Cooperation for the global common good

Universal ethics in the 21st century: Which sensibilities matter?

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Why is our quest for universal ethics still elusive in 2021? Do discussions surrounding universal ethics have to be inevitably freighted with considerations of power? Akin to the compelling sway of gravity, does power make everything less fluid, stodgier and stickier than we are often willing to concede? Even fleetingly, is there a powerless or gravity-free world conceivable? Is it at all possible to envisage for a moment, like Ursula K. Le Guin imaginatively does in "The Left Hand of Darkness", a world without gender prejudice? Or is this a luxury only science fiction writers can envision? Can we extend this metaphorically to imagine a world without class, race and caste prejudice in the twenty-first century? Or is that entirely inconceivable? Can we extend this further to question the hard and unrelenting barriers we have come to erect between nation-states? Do they not appear absurd in the light of existential planetary threats staring us collectively in the face?

The intent of this brief intervention is to invite each of us to mull over these questions afresh. It is to ask uninhibitedly what sensibilities might best service our normative aspirations. It would not be out of place to ask if there is in the first place at least a broad consensus around some minimal normative endeavours. The seemingly obvious can no longer be taken for granted. From a normative perspective, two contenders, which are of particular urgency and yet scarce as internalised political values in this context, are sustainability and international cooperation. In this connection, as a thought experiment, I hazard a guess as to which sensibilities

are likely to matter the most when it comes to safeguarding these values. How may we marshal more widespread agreement in their support? Without erecting too long a laundry list, what I wish to do is to capture some essential sensibilities (five in all) that are worth closely examining if we are to prioritise for meaningful political, social and ecological realisation. These include permeability, empathy, equity, anger and malleability.

An initial sensibility drawing on the work of Rebecca Solnit could be referred to as *permeability*. Solnit, a feminist essayist, in her fascinating book "A Field Guide to Getting Lost" speaks about the many virtues of 'getting lost'. Alluding to a Hebrew tradition of 'Passover' which entails keeping the door ajar for Elijah the prophet, Solnit reads it as a plea to "[l]eave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark" (Solnit 2005: 4). Drawing on a pre-Socratic philosopher, Meno, Solnit recounts how one of her students reminded her of a basic paradox, namely "How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?" (Solnit 2005: 4). As a sensibility, what Solnit is batting for is an openness to "concrete acts of navigating, teaching and surviving" – things we can no longer merely assume (Solnit 2005: 11).

This translates into an openness of minds, the need to relentlessly question orthodoxies, to embrace the discomfiture of stepping out of our echo chambers, to be less deferential to our unexamined assumptions and to value other knowledge systems (of indigenous peoples and assorted marginal constituencies) while restoring our vital connections to nature and other cultures. Most critically is to view ourselves as an integral part of nature and not outside of this frame. No easy task in the twenty-first century but well worth it if we are to get any closer to realising natural sustainability or international cooperation.

Another claimant as far as deeply worthwhile universal sensibilities go is *empathy*. A slew of associated values – acts of kindness and compassion or the quest for justice, for instance, can be rolled up in this offering. George Saunders in a farsighted and enormously well-received convocation address to students at Syracuse University confesses that "[w]hat I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*" (Saunders in Lovell 2013). Exhorting a younger generation to place a premium on kindness without neglecting the regular pursuits of youth or necessarily retreating to the forests for spiritual growth, Saunders suggests that the key lies in this: "If we're going to be kinder, that process has to include taking ourselves seriously – as doers, as accomplishers, as dreamers. We have to do that, to be our best selves" (Lovell 2013).

Saunders hits the nail on the head when he talks about our constant deferral of individual acts of kindness. He observes, "Over the years I've felt:

Kindness sure – but first let me finish this semester, this degree, this book, let me succeed at this job, and afford this house, and raise these kids, and then, finally, when all is accomplished, I'll get started on kindness" (Lovell 2013). Alas, this is often too little, too late. There is a much more satisfying choice to exercise. "Find out what makes you kinder, what opens you up and brings out the most loving, generous and unafraid version of you – and go after those things as nothing else matters" (Lovell 2013). What on the face of it might appear like a pious plea is in reality something which sinks in with the passage of time. Empathy, kindness, compassion is a compact of sensibilities all likely to make a substantial difference to the tone and tenor of politics rebooted in the service of sustainability and cooperation.

Considerations of *equity* are vital if we have to make any real advancement as human collectivities. There is a rich body of literature now documenting the staggering income and wealth inequalities both between and within countries, both in historic and current terms. While I do not intend to burden this brief text with data, it is available at a glance for anybody who is curious. Equity considerations have a life that goes well beyond economic redistribution of resources. It has implications that are both social and political. If people increasingly fall off the system in the absence of a social safety net, societies cease to function as coherent entities. Politically, the fallout of the 2008 recession has been well documented. There is clearly a crisis of political liberalism stemming from the deep rooted structural economic crisis with all its attendant implications.

You could ask why equity considerations are central to both sustainability and cooperation as ideas. They are critical for two reasons. First, if equity is not hitched to considerations of sustainability there will be inevitable comparisons among those with better access to resources vis-à-vis those with poorer access to the same resources – both within and across generations. This is why equitable dialogue is another important pre-requisite if we are to secure durable international cooperation. The basic issues of human dignity tied to equity, and sustainability and international cooperation are essential dimensions to pave the conditions for ensuring a more equitable international order in every sense of the term. Such a worldview needs to acknowledge structural conditions, a case for the redressal of democratic deficits that characterise international institutions and an audit of the degree to which they genuinely represent diverse stakeholder interests. This has implications for the way in which even our domestic politics and policies are organised. Is it a mere spoils system with patron-client arrangements which results in a skewed distribution of any

available economic largesse or is it a more equity-driven, constitutionally guaranteed model of social, political and economic cohabitation?

As a provocation, I suggest another sensibility here that might provide the ballast for social and political action – namely, *anger*. A recent book co-edited by Agnes Callard with Paul Bloom, Judith Butler, Myisha Cherry and Martha Nussbaum has a rich mix of philosophers, social psychologists, political theorists and a legal scholar sparring over the 'value of anger' in public discourse (Callard 2020; Chasman & Cohen 2020: 6). Can anger entail 'righteous incivility' (Olberding 2020)? Why is it important to register one's dissent from prevailing certitudes especially when they prove unequal to the task of achieving our desired normative goals?

Callard concludes that "[w]e can't be good in a bad world" (Callard 2020: 28; Chasman & Cohen 2020: 7). Amy Olberding, making the case for 'righteous incivility', reminds us that "[c]ivil persuasion is a nasty sort of business. It takes patience, care, and work. It entails getting my hands dirty by trying to reason long and hard with others I often cannot like" (Olberding 2020: 157). Anger within bounds then appears as not such a bad thing. It is unacceptable when it tips over and torpedoes any possibility for reasoned discourse. It is harmful when it enters the slippery terrain of identity politics locking us into sticky combat positions without any inkling of possible reconciliation. In any case, it might be worthwhile reckoning, for instance, with generational anger for having left the world poorer because of conscious but deeply flawed choices. The environmental sphere is an excellent illustration of this public sentiment often voiced from around the globe.

A final sensibility worth bating for is *malleability*. What this means is that human transformations are possible. They do not necessarily have to take the form of major upheavals in social, political and economic terms. However, incremental change can chip away at some old blocks and contribute to strengthening rather than weakening the norms of sustainability and cooperation. With regard to the former, we may need to go back to our drawing boards to think about models of community participation and local solutions to local problems even as they are inevitably intertwined with global milieus. With regard to cooperation, we need to ask what might constitute more sensible models of internationalism. Can we, from a political perspective, reassert the value of multilateralism where bilateral or minilateral deals often appear more attractive? Can we harness the power of existing institutions to even partially resolve some of our contemporary collective action dilemmas or should we examine more lock, stock and barrel changes?

None of these questions are easy to answer, and political expediency more often than not tends to shape the trajectory of these commitments when it comes to major states and big corporations. However, our commitments as enlightened global citizens cannot be fickle in these matters. Notwithstanding identifiable constraints, any thinking person today has an obligation to pick up her boot straps and, with a certain degree of normative audacity, set out to clear at least in part the fog that has obscured our real objectives. It is only through incessant striving with an ethical urgency and pragmatic outlook that we can collectively hope to accomplish at least a modicum of global sustainability and worthwhile international cooperation in the twenty-first century. Do we have a choice in the matter? I am afraid not.

References

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