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BOOK REVIEW

Michael Ignatieff (2017). The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World. Harvard University Press

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More than hundred years ago Andrew Carnegie established Church Peace Union aimed at fostering world peace by promoting dialogue among the world's faiths. Later, the Union was transformed into the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. Michael Ignatieff's book *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World* initially was conceived as part of the celebration of the centennial of Carnegie's project. The idea of the book was "to commemorate the illusions about moral progress that gave rise to Carnegie's bequest in 1914, as well as to investigate what moral globalization looks like in the twenty-first century"; and "to take ethics out of the seminar room and study how it shapes people's judgments and actions close to the ground where conflicts start" (p. 3). In June 2013, Ignatieff accompanied by a small research team started a journey of moral discovery that was to take it, over the next three years, to Bosnia and South Africa, Myanmar and Japan, USA and Brazil. Each place forms a separate chapter in the book and illuminates a specific aspect of ordinary virtues, ranging from corruption and public trust to reconciliation after periods of intense conflict. The team was commissioned by the Council to hold global ethical dialogues with experts, academics, jurists, and journalists on the questions: Is globalization drawing people together morally? In spite of all differences, what virtues, principles, and rules of conduct are humans sharing? How does moral reasoning manifest itself in real life?

The methodology of the project was to evaluate through dialogues on moral themes the idea that, as economies, lifestyles, technologies, and attitudes globalize, ethical reasoning also globalizes (p. 5). In other words, sharing the same goods, markets, lifestyles, and life chances, people might share similar patterns of moral reasoning. The belief in human rights, along with humanitarian law, environmentalism, and the religious languages of

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global solidarity, was presupposed to be a possible candidate for a new global ethic, but critical questions remain: How far and how deeply had this ethic spread? Had it really displaced or challenged local moral codes? How did the battle between the local and the universal, the contextual and the global, play out in the moral lives of ordinary people? (p. 5) And how people can create shared moral operating systems from hundreds of different origins, histories, and religions? These were the questions the research team had started with in conversations with people in different settings.

The first chapter summarizes conversations with community organizers, local politicians, police officers, urban theorists, and local passers – by in Queens (New-York) – the place of more different racial, ethnic, and religious groups living together than in any other county in the United States. People there are living side by side, as opposed to living together; and for them, tolerance is not a universal value, just a workaday social practice (p. 15). In the second chapter, the readers found themselves in Los Angeles where Whites and African Americans are now a declining percentage of the population, while Latinos and Asians make up more than a half. Altogether, there are people from 115 foreign countries speaking 224 different languages (p. 52). Therefore, the central ethical problem there is how to generate collaboration among strangers who do not share a common origin, religion, or ethnicity. As Michael Ignatieff notes, "in a diverse city everyone balances primary and secondary affiliations as a matter of course. They may live their most meaningful hours 'inside' their own communities of language, race, or origin, but they also live 'outside' because work leaves them no choice or because they like spending time with people different from themselves" (p. 60).

In the third chapter, the conversations in Rio de Janeiro favelas are analyzed with the aim to examine what rapid economic growth has done to the moral and political relations between enriched and empowered middle classes and poor people left behind. The fourth chapter is about today's Bosnia – the place of afterwar important exercise in "moral globalization where outsiders, trained in the moral disciplines of universalism and the techniques of reconciliation and forgiveness, trying to persuade battered insiders to adopt their moral codes" (p. 93). The fifth chapter brings the readers to the Buddhist monastery in Mandalay (Myanmar) where through the talks about ethnic and religious relations the conclusion was made that for the first time, Burmese society have to ask itself what a democratic country means and who it belongs to – the Buddhist majority or the hundreds of minorities, especially Muslim, who make it their home (p. 117).

The sixth chapter examines the attitudes of people in Japan after Fukushima explosion. For Ignatieff, they seek to do their best in impossible situations, and such a regard for the safety of others is firmly rooted in their "hope in the future of such a community", and "depends on some shared belief in a collective future worth fighting for" (p. 165). Finally, the seventh chapter describes the fragmentation of the initial alliance of actors after the battle against apartheid in South Africa was won. Ignatieff examines what he calls the "fantasy of the rainbow nation", and stresses that transition to a liberal democracy is not a redemption story, but "a tough struggle between elites

determined to use power for their own purposes and a populace struggling to get their hands on at least some of the fruits of democracy" (p. 190).

In each location, Ignatieff finds a common emphasis on what he describes as "ordinary virtues" – the collection of habits and intuitions such as trust, tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation. These are not the result of abstract moral reasoning, but are rather "unreflexive and unthinking". In all locations, as Ignatieff underlines, the individuals they talked to never separated their own private dilemmas from the wider social context of conflict in which they lived: "Generalities about human obligation and moral reasoning [mean] little"; instead, "context was all" (pp. 26–27). While philosophers might think in terms of "the human race, some abstract standard, beyond the veil of ignorance" (p. 208), ordinary people think through moral situations in terms of concrete human relations with their family and friends. It means that instead of dialogues on values themselves, which risked becoming too abstract, the research group decided to focus on the common practical problems of people. The researchers wanted to find out whether people in different settings speak the same ethical language when they confront such issues as corruption and public trust, tolerance in multicultural cities, reconciliation after war and conflict, and resilience in times of uncertainty and danger. Ignatieff insists that "virtue was local", meaning that "we are always in a particular situation, a context, a moment […] and we are always with others, with people whose opinion shapes us and whose views we wish to shape" (p. 209). It is worth mentioning that the title of Ignatieff's book draws on Michel de Montaigne's essay "Of Cruelty" where five hundred years ago he described acts like "greed, lust, envy, and hatred" as "our ordinary vices," and spoke of vice and virtue as often coexisting and competing with one another.

The book shows that in view of the actions of individuals within a local community, the language of human rights is ambiguous. As Ignatieff argues, the human rights revolution has changed what many of us believe about the duty of states; but he doubts it has changed us (p. 216). At the same time, the spread of democracy and of the idea of human rights universalized the notion that citizens have a right to be heard. The research team wanted to understand how global norms like human rights work within everyday moral assumptions. For most of the people they talked to, human rights entered their moral perspective chiefly as an inchoate belief that all human beings, as individuals, are equal: by this, the interlocutors, often very poor people, meant equality of voice. So, Ignatieff writes, "we are in a new moral era in which the struggle for equality has produced a clamor, sometimes violent, for recognition and acknowledgment" (p. 28).

Ignatieff concludes that equality of voice and moral choice as an individual responsibility were the two new expectations observed everywhere. A further conclusion drawn from the conversations is that "the reaction against the forces of globalization is not a passing discontent, but an enduring element in ordinary people's defense of their identities" (p. 204). Thus, the most striking feature of the ordinary virtue perspective is how rarely any of the participants evoked universal principles of any kind – that is, ideas of general obligation to human beings as such – and how frequently they reasoned in terms of the local, the contingent, the here and now, what they owed

those near to them and what they owed themselves. Tolerance as an ordinary virtue is "a discipline of moral individualism, a decision formed by life experience, to suspend prior judgment, to take people as they come, to judge them on their merits, to bat away stereotypes and focus on the distinct reality of the person with whom you are dealing in a moral situation" (p. 212).

As James Traub points out in the *New-York Times,* one of the chief merits of Ignatieff's book is that he discovered in the course of his research that the question he had asked – "Is globalization drawing us together morally?", – was the wrong one. The right question is: "How can we hang on to decency in a world where old patterns, good and bad, have been disrupted?" In addressing that challenge, Ignatieff's book represents a triumph of execution over conception[1].

Ordinary virtues, Ignatieff repeats, do not generalize. They do not ignore difference, and are not interested in ethical consistency; they are anti-theoretical and anti-ideological. In the conflict situation, they are easily exploited for a politics of fear and exclusion. At the same time, they are also the key to healing, reconciliation, and solidarity on both a local and a global scale. The book is thus an analysis of virtues at work in an unjust, dangerous, and uncertain world, a study of how people reproduce virtue and moral order in complex circumstances.

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/books/review/ordinary-virtues-michael-ignatieff.html