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

Ethics & International Affairs, 26, no. 1 (2012), pp. 49–52.
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doi:10.1017/S0892679412000202

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679412000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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."[2]

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."[3]

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,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679412000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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 policy-makers 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.[4] 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.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679412000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

[1] See Michael Ignatieff, "Reimagining a Global Ethic," in this issue.
[2] Isaiah Berlin, "The First and the Last," *New York Review of Books* XLV, no. 8 (May 14, 1998), pp. 53–60.
[3] Quoted in Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), pp. 137–38.
[4] Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert B. Silvers, eds., *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), pp. 73–105.

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