an external intrusion into a normative framework. But which encounter or external intrusion is it that theorists face in the context of global normative thought and that would lead them to relativize their normative standpoints and rethink the way in which they think about global issues?

II.2. External Impingements on the Liberal Framework

Flikschuh implicitly draws on three different considerations to substantiate her claim that liberal global theorists may experience conceptual loss, two empirical and one conceptual one. The empirical impingements on global normative theorizing stem from the observation that the object of global normative thought, i.e. the global order, has been changing in a way that calls into question the central ordering concept of liberal theory, namely the idea of the state, which had been taken for granted as the central justice-delivering institution in liberal political thought for centuries. However, it is not immediately evident what exactly this “unanticipated change” (*ibid.*, 38) regarding the global order consists in.

In the first part of the book, Flikschuh appeals to the way in which globalization has altered and weakened the role of the state. She suggests that “our familiar, domestically developed concepts and principles have lost their grip on a globalized world” (*ibid.*, x), characterized by “the onslaught of vastly accelerated political and economic globalization” (*ibid.*, 6), raising the question of the “continued relevance of domestically conceived concepts in the face of rapidly changing global states of affairs” (*ibid.*, 28). If empirical realities put pressure on the state, liberalism indeed loses its grip on this world if it continues to think about politics in domestic terms. However, why are only *global* theorists called upon to rethink their received normative frameworks? If the world has changed so that the state can no longer play the role assigned to it by liberal theory, this would have consequences for liberal (or even any political) theorizing as such, no matter whether of a global or domestic kind. In fact, this difference would lose its traction; any political morality would be global in some sense.

There is, however, a second empirical impingement on the liberal framework regarding the role of the state that plays a role in Flikschuh's argument: the growing awareness that the state has never taken hold in the African context in the way imagined by liberals – a point, Flikschuh takes up towards the end of the book when engaging with skeptical perspectives on statehood in Africa (*ibid.*, chapter 7), though it also resonates with her reconstruction of Kant's relativization of the duty of state entrance in the face of encountering nomadic peoples. From this point of view, it is not the pressures of globalized capitalism that undermine the role liberals ascribe to the state; rather, it is the encounter with political realities in which the state has never played that role in the first place that warrants a radical rethinking of the concept of statehood.

While the first reading of conceptual loss in liberal global political thinking casts doubts on Flikschuh's emphasis that it is *global* theorists who require reorientation (rather than liberals, or political theorists generally speaking), this second reading questions her insistence that liberals would have to change in ways that might hardly be perceivable as liberal anymore (see *ibid.*, 14). Why would the awareness of the possibility of other forms of political rule for others not merely lead to relativizing liberal statism's claim to global validity – just as Kant relativized the duty of state entrance without, however, giving up the centrality of the state in his own political morality?

A third impingement on the liberal framework of global thought on which Flikschuh draws is less an empirical than a conceptual one. It refers to the emergence of a new concept, namely the idea of global justice.¹ This new concept, Flikschuh

¹ The emergence of the concept of global justice may well be triggered by empirical global dynamics that make this concept seem increasingly indispensable, though the fact of global injustices as such is far from new.

argues, puts pressure on the received normative framework of liberalism because it cannot be incorporated without major changes within that framework. For Flikschuh, the liberal notion of justice is inextricably tied to the state; it simply cannot conceive the logical possibility of “a justice-creating international community without loss of meaning regarding the central ordering concept of the state” (*ibid.*, 27). Hence, if we want to accommodate the idea of global justice, “we cannot preserve our current way of life and thought” (*ibid.*, 14), a way of life and thought that Flikschuh associates with thinking of the state as the central justice-creating institution.

The conceptual point calls for altering core tenets of liberalism in a way that might challenge the liberal character of the normative framework, though it would only apply to those liberal theorists who in fact do see the need to accommodate claims of global justice. However, in what sense is the concept of global justice indeed a framework-*external* impingement on liberalism? Liberal global justice theorists perceive global justice claims – at least in the mostly distributive sense that dominates this debate – as making valid claims that need to be integrated into the liberal framework. On what grounds do they make this basic normative assumption if not on liberal grounds? After all, the tension that arises between claims of global justice and statist assumptions might also be one between conflicting liberal commitments rather than one induced by external impingements on a coherent and essentially statist framework. In other words, is statism really as fundamental to the liberal way of thinking as Flikschuh assumes?

II. 3. Epistemic and Moral Reasons for Reorienting Global Thinking

In fact, Flikschuh herself appeals to alternative reasons for reorienting global normative thought that go far beyond the challenge to statism induced by external impingements on the liberal framework. The first consideration is an epistemic one. Flikschuh decries a “lack of philosophical curiosity” in the global justice debate and asks “[i]f the concern genuinely is with the possibility of *global* thinking, might one not legitimately expect global theorists to read outside their home canons a little?” (*ibid.*, 5 [original emphasis]). Flikschuh’s point is not just that it is intellectually unsatisfactory to merely engage with ways of thinking one knows already, broadly speaking, or that it fails to adequately grasp the global context. It runs deeper. She emphasizes that “[t]o understand my own context reflexively, I must somehow understand that other contexts are possible for me” (*ibid.*, 125) – and this requires an attempt to understand others’ ways of life and reasons for action. Only then can we see our own limitations. For Flikschuh, “we come to understand ourselves through coming to understand foreigners – through coming to understand that, in an odd sort of way, their values could have been ours or, more generally, that we could have been them” (*ibid.*, 126).

This – strong – epistemic claim transcends the context of *global* normative thought in the empirical and practical sense, appealing to the methodological one. It maintains that there simply is no way of reflexively orienting myself, *even in my own context*, without relativizing my standpoint by coming to understand that other normative frameworks would have been possible for me. And thus, the resulting call for reorientation refers to *all* philosophers, not just liberal ones thinking about global predicaments. In fact, it goes straight to the core of the discipline: the search for universally

valid knowledge and what this could mean in light of our limited first-personal perspective.

However, the ignorance of normative frameworks beyond one's own is, for Flikschuh, not just an epistemic but also a moral problem. In comparing her notion of conceptual loss to the Kuhnian paradigm shift, Flikschuh bemoans "that one cannot urge a Kuhnian paradigm shift; Kuhn's account is explanatory, not normative" (*ibid.*, 24). Flikschuh, in contrast concludes that while she may not yet know what a future form of global thinking might look like, it "*should* be more genuinely inclusive" (*ibid.*, 232 [my emphasis]). In fact, the "greatest practical difference which the global justice debate could make", Flikschuh maintains, "lies in breaking the cycles of intellectual exclusion" (*ibid.*, 233) and thus in addressing the epistemic injustice highlighted by post-colonial African philosophers. This call for intellectual inclusivity is cast as a moral requirement: it is an injustice to simply assume that one's own normative framework is right also from the point of view of others without genuinely exposing oneself to their points of view.

These two lines of argument, the moral and epistemic reasons for reorienting global normative thinking on the one hand and the empirical and conceptual considerations about conceptual loss regarding the state on the other, pull in different directions in at least three respects. First, the call for intellectual inclusivity, is not just a response to changing empirical realities or conceptual impingements on a received normative framework. It is based on far more general, epistemic and moral considerations: What is at stake is that liberals *should* acknowledge the limitations of their own normative framework for the sake of being able to reflexively orient themselves and acting morally in their practice of thinking. These claims hold independent of any experience of conceptual loss – and thus raise the question: what role does the experience of

conceptual loss induced by external impingements on one's philosophical framework really play in Flikschuh's argument?

Moreover, the call for intellectual inclusivity is not merely directed against the statism at the heart of liberalism. Rather, it attacks the parochialism underlying an excessively inwardly-oriented liberalism that fails to engage with other points of views. Statism may be one manifestation of such parochialism. But the charge runs deeper than calling for abandoning the statist way of thinking about the proper political context for justice; it calls generally for engaging with other normative frameworks on equal terms – and thus challenges a more fundamental core tenet Flikschuh associates with liberalism: “our implicit belief in liberal morality's historically assumed moral superiority” (*ibid.*, 114). What is at stake, it seems, is not just one central ordering concept but rather liberal self-perception. Hence, one may wonder: do liberals merely lack adequate concepts to grasp global realities or do they hold a distorted moral self-conception and of what philosophical knowledge requires?

The tension between the idea of conceptual loss regarding the idea of the state on the one hand and the more general moral and epistemic challenges to liberalism on the other, reflect different senses of the ‘global’. While the empirical and conceptual impingements highlight shortcomings of the liberal framework in theorizing about global realities – and thus refer to the global as an empirical object of inquiry – the epistemic and normative considerations point towards resistance within liberal theorizing to seriously engage in globally inclusive philosophical debates that, in turn, jeopardizes their very claim to valid philosophical knowledge – and thus to the practical and methodological sense of the global.

II. 4. Conceptual Loss and the Decline of Liberalism

There is, however, a way of bringing these different lines of argument together: one might understand Flikschuh's claim that liberal global theorists may suffer from conceptual loss as an appeal to a far more fundamental anxiety, namely the foreboding of a possible decline of the liberal order, both political and philosophical. From this perspective, it is not merely the role of the state that has changed, empirically speaking. Rather, global relations of power are shifting. Just think of the rise of new global powers but also the pressures for decolonization. What is thought of as impossible from within the liberal framework, namely, that liberalism is only one among many normative and political frameworks with no claim to superiority, is feared to become, eventually, a reality, politically speaking, but ultimately, also philosophically speaking.

After all, these changing empirical and conceptual realities have ramifications that run deeper than merely challenging one core concept, the state. They challenge the very way liberals conceive of themselves, the world and practical philosophy. They challenge their claim to superior knowledge, power and morality. And thus, they also raise disconcerting epistemic questions as to whether 'we' have the right standards to produce knowledge in this changing world and troubling normative questions about the moral quality of 'our' received normative framework that posited 'our' own worldview as superior to others with far reaching and often devastating political consequences for others. In other words, what is at stake in the face of shifting global power is precisely the liberal self-conception as holding the superior political morality.

This way of drawing on the notion of conceptual loss to understand the limitations of liberal global theorizing not only brings together the two lines of argument that run through the book, the claim of conceptual loss regarding statism on the one

hand and the call for inclusive engagement based on epistemic and normative considerations on the other. It also reunites the different senses of the term ‘global’: changing global realities pose an empirical, conceptual, epistemic and normative challenge to liberalism, a challenge to its claim to the universal that can only be addressed by globalizing the philosophical discourse itself. And it makes the somewhat awkward analogy of the liberal predicament with Lear’s analysis of the Crow more plausible. Even though liberalism has been the dominant philosophical and practical paradigm rather than a marginalized culture, the foreshadowing of its decline may confront liberals with the end of the world as they knew it in a way similar to the Crow’s loss of the world. And it may occasion a similar “heightened state of anxiety” that urges fundamentally rethinking liberal theory *and* practice, even if this anxiety is not (yet) consciously experienced or even acknowledged.

I am not suggesting that this is indeed the case. In line with Flikschuh’s tentative, reflective first-personal approach, I merely suggest considering the possibility that dogmatic insistence on the liberal framework and its unexamined underlying assumptions may be a response to anxiety in the face of imminent conceptual loss induced by shifting global power. Flikschuh, however, seems to shy away from such a stronger claim, that would require a historical account of her own situatedness. In fact, the issue of power is strikingly absent in her analysis. She seems to naturally assume that, as it stands, global theorizing simply is liberal theorizing. She does not engage with theorists – in the ‘Western’ world and beyond – who have indeed posed the methodological question of how to think globally in a world marked by global power asymmetries perpetuating colonial realities from within non-liberal philosophical frameworks. Post-colonial and de-colonial theorists²

² See, for instance, Bhambra 2014 and Santos 2014.

come to mind, including African philosophers who seek ways to think the global in a spirit of openness,³ but also recent methodological debates on comparative political theory that explore its transformative aspects.⁴ Flikschuh, in contrast, asks the question of how to think globally from a decidedly liberal perspective, which serves as the unexamined point of reference separating ‘us’ (liberal/global theorists) from the Other.

Ironically, this unquestioned preoccupation with liberalism, with its limitations and inability to seriously question its own assumptions, may, ultimately, express a sense of “conceptual last-standing”, that is an attempt “to go on *as if* no loss was happening” (28) – not in the same sense as global justice theorists who insist that the idea of global justice can be accommodated without changing liberal political morality and hold on to the implicit liberal belief in its own normative superiority – claims that Flikschuh is ready to give up. However, her first-personal reflection on the liberal predicament does not consider the possibility that this very tradition might face decline as the dominant framework of political morality – and what this would entail for the possibility of forging a new liberal future. Despite the spirit of openness that drives her inquiry, her analysis remains tied, in a peculiar sense, to an inward-facing critical engagement with liberalism and a liberal audience.

Conclusion

And thus, Flikschuh’s challenging intellectual journey comes full circle: her critique of the narrow liberal perspective on global issues reflects the assumption of liberalism’s status as the dominant paradigm from which to engage the ‘radical Other’. This preoccupation with liberalism is, of course, in line with her first-

³ See Mbembe, 2017 and 2020.

⁴ See Godrej 2009 and Jenco 2011.

personal contextualism. She reflects on her own philosophical context, that she perceives as largely dominated by political liberalism. Hence, her inquiry into the roots of her dissatisfaction with global justice theory is a reflexive self-critique from a liberal point of view.

Yet, while Flikschuh's first-personal contextualism defies positing an abstract I as the subject of thinking, she does not provide an account of her own historical situatedness – and of the extent to which the first-personal perspective is a plural one, referring to entangled, overlapping and shared social practices that inform or even constitute the experiences that I take as a starting point for my reflections. And thus, it remains open, whose global thinking she addresses: is her book an inquiry into how Flikschuh's liberal audience should re-orient their way of theorizing a globalized world? Is it a personal inquiry into how to make sense of her own, subjective struggle to de-parochialize her thinking, that took her from liberalism, to Kant, Lear, African Philosophy and back to liberalism? Or is it an inquiry into orientation in thinking, generally speaking, a thinking that necessarily starts from a first-personal perspective and yet is confronted with how to respond to other first-personal perspectives? It is certainly a strength of the book that Flikschuh avoids providing simple answers but rather prompts her readers to acknowledge the tensions that arise from confronting the universalizing aspirations arising from one's own perspective with that of others – and challenges them to learn how to leave them open.

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