

# The Dialogue of Global Ethics

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The message of Michael Ignatieff's reflections on reimagining a global ethic is a comforting one for political philosophers.<sup>1</sup> It is vital, he writes, for philosophers to keep doing what they have been doing: addressing the injustices of globalization from a perspective of strict impartiality that treats every human being as the object of equal moral concern. Philosophers should continue to elaborate this "one world" perspective against those partial perspectives arising from the claims of one's particular country or particular religious faith. But their aim should not be to replace the one with the other, but to prompt an ongoing critical dialogue in which more particularistic doctrines of country or faith are called to justify themselves before the one-world ethic's impartial standards—thus prompting the kind of critical self-reflection that is essential to moral change. And in so doing, the one-world ethic cannot be uncritical of itself, for there are different ways of conceiving a global ethic, each of which must answer to the others.

True to the spirit of Isaiah Berlin, Ignatieff's is a cosmopolitanism shorn of any totalizing impulse. Its ultimate value is dialogue; its ultimate requirement is that we submit our ideals to the challenges posed by other perspectives. It is a comforting view, but also bracing—in holding that, while philosophers should continue doing what they have been doing, they cannot do so by talking only to themselves.

The paradigmatic problem for global ethics, for Ignatieff, is global economic justice. The one-world view, the "view from nowhere," insists that we approach this topic by abstracting from the specifics of national identity. Our answers to the question "who deserves what" must ignore such contingencies in treating every human being as an object of equal moral concern. By contrast, the more partial "view from somewhere" holds that national identity carries significant moral weight and that our obligations to distant strangers differ from those to our fellow citizens. The tension here derives from two facts: that we are one world but many peoples, and that each of these peoples exerts a valid moral

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claim. The immigration problem has the same structure. From a one-world perspective, border restrictions seem arbitrary, but from the “many peoples” perspective they seem necessary to maintaining the cohesion of one’s own community.

A great strength of Ignatieff’s argument is his insistence that these quarrels cannot be reduced to ones of altruism versus selfishness, as proponents of cosmopolitanism sometimes suggest. The claims of country may be parochial ones, but they are not arbitrary, for they express important values, specifically those of democracy, construed as the right of peoples to self-determination. The latter is a cherished right for several reasons, starting with its importance in protecting small states from the predations of larger ones. Big countries should not dictate to smaller ones how to order their societies. But accepting such a right also means accepting that (something like) the distinction between citizens and non-citizens is necessary to *distinguish* peoples from one another; moreover, the practices of collective self-determination both presume and promote an identification with one’s own countrymen over others. The tension between a one-world ethic and a one’s-own-country ethic reflects a conflict between two core principles: in Ignatieff’s words, “between democracy and justice, between the value we attach to self-determination of peoples and the value we attach to abstract justice for all individuals.” Indeed, taking democracy seriously means (again quoting Ignatieff) accepting that societies have a “right to be wrong about justice”; for example, they have a right to allocate resources or define membership in ways that conflict with the demands of the view from nowhere.

There is another way of thinking about the justice and democracy conflict, I think. Justice’s view from nowhere is the third-person perspective of social policy. Its impartiality is a matter of how it speaks *about* people and their rights; basically, it treats them all the same. By contrast, democracy’s view from somewhere is the second-person perspective of social engagement. In democracy we take seriously how we speak *to* people, in the projects that we fashion together. This is not a matter of treating all people the same, but of relating to who they are, which begins, of course, with attending to their specific circumstances and experiences. If the view from nowhere is a disembodied perspective, detached from others, the view from somewhere is the more embodied perspective, involved with others. As such, it is more responsive to what it means to ask things of people—in the pursuit of global ideals, say.

This way of putting it bears on Ignatieff’s one discordant note, in speaking of philosophers today. He acknowledges that, while the one-world perspective of

philosophers may inform the common moral vocabulary of NGO activists, it has made little headway in the world of practical politics. Global ethical discourse may flourish “in universities and civil society,” he notes, but it has had little impact on the public at large, whose sentiments shape the politics of democratic states. Communitarians will reply that the problem lies with the global ethic itself, whose view from nowhere constitutes a kind of moral Esperanto that is incapable of speaking to people where they are (at best, it speaks at them, or over them). Ignatieff is not this skeptical. Global ideals are capable of having impact; his example is the “rights of mankind.” But the challenge of translating global ideals into practical politics remains a real one, as Ignatieff knows as well as anyone from his own experience in the rough-and-tumble world of politics. Yet he tells us rather little about how to solve this problem. Perhaps this is where his reflections will take him next.

If so, he might say more about religion than he does here. Indeed, he is so generous in unpacking the partialities of patriotism that it is surprising he says so little about the partialities of faith. This is typical of philosophical discourse today, of course. Philosophers qua citizens have some grasp of what it means to have a country, but since many philosophers are secular they may have trouble understanding what it means to have a faith. For many of them, religion is just an irrational annoyance—and they may be right to characterize it this way. But this hardly makes for meaningful dialogue with the average citizen. Perhaps I speak as an American here. Our most important modern political movement, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s–1960s, promoted human rights by speaking in a robustly religious vernacular. Its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., was both a preacher and the only major political figure in American history to have a Ph.D. in philosophy. For many, a dismissive view of religion in the United States today undoubtedly results from its close association with the religious right, but religion infuses both liberal and conservative politics. Religious institutions gave birth to both the movement against intervention in Central America in the 1970s and the nuclear freeze movement of the 1980s; more recently, the organized churches provided the greatest opposition to the Iraq War. For better or worse, America’s “view from here” is deeply informed by religion. Attending to religion becomes even more imperative when the dialogue is approached from a global perspective.

My chief concern, however, arises from the rather secondary place that Ignatieff accords to problems of war and peace. Global economic justice, immigration, climate change—these are, as he notes, problems of contemporary globalization,

some of them quite recent. By contrast, international conflict has been with us for a very long time, indeed. As such, it provides a framework for raising doubts about appeals to global ideals that are deeper than any raised by these more recent issues.

The history of modern war gives us special reason to be skeptical, if not cynical, of such appeals to view-from-nowhere ideals. I cannot think of any disasters that plans for eradicating world hunger have produced; I cannot think of any catastrophes for which opponents of global climate change must apologize. But I can think of lots of horrible things that schemes for promoting “civilization,” defending “freedom,” or spreading “democracy” have brought about—in the form of modern warfare. Indeed, the only place that global ideals have achieved any real traction in recent American politics is in arguments for America’s invasion of Iraq. It was President George W. Bush who chastised his critics for believing that an Iraqi life was worth less than an American one in making his case for sending other people’s children to die there.

Ignatieff only mentions military action regarding the responsibility of states to intervene in defense of the human rights of other peoples. He notes his own important work on the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, whose perspective on the conditional nature of sovereignty seems to have been confirmed by the recent successful intervention in Libya. But surely cosmopolitans do not engage in the kind of critical self-reflection that Ignatieff calls for if they dwell only on the successes. True self-criticism begins with the failures; and the foregoing suggests how such criticism might proceed: by relating the high ideals of the views from “up there” to their real-life consequences for people “down here.” Only then can we think responsibly about the wisdom of calling for such sacrifices in the future. I am writing this just as the United States is officially concluding its war in Iraq. The newspaper this morning carried a story about the last American to die in that conflict. Army specialist David Hickman was a twenty-three-year-old African American from Greensboro, North Carolina, a former high school linebacker, much beloved for his sense of humor, who was blown to pieces by an improvised bomb just two weeks before he was to be sent home. The average age of Americans who died in Iraq was twenty-six, but David was not untypical. Nearly 1,300 of those killed were twenty-two or younger; 511 were older than thirty-five.

David’s mother, the story tells us, does not want to concern herself with thoughts about the cost of the war and whether it was worth her son’s life. Indeed, the article notes that the war generally has “faded from people’s

thoughts.”<sup>2</sup> But the reflective political philosopher cannot ignore such questions, or let such experiences fade from his or her memories. If democracy implies a right to be wrong, it also involves the responsibility to assume the burdens of its errors (or, in this case, disasters)—and ask what those errors reveal about the enterprise of war itself fought in the name of abstract ideals. But now I betray my own pacifist perspective, which holds that a one-world perspective is ultimately one that rejects armed conflict as a way of solving our common problems.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Michael Ignatieff, “Reimagining a Global Ethic,” in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Don Babwin and Tom Breen, “Remembering the First and Last of Iraq War Dead,” *Associated Press*, December 19, 2011.