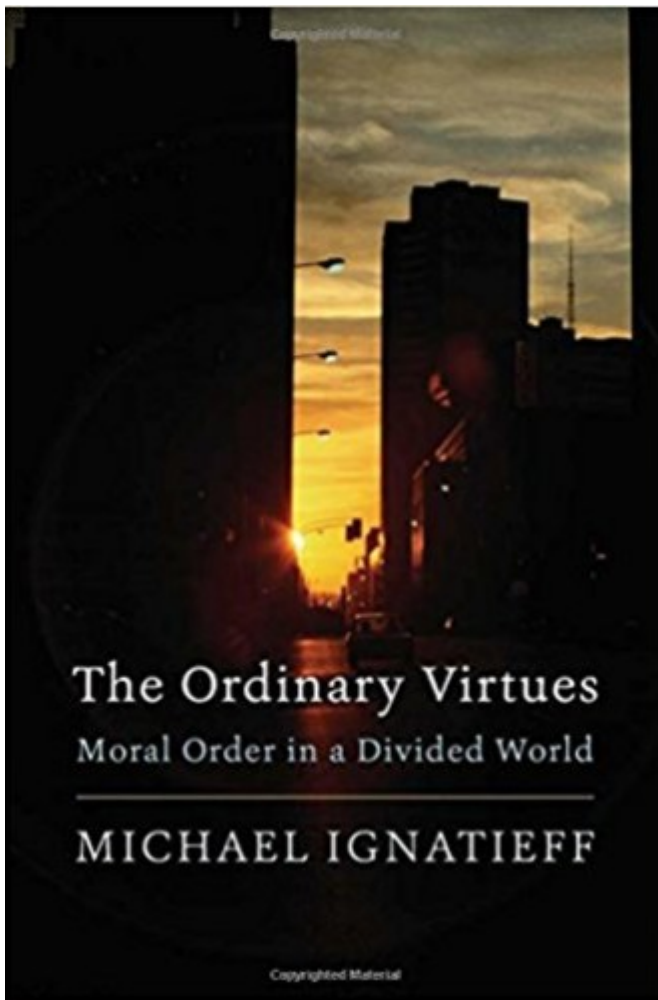


Why human rights and global ethics are inadequate concepts

In a globalized world, Michael Ignatieff argues, grand moral values have failed. What's left is virtue.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue

In Review



The Ordinary Virtues

Moral Order in a Divided World

By Michael Ignatieff

Harvard University Press

Is globalization drawing us together morally? Canadian professor, broadcaster, and politician Michael Ignatieff sought to answer this question as he embarked on a seven-stop world tour. The answer, it turns out, is no.

Seldom has a travelogue yielded such sagacity. Ignatieff's introduction is as masterly an overview of the contemporary globe as one could wish for; his reflections on visits to Rio, Bosnia, Myanmar, Fukushima, South Africa, New York City, and Los Angeles are as compelling a journal as one could desire; and his conclusions are as convincing as they are controversial. Don't be deceived by the bland title: this is a formidable argument grounded in wide research, illustrated with global examples, and illuminated by rousing prose. Ambitious but humble, lively but plausible, wide-ranging but gripping, this is a work of a statesman at the height of his powers.

Ignatieff is a liberal internationalist whose life and work speak of transnational institutions, global initiatives, and universal aspirations. One would expect him to be a faithful advocate of human rights and global ethics. He describes how the language of rights arose from Western philosophy but went global when it was adopted by colonial populations to describe their struggle for independence from European sovereignty.

In no time, every minority group took up the right to self-determination, evoking a cascade of civil wars and secessions. International law, the ecological movement, and religious solidarity all embellished the discourse.

Meanwhile, global ethics adds an evenhanded "view from nowhere" that offers to settle questions of immigration quotas and response to climate change. Activists and NGOs have replaced the administrators of empire as the moral entrepreneurs of anticorruption, environmental sustainability, and vigilant regulatory initiatives.

Yet, after his odyssey around some of the most poignant locations in contemporary history, Ignatieff finds global ethics empty and human rights descriptively inadequate. Universals are invariably abstractions. He sees "not the Good, in its

universal, unchanging form, but goodness, in all its astonishingly contextual singularity.” What makes his critique so compelling is that he’s unquestionably committed to liberal freedom. His scrutiny of Bosnia, Myanmar, and South Africa is a profound study in the attempt to unite democratic sovereignty and human rights. On the way he gives eloquent testimony to his convictions:

Liberal freedom . . . is non-redemptive. . . . It has no project of salvation. It . . . protects human beings from themselves, . . . by means of institutions. Limited government, countervailing power, constitutional rights, markets regulated by law . . . enable the ordinary virtues to flourish among free citizens. Liberal freedom [believes] that public truth is found in competitive debate, . . . that the very purpose of politics is to shelter and protect the conditions of free debate, . . . that in the community of free citizens there are no enemies, only adversaries, and that opposition is a precondition for any successful search for collective truth.

All of this makes his exposure of the unseaworthiness of the gospel of human rights and global ethics devastating.

His conclusion lands harpoon after harpoon, all below the waterline. He notes that his global interlocutors take for granted that they have an equal voice; no one accepts any hierarchy of race or class or expertise. Meanwhile, almost everyone accepts that the responsibility of moral choice can no longer be set aside in favor of obedience to authority; it is about affirming the self and its community. But beyond that, what shapes people’s lives? Ignatieff argues that it’s a desire for moral order, “a framework of expectations that allow them to think of their life, no matter how brutal or difficult, as meaningful.” Ordinary people, unlike Kantian professors, do not universalize or systematize. A global ethic is therefore “unimaginable and irrelevant.”

What can be generalized is that people everywhere are “struggling to make sense of convulsive, destabilizing change.” Narratives such as the inevitability of technological progress, the spread of democracy, and the triumph of scientific rationality founder on the rocks of events such as the Fukushima nuclear disaster, while in Los Angeles and New York, the superiority of the United States is no longer a self-evident truth. Everywhere people are struggling to benefit from globalization, yet not lose their jobs, communities, and settled values. In such circumstances,

fantasies of extermination (like that of ISIS) seduce people into removing all with whom they disagree in the attempt to live without enemies.

Ignatieff reaches a counterintuitive conclusion: moral values are not converging. We live in competing local and global worlds, even while we face the same challenges: how much to trust those who rule us, tolerate those who are different, forgive those who have wronged us, and rebuild life when its fruits have been swept away. Since many people are at home with multiculturalism but want to live with “their own,” he bravely asserts, self-segregated living apart may be what makes living together possible. What people want is choice in the matter.

The notorious policy of Aung San Suu Kyi toward her Rohingya Muslim minority gains a surprisingly sympathetic hearing from this perspective, in a passage that highlights what’s at stake in Ignatieff’s “local, contextual, nonideological, antitheoretical” argument. Meanwhile, pragmatic politicians will find that their appeal to the public is more likely to succeed if based on expanding the neighborly “us”—through compassion, pity, and generosity—rather than highlighting the rights and entitlement of the alien “them” (as the Canadian experience with refugee resettlement has shown).

Bubbling away, insufficiently theorized (but doubtless deliberately so), lies Ignatieff’s alternative to the hubristic overreach of global ethics and the practical flaws of human rights: ordinary virtue. Trust, honesty, politeness, forbearance, and respect are the “operating system of any community.” He found tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and resilience (a blend of buoyancy, elasticity, and improvisation) to be life skills acquired through experience rather than through moral judgment or deliberative thought. In a paragraph that is surely a gesture to St. Paul’s hymn to love, he explains, lyrically:

Ordinary virtue does not generalize. It does not forget or ignore difference; does not pay much attention to the human beneath our diversity; is not much interested in ethical consistency; . . . believes, finally, that ethics is not an abstraction but just what you do and how you live, and that displaying the virtues, as best you can, is the point and purpose of a human life.

Ignatieff makes his case, lucidly, vividly, persuasively. He doesn’t note that Alasdair MacIntyre made a very similar case a generation ago. Ignatieff’s dialogue partners

and sources of wisdom are on a different register. But this book has the potential to make as big a wave in the field of human rights and global ethics as *After Virtue* did in the philosophical and theological academy. At a time of much confusion, paralysis, and despair, few hands on the global tiller are as sure as those of Ignatieff.