

**Global ethics and global responsibility**

The idea of global ethics has been around for some time. As you would expect the very idea has been debated hotly. Is global ethics about international ethics, focused in international issues? Is global ethics about finding universal values? Is it about seeking global action on issues that affect every nation, negotiating responsibility? Is global ethics at all different from ethics *per se*? After all ethics explore how we relate to the other and what values we have in common.

As always the best way of testing any of these things is to look at particular issues that trouble us. A good example is the case of Caterpillar's earth-removing equipment (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-uses-caterpillar-equipment-apparent-extrajudicial-killing>). These were sold to the Israeli government; these were used at one point to flatten Palestinian villages thought to be hiding terrorists (involving modifications to protect the driver from hostile responses). This raises the simple question, is the seller of any product responsible for how that product is used. The stock answer is that the sale is made in good faith on the assumption that the product will be used for its intended purpose. The seller cannot be held responsible for the use of the product in a way that is different from its primary purpose, and in a way that negatively affects others: abusing human rights, causing loss of life and so on. So what happens when the customer who has "misused" the product returns to buy more? Does the knowledge that the product is likely to be used in a certain way now affect the responsibility of the seller? We know that it is wrong to abuse human rights, but am I the seller now in some way responsible for this abuse?

There was a parallel situation in the case of the Nestle baby milk powder controversy, with Nestle accused of being responsible for a huge number of baby deaths in developing countries where there was limited pure water. The discussion came to be heard in the 1978 congressional hearing on global formula marketing practices. Senator Ted Kennedy (TK) interrogated a Nestlé representative (N), resulting in the following uncomfortable exchange:

TK: "Would you agree with me that your product should not be used where there is, uh, impure water? Yes or no."

N: "Uh, we keep all the instructions—"

TK: "Just, just answer. What would you—?"

N: "Of course not. . .!"

TK: "Well, as I understand what you say is that where there is impure water it should not be used."

N: "Yes."

TK: "Where the people are so poor that they're not going to realistically be able to continue to purchase it, which is going to mean that they're going to dilute it to a point which is going to endanger the health, then it should not be used."

N: "Yes."



TK: “Well now, then my final question is what do you do, or what do you feel is your corporate responsibility to find out the extent of the use of your product in those circumstances in the developing part of the world? Do you feel that you have any responsibility?”

N: “We can’t have that responsibility sir” (quoted in [Oyugi, 2012](#), pp. 14-15).

At this point the Nestle representative looks very uncomfortable. He is paid to defend the company but knows, feels, that what he said did not sound “right”. Later he withdrew the comment. He was denying any causal connection between the company and the baby deaths, but he knew that this sounded callous; the company does not care. He was caught on the horns of two distinct views of responsibility. The first is about liability – establishing a clear causal connection that makes you directly responsible for the negative consequences. This, [Ricoeur \(2000\)](#) argues, is essentially about blame, carrying with it legal liability and potential compensation. This seeks to limit responsibility, along with the dynamics of denial and dissociation. Some psychologists see in this the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance involving the natural attempt to justify actions which contradict good sense or core values ([Tavris and Aronson, 2015](#)). This defensiveness inevitably leads to blindness about the social and physical environment. With all effort in defence, it becomes hard to see the wider world and how we connect to it.

The second responsibility which Ricoeur focuses on is positive responsibility. This works against attempts to arbitrarily limit responsibility. Each person or group has to work this out in context, without necessarily an explicit contract. Working that out demands an awareness of the limitations of the person or organization, avoiding taking too much responsibility and a capacity to work together with others and share responsibility. The foundation of this is acceptance of broad shared positive responsibility. Hence, [Levinas \(1998\)](#) argues that all ethics begin with responsibility for the other. He suggests that the enlightenment stress on the autonomous self sets up a false boundary. This preoccupation with the self leads to a preoccupation with power, image and defence of the organization. Any sense of responsibility for the other is then always secondary. Sure enough in the Nestle case we see the corporation beginning to defend their freedom to market their product wherever they want. Hand-in-hand with this defensive approach come *ad hominem* arguments, such as the people who are attacking us are Marxists who want to subvert the free market. Logicians in their studies will tell us of course that this is a logical fallacy. It matters not if you are a Marxist, the issue at hand is determining how Nestle should fulfil its responsibility. Nestle precisely avoided that question because it was focused on the narrow question of whether they had the liability for the deaths of countless babies. Quite properly they addressed that issue in the courts, which was found in their favour. But the matter did not end there and Nestle experienced the shock of reality through customer boycotts which demanded that they take positive responsibility along with major players such as the WHO and the UNICEF.

The argument emerging here is that global ethics is less about a defensive stance, defence of human rights or core values and more about developing positive responsibility with key players in society. None of this is to say that we should ditch human rights ([Ruggie, 2014](#)), key principles or the idea of moral and legal liability. These are important, but not the whole story of global ethics or any ethics for that matter. The danger of defensive ethics is a form of “hardening of the oughteries” ([Lake, 2006](#)). The value we are defending becomes the most important thing for us, because we are defending our identity. Moral psychologist Jonathan [Haidt \(2012\)](#) applies this to the liberals and conservatives in

---

the USA. His research suggests that ethical decisions tend to be intuitive rather than rational and that both liberals and conservatives are focused in defending values and identity. Perhaps Private Willis was right, after all, that:

‘every boy and every gal

That’s born into the world alive

Is either a little Liberal

Or else a little Conservative! (Iolanthe Act 2)

If the stress is on defence, it is not surprising that both sides can neither see the contradictions (the “mote” perhaps[1] in their own perceptions) and nor understand the opposing view[2]. At the heart of all this is a capacity for self-deception that we all share.

Global ethics then can involve a search for common principles and values, but even the most elevated principle can be misused. Even love can be abused (Robinson, 2007). This suggests the foundation of global ethics might be a recognition of a shared universal responsibility. Rights and principles can help to put meaning into this idea but only if they help to keep an open mind. In an important new book, Michael Ignatieff (2017) thus argues that moral order in a divided world is not found in code or principle but in the practice of the “ordinary virtues”. In effect, global ethics is developed through taking responsibility wherever we are.

This also demands a recognition of the plural self. Identity is made up of many different relationships meaning that the self can never be unitary or homogenous (Appiah, 2015). As humans beings we are subject to difference and the likelihood of contradiction. This applies at all levels of community or region. Haidt extends this to argue for helping citizens develop sympathetic relationships so that they seek to understand one another instead of simply using reason to defend oneself and oppose the other. In effect, this starts to view global ethics as a form of peace-building (Lederach, 2005). It takes a serious dialogue as an ontological relation and not simply (Bakhtin, 1984) an argument about propositions or values. Haidt argues that this demands time for reflection. Research shows a few moments of critical reflection on a good argument can change a person’s mind. In contrast, most ethical “encounters” are about asserting a position rather than reflecting on it. Importantly, this also means breaking down our “ideological segregation”. Haidt points out that in the two decades up to 2008, the percentage of Americans living in highly partisan counties increased from 27 to 48 per cent. Evidence also suggests that the internet makes this dynamic worse making it easier to find evidence, however unlikely, that supports one’s views. You do not need to reflect, and everyone believes they have the ethical high ground.

But Nestle did need to reflect when they came up against the boycotts. This was the equivalent of Dr Johnson’s attempt to refute Berkley by stubbing his toe on a large stone. This, he argued, is the reality of the physical world; it is not all in the mind. The customer boycotts were the reality of the social world, not the economists’ views of the consumer. This seeks to view the consumer as without ambiguity, intellectual laziness which simply wants to avoid listening. The proper response to such a challenge is dialogue and reflection with the major players about how shared responsibility might be practised. And for all its imperfections Nestle, with others, developed a means of regulating the market in developing countries, practising the “ordinary virtues” of critical reflection, patience, justice and so on [...] which brings us back to Caterpillar. You can only make the excuse of ignorance once. Once you know how the object has been used or have good evidence of how it might be used,

the narrow range of liability is no longer sufficient. Positive responsibility demands that we share responsibility for the matter in hand.

In this first edition of 2018, several of the articles reflect the questions that surround these issues. How do we handle values? It is easy to assume that they come pre-packaged unaffected by our cultural biases. How do we perceive trust, especially inside organizations? Trust might be deemed to be one of Ignatieff's ordinary virtues. But if so, how do you practise it and how do you deal with the relational fall out when members of an organization express lack of trust? How do different stakeholders become effectively involved in dialogue around responsibility? This is examined in different ways by three articles. Again this involves testing what we mean by responsibility. How does the focus on responsibility affect market efficiency and the sustainability of the organization? Last but not least, how do we make these issues come alive in teaching? I would argue that in learning about corruption this demands careful attention to the meaning of the term, and how corruption itself is not simply acts of deceit but also acts of denial.

**Simon Robinson**

*Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK*

## Notes

1. 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the mote (plank) in your own eye?' Matthew 7:3.
2. See the political divide on sexual harassment at work [www.myajc.com/news/while-democrats-call-for-resignations-conservative-women-stand-colleagues-accused-sexual-misconduct/U8XqfrXMWYXljyCydDhaXP/](http://www.myajc.com/news/while-democrats-call-for-resignations-conservative-women-stand-colleagues-accused-sexual-misconduct/U8XqfrXMWYXljyCydDhaXP/)

## References

- Appiah, K.A. (2015), *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Penguin, London.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984), *The Dialogic Imagination: four Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Haidt, J. (2012), *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Penguin, London.
- Ignatieff, M. (2017), *The Ordinary Virtues*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Lake, F. (2006), *Clinical Theology, a Theological and Psychiatric Basis to Clinical Pastoral Care*, Vol. 1, Emeth publications, London.
- Lederach, J.P. (2005), *The Moral Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Levinas, E. (1998), *Entre Nous: The Thinking of the Other*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Oyugi, J. (2012), "Watering their graves: Breast milk substitute and supplements in developing countries", *The Journal of Gender and Water*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 10-19.
- Ricoeur (2000), *The Concept of Responsibility; an Essay in Semantic Analysis*, The Just (trans. D. Pellauer), Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL, pp. 11-36.
- Robinson, S. (2007), *Spirituality, Ethics and Care*, Jessica Kingsley, London.
- Ruggie, J.G. (2014), *Just Business: Multinational Corporations and Human Rights*, WW Norton, New York, NY.
- Tavris, C. and Aronson, E. (2015), *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)*, Pinter and Martin, Berwick-upon-Tweed.