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In Search of a Global Ethic (vol. 26.1, Spring 2012)

Michael Ignatieff, Reimagining a Global Ethic
Christian Barry, Local Priorities, Universal Priorities, and Enabling Harm
Nicholas Rengger, A Global Ethic and the Hybrid Character of the Moral World
David Rodin, Toward a Global Ethic
Cheyney Ryan, The Dialogue of Global Ethics
Michael Joseph Smith, A Brief Response to Michael Ignatieff

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Editors’ Note

The Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs will turn one hundred years old in February 2014. Andrew Carnegie founded the Council in 1914 with a specific purpose in mind: he thought it was possible to avoid the Great War that he and many others believed was on the horizon. In fact, he approached the project with considerable optimism, confident that the barbarity of industrial war would become a thing of the past. Humanity was evolving, becoming more civilized with each passing decade. Common interests and common sense would surely make large-scale war a relic of bygone days, similar to other uncivilized practices, such as slavery and dueling. Sadly, it was not to be.

The twentieth century brought many horrors, including three world wars (if we count the cold war), the Holocaust, genocides, famines, ethnic cleansing, and terrorism. Yet it also brought amazing normative shifts. Standards have risen, expectations have changed. Universal education, the right to vote, social security, civil rights, women’s rights, the rights of minorities, environmental awareness—all were once thought to be unrealizable, if thought of at all, and yet today they are largely considered basic and fundamental.

Despite the many intractable conflicts we see in today’s world and despite the vast inequalities and unfair circumstances that persist, there are common interests we can build upon. In a globalizing world, we have many opportunities to work toward harmonizing norms and standards to make our planet a more peaceful place. It now seems reasonable to think that the days of large-scale industrial war may be numbered. And perhaps the concept of war itself might evolve into something that looks more like cooperative policing than the “total-war” scenarios we have seen over the past hundred years. We have a lot of work to do here—especially in the area of reducing nuclear weapons—but it is feasible, especially if we base it on a common global ethic.

The following symposium is a product of the inaugural meeting of the Carnegie Council’s Global Ethics Network in November 2011 at the Council’s headquarters in New York City. Over the next two years a network of participants, led by a talented group of Global Ethics Fellows—some of whom have contributed
responses to this symposium—will help establish a new framework for debating a
global ethic, and produce interactive pedagogical tools, original university-level
curricula, and lasting cross-border partnerships. *Ethics & International Affairs*
will collaborate closely with the Fellows and others involved in this ambitious pro-
ject, publishing innovative work on the role of changing values and norms in
international relations today.

In the following essay, Michael Ignatieff takes a global ethic to mean “a morality
whose object is ‘one world’ in which all human beings are entitled to equal moral
concern and in which we have common responsibilities to our habitat,” and which
“seeks to defend all human beings and our common habitat against partialities
and interests grounded in family, community, ethnicity, economic position, and
nation.” The idea comes to life in applying it to specific cases where claims of uni-
versality and particularity compete.

We agree: life on earth is fast becoming a shared destiny. Reimagining a global
ethic—with all of its possibilities and limitations—is no longer a luxury. It is a
practical necessity. As the Council looks toward its centennial and beyond, we
invite you to join us in this challenging but critical task.
Reimagining a Global Ethic

Michael Ignatieff

“Reimagining a global ethic” is a project worthy of Andrew Carnegie and of the Carnegie Council’s upcoming commemoration of his founding gift in 1914. As a collaborative research project stretching forward over the next three years, it ought to be integrative and reconciliatory: that is, it must try to understand the globalization of ethics that has accompanied the globalization of commerce and communications and to figure out what ethical values human beings share across all our differences of race, religion, ethnicity, national identity, and material wealth. When human beings do disagree morally, the search for a global ethic becomes an attempt to elucidate by analysis what exactly people are disagreeing about, so that, after arguing out our differences, we can either agree to disagree or work together to find common ground. Finding common ground on large ethical matters and understanding more deeply why, in some instances, we remain at odds with each other is worthwhile in itself, but it might also further Andrew Carnegie’s original goal in founding the Council, which was to reduce the amount of conflict and violence in the world.

Reimagining a global ethic is an important project, but a dauntingly difficult one, especially if we accept the premise that all human beings, and therefore all cultures, religions, and worldviews, have a right to contribute to the discussion. The old exclusions—by race, class, region, nation, or religion—used to confine global ethical discussion to a manageable, largely Western, largely university-educated elite. Thanks in large measure to the global ethical revolution that accompanied decolonization, these old exclusions are discredited, but now we face the challenge of imagining and conducting a global discussion on the premise of equal inclusion. Even when we narrow the field and assume that those who will want to take part will be those who make ethical reflection their business (ethicists, philosophers, psychologists, and scientists, among others), understanding what a global conversation about ethical universals might entail—one that fully includes North and South, East and West, secular and religious—remains more than a little intimidating.
We should be intimidated. All difficult and ambitious enterprises are intimidating. In this essay, however, my ambitions are modest: to fly high over the field of inquiry, taking some snapshots of the ground below, so that we can begin to reconnoiter a few of the challenges that lie ahead. And my initial question is quite simple: Should we be talking about a “global ethic” in the singular or a “global ethics” in the plural?

A global ethic—a perspective that takes all human beings and their habitat as its subject—does exist and is flourishing in philosophy departments around the world. Its function is essentially critical, rather than affirmative. Its purpose is to lay bare the ethical presuppositions that underpin injustice and inequality in a globalized world and to devise ideal distributions of resources and responsibilities that would make our world fairer.

Since the 1960s, philosophers have developed a global ethic in the singular in response to the injustice of contemporary globalization; but unlike Marxism and the ideologies of colonial liberation, this critique was not conducted in the name of oppressed groups or classes, nor have these philosophers sought to map out a strategy of political liberation. Instead, philosophers of the global ethic have sought to use purely philosophical argument to demonstrate that certain forms of injustice and distributions of global wealth are wrong and that those in a position to do something about these wrongs have an obligation to put them right.

The global ethic is therefore a by-product of contemporary globalization, but the philosophical reasoning that it employs rests on much older foundations. For as long as philosophers have used the idea of natural law to criticize positive law and the idea of the rights of mankind to unmask the privileges of men, they have employed universals to criticize all the forms of ethical partiality that are rooted in attachments to class, identity, nation, or religion. While some of the problems posed by globalization feel new, a global ethic is actually as old as philosophy itself.

Thanks again to the European natural law tradition and centuries of work by international lawyers from Hugo Grotius onward, we also have a global ethics in the plural, enshrined in the structure of existing international law: in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions, and the Refugee Convention, to name only the principal institutional pillars.² These are legal documents, but they incarnate important ethical principles of universal application: the sovereignty of peoples, the rights of individuals, the rules of
civilian immunity in warfare, and the rights of refugees and displaced persons. Here we must speak about ethics in the plural, because each of these domains is purpose-designed to solve specific problems and because their ethical frameworks contradict each other, most obviously in the conflict between state sovereignty and human rights. Since they are political documents, the products of negotiation and compromise, some of their tenets do not square with the abstract premises of a global ethic either.

If we already have a global ethic in the singular and in the plural, reimagining a global ethic does not require us to start again and reconstruct its foundations. These foundations may be Western in origin, but their embodiment in international law has been ratified by nations around the world. This gives us a minimum framework to work with, a framework derived from the labor of many minds over many centuries, what the history of philosophy and the evolution of international law have bequeathed to us all. This framework—a global ethic in the singular and international ethics in the plural—provides a starting point for a global dialogue about what we share and do not share as human beings.

It must be admitted, however, that a lot of important people seem to think we lack a common framework and need to start afresh. In 1993 the German theologian Hans Kung compiled a universal declaration of duties because he believed rights talk was too individualistic and failed to capture essential features of the human good. Islamic and Asian leaders have also published international declarations of human responsibility. The language of duty and responsibility is being pressed into service because the existing language of rights is held to be too Western and fails to capture an individual’s responsibility to, and dependence upon, wider communities, whether they be religious, familial, or national.

Rights talk does have notorious limitations as a language of the human good. Who does not suppose, for example, that love is an essential human good, but who believes we all have a “right to love”? These problems with rights as a language of the good are well known, but no better language is likely to be found. The difficulty with abandoning rights talk or seeking to convert rights propositions into duty language is that it discards rights’ potential for juridical embodiment and enforceability. What rights talk does so well is to correlate specific rights holders and their claims with determinate duty holders. Rights talk will remain an essential component of any global ethic, precisely because the protections it affords can be demanded by actual individuals. If a global ethic cannot empower discrete, identifiable individuals, in all their singularity,
with specific claims that they can enforce against those who oppress them, what is it good for?

Religious leaders have also weighed in on the project of reimagining a global ethic for a globalized world, using interfaith gatherings to assemble syncretic compilations of ethical norms from the world’s religions, some believing that Christianity may have had too much of a say up to this point or that the language of the contemporary good has abandoned its necessary religious underpinnings. But metaphysical underpinnings, whatever their religious source, are essentially contestable. What is contestable is not merely whether the Almighty exists in any form, but whether ethical systems depend for their validity on His or Her commands. Many religious and spiritual systems insist that ethical duty takes the form of a divine command, but not all ethical systems do. Indeed, many of the human values that orient and guide human conduct have no divine or metaphysical foundation. Spiritual yearnings are universal features of human experience, yet it is not obvious why an ethic has to be grounded in these yearnings or the spiritual claims that arise from them. An ethic can have secular foundations without making final claims about the truth of these foundations. These secular foundations include indisputable facts about human beings, such as our need for love and our abhorrence of undeserved cruelty. Secular grounds for the language of the good are best understood not as secular trumps but as bracketing operations, attempts to find common ethical ground in the absence of agreement on their ultimate metaphysical basis. What the French philosopher Jacques Maritain initially said about human rights in 1946—that we can agree we have them, and even specify what they are, without agreeing on why we have them—is true of a global ethic more generally. We know we have universal obligations to other human beings, even if we continue to disagree about why we have them. This intellectual strategy—focusing on where we agree and bracketing infinitely contestable claims—made possible the limited consensus that sustains international human rights conventions. Reimagining a global ethic would have to work on the same basis, reaching out to common ground where such exists, while agreeing to disagree about the claim that ethical conduct must be derived from a spiritual or religious duty.

Another site of discussion of a global ethic is found where science and philosophy meet. Philosophers and scientists have sought through dialogues to uncover the common ground of ethics in human nature or in the latest findings in psychology, genetics, or neurobiology. Again, it is of the greatest interest to discover whether our ethical norms have a physical grounding in neurobiology or

Michael Ignatieff
Darwinian instinct, but again the connection between moral action and physiology is complex, and essentially contestable, and it should be possible to agree what a global ethic commands us to do without having to accept that neuronal or biological principles explain why we behave as we do in our moral lives.

In what follows I am going to bracket these metaphysical, Darwinian, and neurobiological issues and focus on the global ethic we have and the global ethics codified in international law, and argue that the proper work of reimagining a global ethic is to think harder about the conflicts of principle between them. We need to distinguish at least three levels at which these conflicts arise. First, we live in a morally pluralistic world divided into communities of action and belief, each of which acts upon different principles. These communities disagree with each other about the content of the good. Second, people within these communities disagree about what shared principles commit them to do in moral life. Third, even where there is agreement across different moral communities about principles held in common, it will be apparent that the shared principles themselves conflict with each other. It is this last conflict, between the principles themselves, within a global ethic itself, and within the competing ethical systems incarnated in international law, that I want to turn to now.

I take a global ethic in the singular to mean a morality whose object is “one world” in which all human beings are entitled to equal moral concern and in which we have common responsibilities to our habitat. This starting premise implies a particular vantage point. This could be called the “view from nowhere” or “nowhere in particular.” A global ethic seeks to defend all human beings and our common habitat against partialities and interests grounded in family, community, ethnicity, economic position, and nation.

The view from nowhere is not an easy one to achieve, but it is the view that we are trying to reach if we say, for example, that we are reasoning from behind “a veil of ignorance” or if we use an imaginative construction like “natural rights” to assess the actual rights of living beings. Once embraced, the view from nowhere allows us to expose the partiality of views from somewhere, especially those that shape us in our national communities. Joseph Carens, Michael Walzer, Michael Blake, and Thomas Hurka, just to name a few of the global ethicists I have in mind, have asked why states should have the right to impose visa and immigration quotas on some but not all human beings, why states have the right to expel non-citizens, and why they so grossly favor their own citizens over people living in other countries in the distribution of global resources. Thomas Pogge, Henry
Shue, and Peter Singer have all argued that allocating global resources to individuals on the basis of the country they happen to have been born in carries moral luck too far. Singer and others have used global ethics to figure out a morally rational way to apportion responsibility for action on climate change.

The one-world perspective that emerges from the work of these philosophers has provided a common moral vocabulary that drives the activism of civil society NGOs everywhere. It is a philosophy in service of a sustained critique of the way power is exercised by states, corporations, and national communities against the common interests of mankind; and thanks to the work of these philosophers, many people have a richer and keener sense of what these common interests should be.

As a politics, however, the one-world perspective is failing to make much headway. States are no closer to a morally rational way of allocating responsibility for action on climate change. Countries still impose immigration quotas, and few countries have met their global justice obligations to the poorest on Earth. A global ethical discourse flourishes in universities and civil society, but it has made limited progress against the ethical practice of states.

Some global ethicists attribute the political failure of a global ethic to selfish national interest. There is no doubt that politicians are partial, and that the political drivers of state action at the domestic level are relentlessly local. The universal barely registers. Yet the problem runs deeper than that. Democratic publics do not actually believe the universal should trump their local interests. They believe, if asked to think about it, that their own interests as a national community ought to prevail over assistance to peoples in other countries, and they do not see why they are required to make sacrifices in relation to such abstract issues as climate change. I would not want to dignify this localism with much moral stature, but neither do I want to dismiss it as mere prejudice. It is a symptom of a conflict, at least in states with popular suffrage, between two principles: 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. National communities, in other words, have some good reasons, as well as some not so good ones, to privilege local ahead of universal priorities and interests. Giving moral priority to our own children, families, people, or society is natural and defensible enough. The issue is how much of the inequality that can result is defensible. The strength of a global ethic is to pose that question and to force the local to defend the inequality that results. At a formal level, this is a conflict between what democracy permits and what justice demands.

Michael Ignatieff
Isaiah Berlin observed long ago that absolute values such as these conflict absolutely. All good things cannot be had at once. Justice versus democracy is only one such conflict. Others, including justice versus mercy, or liberty versus equality, are just as familiar. Given these antinomies, it is not obvious how a global ethic can be an internally consistent noncontradictory rank ordering of moral goods. Instead, a global ethic is better understood not as a series of propositions, but as a site of argument in which the particular is called to the bar of justification before the universal. A global ethic creates the possibility of a process of recurrent adversarial justification. It is not itself immune from the obligation to justify.

We can see what this means in relation to justice and democracy. Democratic communities have the right to balance what they owe to their own members against what they owe to strangers beyond their borders. Because politics everywhere is local, a global ethic, privileging universal rather than proximate duties, may prevail at certain moments but will never trump in practical politics. Democratic choice will be ordered by the preferences of citizens, and free debate among citizens will determine the distribution of scarce resources between domestic and international claims to them. What this means in practice is that democratic peoples have the right to be wrong about justice. Not indefinitely so. Like all rights, this right of sovereignty is not unlimited. If the sovereign in question is a constitutional democracy, the right to be wrong about justice will be constrained by the rights guarantees that constrain all constitutional exercises of power. If the sovereign is not constitutionally bound from within, it will have to be constrained from without by international opinion and by the community of states.

While the present distribution of global resources grossly privileges citizens of rich states at the expense of those of poorer ones, it does not follow that it would be just to privilege poor strangers at the expense of one’s fellow citizens. It is all a matter of finding a balance between duties to citizens and strangers and between democratic self-determination and universal justice. Finding that balance is the province of politics.

It is a fact of politics that the interests of democratic citizens will be shaped primarily, though not exclusively, by the view from where they sit, and only secondarily, if at all, by the view from nowhere. Changing this will take time. Global ethicists have sought to respond to the claims of national self-interest by casting their arguments in terms of what John Stuart Mill called “self-interest properly understood.” What has to be properly understood by democratic electorates, the philosophers argue, is that in relation to climate change, for example, there will
be no “somewhere” to defend unless they elect governments that factor in, to an important degree, the universal interests of our habitat.\textsuperscript{19}

This may be true, but the main political obstacle to climate change action is no longer public disbelief as to whether adverse climate change is occurring or even disagreement as to whether states have a duty to do something about it, but rather how to solve the problem of the penalties—in economic competitiveness—that first-mover states believe they will incur. So an appropriate further task for a global ethic in the singular will be to reason out the incentives necessary to solve these first-mover problems. A global ethic will have to pass from philosophy to policy.

There are no trump cards of justice to play in policy or politics, but the entry of a global ethic into political debate will subject all particularistic claims to a demand of justification. Hopefully, this will set in motion a process by which national policy becomes more globally justifiable over time. The view from nowhere has put everyone’s self-justifications to the test; and if the powerful sleep less well at night, so much the better.

A second function of a global ethic is to criticize the value systems of different faiths and groups and oblige them to justify themselves. Religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences help constitute our moral loyalties, and these loyalties are bound to be partial: we privilege the claims of those who are like us over those who are not like us. The issue then becomes how a global ethic negotiates with the moral partiality that is constitutive of human attachments.

What status do we give a global ethic in a pluralistic world that, as a matter of fact, is composed, ethically speaking, of competing moral universes? Once you discard, as a global ethic must, the idea that certain moral values trump others by virtue of their association with religious authority—indeed, if we discard the idea that any one value trumps another by virtue of its association with any kind of authority—then we are left with the need for justification and persuasion by reason. All those who reason are equal, since we are all human beings, but some reasons turn out to be better than others. The test of which are better depends on how persuasive they are in argument. On this rough-and-ready model of adversarial justification, 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.

In a globalized world, the fact of adversarial justification is unavoidable because the particular and the universal do not live in disconnected bell jars. The reality is
constant permeation between the membranes of one body. The particular and the universal, the local and the national, the rural and the metropolitan, are all in constant interaction. Ethical systems, whether local or global, are also heavily competitive, since they are constantly bidding for adherents, seeking to hold on to doubters and to ward off attacks. Moral universes are no longer closed to each other, if they ever were, and each is in justificatory dialogue with the other.

Let us look more closely at how a global ethic interacts with local practice in a specific case, female genital cutting (FGC). Western NGOs promoting health and voice rights in developing societies have learned over time that local “buy-in” is crucial if this practice is to be eliminated. We can contrast “buy-in” with conversion. Missionaries seek conversion. They seek the soul. Buy-in is not about the soul. It is an exchange in which one side offers to change a practice in return for the respect of others. Buy-in requires lengthy negotiation between the particular and the universal, community by community, and power on the ground lies more with the former than with the latter. The universal takes the form, often enough, of a humanitarian aid worker or public health nurse. The local takes the form of a village political system in which power is held by elders and where women may not have voice or influence.

Female genital cutting will not stop simply because Western health workers point out the septicemia statistics. It has not been stopped by top-down legislative bans. The tradition stops when village women decide they can substitute alternative initiation rituals that safeguard their girls’ health without lowering their value to the families as brides. When there is successful buy-in, the particular practice changes, and fewer girls die of septicemia. But the universal changes, too: women’s rights advocates acknowledge the importance for women of supporting local marriage customs, even when these fall short of Western standards of gender equality. Buy-in implies trade-offs on both sides. Female mortality declines, while polygamy and patriarchy may endure. Yet that is not the end of the story. Once the dialogue between the particular and universal has been joined, more buy-in may occur and more change may happen in subsequent iterations.

There are many examples of this dialogue between the particular and the universal. For instance, since the Soviet invasion in 1979, and now with the more recent NATO presence, Afghan traditional society has come face-to-face with moral universalism and female equality via the National Solidarity Program and other Western attempts to promote female education, political participation, and reduced female mortality rates. What these encounters reveal is that female
subordination is not just one value among many in a local patriarchal culture; rather, it is held to be the very condition for the survival of these communities as such, since their members, even female ones, cannot conceive of the community apart from its patriarchal structure. All the same, despite the deeply rooted local attachment to female subordination, change does occur. Women do begin to participate in village councils, young girls do go to school, female mortality does decline.

What we need to understand better is how universalist claims to advance women are negotiated, case by specific case, in conditions of inequality. We need an anthropology of this buy-in process between local and universal ethics on the ground in order to understand how better to promote a global ethic, especially in relation to women’s rights, that is freely chosen by those affected and that follows from a process of reciprocal justification and exchange. Reimagining a global ethic means understanding the anthropology of this encounter, in society after society, between the local and the global, between the tribal/familial and the universal.

To summarize: a global ethic defends the universal interests of mankind and the planet; its purpose is to engage all forms of ethical particularism in adversarial justification; and the rules of these encounters, flowing as they do from the starting premise of human equality, preclude coercion and mandate tolerance.

If the first two functions of a global ethic are to interrogate particularism in the nation-state and at the community level, its third function is to interrogate the universalism of international law itself.

The universal is embodied in four basic pillars of international law, erected between 1945 and 1952:

- The UN Charter, guaranteeing the inviolability and equality of sovereign states.
- The UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) and the ensuing system of covenants, including the Genocide Convention, guaranteeing the rights of individuals.
- The Geneva Conventions, guaranteeing civilian immunity in time of war.
- The Refugee Convention, protecting persons with a well-founded fear of persecution.

Thus, when we say we do not have to rebuild the foundations of global ethics, we mean that there already exists this legally codified fabric of ethical conventions.
that has been ratified by peoples around the world and that to some degree con-
strains the behavior of states.

While it is conventional to think of this structure of international law as a
mutually reinforcing and interlocking structure of obligation, it is important to
notice how each of these self-contained ethical systems conflicts with the others:

- The Charter prioritizes state sovereignty, which contradicts the UDHR’s
  prioritizing of human rights.
- The Geneva Conventions prioritize civilian protection in war, while the
  UDHR prioritizes the pacific principle of a universal right to life.
- Refugee conventions balance protection for refugees while conceding the
  moral priority of citizens’ rights. The privilege accorded by states to the
  rights of their own citizens is not easy to reconcile with the idea of the un-
  versality of human rights, and hence the equality of human beings regard-
  less of citizenship.

Each purpose of these conventions—to protect sovereignty, to promote human
rights, to civilize war, to save refugees—defines a particular ethical framework. So
we have a global ethics in the plural as a matter of institutional and legal practice,
while in philosophy departments we have a global ethic in the singular.

There are contradictions at the heart of the ethical systems institutionalized in
international law. The most obvious is between state sovereignty and human
rights. Sovereignty itself incarnates an important moral principle: the equality
of peoples and the right of the weak to defend themselves against the strong in
a world of unequal state power. If we want a world in which strong states do
not have the right to dictate to the weak, we have to guarantee the inviolability
of states in law, and if we do this, we have to accept the likelihood that some
will exploit sovereignty to oppress their own people. Our international legal struc-
ture values two competing ethical goals, and a morally adequate international sys-
tem has to seek reconciliation between principles at variance with each other.

What we can do—and what the International Commission on Intervention and
State Sovereignty has in fact done—is to propose that sovereignty be made con-
ditional on two basic responsibilities: respect for the sovereignty of other states
and responsibility to provide basic security for one’s own citizens—that is, to
refrain from subjecting them to massacre, genocide, or ethnic cleansing. This
sets the bar of responsibility low, but it also defines the moral conditions that
would justify intervention by another state.22 Sovereignty as responsibility, in

REIMAGINING A GLOBAL ETHIC
other words, can be understood as a conceptual bridge between two competing ethical systems: the UN Charter system of sovereignty and the human rights conventions. Yet the contradictions between the two will endure and will force hard choices on all actors in the international system. Ethicists can elucidate these choices, but they cannot eliminate the burden of decision that necessarily falls on political actors.

This high-altitude view of the field tells us there is a global ethic as a discourse on the one hand and a global ethics as institutional practice on the other. The former exists in part to criticize the latter. We do not need to invent a new global ethic so much as understand the deeper contradictions within the ethical systems that already guide the action of states, individuals, and leaders. Professional ethicists have a job to do: to understand the contradictions between democracy and justice, the self-determination of peoples versus survival of the planet, and the value of sovereign equality versus human rights. Understanding these contradictions will help us to negotiate them in practical politics. My key point is that the real function of a global ethic is to force such contradictions out into the open light of public debate and to force political excuses for injustice to justify themselves.

Moral life is a process of justification—giving reasons for opinions, reasons for conduct—to those who do not share our point of view and then altering both our opinions and our conduct when we discover our justifications failing us. The essence of moral life is this 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.

It is vital for philosophers and others working in this field to elaborate further the view from nowhere. Without it, the view from somewhere will not be faced with the burden of justification. And without this burden, without the test of argument, we will not change, and it is change that matters.

NOTES

1 This essay began life as a lecture to the Global Ethics Fellows, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, New York, November 10, 2011. The original version is available in audio and video format at www.carnegiecouncil.org/resources/audio/data/000714. In revising it for publication, I am grateful to Joel Rosenthal and the Ethics Fellows for their criticism and suggestions. The Council’s

18

Michael Ignatieff
project on reimagining a global ethic is an initiative to commemorate the centenary of the founding of the Council in 1914 by Andrew Carnegie.


19 Singer, *One World*, chap. 2.


22 International Commission on Sovereignty and Intervention (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 2001).
National communities,” Michael Ignatieff writes in his thoughtful essay on the prospects for a global ethic, “have some good reasons, as well as some not so good ones, to privilege local ahead of universal priorities and interests.” And he goes on to explain the clash of local and universal priorities as rooted in a conflict between the values of “justice and democracy.” I would rather suggest that the conflict is an internal one—a conflict inherent in our thinking about what justice requires. But in any case, he is surely right that providing a compelling account of how to distinguish good from bad reasons for privileging local priorities, and identifying how weighty the good reasons for local priorities are, is fundamental to developing a plausible global ethic.

When a national community privileges local over universal priorities, it gives more weight to the interests of its members than they would have in an impartial ordering. Only a radical nationalist affirms the absolute privileging of local priorities, and only the most radical cosmopolitan denies that local priorities can ever be privileged. At present, there is little agreement about just how local and universal priorities should be balanced as a matter of policy, even though (as I will discuss below) there seems to be substantial agreement on some very clear-cut cases.

Before turning to questions of substance, however, it is important to note that there is just as much heated philosophical disagreement over the best method for determining the appropriate balance between local and universal priorities. Some philosophers, as Ignatieff notes, require that privileging the local be justified from an impartial point of view—the view from nowhere in particular. It may seem puzzling that any meaningful local priority could be justified in this way. If we

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really recognize that we are but one among many, and that our well-being and that of those close to us is of no greater intrinsic importance than the well-being of others, how can we hope to justify the moral weight we ascribe to the interests of our co-nationals, especially to our near and dear, who may be already pretty well off? With this starting point, it may seem obvious that one will arrive at the radical conclusions reached by such theorists as Peter Singer and Peter Unger, who maintain that we act seriously immorally if we fail to give away most of our financially valuable assets to reduce the severe deprivations of others. However, this impression may be misleading. Perhaps allowing certain forms of local priority—to family, close friends, and so on—is required if people are to live lives that they can recognize as having any value, given certain facts about human nature that cannot be easily changed, if they can be changed at all. And perhaps privileging the local is the best administrative device we currently have for protecting the interests of people throughout the world. To take an example from trade policy, having a global order in which each government makes trade policies that enhance the well-being of its citizens without taking into account its effects on noncitizens may be better at promoting universal interests than any feasible alternatives. Some have gone so far as to claim that (under current conditions, at least) functioning liberal democracies with welfare systems can only be sustained by national communities—collectives that are constituted first and foremost by their members’ beliefs that they “belong” together and that they must give priority to one another’s interests over the interests of outsiders.

There is, however, a great deal of resistance to the claim that prioritizing the local is permissible only if it can be justified impartially. And this resistance comes not only from the “political drivers of state action” that Ignatieff mentions, but from rival camps within philosophy. For many, the problem with any approach to global ethics that demands such justification is not that it fails to motivate or gain traction in the world of politics, but that it fails to take other values sufficiently into account. Bernard Williams, for example, famously mocked the idea that we needed to invoke impartial justification in order to permit us to save our spouse from harm in an instance when we are forced to choose between saving our spouse or saving a stranger. For Williams, the reasons we give priority to those who are near to us in such cases are not derived from impartial concerns; and even to try to justify them in these terms would be a distortion of practical reasoning. Philosophers such as Susan Wolf have argued that it is a serious
mistake to view the reasons that we have for pursuing particular goals, including those that involve giving priority to certain favored individuals, as excuses for not living lives that are maximally morally good from an impartial perspective. Some critics of impartial justification also stress that we prioritize the local for positive noninstrumental reasons, and stress the centrality of these reasons to moral thinking, emphasizing the situated nature of practical reasoning. As Samuel Scheffler puts it, “the willingness to make sacrifices for one’s family, one’s community, one’s friends is seen as one of the marks of a good or virtuous person, and the demands of morality, as ordinarily interpreted, have less to do with abstractions like the overall good than with the specific web of roles and relationships that serve to situate a person in social space.” These critics acknowledge that our well-being and that of those close to us is of no greater intrinsic importance than the well-being of others, but they nevertheless claim that we unobjectionably view the world from within a web of our own interests, identifications, and commitments, which are given special weight in our practical deliberations.

Whatever side one takes in this methodological dispute, it seems important to come to grips with the content of common moral thinking about the nature, scope, and limits of local priority. In referring to common moral thinking, I do not mean to suggest that these are universally held ideas—no ideas are, except empty generalizations. Rather, they are ideas that are shared by a great many people, including a great many readers of this journal, and which are implicit in international practice in some measure. Ignatieff is right when he says that we already have a global ethics. But this ethics is embedded not only in such instruments as the UN Charter and the various human rights conventions, but in international practice and the beliefs of a great many people. Starting (though not necessarily ending) with such ideas seems crucial if we are to achieve “buy-in,” as he puts it, to any alternative modes of thinking about the appropriate balance of local and universal priorities.

The first thing to notice about common moral thinking regarding local priority is that it is complex, and that it resists reduction to any easy formula. There is no fixed exchange rate between the interests of locals and nonlocals. Indeed, when faced with a particular political choice, the degree to which local priorities are privileged seems to depend very much on the context. If, for instance, the issue concerns the mere expenditure of resources, a great deal of permissible local priority is assumed in common moral thinking. A slight but costly improvement of a stretch of road, resulting in a small reduction in the likelihood of serious automobile
accidents, is routinely carried out by relatively wealthy nations, even though the funds employed for this purpose could save many hundreds of lives were they instead spent on improving basic sanitation or access to clean water in some poorer nation. The relatively wealthy nation is ordinarily thought to be morally permitted to act in this manner, and arguably even required to do so. In other contexts, however, local priority seems much more sharply limited. For example, it is not commonly thought to be permissible for a national community to dump toxic waste in the water supply of the territory of some other state, even if doing so is necessary to prevent much larger health problems from afflicting its own members.

What explains the dramatic difference in the weight granted to local priorities in these two cases? How were the actions of the wealthy nation that spent its resources on road repairs relevant to the suffering of the people in the poorer nation in the first place? The question itself appears odd, since it may seem inappropriate to say that it was relevant in any way whatsoever. A sensible answer, however, would be that the actions of the wealthy nation were relevant because they could have but failed to use those same funds to address or prevent suffering in the poorer nation. Of course, this answer does not refer to any one thing in particular that the wealthy nation did—improving a road is just one of countless examples—but to what this nation did not do, which was not providing those resources to the poorer one. In the case of toxic waste, on the other hand, the relevance of the actions of one nation to the suffering of people in a neighboring state is more straightforward and relates to a particular thing that it did. That is, it initiated a complete causal process by dumping the waste that linked it with the resultant harms. The toxic waste case is a clear-cut instance of doing harm, while the road repair case is a clear-cut case of failing to prevent harm. So one way of characterizing common moral thinking about local priority is to follow Thomas Pogge, who has argued that moral reasons for local priority can be weighty when what is at stake is failing to prevent harm, but not nearly so weighty when what is at stake is doing harm.\(^9\)

This characterization seems correct as far as it goes, but it is nevertheless incomplete. It is incomplete because there are many instances in which one national community is connected to harms suffered by nonnationals without it being the case that they have done harm in a clear-cut manner, nor that they have merely failed to prevent it. That is, in many cases, nations become relevant to the harms suffered by non-nationals because of things that they do, but without
it being the case that they have initiated a continuous causal process that results in these harms, as in the example of dumping toxic waste into a neighboring state’s water supply. Elsewhere I have argued that these are cases that are most aptly described as instances of enabling harm. The international scene is replete with such cases. For example, the drug enforcement policy of one nation may, through its incentive effects, enable substantial human rights violations in neighboring states. Or the implementation of an import tariff or export subsidies by one nation may reduce the export prospects of other states. Or a skills-based migration policy may lead to the flight of much-needed health professionals from other states.

Significantly, it is with respect to these kinds of issues where thinking about the balance between local and universal priorities seems most shaky. Some think of the manipulation of trade regulations for national benefit as the legitimate prerogative of national communities, while others view such policies as egregious wrongs. For instance, as the New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof has written: “By inflating farm subsidies even more, Congress [is] impoverishing and occasionally killing Africans whom we claim to be trying to help.” Kristof is implicitly treating enabling harm through trade policy as morally equivalent to a clear-cut case of doing harm. And this seems to be Pogge’s view as well. Some philosophers who have written on this topic, on the other hand, consider enabling harm to be morally equivalent with clear-cut cases of failing to prevent harm.

My own view, which I think coincides with the intuitions of many, is that the permissibility of prioritizing local interests seems somewhat more limited with respect to enabling harm than with respect to failing to prevent harm, but broader than with respect to doing harm. But I cannot argue for this position here. In any case, a plausible global ethic will need to develop norms for balancing priorities in these ubiquitous and under-theorized cases. And the norms that we develop will likely have significant implications for practice. If we conclude that it is not permissible for states to enable significant harms for others in order to avoid relatively minor costs to themselves, then this provides a strong prima facie case for international regulation of the policy areas where they are most likely to enable harm. If, on the other hand, we conclude that it is permissible for states to enable significant harms for others to avoid relatively minor costs to themselves, then this provides an equally strong prima facie case for leaving the policy area to purely domestic regulation. Indeed, this debate may itself help constitute the idea of a
global ethic: one in which, as Ignatieff puts it, “the particular is called to the bar of justification before the universal . . . creating the possibility of a process of recurrent adversarial justification.”

NOTES
1 See Michael Ignatieff, “Reimagining a Global Ethic,” in this issue.
3 See Peter Singer, One World, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).
A Global Ethic and the Hybrid Character of the Moral World

Nicholas Rengger*

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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*I am grateful to the editors of Ethics & International Affairs for the invitation to contribute this response, to Michael Ignatieff for his excellent lecture and the animated conversation following, and to my fellow Global Ethics Fellows (as it were) for the good companionship and conversation as we started the journey.

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27
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.

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. 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. 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 surrenderable 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). 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. 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.” 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).
7 Ibid., p. 481.
Toward a Global Ethic

David Rodin

We are one humanity, but seven billion humans. This is the essential challenge of global ethics: how to accommodate the tension between our universal and particular natures. This tension is, of course, age-old and runs through all moral and political philosophy. But in the world of the early twenty-first century it plays out in distinctive new ways. Ethics has always engaged twin capacities inherent in every human: the capacity to harm and the capacity to help. But the profound set of transformations commonly referred to as globalization—the increasing mobility of goods, labor, and capital; the increasing interconnectedness of political, economic, and financial systems; and the radical empowerment of groups and individuals through technology—have enabled us to harm and to help others in ways that our forebears could not have imagined. What we require from a global ethic is shaped by these transformative forces; and global ethics—the success or failure of that project—will substantially shape the course of the twenty-first century.

In this essay I will not address the content of a global ethic—that is, the particular rights and responsibilities it assigns—but shall instead comment on several essential preliminaries. First, I will reflect on what defines a global ethic. Second, I will consider two important objections to global ethics. Finally, I will suggest the appropriate attitude to adopt toward its pursuit. I will use the term “global ethic” to refer to a substantive ethical framework with the characteristics I discuss in this paper. “Global ethics” I shall take to mean the process of reflection, study, and argumentation whose goal is the articulation of a global ethic.¹

What, then, is a global ethic? What is its distinctive domain, and how should it be distinguished from other aspects of moral and political life? I believe that it is best defined by two distinct but complementary forces. We are “pushed” toward a global ethic by the need to address urgent issues that are increasingly global in nature, and we are “pulled” toward a global ethic by a universal core implicit in

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the very idea of ethics—a core articulated most powerfully by the idea of human rights.

To develop the first of these themes: a global ethic contains the principles, rules, institutional arrangements, attitudes, and virtues required to address global issues. Issues are “global” either because they are global in scope, which means they affect all or almost all of humanity, thus giving all persons a stake in how they are resolved; or because they have distinctive features such that they cannot be adequately addressed solely at more local or regional levels of governance.

This immediately tells us that the domain of global ethics is profoundly affected by societal, technological, and political change. In the past, management of fisheries was a local issue. But when factory ships can fish a species to extinction on the far side of the world, it becomes a paradigmatic issue of global ethics. The emission of pollutants was in the past largely a local issue. But when driving a car in Adelaide is causally connected to increased risk of flooding in Bangladesh, it becomes a global issue. We have always required ethical principles to inform a fair allocation of costs and benefits and to provide authoritative mechanisms of dispute resolution. But whereas in the past these were primarily required within local or national communities, global issues require us to resolve conflicts and distribute costs and benefits between and across diverse communities.

It should be obvious that as the world globalizes, more and more issues that were once local or regional come within the domain of global ethics. Today many of our most urgent policy issues are global in this way: climate change and environmental degradation; management of the trade and financial systems; management of the food, water, agricultural, and forestry systems; preventing and treating infectious diseases, including pandemics; preventing the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction; preventing armed conflict and genocide; eliminating poverty; management of the oceans; and ensuring the security of cyberspace. This is an overwhelming (yet still incomplete) catalogue of quite devilish problems. It vividly demonstrates why the development of effective principles of global ethics is among the most important intellectual tasks of our time.

I have said that it is a defining feature of many global issues that they cannot be adequately addressed in a solely local or regional manner. But it would be a mistake to think that global issues must therefore be addressed exclusively at the global or international level. Some global issues have been successfully managed primarily at the level of formal international coordination (think, for example, of the framework of principles that constitute the laws of the sea). But many global
issues require coordinated action at the international, regional, national, and indeed individual level.

Climate change is a good example of this latter category. Much attention has been focused on the attempt to produce a legally binding accord among the world’s 193 states to limit emissions. This is the paradigm of a truly global governance mechanism. But even if such a binding universal accord is both possible and necessary, it will not in itself exhaust responsibilities for action over climate change. Ancillary action will be required by numerous actors who are not themselves parties to an international agreement and whose responsibilities cannot be fully specified there. These actors will include regional groupings of states, municipal and local authorities, civil society groups, and individuals. Unless action is taken across all these domains, the problem of global warming is unlikely to be resolved.

Most global issues are like this. They must be addressed through differing combinations of the global and local. The point of global ethics is not that the management of global issues should always be pushed upward, to global mechanisms. The point is rather that identifying the right balance between global and local responsibilities (and doing so in the complex circumstances of partial compliance or noncompliance by other actors) is itself a key function of global ethics.

A further function of global ethics is to determine the appropriate balance between local interests and global obligations. For example, when acting in a way that bears on global issues, how much partiality am I permitted to show to my own welfare, and the welfare of those close to me, as against the collective interests of mankind? I take this issue of balance to be a core question of global ethics. But in this I differ from Michael Ignatieff. He identifies the global ethic wholly with an impartial morality. On this view the global ethic stands in stark contrast to all partiality and exists precisely to hold particular interests to the standard of what he calls (following Thomas Nagel) “the view from nowhere.”

While impartiality clearly has an important role to play in the global ethic, I think that it is a mistake to equate the two. This is because, first, partial interests often present themselves in deeply moralized forms. Concern for, and commitment to, family, friends, colleagues, or compatriots generate real moral obligations, and these may sometimes demand extraordinary self-sacrifice. The phenomenon of what we might call “altruistic partiality” is real and must be figured into any plausible ethic, including the global ethic.

Second, we require an account of how the conflicts that inevitably arise between the view from nowhere and local interests can be navigated. If these conflicts are
not resolved within the framework of a global ethic, then they will have to be resolved outside it. In particular, they will be pushed into a domain of politics that is stripped of substantive moral content: politics as a messy amalgam of persuasion, horse-trading, and naked power. Ignatieff rightly emphasizes that there is often a tension between the localism of politics and the ambitions of global ethics. But we should also remember that it is a function of ethics to provide a context for politics. Ethics confronts us with an inescapable question that presents itself in the first person: how, morally, ought I to engage in this process of politics? This, in turn, must include the question of balancing: to what extent should my political action be guided by impartial concerns and to what extent am I permitted (or perhaps even required) to defend the interests of family, neighbors, or state against those of the world as a whole? If global politics is not to be artificially divorced from ethics, then these questions of balance must be addressed squarely within the global ethic and not pushed outside.

To see how these tensions between the partial and the impartial might be navigated within a global ethic, we may consider the way that they are treated within the conception of human rights. Human rights contain exquisite mechanisms for balancing the particular and the universal. On the one hand, human rights protect certain basic interests of all persons universally. In this respect they are exemplars of the impartial view from nowhere. On the other hand, possessing a right provides a normative ground to protect particular interests even against, and above, the common interest. To say that I have the right to life is to say that my life cannot be taken by others (without infringing my rights), even if that were necessary to prevent some global catastrophe. Human rights thus provide one way (though not the only way) of navigating between partial and impartial interests. To the extent that human rights figure within the global ethic, then a moral appraisal of the tension between the partial and impartial will be hardwired into it.

We have seen that one way of marking the domain of global ethics is that it aspires to provide the moral resources to effectively address global issues. We are pushed toward a global ethic by the urgency of the world’s problems. But there is an equally important way of thinking about global ethics that gains its impetus from commitments internal to our moral thought. The global ethic in this sense contains the universal core of morality—those centrally important moral considerations that are applicable to all people everywhere.

We may think about the distinction between the two components of global ethics in the following way. If a man is tortured in a secret prison cell, this
does not constitute a global issue in the manner discussed above. It is not a matter that affects almost all humans, and its resolution requires nothing more than restraint by the particular individuals and institutions involved. Yet we properly think of torture as a matter of global rather than local ethics. Designating it as such signifies two things: First, we affirm that it is true of all people everywhere that they have the right not to be tortured. Second, we affirm that any violation of this right—even a single violation against a single individual—is of proper concern to everyone, everywhere: it is everyone’s business when universal rights and values are violated.

The idea that certain central moral truths have universal application is found in many moral traditions, but nowhere has it been articulated more powerfully and with broader appeal than in the conception of universal human rights. For this reason, rights have a special role to play in the global ethic. Human rights also capture an important additional feature of the universal global ethic: its minimalism. The global ethic is not a full account of human flourishing. Rather, it articulates a bare minimum standard that is the precondition of moral decency for all people everywhere.

What is contained within this universal moral minimum? That is a significant controversy within global ethics. Certainly, the core negative rights will fall within it: the right to life, the right against torture, the right against slavery, the right against rape and sexual abuse, the right not to have one’s liberty arbitrarily curtailed or one’s property arbitrarily seized. That is a minimal list indeed, and many would insist on the inclusion of such positive rights as basic welfare rights, including the right to a minimum of sustenance, health care, shelter, and education. There are powerful reasons to include welfare rights, though there are also well-known problems with how to allocate the correlative duties implied by these rights. The boundary may be drawn more expansively still to include democratic rights and basic tenets of distributive justice. This debate will not be settled easily. But I will argue below that global ethics must include a conception of moral progress. If that is right, then there is reason to hope that universal global ethics may develop over time from a minimal core to a more ambitiously maximalist conception.

If the global ethic has two components in the way I have suggested, then one may fairly ask how they are related to one another. One hopeful hypothesis is that the universal rights articulated by the global ethic are themselves necessary features of the ethic required to address global issues. There is some reason to believe that this is true. Most global issues involve the violation or infringement
of rights on a massive scale (global warming, war, and atrocity are paradigmatic in this respect). The framework of rights contains sophisticated internal mechanisms for addressing such violations and infringements. In particular, infringing or threatening a right triggers specific liabilities in others to safeguard that right. These liabilities come in three fundamental forms: those responsible for infringing a right can be liable to harmful defensive action; they can be liable to claims for compensation or redress for infringing the right; and they can be liable to punishment for wrongfully infringing the right. These are powerful mechanisms, but much more work needs to be done on how this internal “logic of rights” can be applied to complex global issues. In particular, we need a much better understanding of how unintended externality harms that cross borders (such as those that arise from carbon emissions) generate defensive, compensatory, and punitive liabilities.

While there are clear synergies between the two components of a global ethic, we must recognize that there is also a potential conflict. Universal rights belong first and foremost to individuals. They contain fundamental protections that ought not be simply disregarded even if it would be highly advantageous to do so in order to address an urgent global issue. Thus, while universal rights provide significant resources to address global issues, they also generate substantial constraints on what the solution to those issues can be.

If it is correct that global ethics aspires to articulate a minimal moral truth applicable to all persons, then global ethics stands squarely opposed to moral skepticism, which, in its various forms, denies that there can be such universal moral truth. In particular, global ethics opposes moral relativism and political realism, both of which have exerted a powerful influence on contemporary debate.

Relativism begins from the undeniable fact that moral beliefs differ significantly, both between communities and within particular communities over time. Relativism posits an explanation of this: variations in moral commitment are not disagreements about moral facts; rather, they simply reflect the different preferences that social groups happen to have at a particular time. If there are no culture-independent moral facts, then there can be no universal moral truths. As many authors have pointed out, however, relativism is not entailed simply by differences in belief. In the past, most humans believed the world was flat, whereas now most believe it to be round. This does not imply that there is no matter of fact about the shape of the world. We must look at the nature of the disagreement and whether there are persuasive explanations for why it exists.
The contention that there is a universal core to morality is more plausible when one makes the obvious observation that much of morality does not fall within it. As I observed above, the universal global ethic is minimal. There are many rules, norms, and values that are undoubtedly moral, but for which it is entirely appropriate that there exist substantial variations between different communities. This is often the case when the moral considerations concern trade-offs between generalized risks and benefits within a community’s population. Think, for example, of different regimes of health and safety in different countries, or the differing ways that the interests of the employed and unemployed are balanced in employment regulation, or of different speed limits, consumer protection, or gun ownership regulations. It would be foolish to suggest that there is one universally right form of these norms. In all of these cases it is morally appropriate for different communities to decide these issues in different ways according to their own distinctive preferences (within certain limits).

In contrast, the basic rights that are plausible candidates for a universal global ethic do not present themselves as discretionary in this way. First, there is considerable global agreement on the existence of these basic rights. Second, though there certainly exist groups who deny each of these rights, we do not regard this denial as reasonable variation; rather, we see it as evidence of ignorance or iniquity.

This brings us to the second weakness in the relativist’s position. We have an alternative explanation for the differences in moral belief that motivate relativism. That explanation is progress. There are clear cases in which variations in moral belief over time and between communities are best explained not as shifts in simple cultural preferences, but as progress toward a more morally perfect state of affairs. The prohibition of slavery, the establishment of universal suffrage, and the recognition of the rights of women, children, racial minorities, and homosexuals are all clear examples of genuine moral progress.

Conceptions of moral progress are deeply unfashionable because they have become associated with a smug view of history as an inevitable ascent toward a moral apex represented by Western culture. Herbert Butterfield immortalized this objectionable view as the “Whig interpretation of history.” In fact, the possibility of moral progress implies the opposite attitude. While it is right to feel pride in the progress we have made, this must be tempered by humility at the progress we have yet to achieve. After all, who can say which of our current moral assumptions will, a century from now, be viewed in the same way that we now view...
Victorian attitudes toward women, nonwhites, and homosexuals? We should always be alive to the fact that the corollary of progress is the possibility of error. There is thus a grain of truth in the relativist’s position: parochial prejudice often masquerades as universal truth. This requires caution and a constant readiness to engage in serious and systematic interrogation of even our most basic moral beliefs. However, it does not entail abandoning conceptions of moral truth and progress (indeed, the confusion of prejudice with moral truth only matters if there is a truth).

Different problems beset political realism. There are many nuanced and sophisticated forms of realism, but the variant that has most influenced popular discourse has been naïve realism that holds that the pursuit of national self-interest always precludes the possibility of international morality. The weakness of this view is that it is ambiguous between two different claims, one of which is descriptive and the other prescriptive. In its descriptive form, realism holds that, as a matter of fact, state action is determined solely by national self-interest. But that view is clearly wrong. There have been many cases in which states have taken dangerous and costly actions that cannot be explained other than by reference to moral beliefs and motivations. Britain’s intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000, America’s ill-fated intervention in Somalia in 1993, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 cannot be explained in terms of the rational pursuit of national self-interest alone, and each was arguably influenced by underlying moral commitments (albeit, as in the case of Iraq, sometimes tragically misconceived).

There is also something charmingly innocent about the realist’s view of the officials who shape state action. One is required to believe that officials always act from fidelity to a shining conception of the national interest, rather than the more prosaic motives of career, interagency rivalry, or personal jealously. One suspects that realists cannot have spent much time within ordinary office environments. For better or for worse, states and state officials often do act for reasons other than national self-interest.

The second interpretation of realism explicitly recognizes this. It holds not that states always do act from national self-interest, but that they ought to. Realists contend that when states act for moral reasons they often create tragically counterproductive effects, generating significant danger for themselves and others. Everyone will be better off if states put aside moral considerations and act only from self-interest.

Notice, however, that realism in its prescriptive form is not a denial of ethics in international affairs. It is a particular account of what states ought to do. In other
words, it is itself a species of international ethics, and must be assessed as such. As with relativism, there is a grain of truth in the realist’s position. That grain is that there are significant ethical risks to excessive moral zeal. Idealistic moralism that ignores the constraints on effective action, including political constraints, is a recipe for disaster. But once one has absorbed that modest truth, the implausibility of the prescriptive realist position becomes obvious. It would be strange indeed if the best way for states to do what is right were to ignore all considerations of right and wrong and instead to do what is in their own self-interest. Much more plausible is that for states to act well they (like persons) must think seriously about their moral obligations, but they must do so with a cautionary awareness of the constraints and limitations upon their moral agency.

All of this points to the importance of developing the correct attitude to orient our engagement in the project of global ethics. Aspects of that attitude have already emerged clearly from our discussion. It is an attitude of humility and caution expressed through a readiness to ruthlessly interrogate our own deepest moral assumptions. It contains a commitment to rigor and seriousness. The tools of many disciplines must be brought to bear (not just philosophy, though philosophy has a central role). It is an explicitly progressive attitude. Our engagement in global ethics should be energized by the very real moral progress we have already made. But it is also an attitude made steely vigilant by the equally real possibilities of error and moral regress. The social and political expression of rights and values must be constantly nurtured and maintained if they are not to wither or collapse.

Most of all we must adopt what we might call the “internal attitude.” I mean by this that we come to global ethics already inhabiting morality. Our task is to interpret, develop, and apply it to the best of our abilities. Relativism, realism, and egoism fail as objections to global ethics not so much because they are false as because they are irrelevant. Just as we do not need to refute the skeptical hypothesis that we might be brains in a vat in order to make progress in physics, so we do not need to refute moral skepticism in order to make progress on the ethical issues that matter. The questions of metaethics are valid, but they are not our questions. As I observed above, the serious questions of morality are mostly presented in the first person: what should I do (given my resources and my role as a voting citizen, official, soldier, head of state, family member, educator, civil society advocate, and so forth)? The metaphor of the “view from nowhere” is helpful in some respects, but it misleads in others. What is required is the view—surveyed with moral honesty and rigor—from exactly where we are.
NOTES

1 Note that this usage differs from Michael Ignatieff’s in “Reimagining a Global Ethic,” in this issue.
2 Ignatieff, “Reimagining a Global Ethic.”
3 To be sure, each of these rights has fuzzy edges. For example, different jurisdictions draw the distinction between self-defense and culpable homicide in slightly different ways. But we are much less inclined to view these differences as morally discretionary, as opposed to disagreements over moral facts. In any case, the prohibition of paradigm cases of murder, rape, torture, slavery, and the like is nonnegotiable.
The message of Michael Ignatieff’s reflections on reimagining a global ethic is a comforting one for political philosophers. 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
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.” 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

1 See Michael Ignatieff, “Reimagining a Global Ethic,” in this issue.
2 Don Babwin and Tom Breen, “Remembering the First and Last of Iraq War Dead,” Associated Press, December 19, 2011.
A Brief Response to Michael Ignatieff

Michael Joseph Smith

In his elegant essay on the tension between a singular global ethic and global ethics in the plural, Michael Ignatieff invites us to “think harder about the conflicts of principle between them.”1 He is certainly right that harder thinking is needed: advocates of both versions of a global ethic sometimes seem locked into mutual self-righteousness. What we might call singular, or universal, ethicists often accuse pluralists of parochial atavism, while the partisans of plural, usually national, ethics think that the universalists are naive at best, arrogant at worst. Both are utterly convinced that they are right.

Ignatieff is surely correct when he points out that the philosophical success of the singular universalists, who have so skillfully outlined persuasive positions on global justice from the “view from nowhere,” has not been matched in the political arena. Indeed, the American election process seems peculiarly designed to work against the acceptance of the responsibilities of a truly global ethic. The Republican Party today seems determined both to deny the science of climate change and to insist on the superiority of its singular version of ethics—global or national. And the democratic electoral processes in states all over the world place advocates of a singular global ethic at a permanent disadvantage. In elections, if not ethics, the view from a specific somewhere almost always blocks the view from nowhere.

Drawing on his deep knowledge of the work of Isaiah Berlin, Ignatieff reminds us of Berlin’s insight that “some absolute values conflict absolutely, and all good things cannot be had at once.” For Ignatieff, the global ethic challenges “all the forms of ethical partiality that are rooted in attachments to class, identity, nation, or religion.” Yet he recognizes the force of this ethical partiality and cites the legal scholar Brad Roth, who suggests that “democratic peoples have the right to be wrong about justice.” But does this right actually exist, even in the way Ignatieff

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49
goes on to limit it? He tells us that “the right to be wrong about justice will be constrained by the rights guarantees that constrain all constitutional exercises of power.” But even if this right does exist, and certainly states claim it, I wonder whether approaching the issue as a democratic “right to be wrong,” however limited or constrained, is helpful. The language itself seems to encourage a standoff rather than a dialogue. If a sovereign claim to be right refuses to recognize a higher arbiter (and that would seem to be the point of claiming the right to be wrong), then we have a stalemate. We come close to the way Berlin memorably describes the relativist position when two ethics conflict: “My values are mine, yours are yours, and if we clash, too bad, neither of us can claim to be right.”

Rather than think of a right to be wrong, however (theoretically) limited, perhaps we should reorient the discussion to the costs of insisting on this right. For one could surely argue that the “good things” lost by favoring parochial national choices over global imperatives are far greater in both their moral and material consequences than any losses that might result from adherence to a singular global ethic. Global climate change, profligate energy use, the chronic misdistribution of wealth and resources, the fragile and endangered status of disempowered people everywhere—all these are largely the result of insisting on the priority of the value of states over that of human beings. As one of the founders of modern realism, Hans Morgenthau, put it in 1946, “The state has indeed become a ‘mortal God,’ and for an age that believes no longer in an immortal god, the state becomes the only God there is.” This attitude lingers to the present day, judging at least by political rhetoric; but even Morgenthau recognized toward the end of his life that “in the atomic age nationalism and the nation-state must make way for a political principle of larger dimensions, in tune with the world-wide configuration of interest and power of the age.”

Whence will come this political principle, this global ethic, of larger dimensions? Ignatieff recognizes the importance of nongovernmental organizations in helping to embody that global ethic, rightly pointing out that they help to negotiate the accommodation between the universal and the specific when they seek “buy in” rather than conversion, or, one might say, submission. He further points to the work of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), which has tried to redefine national sovereignty as a responsibility, not just as immunity to outside scrutiny or intervention. In the first of these examples, advocates of a singular global ethic work to embed that ethic in local practices; in the second, the commission sought, with considerable success,
to reorient the debate on humanitarian intervention toward the responsibilities that sovereign states have toward their citizens. The difference between the two approaches concerns the relevant actors: NGOs enable direct action by women and men committed to global justice; the ICSS sought mainly to persuade policymakers in foreign ministries and the United Nations. Clearly, both approaches, and many more, are needed if change is to occur.

For me, the challenge for those committed to a global ethic is not to make better arguments, to point out more contradictions, to seek greater justification—though, of course, as Ignatieff eloquently argues, these tasks remain vital. Rather, we must devise a way to engage democratic leaders and polities, to challenge them (us!) to think and act according to a universal global ethic that treats all humans, and their human rights, equally. But to invoke Berlin again, perhaps a better way to move toward this goal is to insist less on the superiority of our version of the absolute value and, rather, to emphasize more the things we will lose if we remain wedded to our particularist convictions. In an interesting exchange during a symposium on Berlin, Ronald Dworkin and Bernard Williams debated on how best to confront apparent conflicts of values. Should we try to work out a fully consistent philosophical position and explain how the other side has misunderstood things (Dworkin’s view, and, I would suggest, the typical position of singular globalists)? Or should we, in Williams’s interpretation of Berlin, acknowledge that, yes, when striving to resolve conflict between principles there will be some loss to a value you treasure? In a clash between values, one side cannot achieve all its goals. Some losses seem unavoidable.

Perhaps in an interdependent world, where solutions to global problems require genuinely global cooperation, national sovereignty must give way; even democratic peoples do not have the right to be wrong. Rather, perhaps we who seek great fealty to a genuinely global ethic need to recognize that we cannot all win; that some sacrifice in the lifestyles of the richer countries must be made; that local choices, even if arrived at democratically, cannot always trump the needs of future generations and the life of the planet. Maybe we need to say not “you’re wrong,” but rather “yes, I see your point, but we can’t have everything we want now and guarantee a life for our grandchildren and basic rights for our fellow human beings.” To pursue a singular ethic we must always remember the pull of the particular, even as we seek to move beyond it.
NOTES

1 See Michael Ignatieff, “Reimagining a Global Ethic,” in this issue.
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