Business Ethics Under the Framework of Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” Theory

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ABSTRACT

Businesses must have their ethics in order to bring order and prosperity to economy. The failed attempts of “corporate governance” in recent years have highlighted the importance of this essential factor. Perhaps this is because ethics is not universal in different regions and cultures, and is under the influence of historical traditions and educational systems. It is difficult to find a common view in such a broad area when different groups, cultures, religions, lifestyles, societies, and economic structures all cause a degree of influence to the perception of ethics.

Yet business ethics is often defined as a social responsibility carried by the economic society. Richard T. De George explains that this is because business is a component of our society, and the restrictions the society sets up for businesses are usually ethical, indicating the social responsibility they carry is the core issue of business ethics. Consequently, Richard T. De George has used the “social responsibility” point of view to assert the fact that people agree with the following statement: business must carry certain amount of social responsibilities.

If “business has social responsibilities” is an accurate statement, then this must mean that business and the people of society have a relationship that involves rights and duties of both parties. T. Donaldson and Thomas Dunfee pointed out that within the social responsibilities of a business, an implied “social contract” used for reviewing business ethics, exists between the business and society. But we currently live in the globalization age, business apparently is not just responsible toward one country; they have a variety of social responsibilities and different ethical standards to deal with, which means business ethics will face difficulties of improvising and challenges of abiding by “global social contract”.

 Apparently, these scholars are attempting to express that a social contract should include universal business ethical norms. Yet the question is, does a “social contract” even exist? In other words, does everyone on this planet agree that a business should have specific responsibilities? To answer this question, Donaldson has used the theory of “Global Ethic” proposed by Hans Küng, and proved that a series of “universal business ethics” do exist. This is why we choose Hans Küng as the focus of this research.

Keywords: business ethics, business social responsibility, social contract, global social contracts, universal business ethics

HANS KÜNG’S “GLOBAL ETHIC” THEORY

The Universal Ethics Project the UNESCO launched in 1997 was the most famous universal ethic movement during that time, which was highly promoted and could not have been done without a Swiss Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng. In 1993, Hans Küng proposed “The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions” in “The Parliament of the World’s Religions”, which deeply affected the operations of Universal Ethics Project. Back in 1989, Hans Küng proposed in his thesis in a “World’s Religions and Human Rights Conference” in Paris, stating that “There will be no peace for the world if there is no peace between the religions,” which drew the starting point and initiated the genesis for the Global Ethic Movement. In 1993, Hans Küng decided to transform his “Global Ethic” concept into “The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions.” He proposed it in “The Parliament of the World’s Religions” during that same year, 6500 people with different religious backgrounds signed this agreement, making this a great event of that time.

Hans Küng’s influence is vast. The proposal for “global civic ethics” was able to surface in the “Commission on Global Governance” in 1995 after three years of the death of German ex-president Willy Brand (1913-1992), who once
led this Commission. During that same year, the "World commission on culture and development" urged that it was imperative to have and set standards for "Global Ethic". In the first meeting of "The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions" in 1997, which was a part of the universal ethics project promoted by the UNESCO, Hans Küng was of course one of the twelve representatives that attended the meeting. The second meeting was held in Italy in December 1997, Hans Küng was also invited; it was agreed that the UNESCO would strongly propose the decisions made during the research of Global Ethics, and that is why this topic is under enormous discussion around the world.

For the convenience of discussion, this research only focuses on Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” theory proposed during “The Parliament of the World’s Religions” at Chicago in 1993, where 6500 personnel with different religious backgrounds signed and agreed to the terms of “Global Ethic” included in “The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions”.

The most basic attitude of “Global Ethic” is: Every human being must be treated humbly. Secondly, there are four principles all religions agreed that are essential and commonly shared: 1. Commitment to a culture of nonviolence and respect for life. 2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order. 3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness. 4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

Hans Küng specifies that the “Global Ethic” he proposes is not a new global ideology, nor is it a religion that is above or trying to compete with any global religion. It is just a universal and undeniable principle on this earth, and a common understanding or agreement toward the dignity and attitudes of values. Yet “Global Ethic” should avoid repeating the content of what the UN human rights declaration has already proposed, and must be prevented from transforming into a law or strict order that has means of terrifying or threat toward the people. It should not and cannot ignore the complex problems and difficulties that arise from this post-society era, or it will not be applicable for society of today.

And so, Hans Küng stresses that “Global Ethic” declaration should be practical and meet the needs of the society, or it will be just another dream or oasis. Yet it must include deep levels of ethics, and not for just solving problems. Another point to note is that the declaration of “Global Ethic” should be expressed by warm and easily understood words that embed feeling within, instead of cold and rigid words that are hard to understand. Finally, the “Global Ethic” declaration should obtain consensus from different religions and cultures.

Hans Küng has used the concepts and standards of “Global Ethic” declaration to share his “localization of Christian spirit’ beliefs. Hans Küng worried that the pursuit of “localization of Christian spirit’ would come in contact with the “civilization conflict” proposed by Huntington, and so he especially noted that Huntington once said people from different cultures should pursue and develop commonly shared values within all of us; this is consistent with the principles of “Global Ethic”, and therefore consistent with the “localization of Christian spirit” idea. Focusing on the four essential principles of the “Global Ethic” declaration, Hans Küng especially stresses the part regarding trust, which is the commitment of a life of truthfulness. Toward this principle of “Global Ethic”, Hans Küng comments:

We see and hear so many great religions of humankind that state it is a sin to lie; A positive way of saying this is that we should do what we say, and say what we do. If we think about the embedded meaning of this, it actually is clarifying the fact that no person, institution, country, organization, or religious group has the right to lie or deceive others.

On the other hand, Hans Küng thinks that if there is no principle of trust to lead mankind, people will not be able to tell what the important things in life are. For instance, if a person in the mass media business does not understand the responsibilities of protecting the truth in societies, then there is a possibility of the truth being manipulated for unjust purposes. A scientist or researcher may abide by the policies of political weather or even commercial profits, when the truth is forgotten. When politicians or leaders cannot live truthfully, they are betraying the trust of their people. When religious leaders forget the truth and demean other religions, conflicts will arise.
THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF HANS KÜNG’S “GLOBAL ETHIC” THEORY FOR BUSINESS ETHICS

Regarding the business ethics issues, Richard T. De George, Archie B. Carroll, Ann K. Buchholtz, John B. Cullen, K. Praveen Parboteeah, O. C. Ferrell, John Fredrich, Linda Ferrell, W. Michael Hoffman, Robert E. Frederick, Michael Novak, and Peter W. F. Davies and several others all have stated that business should have social responsibilities.⁹

Carrol divides social responsibilities into four groups, economic responsibility, legal responsibility, ethical responsibility, and philanthropic responsibility; the latter two groups are not under the restriction of law and regulations, meaning this an ethic matter outside the responsibilities given by law.¹⁰ There are theories that business ethics is strictly about taking the perspective of the shareholders and business beneficial associates, while thinking in their interest at the same time; Milton Friedman¹¹ is one famous example. In his thinking, only individuals have social responsibilities, and businesses do not.

Yet Hans Küng has combined the basic attitude and four main principles of “Global Ethic” declaration to express his multi-perspective toward business ethics. If we think of those who deliberately steal assets and results in the fall of companies, no doubt this is the cause of untruthfulness and deceit. Hans Küng strongly reminds us: Never steal, never deceive. This commitment is easily seen in all religions and ethical norms. It means and expresses that no person has the right to steal or take away the properties of others or the society. A further implement expresses the fact that we should take responsibility for what we do in this world, and never ignore the responsibilities the society or world has put on our shoulders.¹² From the above we can easily see the contract theory of ethic Hans Küng has constantly been trying to express to this world.

THE EFFECTS OF HANS KÜNG’S “GLOBAL ETHIC” THEORY TOWARD THE BUSINESS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE “SOCIAL CONTRACT”

Hans Küng directly states that his Global Ethic basic attitude and four principles is not a specific way of thinking, nor is it religion or something better religion; it is just a common agreement and acceptance to what ethic should be. This type of common sense is applicable for all persons on this planet. Weltethos is the German way of saying Global Ethic, in French it is “éthique planétaire”, in Italian it is “etica mondiale”, and in Czech it is “světový étos”. We can also use other words to describe global ethic, such as the ethic of humans, or universal, common ethic. We try to use words that describe ethic on the planet level, thus making the concept applicable for the people on a global standard.¹³ Therefore, in some way, Hans Küng’s proposal for “Global Ethic” is actually rich in the spirit of agreeing to “social contracts”.

Yet when business ethic scholars are talking about business social responsibilities now, “social contracts” seem to be the main thinking pathway. Donaldson expressed that business and society come to terms on an invisible yet mutual understanding in the form of “social contracts”, and this is the basis for the formation of business ethics¹⁴. We now shall review a few historical “social contracts” theories, and then discuss “business social contract theories”.

Beginning from the State of Nature, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have individually developed their own versions of social contract theory. Thomas Hobbes proposes that without the sovereign--adjudicator and law executer, human society would easily degrade into periods of the Stone Age. John Locke agrees that a society without a sovereign would definitely be dangerous, though they would not be as extreme as the examples proposed by Thomas Hobbes. Locke thinks that people would still be quite organized, although a Sovereign (government) would still have a certain amount of restriction. Jean-Jacques Rousseau thinks that even if society became a jungle, the crumbled society would still be intact, and so the existence of a Sovereign (government) would not definitely be depended on by the people. The righteous of it would have to be agreed by their people first.¹⁵

Although the social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau are not exactly the same, but they do share the common sense that people should come to terms on a set of rules everybody learns to obey by cooperating with and trusting each other. This will prevent the body, assets, or freedom rights from being exploited and letting the society return to its undeveloped state of chaos. A point worth noting is that John Rawls thinks if people signed the social contract when they were in an original position located behind the veil of ignorance, it would be much
more possible to come to terms together and bring fairness for everyone. The results would not only be righteous and justified, people would also be very convinced; this can be described as justice as fairness.  

Donaldson previously commented that social contracts do not exist in the form of words, Lin Li also argues:  

We should treat the social contract as a part of society where people “obey and agree silently or in the form of behavior, language, and texts to express their acknowledgement.”

Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” declaration of course could not get the signature of all 6 billion people on this planet. Yet Hans Küng attempted to use induction to express the fact that its content exists in all types of cultures. During the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993, Hans Küng let 6500 participants sign this Declaration, most of these were individual religious people that did not represent groups. Hans Küng apparently wanted to use his work of induction, and the signature of Declaration, to express that it had abundant social contract characteristics. One of Hans Küng’s students, Karl-Joseph Kuschel explains that what a religious parliament expresses can be divided into two parts. The first part is that different religions have come to gather at a same place at the same time, and treat each other equally and respectfully, and come to understand that no religion is inferior or superior to others. The second part is that everyone came as an individual instead of being a religious leader, thus discarding the diplomatic part of this gathering, and providing more time for insights on mankind.

Therefore, the success of this parliament should be the cause of that it was a non-official and individual activity that reflected all aspects of religion. And so, Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” declaration can be viewed as a social contract that was agreed by people around the globe in The Parliament of the World’s Religions. While Donaldson & Dunfee in their research of business social responsibility within the Integrative social contract theory has also been looking for a system of business ethics that was suitable for the whole world. This means that business ethics has to be flexible when encountering different cultures, and find a common ethic and behavior basis that will combine universal ethics and international business ethics. There are three main ways to solve the problems of international business ethics when cultural difference issues arise: ethical relativism, pan-moralism, and interactionism. Ethical relativism is the theory that holds that morality is relative to the norms of one's culture. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced. The same action may be morally right in one society but be morally wrong in another. For the ethical relativist, there are no universal moral standards -- standards that can be universally applied to all peoples at all times. The only moral standards against which a society's practices can be judged are its own.

Pan-moralism argues that there must be some way to decide whether something is right or wrong, and it will not be different because of cultural differences. There is another viewpoint that does not take the extreme viewpoint as the two above, which is goal interactive theory. Interactionism focuses on continuous interactions between an individual and the social structure as perceived by an individual rather than an external observer. Interactionists analyze patterns of interaction and related implications within the interactionist framework. Through mutual reflexive expectations and interpretations of the intentions of others and their related actions, the members of the social structure develop patterns of interaction. It believes that different cultures will definitely have different goals, and that conflicts will happen because of this. During the communication process however, if ethic issues are not important, then it is quite possible to come to an agreement even if there are conflicts in ethic issues. However, if they are important, then one of the two must back off, or the deal will be called off.

From this we can see that no matter which of the three theories above, they all have limitations. Such as believers of ethical relativism often form gaps and conflicts between different branches because of their dynamic business ethics decision method. Although pan-moralism believers do not have this problem, but they often cannot be agreed universally because of their moral imperialism spirit. Believers of goal interactive theory on the other hand, try to find truth and values during meetings and engagements, which is quite costly and inefficient to finish the job; it is limited by its own belief.

Donaldson & Dunfee further divide the “social contract” into “macrosocial contract” and “microsocial contract”. “ Macrosocial contracts” is for those that judge the “social contract”, and agree on the business ethics terms that both parties will comply to. Microsocial contracts mean a commonly agreed ethical norm among a group of people that exercise economic related activities. During the formation of microsocial contracts, most will come to terms on a
common ground of ethical norms that can be called authentic ethical norms; this type of ethical norm is very exclusive. When authentic ethical norms are able to cross different communities and survive, then we can say it is a hypernorms, which becomes the content of macro-contracts. 21

Donaldson & Dunfee further divide hypernorms into procedural, structural, and substantive hypernorms. “Procedural hypernorms” specify the rights of exit and voice essential to support microsocial consent. “Structural hypernorms” are where everyone within a community has to respect and depend on the political, economical, societal, and law systems to survive. “Substantive hypernorms” are the basic right and wrong, good and evil values which are the same among different cultures. Donaldson and Dunfee’s “substantive hypernorms” are the focus of this research. 22

Donaldson & Dunfee divide the sources of substantive hypernorm into philosophical and collective agreement. Philosophical includes the beliefs of Confucius, John Locke, Kant, Henry Shue, Shun, Richard T. De George. Collective agreement includes the “Global Human rights Declaration” and Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic Declaration” in the “The Parliament of the World’s Religions”. According to the categorization by Donaldson and Dunfee, the sources of “substantive hypernorms” can be sorted as “general”, “global arrangements”, “environment”, “social”, and “economic.” 23

The quotes from Hans Küng are listed in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Sources and examples for hypernorms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others. Or in positive terms, what you wish done to yourself, do to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different religious and cultural traditions must not prevent our common involvement in opposing all forms inhumanity and working for greater humanness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A fundamental demand: Every human being must be treated humanly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Global arrangements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We commit ourselves to a global ethic of peace-fostering…ways of life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We all have a responsibility for a better global order.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every human being without distinction of age, sex, race, color, physical or mental ability, language, religion, political view, or social or national original possesses an unalienable and untouchable dignity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We condemn sexual exploitation and sexual discrimination as one of the worst forms of human degradation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Economic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the developed countries, a distinction must be made between necessary and limitless consumption, between social beneficial and non-beneficial uses of property.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the plight of the poorest billions of humans on this planet, particularly women and children, is to be improved, the world economy must be structured more justly.</td>
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Actually, the structure of Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” principles is to set up the lowest standard for human values and basic attitudes. He expresses that he does seek an absolute global agreement on moral issues, but only a minimum standard for everyone to follow. Regarding to this point, Hans Küng has been deeply affected by Michael Walzer beliefs. Walzer divides ethics into two kinds, one is thin ethics; another is core ethics, which includes the basic survival rights, right to be treated fairly, and the right to relief one self from physical or spiritual harm. 24 This concept of core ethics is very similar to the “hypernorms” concept of Donaldson & Dunfee and the “core ” of human rights (the most sacred
right that should not be jeopardized) that is seen in German laws. \(^{25}\)

The most important belief of Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic”, is not only about the discussion of concepts, it was him who proposed the 4 essential principles to 6500 participants of The Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago that lasted from August 28\(^{th}\) to September 4\(^{th}\). The 4 principles are:

1. Commitment to a culture of nonviolence and respect for life.
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

He hopes that these are suitable for all communities, and that they can all agree to this authentic ethical norm, which Donaldson & Dunfee referred to as hypernorms. \(^{26}\) Thus it is obvious that hypernorms actually form the content for the previous mentioned “macrocontract”, it also is the embedded meaning within this research of business ethics.

**CHALLENGES THE CONSTRUCTION OF BUSINESS ETHICS AND BUSINESS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES FACE WHEN HANS KÜNG’S “GLOBAL ETHIC” THEORY IS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT**

Hans Küng believes that every human being must be treated humanely, and he came up with the idea of “Global Ethic” from there. Hans Küng has used the concept of looking for a commonly shared thinking between cultures by Samuel P. Huntington and the basic moral standard concept of Michael Walzer, to expand it into a search for a basic ethic standard between different religions and cultures known as “Global Ethic” and its four essential principles. He also attempts to let all this to be seen and treated as a kind of “global social contract”. Hans Küng has been trying hard to find a belief that is shared by all religions. For instance, he especially stresses the Confucian spirit of “Do not do to others what you do not want to happen on yourself.” can be seen in the traditions of eastern and western societies. \(^{27}\) And this provides one of the common moral standards when people are trying to seek agreement among international business ethics. In other words, he is trying to find common values among different cultures and hopes that will be agreed by all on this earth.

In the end, Hans Küng really has found a common structure of rule, and let 6500 individuals to sign a declaration, but does this mean that the social contract he proposes or the moral values within the universal moral Declaration are successfully proven to this world? This is yet to be proved, and one of the things this research plans to reflect on. In other words, although social contracts may not and cannot be a form of papers for people to sign, and should be a set of behavior modes for people to follow, but will it really be accepted and exercised by everyone on this earth? I argue that in the search for “universal business ethics”, there will be two major difficulties. One, Hans Küng’s attempt is of good will and embeds high hopes for success, yet it is ultimately a hard task. Can Hans Küng’s observation really prove the existence of a “universal social contract”? Especially when the current era has been totally secularized, freedom of beliefs are flexible, and values are not universal any more; is there really such a content mentioned in “universal social contracts”? If the formation of “universal business ethics” wishes to use methods of Hans Küng, will it be a success? The second difficulty is that if the reason for proposing “universal business ethics” is to “increase economic welfare and individual interests”, it will be deeply criticized by traditional moral scholars. This is because that in “deontological theory”, it is not acceptable to do good for the pursuit of a better outcome. In other words, if the goal for telling the truth is to make more money, then it is only an act of cleverness, with no moral value worth noting.

If rules are obeyed because they produce better outcomes, does it mean that in the future these rules can be broken if other better outcomes surface? \(^{28}\) Yet to this day, the business ethic people propose today, lack this belief. Most businesses think that obeying to business ethics is for the interest of better economic welfare and personal interest. How should this problem be solved? This is one of the issues we plan to discuss, and we want to point out that the moral values in deontological theory are not absolute; “obeying rules for better outcomes” can still be an act of moral behavior.
CONCLUSION

Hans Küng attempts to use the spirit of “Do not do to others what you do not want to happen on yourself.” as a starting point, and form it as the content for universal morals. It seems like a difficult task, because with this kind of employment method, it will face a problem believers of “social contract theory” all endure, and that is how can one know what is good for yourself is good for others as well? Apparently it will not be the same for everyone, so for the common belief of “Do not do to others what you do not want to happen on yourself.” would seem too general to prove the validity of any proposals within Hans Küng’s “Global ethic principles” declaration. However, “social contract theory” believers think that people do have common hopes, wishes, and tend to make the same choices. This type of thinking still needs to be proved, because we have not seen such accordance in humankind. So this research indicates that Hans Küng’s “social contract theory” is not acceptable.

Since we cannot use a “social contract” to seek for global business ethics, perhaps Hartford’s view of society has more insight and research value. If a group of people likes the act of good will of a person and they come together to dictate others that fail to obey this belief, then it will most likely just cause fear and consequent obedience in these people. This is how they acquire the life they have been wishing for and love the values this system has provided them and thus agree with such discipline. Hans Küng and several others all propose a moral value, yet the basis is hard to accept. However we can view this as a way of advertising for what he believes, thus gathering more believers to join their group, and fulfilling the means for survival of their belief over time.

Although Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” declaration was signed by 6500 individuals with different religious backgrounds and is considered a great success and milestone, yet Hans Küng can expect, but cannot guarantee that any of the signed content will be fulfilled. This is why the promise of “global social contracts” is not flawless. Even though moral principles can change people, but it does remind us that if we plan to use “Global Ethic” principles to exercise “Global Ethic” behavior, this is definitely one important issue Hans Küng’s “Global Ethic” theory will face in the future.

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2. Shu-hsien Liu has personally attended the first & second Parliament of the World’s Religions and deeply understands the work and efforts of Hans Küng.
5. Ibid., pp108-109
6. Ibid., p119
7. Ibid., p111
8. Ibid., pp111-113
13. Ibid., p172.
17. Ibid., p. 468.
23. Ibid., pp.70-73.
28. The representative for “deontological theory” would be Immanuel Kant. Refer to Groundwork of the metaphysic of Morals BA 18-19.
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