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International Society: Diverse Ethical Perspectives (Book Review)

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MAPEL, DAVID R., and NARDIN, TERRY, eds. *International Society: Diverse Ethical Perspectives*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998. x+263 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

“Anyone who takes in hand a table of cross-national socioeconomic indicators,” writes David Miller, “is likely to feel at once that the present constitution of international society is radically unjust” (p. 164). Articulating a credible perspective from which to address this injustice is the task proposed for David Mapel and Terry Nardin’s contributors. Thirteen chapters are framed by the editors’ introduction and a retrospective conclusion by Mapel alone.

In the main, the results are more satisfying than Nardin and Mapel’s earlier collection, *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge, 1992), if only because the positions are presented in point/counterpoint fashion, with Nardin’s presentation of “rule of law positivism” balanced by Frederick Whelan’s essay “Legal Positivism and International Society,” Robert George’s “Natural Law and International Order” taken on by Richard Friedman’s “Some Thoughts on Natural Law and International Order,” and so on, covering additionally the Kantian, contractarian, and cosmopolitan approaches to international ethics. The essays by David Novak, Max

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Stackhouse, and Sohail Hashmi are billed as “theological commentaries,” but they are solid and independently valuable essays.

Whether they ground law and ethics in God, reason, or human nature, or follow John Charvet in “rejecting moral realism and accepting the view that moral norms and their authority are a human invention” (p. 115), all of the authors recognize the need to balance the pursuit of justice with the independence of the various states and peoples who constitute international society; justice and independence are both important goods, and they are not necessarily commensurable. This incommensurability comes out particularly in matters of religion. For example, given his affinity with the Catholic tradition, George’s remark that “respect for the integrity of legitimate cultures is itself a requirement of natural justice” (p. 67) is bound to raise eyebrows. What makes a culture legitimate or, more importantly, illegitimate may not be so easy to determine.

On the flip side, Charvet’s contractarian theory requires a minimal commitment to liberal values, and Islamic states, he suggests, will experience “a serious problem of adherence. For what their legitimizing principles prescribe domestically as constituting just cooperation is incompatible with the liberal principles that they are required to follow internationally” (p. 127). Brian Berry, sketching “a cosmopolitan perspective,” encounters a similar problem in “the Hindu Varna system” but suggests that such a system need not be accorded any legitimacy, since “anybody could reasonably reject basing an inegalitarian social system on a set of religious beliefs, since these beliefs could themselves reasonably be rejected” (p. 158). What counts as “reasonable rejection” is no more self-evident than it is for “legitimate culture.”

When David Novak writes that “the range of persons who can make moral claims is largely dependent on whether or not they are the kind of people those in power can and want to communicate with” (p. 197), he reflects a worry shared by Stackhouse and Hashmi that the some “generally fictitious situation, such as a ‘state of nature’ or an ‘original position’” (p. 198) will be used to rule religious voices out of order in debates about the shape of international society and subsequently, perhaps, rule them out of order altogether. That such a cavalier attitude toward religion is questionable, at best, is nicely brought out by Miller, who remarks apropos of Barry’s cosmopolitanism that, “without imbibing a large dose of religious skepticism” (p. 178), it is hard to see how the basic tenets of liberalism differ, in terms of reasonable rejectability, from religious ones. As long as fundamental differences remain in matters of ethics, religion, and human well-being, what is reasonable from one perspective will remain contentious from others.

The most important issue in international ethics is not, I think, the status of international law or the various schemes for securing distributive justice but the justification of military intervention, even for humanitarian purposes. The exchange between the Kantians is instructive. Pierre Laberge recognizes that “the UN has no chance of surviving without the principle of nonintervention,” and he attempts to justify that principle on the grounds that “Kant praises linguistic and religious plurality as a tool used by nature to protect us from the advent of a despotic (vs. republican) world State” (pp. 98–99). Fernando Tesón, however, rejects this as “a realist trap” (p. 108) and insists that “in extreme circumstances, force may [be] the only means to defend the liberal alliance against dictators or to rescue their victims” (pp. 111–12). Few may doubt that Pol Pot was a murderous dictator, but when, how, and by whom he should have been stopped is still a matter of debate. Does a New Guinea tribe that considers fellatio between male

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initiates essential constitute a “legitimate culture?” If not, should the practice be put down? Is repelling invasion to secure an uninterrupted flow of oil an instance of just war? Until these and similar questions are dealt with, international ethics will remain a wide open field.

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