A Global Ethic: Reflections on the 21st Century

Plenary Address

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For reasons that I hope will become evident, I will begin and end my presentation—frame it, in other words—with poetry. Both poems are by Elizabeth Sewell. The first is titled "Method":

> The rule, we find,
> Is to be permeable; marbles stain;
> Light filters through packed crystals;
> someone's pain
> Threads our interstices.
> Creatures of all kind
> Are porous, breathe, fuse with their media;
> Closures but seem.
> Given a mind,
> Much more so; tides of the universe
> have play;
> Stars sift across our system once a day;
> Cosmos and chaos all we do.
> Then, Soul, defined
> As other, yet materially fleshed,
> Thy proper form retaining, o be meshed?
> What flood of love, air, fire,
> Weep if thou will for shame and for desire,
> Shall stream thee through.
>
> —Elizabeth Sewell (1964)

There is a profound sense in which, although I will go on talking and trying to elaborate upon my sense of meaning for the assigned topic, I really have little more to add that can improve upon the force of insight embedded in these lines. That said, it is of more than passing interest to wonder why poetry is presumed to be beautiful but decorative, entertaining but insubstantial, inspiring but inconsequential, at the point of serious inquiry into matters global and matters ethical.

A. The four key terms in the title of my presentation are obviously global, ethic, reflections, and the 21st century. In considering their significance and interrelationship, however, our inclination to accept at face value certain assumptions about their meanings creates several interesting problems.

Consider the term "21st century," for example. With still three years to go, the millennium jargon industry is churning out jingoisms at an alarming rate, attempting in not-so-subtle ways to create an amorphous but definite expectation that we are on the verge of experiencing a series of open-ended and qualitatively unique events. Likewise the term global is becoming a linguistic token that conjures linkages that cross geographical, cultural, and temporal spans through technology, economics, travel, and high-minded problem solving.

Reflections is the "sleeper" among these four terms, implying, we imagine, the apparently neutral process of thinking about things—anything, really—a "global ethic," for example. And finally, the real stumbler, ethic, which we are likely to assume we can understand by examining a set of values held by people who, if pressed, could justify these values with good

reasons. Notice incidentally, that the word in the title is "ethic," in the singular, as though we are seeking a single value-base for everyone on the globe—a daunting task. It should be obvious why I bring to my task a spirit of genuine humility, which I hope you will appreciate in the face of so large an assignment.

For reasons I hope to make clear, I wish to call into question some of the common-sense assumptions we are tempted to bring to these four terms; and further, to claim that it is increasingly dangerous not to examine these assumptions, insofar as they prevent us from perceiving and addressing the deeper challenges inherent in fashioning a global ethic for a new century. To state my position as clearly as I can, the present organization of knowledge and experience, especially as embodied in the major institutions of societies, makes extremely difficult—perhaps even precludes—the development of a coherent framework for ethical understanding and action.

B. Why is this so? It is because the dominant view of the moral life can be characterized as a series of definite, overt, self-conscious choices that each individual makes in specific situations. It follows that one's ethical judgments are entirely private and can be supported by reasons that are presumed to be valid across multiple situations. As a moral agent, therefore, I am supposedly free to step back and survey the facts of a situation, make choices, and give a reasonable account of my decisions.

The philosopher Iris Murdoch has described this assumption about the dynamics of ethical choice and has offered an intriguing alternative: It is proposed on the current view that we regard moral differences as differences of choice, given a discussible background of facts. This picture seems plausible if we take as the center of "the moral" the situation of a man making a definite choice (such as whether to join a political party) and defending it by reasons containing reference to facts. It seems less plausible when we attend to the notion of "moral being" as self-reflection or complex attitudes to life, which are continuously displayed and elaborated in overt and inward speech but are not separable temporally into situations. Here moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision. In other words, a moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of Gestalt. We differ not only because we *select different objects* out of the same world but because we *see different worlds* [my emphasis] (Murdoch 1956).

I believe this way of describing moral agency offers a helpful point of departure for talking about a global ethic. What is being suggested is that ethics and moral agency are rooted not in choices but in visions; not in what we elect to do, but in what we see as the real world. Ethics, in other words, is a function of the imagination. Our capacity to act is tied to our ability to imagine; we can do only what we first imagine it is possible to do.

This is not especially surprising, considering the fact that all feats of human intellect, all systems devised to account for ourselves and our world are, at bottom, imaginative constructions—whether they are scientific, artistic, mathematical, religious, or ethical. There are no entirely neutral facts and no situations which can be reduced only to objective measures, for the simple reason that the symbolic concepts of *facts* and *situations* and *measures* are themselves imaginative expressions devised by persons within frameworks whose cogency is upheld precisely to the extent that we have faith in their efficacy. We believe in them, if you will—however unselfconsciously.

I am aware that this is not an unproblematic observation and that in an audience such as this there are undoubtedly logical analysts, philosophical empiricists, and scientific objectivists who would wish to challenge this view. Nevertheless, for the time being I will simply assert that it is true, and also that its being true has significant implications for the possibility of fashioning a global ethic.

C. The same poet, Elizabeth Sewell, once observed that the modern world is "dying of a hardening of the images." This suggests that we are desperately in need of images large enough and compelling enough for us to live inside, and that continuing to force our lives to fit into the narrow constraints of the dominant images of

ourselves and the world is tantamount to embracing our own death throes.

If the root cause of ethical dilemmas is not a matter of how people choose to deal with the facts of the world in contrast with how other people deal with those same facts, but rather that people see, and therefore live inside, different worlds, then our inescapable moral obligation is an imaginative task of refashioning our vision in ways that enable us, even compel us, to see the same world. It requires us to take up the vocation of configuring and realizing more humane images of our lives and our world, and in the process, to have the courage to embrace our solidarity with our neighbors and our Earth.

Rightly perceived, values are not separable components of a larger whole. Rather, they constitute a certain angle of vision on the whole of our experience. Our perception of the whole is already an affirmation of what we value—which is to say, of the imaginative complex in which our lives are already invested. As such, values cannot be excluded from the sharp-edged public policy world of economics, politics, and technology, and relegated to a strictly personal, affective domain of individual preference and choice.

D. It is one thing to re-imagine a single, interrelated moral universe, which I am espousing, it is perhaps more difficult for us actually to reconstitute ourselves, which is to say, to fashion an image of ourselves that in the very shaping empowers us to act as essentially and inextricably earthbound, and to conclude, as a result, that an appropriate ethic for global human experience is likewise grounded in the earth itself. It is of more than passing interest to remember that the self-designating term in English, human, comes from humus, meaning "of the earth." And it is instructive to know that the English word, person, is from per-sona, meaning to "sound through."

The ligaments of the world constitute the sinews of our very being. That we are "of the earth," as an ingrained, inseparable part of the world, is not really a choice. It is our bestowed condition. Our giving voice to that condition is Earth's own way of sounding through its proudest creature. We are, in the strictest possible sense, echo chambers of what, in the modern world, has come to be separately identified as "nature," "the environment," "society," and "the human community." As nature's grand medium for "sounding through," we are, by virtue of who we are, called to give voice to the reality of our shared life and shared world. Our options in this regard—choices, if you will—are not limitless. Indeed, they are not really choices at all. In fact, we are limited by the bodily, worldly condition of our humanity; but that limitation is also the precondition for realizing the best that is in us and available to us.

According to Hannah Arendt (1961), the word culture (as well as the concept) is of Roman origin. It derives from *colere*, meaning to cultivate, to dwell, to take care of, to tend and preserve. Cicero's use of the word for matters of spirit and mind was suggestive of taste and sensitivity to beauty. Thus, says Arendt, we mean by culture "the mode of intercourse of man with the things of the world."

Cicero was also one of the first to use the term *humanitas* to refer to a capacity for humanizing beautiful things in order to create a culture. What does it mean to "humanize" what is beautiful? For the Greeks, the difference between a barbarian and a cultured person was a difference of being able to make judgments and set limits, even to beauty, for the sake of maintaining a uniquely human culture. The barbarian was not a crude desecrator of beautiful things; he was someone who did not know how to set limits. It was the capacity to exercise judgment and set limits that debarbarized the world and created culture. Culture exists only so long as people take care of those things that transform the world into a habitation fit for human presence.

Our primary ethical challenge is to begin to imagine a global culture that takes care of the earth and preserves the things of the world as a distinctly human habitation, and that enables us to intertwine with our own voices the voices that sift across our system once a day.

Cosmos and chaos all we do.
Then, Soul, defined
As other, yet materially fleshed,
Thy proper form retaining, o be meshed?
What flood of love, air, fire,
Weep if thou will for shame and for desire,
Shall stream thee through.

—Elizabeth Sewell (1964)

In my judgment, there are five great issues we will face in the 21st century (maybe there are 8 or 15; no matter—if we can face up to these five, something like a global culture may be imaginable.) I call them "E-word issues." They are: economics, ethnicity, environment, education, and ethics. From among these issues, perhaps the greatest challenge will be to resist the temptation to reduce ethics to ideological precepts that harden into intractable barriers between human beings, and instead, to imagine and then to enact the re-placing of ourselves in a world we long to recognize as a congenial home for the human spirit. Should that happen, the ordinary transactions of speech, laughter, and friendship, as well as planting, bathing, and eating may presage the upsurge of the sacred, and begin to replenish the wellsprings of our spiritual well-being.

The good news is that what is given in and through our bodily existence in the world is sufficient for the realization of human fulfillment—if only once we can see ourselves and the world whole and, seeing it, have the courage to embrace it.

Never again lay ear against a shell:
Already something stirs, or so it seems.
Listen only to stones who cannot tell,
They sleep so fast, their stiff inaudible
dreams,
Whispered through walls of bone into your
skull.

For yesterday a bud began to speak.
(So young? but offshoot of a classic line
Half-infinite to our poor Latin and Greek,
Each plant a slip of immemorial vine,
And even more than we, both young
and old.)

Conservative in what it had to teach,
The mode Socratic and the theme
Scholastic,
Actions and figures as implicit speech,
From which organic Trivium green
and plastic
As its own substance it deduced ourselves.

Showed three relations: first that of survival,
The Dialectic in the thorn and claw,
Bodily argument with every rival
As the inflexible ruling of the law.
Here Darwin stopped-but there are two
to come:

For Rhetoric plays with natural selection,
Hyperbole swims and flies in red and gold;
Ingenious living similes for protection,
Beauty's unnecessary manifold;
And Grammar is the dance of living form.

Was this once known and framed to
education,
High ancient code, we fools have lost
the clues?
Master-vision or mere hallucination,
Organon bedded crackling like a fuse
In the damp innocence of a crinkled bud?

Suppose it opens as we wait before it,
A huge gold circle with a face and eyes,
Would it begin to speak? best to implore it,
"Moon, make no mouth whose monstrous
prophecies
Blow like God's horns as we go down
to dust"?

Or would it simply show, in slow
dilating,
Plato and Aristotle closely curled
Inside a yellow roseleaf, speculating
That language is the nature of the
world,
And all philosophy a flowering thought?

Fierce, honey-throated, formalized,
prolific,
Anticipate in our most human powers,
The poet but a speaking hieroglyphic
In one whole universe of continual fol
lowers,
Shall we run weeping, throw away
our life?

Or gather little children in a ring,
And blossom into oracles and sing
That mind and word is every living
thing?

—Elizabeth Sewell (1971)

References

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