

A Global Ethic and the Hybrid Character of the Moral World

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In the lead essay of this symposium, Michael Ignatieff offers a characteristic blend of philosophical acuteness and political good sense on a topic that, we can all agree, is central to many of the most important questions on the contemporary political and international agenda.¹ His analysis is prescient, challenging, and deserves pondering at some length; thus, in this short response I cannot deal with it in anything like the detail it deserves. But the enforced brevity is perhaps an advantage as well, in that it forces me to concentrate on where I differ from Ignatieff and on my own sense of what we might imply when we use such a term as “a global ethic.”

Ignatieff’s basic argument is predicated on the claim that talk of a global ethic brings together two rather different things: a global ethic in the singular and a global ethics in the plural. The former—“a perspective that takes all human beings and their habitat as its subject”—is flourishing, he suggests, in philosophical discussion around the world, has a long and distinguished history, is best seen as a “view from nowhere,” and has, as its central function, the requirement “to justify.” But this will require confronting the problems between, at least in democratic states, the universal and the particular—for example, the conflict between what Ignatieff terms “democracy and justice”; that is, the values inherent in the self-determination of peoples and the values inherent in abstract justice for all individuals. As he puts it in cases such as these “the particular faces off against the universal, but neither plays as trumps; neither is privileged with any authority other than reason and both are obliged to justify themselves.”

The latter, global ethics in the plural, is not a discourse but rather an institutional practice or set of practices enshrined in the four central documents of

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the postwar order: the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), the Geneva Conventions, and the Refugee Convention. The problem with global ethics in the plural is that these practices offer contradictory priorities and often conflict—the best example being, he thinks, the conflict between state sovereignty (enshrined in the Charter) and human rights (enshrined in the UDHR). Conceptual bridges can be found—he suggests that the adoption of the responsibility to protect doctrine is such a bridge, as it makes sovereignty conditional on two basic responsibilities—but that does not eliminate the problem.²

The real point of a global ethic, Ignatieff suggests in his conclusion, is to force the contradictions inherent in both discourse and practices out into the open and thus to engage in a process of “recurrent, repeated, behavior-changing justification. The process needs standards—a global ethic provides the view from nowhere, global ethics provides a view from somewhere. And if sides in dispute accept the standard, they argue with each other, not past each other; and if they accept the standard, they are more likely to accept the obligation to change when justification fails.”

There is much in this with which we can agree, of course. It is certainly true that the global ethic in the singular has a long and distinguished history (or rather, as I shall return to in a moment, histories), that it is flourishing in contemporary (analytic) philosophy, and that it has raised profound problems of justification for many contemporary practices.³ It is true also that the founding documents of the postwar order do conflict, and that this then impels us to see if we can find ways of bridging such divides where possible.⁴ So if we can agree on so much, where might I disagree—or at least express a doubt about Ignatieff’s reimagining?

We can best get some purchase on at least the beginnings of a disagreement, I think, if we return to the point I hinted at earlier. Ignatieff says that the idea of a global ethic has a long history, and he is right in one sense. For example, most of the world’s great religions hold a “global ethic” view in one sense at least, in that they believe they hold the true view of the ethical structure of the human (and in some cases the nonhuman) world. The problem, of course, is that the contents of these views are in many cases incommensurable: natural law in medieval Christianity and the universalist assumptions of medieval Islam are both demonstrably a global ethic (of sorts), but they are also incommensurable. This does not mean there can be no dialogue, nor does it mean that such views cannot sometimes change, but it does suggest that what, formally, is a “global ethic” is rather

less than this in real terms. And much the same might be said about the cosmopolitan predilection of many contemporary analytic philosophers. Both Kantian cosmopolitans (Thomas Pogge, Onora O'Neill) and consequentialist cosmopolitans (Peter Singer) adopt a global ethic, but *the content* of each ethic is radically different.

It was, indeed, recognition of the *incommensurable* character of global ethical views that shaped the way in which the Universal Declaration was drafted and which is why the declaratory nature of the document offers no grounding for the claims that are advanced in it. Rights are said in the preamble to be inalienable (not surrendable by their possessors), but nothing is said about why (or how) human beings have them and why they might be inalienable for the simple reason that while those drafting the document could agree that all human beings have rights, they did not agree why (or how they came by them).⁵ Why is this significant? Simply because it implies that both the global ethic in the singular and global ethics in the plural are only truly global if their assumptions are not fully spelled out. Once one *does* spell them out, the differences—sometimes very glaring differences—become apparent.

And that brings me to why the conclusion Ignatieff derives from his argument might be doubly problematic. A process of endless justification works only, he suggests, when the participants accept the standards. But if the above is correct, the standards (both a global ethic in the singular and global ethics in the plural) can be held universally only when *not* forced to justify themselves; they would collapse as standards in the relevant sense if they were. Thus, the conclusion Ignatieff wants to derive from his argument might actually be invalidated by it.

And there is, perhaps, a wider problem. The moral life, at whatever level one considers it, displays, I think, a hybrid character. One form of it certainly does lie in the exercise of reason to justify (or fail to justify) the actions we have performed or are planning to perform. It would therefore result in precisely what Ignatieff suggests his “global ethic” does—a requirement for justification. But another form, as Michael Oakeshott suggests, consists largely in the exercise of habitual affection and conduct.⁶ Most actual moralities are combinations of these two (and possibly other forms as well). But in as much as Ignatieff's essay suggests that a global ethic would issue in “repeated, recurrent, behavior-changing justification,” it looks very much as if his global ethic (of either kind) would very largely fall into the former camp. And that, surely, would be problematic. As

Oakeshott points out, where the form of the moral life is *dominated* by this process of constantly reflective self-consciousness (as opposed to being partly constituted by it), its effects can be ruinous. This, he thinks, is precisely the problem of the contemporary world: “Morality in this form,” he suggests, “regardless of the quality of the ideals, breeds nothing but distraction and moral instability.”⁷ In other words, if the task of a global ethic is to *constantly* insist on the requirements of justification, it is going to drain itself of anything that can support the content of the ethic itself; and we have heard already that the content of such an ethic is highly disputable in any event. I hardly think that a cacophonous Babel would be the best way of imagining—or reimagining—a global ethic.

So is there an alternative? I think there is, but it is not, strictly speaking, an alternative—a complete and incommensurable opposite—but rather an acceptance of the necessary logic of the hybrid character of the moral world. We should first understand that it is precisely the thick commitments of particularity we all possess that flavor the moral life, give it weight and significance, and create its real charge for us (whoever the “us” might be). But we must also understand that such commitments stand side by side with the requirements of living with others who do not share them—in our own communities and in others. This certainly requires, as Ignatieff supposes, “standards,” but the standards will not be substantive but, so to speak, adverbial—they will be the recognition of the values we need to adopt in a world of deep plurality if we are not to do violence to our own particularities or to the particularities of others.

The final problem with Ignatieff’s undeniably powerful essay is perhaps an elision of the procedural with the substantive. His reimagining of a global ethic assumes a level of substantive agreement that I think is not likely, at least in the short term, but that does not deny that there could be a level of *procedural* agreement that allows for both certain general rules to govern conduct and many thick particularities. He is quite right to suppose that, even at the level of procedural rules, politics will never be far away. But the best image of a global ethic, I think, is one that recognizes not only the depth of our pluralities but the value that might be found in such diversity for its own sake and for the gifts such diversity can offer to all. It is to be found not in enforced and recurrent justification (though this does not mean that justification will never play a role) but rather in conversation and dialogue—about similarities and differences, rules and responsibilities, conduct becoming and unbecoming. Of course, people can refuse the invitation to participate in such a conversation; they can try and

keep themselves isolated or shout so loud they hope to drown out every other voice. In as much as they do so, however, they simply move away from the understanding of what a global ethic must involve. But that is not to be wondered at. The idea of a global ethic will always have enemies as well as friends. Notwithstanding my doubt about one aspect of Ignatieff's rich and provocative essay, I do not doubt that he is a friend of the idea of a global ethic—and a powerful and persuasive friend, indeed.

NOTES

- ¹ See Michael Ignatieff, "Reimagining a Global Ethic," in this issue.
- ² Following the initiative of then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Canadian government set up the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in September 2000. At its third meeting Gareth Evans, Mohamed Sahnoun, and Ignatieff suggested that the phrase "responsibility to protect" be adopted in place of such phrases as a right (or a duty) of intervention. The commission reported in December 2001 and the language was adopted by the UN World Summit in 2005.
- ³ The growth of cosmopolitan ethics and political theory over the last thirty years is testimony to this. Leading figures include Charles Beitz, Onora O'Neill, Thomas Pogge, Henry Shue, and Peter Singer.
- ⁴ This is not just because they are dealing with different problems—Ignatieff's point in his paper—though it is certainly partly that, but also because of the somewhat baroque origin of many of the ideas in the first place. A very good example in the case of the UN Charter can be found brilliantly discussed in Mark Mazower's excellent *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- ⁵ A good discussion is Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2002).
- ⁶ Here I follow Michael Oakeshott's discussion in his essay "The Tower of Babel," in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, expanded ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Liberty Fund, 1991[1962]).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 481.