ESSAY

Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse

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There has been a recent growth in arguments for decolonizing dominant frameworks of normative thinking in international relations.[1] It is not my purpose here to weigh the pros and cons of these arguments as such but rather to explore the implications of one suggestion for how decolonization might be brought about. This is the suggestion that taking the idea of the "pluriverse" seriously could be the best way to decolonize international theory in general,[2] and global ethics in particular.[3] This essay proceeds in three stages. First, it analyzes the various meanings and arguments attached to the term pluriverse. Second, it explores the challenges of taking the pluriverse seriously for thinking about ethics in international relations. Third, it suggests some possibilities that might follow from a careful engagement with pluriversality for global ethical thinking. It concludes that thinking with the pluriverse necessitates changing how we think about the point and purpose of global ethics in ways that exceed procedural and substantive accounts of decolonial justice.

The Idea of Pluriversality

In the history of Western philosophy, William James used the idea of the pluriverse, or more commonly the "multiverse," to express what it meant to start one's thinking about the world (universe) from a pluralist rather than a monist perspective. Monists, on James's account, presumed that the universe was a singular whole with nothing outside of it, which meant that apparent difference in the world was ultimately a matter of internal differentiation rather than genuine externality. By contrast:

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> Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many, means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related*. Everything you can think of however vast or inclusive has on the pluralistic view a genuinely "external" environment of some sort or amount. Things are "with" one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything or dominates over everything.[4]

James's argument was developed within the terrain of Western philosophy, and he identified it with a broadly empiricist tradition of philosophical thinking. He was interested in particular in how one could maintain the validity of claims about the world, such as the reality of supernatural phenomena, that did not make sense in terms of dominant scientific rationalism and naturalism.

James's work is rarely cited in the recent revival of the idea of pluriversality; instead it is situated as part of a distinctive "decolonial" development of and reaction against modernist and postcolonial thought. It is inspired in particular by indigenous movements in Latin America and elsewhere that have resisted the encroachments of modernity in the form of industrialization, urbanization, and ecological devastation. These movements understand themselves as located in worlds that are radically different to modern ways of being, and that provide an alternative place and time from which to mobilize resistance to modernity.[5] Decolonial thinking shares the postcolonial concern with the material and epistemological hegemony of Western colonial modernity, but sees postcolonialism as not taking differences between Western colonial modernity and other ways of being sufficiently seriously. Rather than thinking in terms of concepts such as "hybridity," in which the distinctiveness of alternatives to Western colonial modernity become blurred, pluriversal arguments stress the radical distinction between Western colonial modernity and other ways of being and call for a "relational ontology," in which worlds external to one another can nevertheless coexist, without one subsuming the others. This is clearly reminiscent of James's account of the external relation discussed above.

Pluriversal arguments take different, more or less radical forms, but they always rest on two key assertions. The first is that Western theory and practice depend on a "one world" Euromodern ontology that has particular ethical and political effects. This ontology comprises three key elements, summed up by Mario Blaser as follows: "an ontologically stark distinction between Nature and Culture, a dominant tendency to conceive difference (including the difference between Nature and Culture) in hierarchical terms, and a linear conception of time."[6] The second assertion is that this ontology's claim to universality is false.

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There are actually multiple worlds, ontologically different from the Euromodern world, and with different ethical and political implications. Thinking in terms of the pluriverse brings the politics of ontology to the forefront of concern.

Pluriversal arguments insist that the transformations that modernity entails are ontologically destructive. This is not just about the explicitly genocidal effects of colonialism but about how even those members of the colonized who are not killed are deprived of the world they previously inhabited. Such arguments also insist that colonial and imperial politics cannot be detached from ontological assumptions, and therefore will persist as long as those ontological assumptions are in place. And they point to the inadequacy of accounts of difference that presume essential sameness. These accounts would include familiar hierarchical claims about the "backwardness" of those who do not share Western ways of life, where differential positioning in a common historical temporality anchors ontological sameness. They would also include apparently more progressive positions that rely on ideas of "perspective" or "standpoint" for critique, while still assuming a singular ontology. Pluriversalists are particularly critical of the use of the term "culture" to describe and explain non-Western ways of life, since the term is itself parasitic on Euromodern ontology, which presupposes an ontological divide between nature and culture.[7]

The contemporary idea of the pluriverse then is both a critique of the Euromodern world's claim to universality and an assertion of multiple ontologies and the importance of the political and ethical implications of those ontologies. As Arturo Escobar writes, "The pluriverse is a tool to first, make alternatives to one world plausible to one-worlders, and second, provide resonance to those other worlds that interrupt the one world story."[8] The latter point is crucial to the critical power of pluriversality, since it directs attention not only to the colonial implications of Euromodern ontology but also to the possibility of alternative ontologies having different, and perhaps less damaging, ethical and political implications. As Escobar suggests, pluriversal arguments are used not only to disrupt hegemonic one world stories but also to revalue "other" worlds. Following the Zapatista slogan "For everyone, everything. For us, nothing," these arguments propose the goal of producing a world in which many worlds can fit.[9] Nevertheless, the meaning of this goal is ambiguous. Some versions of pluriversality suggest that the differences between worlds are incommensurable. They locate positive values in worlds other than those of Western modernity, but also see how it may be difficult to build relations between worlds in a context of radical difference. By

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contrast, other versions of pluriversality stress relationality and, as in Walter Mignolo's notion of "border thinking,"[10] the importance of sites where different worlds are already entangled for developing alternatives to colonial modernity.

Implications for Global Ethics

The point and purpose of global ethics is to address ethical questions inherent in relations, situations, and contexts at the international, transnational, and global level. Accounts of, for example, global justice, sustainable development, women's human rights, or the ethics of war are all intended to be meaningful and applicable across various geopolitical and ideational boundaries. For this reason, much contemporary work in international and global ethics is prey to a pluriversal critique, in that such work takes for granted the universality of a Euromodern ontology while aiming to generate values and principles with global reach. From a pluriversal point of view, extending the scope of ethical judgment across worlds is bound to result in impasse, in which the outcomes of ethical judgment are either unintelligible or unworkable in the terms of the worlds to which they are being applied. Or else global ethics becomes part of a fundamentally colonial project in which other worlds are forced to take on a Euromodern world that is alien to them, which again would contradict the explicit ambitions of most arguments in global ethics. In short, taking pluriversality seriously would seem to put global ethics in an impossible position.

Pluriversality also, of course, challenges the universal validity of ontological assumptions underlying predominant cosmopolitan global ethical frameworks. For example, from a pluriversal viewpoint, the common assumption in global ethics that morality consists of the transcendence of various kinds of material and cultural determination, or that human beings are essentially distinct from other modes of being, does not necessarily hold true outside of a Euromodern ontology. This means that any account of the moral subject that relies on making an ontological cut between, for example, reason on the one hand and nature on the other, or between the human and the animal, is not universal but parochial. Moreover, these parochial assumptions are not neutral or benign in relation to other modes of being, but are intrinsically hierarchical, so that those who do not embrace these views have traditionally been identified with the inferior term, as that which is to be transcended: the natural or the animal. A global ethics seeking to respond to the pluriversal challenge must therefore find appropriate ways of answering not

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only the charge of false universalism but also the charge that its ontological politics undermine its pretensions to justice.

One way to respond to the challenge of political ontology, explored recently by Robin Dunford, is to build on the implications of both parochialism and plurality that emerge from the pluriversal critique of dominant cosmopolitan global ethics. Dunford argues that this is not something that can be done theoretically; rather it requires practical engagement and dialogue between different worlds.[11] On his account, a genuinely pluriversal ethics must take seriously the claims of non-Western, nonmodern actors to be producers of ethical knowledge and values. This necessitates their having direct input into arguments about, for example, whether proposed policies of deforestation or industrialization are just or not.

Here, however, Dunford runs into a familiar problem. Reducing pluriversal ethics to procedure runs the risk that the worlds that win particular arguments may then close down pluriversal possibilities in the future. Or, even worse, that the parochial world of Western colonial modernity might win out, if considered as an option among others, and therefore return ethical debate to the hegemonic frameworks of cosmopolitanism. In seeking to respond to this, he argues that pluriversality has to be taken not only as "a particular process of value formation" but also as a substantive value in itself.[12] Thus, pluriversality not only tells us how to do ethics; it also provides us with the measure for what does and does not count as an ethical outcome. In Dunford's view, this still leaves a plurality of possibilities open for thinking about global justice, and it simply outlaws those visions of global justice internally related to projects of colonial domination. Pluriversal global ethics, therefore, is both proceduralist and substantive, essentially democratic in the way that it tackles ethical questions in world politics, and exemplifying justice as a value in itself.

Having mapped out what it would mean for global ethics to take a pluriversal form, Dunford points to one possible area of difficulty:

> Moreover, the demand of a pluriverse may be impossible to meet fully; in an interconnected world, it may be impossible to ensure that it is not the case that the actions of some constrain the worlds of others. This does not mean, however, that some worlds, practices, livelihoods, lifestyles and institutional designs are not more compatible with a pluriverse than others. Recognizing interconnectedness—and the long history of interconnectedness—only increases the importance of striving for a pluriversal world in an attempt to build a world free from the domination and destruction of the colonial matrix of power.[13]

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Dunford's unease with the ways in which global interconnectedness may undermine the project of pluriversality points to some tensions in his resolution of the question as to what a decolonial global ethics would look like. In abstracting the idea of pluriversality as the overarching value and aim for a decolonial ethics, he moves away from the messy world of political contestation from which his analysis started. Rather than pluriversality being the worldly condition in which we find ourselves, it becomes the utopian vision toward which we should be working. Focus is shifted from the realm of practical engagement between different worlds to an ideal of (as Dunford says above) "a world free from the domination and destruction of the colonial matrix of power." If one is sure of this ideal, then it becomes unclear why we should bother with the procedural dimension of pluriversality rather than focusing our attention on reinforcing the ways in which encroachment of one world upon another can be prevented. This seems to point us back in the direction of some of the ambiguities of pluriversal thinking identified at the end of the first section above. One's vision of the ideal pluriversal world will differ depending on whether one puts emphasis on "difference" or "relationality." To the extent that the ideal incorporates separateness, it pushes decolonial ethics toward a kind of pure affirmation of difference, and prejudges attempts to ground it in the politics of actual engagement between people and ideas.

Pluriversal Possibilities

Dunford provides a persuasive argument for the helpfulness of the idea of pluriversality in decolonizing global ethics. In this final section, however, I want to suggest that the possibilities opened up for global ethics by the idea of pluriversality may be somewhat different, and perhaps more profoundly disturbing to prevailing views about the point and purpose of global ethics, than Dunford's account would admit. The ethical issues raised by the pluriversal critique of colonial modernity are not, I would argue, straightforwardly to do with either procedure or the institutionalization of a new categorical imperative for ethical theory and practice. The latter ideas leave in place the notion that answers to questions about the right and the good are in some sense knowable, as long as we have the right standards and procedures. In other words, they assert that if our standard is a decolonized world in which different worlds may coexist, and our procedure is properly democratic, then global justice could be both knowable and doable. In contrast, I will suggest

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that pluriversality pushes us away from the possibility of specifying what the attainment of global justice might mean, and toward the importance of the cultivation of particular kinds of virtue in the context of ethical practices of coexistence and collaboration. Pluriversal ethics is not about finding new ways of sorting out the meaning of justice but rather about finding new ways of relating to ourselves and to each other in our pursuit of whatever we may think of as justice. This includes dealing with the limits we encounter in working on ourselves and relating to others. Somewhat counterintuitively, this brings global ethics back to its parochial beginnings just as much as it focuses attention on distant, supposedly radically different others.

Here I am building on suggestions from some of the pluriversal literature that engages directly with practices of coexistence and collaboration in the context of decolonial resistant politics. Two concepts emerge from this literature that can help to organize an account of what thinking with the pluriverse might mean for global ethics: "dissonance" and "negotiation."

Dissonance

The first thing to note is that pluriversal engagement in political action, for example against the proposed destruction by a mining company of sacred sites central to the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples, is always highly complex. It can involve not only the clash between an indigenous world and the world of a destructive colonial modernity but also often an uneasy relation between different worlds inhabited by different participants in resistance (anti-capitalist protestors, eco-activists, spiritual leaders from different traditions), as well as inequalities in power and resources among those participants. This, inevitably, involves the experience of dissonance; especially when some participants come up against a particular limit imposed by an alternative mode of being in the world. Martha Chaves and her colleagues argue that "rather than romanticizing a 'pluriverse' where everybody gets along, engaging with such 'ontological politics' forces us to not only acknowledge the existence of different realities but also the power plays within and between them."[14]

These authors describe the experience of feminist environmental activists who were refused access to complete a march to a mountain under threat from developers because women were restricted from entry to this sacred site. Initial incredulity and indignation gave way to the feminists' acceptance, if not endorsement, of their exclusion. They instead entered an alternative engagement with

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indigenous women that did not challenge established indigenous practice. The point here is that these feminist actors did not address the dissonance they experienced by acknowledging that the rights of the indigenous community somehow trump the value of gender equality. They did not change their views about the meaning or priority of gender justice, but instead accepted the limitation of their own rectitude in the light of the commitment to work with others toward a particular goal. In this respect, dissonance can become a catalyst for work on the self that then enables constructive work with others. This work with others does not take place without cost. It is painful to put one's own sense of self and entitlement to one side. Nevertheless, such work builds a pluriversal ethics not theoretically but in contingent practices of accommodation. Any such practice is fundamentally contingent upon the recognition of which relations are important within a particular context. It leaves a permanent legacy not in a change in ethical commitments but in the sedimentation of ethical capacities, of self-restraint and humility, to limit the imperial reach of those commitments.

Negotiation

The idea of the pluriverse counters familiar understandings of ethical judgment with a model of negotiation. The most common account of ethical judgment in contemporary global ethics is a determinative one. This involves the formulation of general principles under which particular cases are subsumed. Even Dunford's assertion of pluriversality as a substantive value echoes this determinative model, acting as a kind of categorical imperative by which global ethical claims are ultimately governed, or to which they must aspire. Negotiation, in contrast, assumes multiple sets of determinative commitments, among which there is no overriding rule and no shared ideal. The success or failure of genuine negotiation, as opposed to the imposition of one view on others, requires more than clarity about one's determinative commitments, even if these are commitments to ethical pluralism. It involves cultivating relational and creative resources for finding ways of working with others. As Marisol de la Cadena has noted, "I think of the pluriverse as partially connected heterogenous socionatural worlds negotiating their ontological disagreements politically."[15] Relational resources involve capacities to identify and act on which relations take priority within specific contexts. Creative resources involve capacities to work collaboratively to create something new, which may not be describable in the terms of any of the collaborators' worlds.

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Such capacities do not evolve in response to any kind of recipe but in the ongoing experience of reflective interaction across and between different ways of being.

An exemplary account of pluriversality in practice can be found in Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*.[16] In this text, Lear examines how Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow nation, drew on the relational and creative resources inherent in his world to build new possibilities for his people in a radically different world. Lear explains how Plenty Coups uses interpretations of his dreams of a catastrophic future as a young man to recreate the existence of the Crow nation. The use of dreams and traditional symbols provide him with a familiar language through which to negotiate acceptance of change among his own people—for example, by leading them to the decision that hunting buffalo is no longer what defines them. But the dreams also provide him with a way to translate the relation of the Crow nation to their land into the terms of modernity, which enables him to access ways of holding on to the land. Lear summarizes: "And so, Plenty Coups not only saw his dream as confirmed; he had reason to think that his steadfast commitment to his dream played a crucial role in his successfully negotiating a future for his tribe."[17] Plenty Coups exemplifies pluriversal ethics because he is able to find a way to successfully cut across worlds and create a future in a context in which any recognizable future had disappeared. Plenty Coups's story casts light on the difference that privilege makes in thinking with the pluriverse. And it makes one wonder why it seems to be so difficult for those caught up in the one world of Euromodernity to adjust their requirements to the demands of coexistence or collaboration with other worlds.

I am suggesting, therefore, that taking pluriversality seriously means shifting our understanding of global ethics away from seeing it as a route to determining answers to questions of global justice and toward seeing it as an embodied, reflective practice contingently attached to specific goals and contexts. This means learning how to live with bracketing ontological and ethical commitments, and learning how to discriminate ethical priorities within complex and power-laden situations. In this respect, it is helpful to remember that such bracketing and discrimination are part of everyday ethical practice everywhere.

Fundamental clashes of ontology are not only the prerogative of contexts in which Western colonial worlds meet those of indigenous peoples. As James reminds us, gods, spirits, and animate materiality have never actually disappeared from the world of Euromodernity. They may have been banished from a particular kind of epistemic, technological imagination, in particular in academic thinking,

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but in practice we are constantly negotiating our relation with them. Some of the time, this is in monist ways that seek to subsume all nonempirical experience under a dominant explanation, but more often it is in pluralist ways that allow relation to other worlds through contingent connection, acknowledgment of limitation, coexistence, or collaboration for some particular purpose. The godly and the godless can live with each other, and even collaborate to make a better world, if they resist the temptation to subsume the other's reality into their own world as delusion.

Conclusion

The idea of pluriversality offers a distinct pathway to decolonizing global ethics. As explored above, I think the challenge of pluriversality calls for a more radical response than democratizing ethical debate, or governing it in terms of a commitment to ontological pluralism as a value. This is because such measures would only partially decolonize global ethics. They would certainly open it up to different voices and force an abandonment of dominant Euromodern paradigms, but they would not do away with the subsumptive account of ethical judgment maintained by global ethics and its tendency to separate out the formulation of ethical positions from their outcome and application. In my view, pluriversality puts epistemic and technocratic models of ethics into question. Instead, it focuses our attention on what it means to live with others without subsuming them into one world or another. It makes us think about how coexistence and collaboration work and the kinds of virtues and capacities they rely on and cultivate. A pluriversal ethics is not about finding out the right answers but about experiments in "being with." It is not something that can be known in any satisfactory way; it is only something that can be done.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Duncan Bell, ed., *Empire, Race and Global Justice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Catherine Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Katrin Flikschuh, *What Is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Louiza Odysseos, "Prolegomena to Any Future Decolonial Ethics: Coloniality, Poetics and 'Being Human as Praxis,'" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 3 (April 2017), pp. 447–72.

[2] David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, "Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 3 (June 2017), pp. 293–311; Cristina Rojas, "Contesting the Colonial Logics of the International: Towards a Relational Politics for the Pluriverse," *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 4 (2016), pp. 369–82.

[3] Robin Dunford, "Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics," *Journal of Global Ethics* 13, no. 3 (September 2017), pp. 380–97.

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[4] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at the Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, Project Gutenburg, under "Lecture 8," www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11984/pg11984.html. Emphasis in the original.

[5] Mario Blaser, "Political Ontology: Cultural Studies without 'Cultures'?," *Cultural Studies* 23, nos. 5–6 (2009), pp. 873–96; Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh, "Radical Democracy in Global Perspective: Notes from the Pluriverse," *Third World Quarterly* 32 no. 4 (2011), pp. 689–706; Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond 'Politics,'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (April 2010), pp. 334–70; Martha Chaves, Thomas Macintyre, Gerard Verschoor, and Arjen E. J. Wals, "Towards Transgressive Learning through Ontological Politics: Answering the 'Call of the Mountain' in a Colombian Network of Sustainability," *Sustainability* 9, no. 1 (December 2016), 1–19; Arturo Escobar, "Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South," *Revista de antropologia Iberoamericana* 11, no. 1 (January–April 2016), pp. 11–32; Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar, "Post-Development @ 25: On 'Being Stuck' and Moving Forward, Sideways, Backward and Otherwise," in "*The Development Dictionary* @25: Post-Development and Its Consequences," ed. Aram Ziai, special issue, *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 12 (June 2017), pp. 2559–72; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (London: Duke University Press, 2011).

[6] Blaser, "Political Ontology," p. 890.

[7] Blaney and Tickner, "Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR," p. 304; Blaser, "Political Ontology," p. 888.

[8] Escobar, "Thinking-Feeling with the Earth," p. 22.

[9] Ibid., p. 20.

[10] Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

[11] Dunford, "Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics," p. 11.

[12] Ibid., pp. 12–13.

[13] Ibid., pp. 14–15.

[14] Chaves et al., "Towards Transgressive Learning through Ontological Politics," p. 5.

[15] Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes," p. 30.

[16] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[17] Ibid., p. 144.

Abstract: This essay examines the idea of the pluriverse as one response to recent calls for the decolonization of international and global ethics. It argues that taking pluriversality seriously challenges prevailing understandings of global ethics as the acquisition and application of moral expertise. Instead of aiming to *know* the meaning of global justice and then *apply* it to particular contexts, a pluriversal ethics addresses the question of how to cultivate a practical ethic of coexistence and collaboration with others in an ontologically plural and radically hierarchical world.

Keywords: pluriverse, ethics, global, decolonial, virtue, international theory, William James

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