E-mail and Eudaimonia: Global Justice and Moral Concern

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Abstract

In his recent book, Happiness, Pedro Tabensky has argued for an Aristotelian account of happiness as eudaimonia or flourishing. However, his account of happiness appears to have the unfortunate implication that both individual eudaimonia and global justice are in principle unattainable. I examine Tabensky's reasons for believing that his account has such unfortunate implications, and suggest that, if appropriately modified, he would be able to avoid them.

In his recent book, Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose, Pedro Tabensky has developed a broadly Aristotelian account of happiness as eudaimonia or flourishing. Tabensky's Aristotelian leanings are informed by considerations drawn from contemporary communitarianism, and tempered by a repudiation of Aristotle's attitudes towards women and slaves. Some aspects of his theory of eudaimonia go well beyond anything claimed by Aristotle. One especially distinctive point is the strong connection that Tabensky draws between the flourishing of the individual and the flourishing of the community in which the individual is embedded. In brief, his view is that an individual can only attain complete eudaimonia if the community of which she is a member, and in which her life is embedded, is free from exploitation and other forms of injustice.

A full discussion of Tabensky's account of eudaimonia is well beyond the scope of this paper. I propose rather to limit myself to the discussion of a problematic theoretical implication of the above-mentioned connection Tabensky posits between individual flourishing and the level of justice in that individual's community. The implication is one that Tabensky himself notes within the text of Happiness; but he does not, to my knowledge, provide a response, either within the book or elsewhere. The problem is that, on Tabensky's accounts of justice, community and flourishing, both global justice and individual flourishing (or eudaimonia) appear to be unattainable. This problem arises in a powerful form for Tabensky, in large part because of his particular views on the nature of justice and community. A brief exposition of these views will lay the ground for an articulation of the problem Tabensky faces, and for my proposal for remedying this problem.

For Tabensky, justice is most fundamentally a property of persons rather than of groups or societies; individual justice is that “state of character which makes people disposed to do what is just” (Tabensky 2003: 171). Justice can also be attributed to communities. Communal justice (that is, justice as it pertains to a community) is the “ethical ideal that informs our interactions, including our emotional responses, with
our community” (Tabensky 2003: 171). Justice “can only be achieved when the conditions for individual flourishing for every member of a given community have been achieved” (Tabensky 2003: 173). The relationship between individual justice and communal justice is given as follows: “Individual justice (complete virtue) spreads out through the community, thus forming communal justice” (Tabensky 2003: 178).

Communal justice is obtained relative to a community, and so requires some account of community. Here Tabensky is broad, treating as a community any group of people linked by dialogical bonds. The definition does not require any particular number of dialogical bonds relative to the number of people in the group, nor that community members think of themselves as belonging to a community. The definition is thus broad enough to include, at one end, psychological communities – communities whose members all know each other personally and who think of themselves collectively as a community; and at the other extreme, groups of people of whom most have never met, who do not think of themselves as sharing a community but who are indirectly connected through their dialogical relationships with some other members of the group. An (extreme) example of the second kind of community would be two isolated city-states, both of which are visited by a single trader who has one friend in each.

Now, according to Tabensky, the quality of the relationships in a community and the quality of justice in that community are mutually dependent. For one thing, a particular kind of personal relationship (friendships oriented towards the development of virtue) is necessary for individuals to develop the virtues required to function as virtuous members of broader communities. Conversely, the moral quality of friendships is affected by the moral quality of the wider community within which they are embedded. Each friend is a member of the wider community, and is subject to its values and pressures; if his or her other relationships tend towards injustice, then this distortion may also infect the moral quality of the friendship. This deep interconnectedness requires individuals to turn outwards from their immediate friendships and social circles, in order to help ensure that the community in which they are embedded provides, and continues to provide, a social framework capable of supporting these relationships.

But, under these various accounts of justice, community, relationships and flourishing, Tabensky believes that global justice is unattainable, and that this in turn will make eudaimonia unattainable for the individual inhabitants of the global community. Let’s see why this problem arises for Tabensky. As noted above, he defines a community as a group of individuals linked by dialogical relationships. Friendships are the most valuable kind of dialogical relationship; as he puts it, “Friendships are the glue of the social” (Tabensky 2003: 172). While the maintenance of other kinds of relationship, such as fellow-citizenship or the relationship between ruler and ruled, is also mentioned as important, friendship is the only kind of relationship to which Tabensky attaches any substantial moral significance. It is the only kind of relationship that he considers necessary for the development of the virtues, and it is the only one whose contribution to the development of moral awareness he describes in any detail.

Because friendships are always embedded within a wider community, the ethical quality of the friendships within a community affects the ethical quality of the community as a whole. At the same time, the ethical quality of the community as a whole affects (encouraging or distorting) the quality of friendships. Accordingly, “we could not reasonably conceive of the health of our immediate circles independently of considering the health of the community within which our lives, and the lives of those closest to us, are played out” (Tabensky 2003: 128). Thus, if injustice occurs any-
where in a community (for instance, if one or more of its members is individually unjust), the effects of this injustice will flow onto all the friendships that are linked through that community and will reduce their ethical quality. Since “one can only fully develop the best possible character if one's intimate relationships are healthy” (Tabensky 2003: 172), and since friendships will be tainted by injustice anywhere in the network of dialogical relationships, both one's own virtue and one's *eudaimonia* are compromised by one's inhabiting an unjust community.

Tabensky invites us to accept this ethical vulnerability, and to respond to it by accepting that the achievement of our own flourishing depends on our contributing to the attainment and maintenance of a community in which all may achieve *eudaimonia*. And this might in fact be possible, Tabensky claims, in a community that is small enough for each member to have moral concern for all other members. But, on Tabensky's account of community, as a “group of people linked by dialogical bonds,” (Tabensky 2003: 208 n. 73). The largest community to which everyone belongs today is, in fact, the global community (or something very close to it). And Tabensky doubts whether justice can be instantiated at the global level (Tabensky 2003: 172). His doubts stem from a belief that there is “very probably a psychological limit which restricts the scope of our possible moral concerns, and [. . .] this limit may not extend as far as our global community” (Tabensky 2003: 172). If such a psychological limit does indeed exist, and if it does indeed prevent individuals from acting justly towards all other inhabitants of the world, then it poses grave obstacles for the attainment of global justice.

This psychological limit is also an obstacle to the achievement of *eudaimonia*, because, for Tabensky, the moral quality of individuals' lives and relationships is affected by the moral quality of the community that they inhabit. Injustice in some parts of the community cannot but “infect” other parts. As he puts it, “I think it is clear that if, for the most part, or to a large extent, the intimate relationships of the members of our community were unhealthy or corrupt, then corrupt forms of love would spread out through the web that constitutes our (global) community in ways that would significantly influence the general fabric of our community, and hence the quality of our individual lives” (Tabensky 2003: 176). If Tabensky is correct to claim that global justice is presently unattainable, this also bodes ill for the possibility of any individual attaining *eudaimonia*.

Indeed, the difficulties may be even greater than Tabensky suspects, applying to smaller communities such as the city-state just as readily as to the current global community. For even a moderately demanding reading of the “moral concern” that Tabensky believes is necessary for just behaviour towards others, it would seem that individuals are incapable of having moral concern for more than a very few people. Taking moral concern to, say, require personal knowledge of the goals and circumstances of the individual towards which it is directed, it is impossible to imagine any individual capable of moral concern for even the ten thousand inhabitants of a Classical city-state, or of a contemporary medium-sized city, or of a national or ethnic community. Even within the narrow confines of a city-state (and assuming for the sake of argument no external contact between members of that state and the wider world), each individual will know only a small proportion of the ten thousand or so other inhabitants. Each individual's interactions with the remaining inhabitants will be indirect, just as most of each individual's interactions with other inhabitants of the world today are indirect. Accordingly, it would seem that if there are limitations to moral
concern of the kind that Tabensky has in mind, these are likely to prevent the attainment of both justice and eudaimonia in all but the smallest and closest-knit communities.

I believe that there is a way for Tabensky to resolve this difficulty without doing any great damage to his broader theoretical framework. The strategy would be to argue that moral concern, of the kind that Tabensky seems to have in mind, is simply not required for just behaviour towards strangers, of whom one knows little or nothing, and with whom one has no direct relationship of any kind. Whatever limits there may be on the scope of individuals' moral concern (and I do not deny that there are limits of some sort), these limits no more render justice unattainable at the global level than they do at the level of the nation or of the Classical city-state. Individual justice can extend to the global level, just as it can extend to the national or city-state level, without requiring the full force of moral concern to extend to every individual member of the community. I will develop an argument of this sort to show that Tabensky can discard his claims about moral concern without doing damage to his broader account of the relationship between justice and eudaimonia.

To prepare the way for the argument, it is important to clarify the precise nature of Tabensky's concerns. What is the "global justice" whose attainment he doubts is possible, and what is the nature of the moral concern that he considers to be necessary for it? For Tabensky, "communal justice" is an ideal attained when "the conditions for individual flourishing for every member of a given community have been achieved" (Tabensky 2003: 173). A just community can accordingly be characterised, minimally, as a community containing no exploitative or purely commercial relationships (Tabensky 2003: 174). Global justice is, then, a singular instance of communal justice, in which the community in question is the global community, and that community is free of exploitative and purely commercial relationships. This much is not especially contentious.

More contentious is Tabensky's specification of a necessary condition for an individual to be just towards the rest of the global population. He proposes that global justice will only obtain when individuals are just in their behaviour towards all other inhabitants of the world, however geographically and causally removed they may be. And in order for individuals to be just towards all others, he further suggests, they must have moral concern that reaches out beyond the particular moral concern they have for people and issues close to them, to encompass every other individual in the world. Call this the Global Moral Concern Requirement.

The Global Moral Concern Requirement does seem, at first blush, quite impossible to satisfy. How could we ever extend the same kind of moral concern that we direct towards friends and family, and to a lesser extent to colleagues and acquaintances, to every inhabitant of the world? The epistemic burden alone would be unbearable, let alone the practical demands. More to the point, the Global Moral Concern Requirement also seems rather implausible as a condition of the attainment of communal justice more generally. As pointed out above, a condition of communal justice that requires particular concern for all other individual members of a community is going to make justice unattainable in all but the smallest communities; smaller even than the Classical city-state.
The plausibility of the Global Moral Concern Requirement might seem greater if a different, less stringent, interpretation were to be given to moral concern. This is the path I would like to follow, developing a distinction that Tabensky himself uses but does not develop, among varieties of moral concern. When discussing individuals' capacity to change the world Tabensky points to the existence of two varieties. One of these he describes as particular and practical, directed towards people and concerns close to the individual; the other is described as general and intellectual, not necessarily resulting in any particular actions or behaviour (Tabensky 2003:188):

This expansive move is inevitably a move from particularity to generality, from the specific 'you' to the 'you' of humanity. This move has inevitable moral consequences. I can direct myself towards your specific problems, insofar as you are close to me, and I can embrace specific concerns that touch me closely, but I cannot embrace all concerns. [...] A finite creature cannot extend itself indefinitely.

Thus, moral concern, as Tabensky here suggests, is not something that individuals have uniformly for all others, even in the smallest communities. Rather, moral concern is, in an important sense, hierarchical. It varies from particular moral concern for a well-known other (the philial relationship) at one end, to general moral concern, or impersonal respect for the mass of humanity at the other. Furthermore, between these two extremes of moral concern, there are varieties of moral concern appropriate to those with whom one has a slight acquaintance, and to those to whom one is linked indirectly, by chains of dialogical relations.

Now, Tabensky's concerns about the attainability of global justice seem to be linked to the interpretation of moral concern as particular moral concern. And particular moral concern certainly cannot be extended to one and all; constraints on time and energy, not to mention geographical and linguistic barriers, rule out active care for more than a few people, though these few might be widely dispersed across the globe. And, equally clearly, even if one does have a general respect for the humanity of others, one will still lack the time and epistemic capacity to find out enough about all the unknown others in the world to be sure that one's actions are not affecting any of them negatively. This focus on requiring moral concern for global justice leads to Tabensky's pessimism about global justice.

General moral concern, at the other extreme, is not, in Tabensky's opinion, directed towards the particular interests or circumstances of any individual. Tabensky's view, though not explicitly stated, appears to be that general moral concern is simply too general and intellectual to make any practical difference to the circumstances of others' lives. Here, though, I believe that Tabensky makes an error. He underdescribes the practical possibilities associated with forms of particular moral concern that are less intimate than philia, and he overlooks the practical potential of general moral concern. In fact, there is plenty of room to manoeuvre here. For one thing, as Tabensky notes, the hierarchy of concern admits of degrees, and one might be concerned (though to a very small degree) with a far wider range of people than mere friends and associates. For another, even the most general concern, directed towards the mass of humanity rather than to particular people or injustices, may make some practical difference (at least in the right circumstances).

I will take the first point first. Although nobody can exercise moral concern in the practical sense towards every other inhabitant of the globe, one's moral concern can be extended well beyond one's own immediate circle of friends and one's local sub-com-
Community. One's concerns may be much wider in geographical scope than Tabensky's account of moral concern accepts. A citizen of a global community can exercise particular moral concern at a global level, and towards a wide range of very different and distant individuals, even if that particular moral concern cannot reach all other members of the global community.

This point can be demonstrated by a brief consideration of examples. Consider how the members and employees of international development agencies such as Oxfam work today to alleviate suffering and assist in grass-roots development, all the while establishing dialogical connections with particular exploited individuals, which assist in guiding their relief and development efforts. International human rights watchdogs such as Amnesty International function to increase public awareness of injustices suffered by particular other people around the world, and to facilitate national and international campaigns against particular injustices, such as the unfair regulations currently governing international trade to the disadvantage of developing countries. And (at least some) individuals in developed countries, learning of the exploitation by multinational corporations of workers in the workshops of some developing countries, take the time (currently minimal) to find and purchase products that are certified to be fairly traded, and to involve no exploitation in their production. In this sense, particular moral concern can be global in its reach.

The development of comparatively affordable long-range communication technologies, such as e-mail, also helps to facilitate the development of particular moral concern for others widely dispersed around the globe. These technologies should not be overlooked, for they provide a range of possibilities for increasing the density of dialogical communication, including but not limited to philial relations, at a global level. Synchronous electronic communication enables its participants to communicate textually (and with the addition of pictures), anywhere in the world. Leaving aside complications such as the affordability of the technology and the availability of the equipment, electronic communication would seem to enable dialogical bonds to spread, and intimacy to form. Likewise, friendships already established between people who have, in the past, been able to share time together, can be maintained via electronic communication (Rooksby 2002).

Tabensky might be suspicious of the claim that electronic communication is capable of sustaining philial relationships. For he, like Aristotle, believes that it is necessary for friends to spend time together, in order for them to know enough of each other to be a faithful mirror to each other's self. But with the advent of synchronous electronic communication, perhaps we can be a little flexible in how we understand the expression “spending time together.” Might it not be interpreted more generously to include relationships that do not involve spending time in each other's physical presence, but do involve spending substantial amounts of time communicating with each other, by electronic or other means, such as the exchange of letters or telephone conversations?

Electronic communication does have certain obvious limitations as a means to developing friendships, and particularly virtue friendships; it affords its users a relatively limited range of shared activities in which to participate and learn about each other. It precludes physical contact, shared physical activities of most kinds, and the participation in the mundane activities of everyday life that Tabensky, following Aristotle, holds to be essential to the development of friendship. On the other hand, if people want to be friends, and have virtue as their aim, then spending time communicating together via electronic media may well afford ample opportunities for each to know the
other well, to be a mirror to the self, and to provide constructive suggestions for self-knowledge, self-improvement and the exercise of the virtues. Additionally, electronic communication opens up possibilities for quick, efficient, affordable trans-national political action and campaigning not available in the past. We should be mindful of the potential of new communication technologies for facilitating the formation of more, and deeper dialogical relationships across the globe. And we may hope that as such relationships form, they increase awareness of the extent to which individuals' lives are indeed connected to and affected by the lives of physically and causally remote others.

The above-listed possibilities promise a great deal, because they facilitate the acquisition of knowledge about people, geographically remote and personally unknown to us, who are affected by our actions, or by the actions of third parties who function as intermediaries between us and those people. But of course, even if an individual's particular moral concern can reach across the globe, it will still not reach all the inhabitants of the globe, in that it will not be directed particularly at them as individuals with particular goals or sets of goals. I can learn more about how to direct my purchasing practices to assist the poor coffee-growing communities of East Timor or Malawi, and I can develop friendships via e-mail with individuals in Bhutan and Barbados. But still I lack the time to know everything about all the inhabitants of the world. There is, as Tabensky asserts, only so much of one individual's (particular) moral concern to go around.

Here we move to the second point made above. General moral concern can contribute practically to the development of a just world, though in rather different ways from the contributions made by particular moral concern. The key point to be made in this regard is that general moral concern, rather than being abstract, intellectual and impractical, can have positive practical ramifications. If, as Tabensky argues, global justice is instantiated when the world contains no exploitative or purely commercial relationships, then it seems quite plausible that global justice can obtain without everyone having particular moral concern for everyone else. A general moral concern for the preservation of a state of affairs in which others are not prevented from pursuing their goals and interests can result in substantial effects, even if one does not have specific knowledge of others' circumstances or goals.

How might this be possible? The answer is, in short, through the development of appropriate institutions and other organisations that facilitate collective action aimed at promoting global justice. Within Tabensky's theoretical framework, general moral concern for persons can be thought of as the recognition that all human beings have goals and aspirations that define each of them as an individual, that they share certain common needs and interests (in food, clothing, shelter, personal relationships and so on) and that they share the same overarching telos, namely eudaimonia or flourishing (Tabensky 2003: 189). And this recognition, given even the most minimal knowledge of social, political and economic conditions around the globe, may be very far from purely intellectual and impractical. Exactly how this recognition plays out in our individual actions depends, of course, on what options for action are available to us. But, even knowing nothing about others' specific goals, we can be confident that all other persons share certain interests (such as the satisfaction of basic needs), and equally confident that some of our actions at least will contribute to (or at least not detract from) the others' attainment of those goals.
The social and political infrastructure that currently exists makes the expression of general moral concern for unknown others a relatively easy matter, even if they have not succeeded to date in eradicating injustice. Consider the available options, all of which are intended to target global injustice. Innumerable non-government organisations (NGOs) dedicated to eradicating poverty and injustice currently work in developing countries to assist the poor and exploited, and these NGOs willingly take donations from concerned individuals. Avenues for seeking political influence are also being developed, by committed individuals and groups with a passion for global justice. And organisations around the world are working to develop alternatives to the current exploitative global trade system that Tabensky singles out as a great contemporary injustice; alternative trading systems, known collectively as “alternative trade” or “fair trade” are being established and are being ever more widely used. As a result consumers in developed countries find it ever easier to locate and purchase fairly traded products.

These points suggest a more general observation about Tabensky's approach to global justice, characterised as a world free of exploitative and purely commercial relationships, in which all have the opportunity to flourish. This is that, because of his laudable focus on the moral significance of a particular variety of personal relationships, namely philial relationships, he quite overlooks the moral value of a wide range of other social forms, such as political alliances and institutions whose members are committed to promoting justice. While such alliances and institutions may require members who have philial relationships, the alliances and institutions themselves have a great deal to contribute to justice. Peter Railton has highlighted this important aspect of social institutions: “By altering social and political arrangements we can lessen the disruptiveness of moral demands on our lives, and in the long run achieve better results than free-lance good-doing” (Railton 1984: 123). Railton illustrates the point with an example (Railton 1984: 123):

[I]n a society where there are no organized forms of disaster relief, it may be the case that, if disaster were to strike a particular region, people all over the country would be obliged to make a special effort to provide aid. If, on the other hand, an adequate system of publicly financed disaster relief existed, then it probably would be a very poor idea for people to interrupt their normal lives to help – their efforts would probably be uncoordinated, ill-informed, an interference with skilled relief work, and economically disruptive (perhaps even damaging to the society's ability to pay for the relief effort).

Of course, Tabensky's theory of the good is very different from Railton's. But the point at issue is that general moral concern might be directed into global and local institutions, such as disaster relief funds and fair trade systems, rather than towards all the many unknown individuals affected by such institutions. General moral concern, directed towards political alliances and institutions can make a contribution to justice.

So to conclude, while Tabensky may be correct to be pessimistic about the possibility of attaining global justice, he is correct for the wrong reasons. Individuals' moral concern, in its general form, can reach out globally, directed towards the common, general moral interests shared by others around the world, and towards the development and preservation of institutions that promote global justice. Accordingly, limits to individuals' capacity for global moral concern are not the culprit in perpetuating global injustice. There is hope yet for the realisation of both global justice and eudaimonia.
Bibliography