How might we live? Global ethics in a new century

Introduction

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Choice is at the heart of ethics, but our choices are never entirely free. Human choice is fettered by history, by context, by biology, by expected consequences and by imagination. Every choice has a history, and a price. In world politics, the scope for choice seems particularly fettered. Historical and geographical contextualization, and projected price have meant that politics beyond state borders has traditionally been understood as an arena of necessity, not ethics. Choice may never be entirely free, but neither is it totally determined; to argue it is, as a result of biology, the unconscious, predestination or whatever would be to abolish ethics. This is not our position, or that of the contributors. We do however recognize that the fettering of ethical choice begins at birth.

Humans are nationalized or tribalized once we are born almost as quickly as we are genderized. We learn to live in concentric circles of loyalty, sympathy, duty and conceptions of justice; and for the most part, the tighter the circle, the stronger have been the moral codes shaping behaviour. Even so, the idea that there are natural limits to ethics has not gone uncontested. There has been a long tradition—while still privileging the family bond—which has stressed the need to think ethically from the outside inwards, rather than the opposite. Conceiving ethics from what Henry Sidgwick called ‘the point of view of the universe’ (an all-embracing perspective which accords strangers no less consideration than one’s own kind, however defined) has been a two-thousand year tradition. Politically speaking, though, this tradition has been significantly more marginal than those in-group perspectives which have begun at the hearth and have kept duties and obligations within the boundaries of ‘blood and belonging’.

The question How Might We Live? in the context of world politics is therefore not simply an invitation to discuss ethical ideas and moral codes—what constitutes a virtuous character and right and wrong behaviour. It is an invitation to do so in the context of boundaries—between peoples and between polities. What are the limits to the ‘we’ in the question forming the title of this volume? In the eight decades since the academic discipline of International Relations was invented, its students have generally coalesced around a common understanding of the answer. The natural limit to politically relevant ethics has been seen to be a state’s boundary. The operational cry has been ‘my country right or wrong’, even when the country

2 For an account of a particularly virulent contemporary manifestation of this, see Michael Ignatieff, Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism (London: Vintage, 1994).
concerned has been aggressive or oppressive. What has mattered more has been the ‘my’ not the ‘right or wrong’.

This volume examines major questions thrown up by contending traditions about ethics in the global context, at a time when six billion humans look towards the promise and dangers of a new century. How might we live in the face of the dynamics of this first truly global age? In the context of present-day and future global transformations, the contributors below discuss some of the oldest questions about duties and obligations within and beyond humanly constructed boundaries. In so doing, they help us ponder what we consider to be the most profound question in world politics today: who will the twenty-first century be for? This Special Issue is the logical extension of the first two Special Issues of the Review of International Studies. The Eighty Years’ Crisis discussed the development of the academic subject of International Relations from its origins in 1919, while The Interregnum examined the major controversies attempting to explain the dynamics of world politics in the decade following the end of the Cold War. The third now asks how might human societies live. In contrast to the orthodoxies of academic Philosophy and International Relations in much of the twentieth-century, which marginalized or rejected the study of ethics, the contributors to this volume assume and assert the belief that politics and ethics are as inseparable as politics and power.

A point of view emphasizing the unity of politics and ethics would have struck many students and practitioners of International Relations over the years as misconceived. Critics of this view would include students of statecraft who have talked of ‘balancing’ power and morality (how can one balance what cannot be separated?). A recent and high profile illustration of a group of policymakers conceiving power and morality to be distinct were those members of the New Labour Government advocating an ‘ethical foreign policy’; this idea wrongly implied the possibility of ethic-free as opposed to differently-ethical foreign policies. Foreign policy is always an-ethics-in-action; one can no more conceive foreign policy quarantined from ethical considerations and implications than one can conceive foreign policy quarantined from power considerations and implications. A point of view rejecting the unity of politics and ethics is itself a particular ethical perspective. The marginalizing of normative thinking in academic International Relations is not a point of view supported by the contributors in this volume.

The 1980s witnessed a growing sense of intellectual inadequacy within many sections of the discipline; the collective failure to foresee the end of the Cold War seemed to be another exposure of the discipline’s weaknesses and some vindication of the growing concerns—though the critics did not prove themselves to be any more successful at prediction. This historic turning point confirmed the professional impulse to engage in a season of considerable self-criticism: after the Cold War, the cold shower. But the discipline was never as impoverished—or uniquely blinkered—as was asserted by some of those who attacked it. In this regard, it is important to remember that for a long period what one of us has described as the ethic cleansing of academic International Relations was only a reflection of what was happening in academic Philosophy itself. The latter, from the start of the twentieth century, fell


under the sway of one particular school—that of analytical philosophy—which argued that because ethical claims are beyond proof or testability, deriving as they do from emotions or subjective opinions, that they are not therefore appropriate for philosophical enquiry. Analytical philosophy, which included logical positivism, ruled out speculation about the supernatural ontologies and other beliefs that make up moral philosophy. In their striving for objectivity the logical positivists, for example, rejected philosophizing about the meaning of life—which involves questions about right and wrong—and instead advocated that the philosophical investigation of language was as far as philosophers could go, even though some recognized that this meant they could not go very far. In Britain, modern scepticism about moral philosophy appeared well before the invention of academic International Relations, with G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* in 1903; it was then consolidated for a generation with A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*, which appeared in 1936, just at the time the reaction was setting in against what is usually taken to be the initial utopian phase of the new subject of International Relations.

If the continental (mainly Austrian) influence within analytical philosophy at the start of the century in Britain was stronger than has sometimes been credited by British writers—Anglo-Saxon pragmatism has been a more intuitive explanation—there has certainly been no underestimation of continental influence on a later manifestation of moral scepticism in Philosophy, this time in the last third of the century. This later manifestation, post-structuralism, had its mainspring in France, and has been influential in many areas of thought, including academic International Relations. The post-structuralist turn in the history of ideas developed—albeit somewhat ambiguously to some of its ‘leading’ thinkers—into a confrontation with Enlightenment thinking. This included the latter’s concern with ethics based on reason and related ideas of progress and emancipation. The move to deconstruction was in part a move against the established ‘foundations’ of ethics.

The success of this intellectual movement committed to deconstruction seemed to be confirmed when the term ‘post-modernism’ entered the mainstream; and by dextrous self-labelling, the post-modernists seemed to have done to so-called modernists what self-labelled realists had earlier done to utopians in the discipline of International Relations. Labelling is one of the tactical moves in all intellectual struggles. The exponents of post-modernism made an exception to their usual critique of progress by at least implying that the signifier ‘post’ had more than chronological significance; their self-label implied not only that the Enlightenment was dead, but that what had taken its place represented intellectual improvement. This viewpoint, as Martha Nussbaum has gently hinted, has been reinforced in teaching situations by the tendency of its advocates to give post-modernism ‘the last word, as though it had eclipsed Enlightenment thinking’. The debate between post-modernists and other schools of thought within both International Relations and

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6 E.H. Carr’s *Twenty Years’ Crisis* is seen as the key work ending the ‘idealist’—or as Carr called it, the ‘utopian’—phase of the discipline. For an account of the ostensible debate between inter-war idealists and realists, see Peter Wilson, *The Myth of the First Great Debate* in Dunne, Cox and Booth (eds.), *The Eighty Years’ Crisis*.


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Philosophy goes on, though perhaps not as aggressively as a decade ago. Some common ground has been found, with some International Relations scholars engaging with issues relating to language and social construction, while some post-modernists/post-structuralists have shown that their views of the Enlightenment have not always been as extreme as their reputation. A giant among post-modernists, Richard Rorty—albeit in a footnote in his much-cited Oxford Amnesty lecture in 1993—clearly rejected the view that Enlightenment ideas about human freedom were obsolete, and asserted that ‘nobody has come up with a better[project].

One important theme in the post-structuralist critique of orthodox International Relations has been to raise awareness about the relationship between power and knowledge. The influence of Michel Foucault has obviously been central in this. But the relationship between power and ideas had already been an important theme in some realist writings in International Relations for some time. In his classic Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919–1939, Carr had clinically revealed the synergy between international morality and international law and the interests and preferences of the great powers. But earlier than Carr, Gramsci had written about ‘hegemony’ and ‘common sense’ in relation to the values and attitudes that served the powerful.

Much earlier still, at the very birth of Western philosophy, Plato asked us to think, through the words of Thrasymachus, whether ‘the just is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger’.

The relationship between power and ideas is important, and more complex than either realists or post-structuralists usually suggest. Some ideas are backed with more effective power than others; as we said at the start, no choice is entirely free. Our choices are shaped by structures of power. But we also stressed the centrality of choice. The market-places as well as the battle-grounds of ethical contestation have been important sites for shaping the human story. The landscape of all politics, including the world arena, would look markedly different if humans were not what one of the contributors to the volume, Mary Midgley, has called ‘ethical primates’. We are as we are on a global scale, in part, because of the contestation of ethics, as well as the contestation of political power, and the two are not simply and directly related. They are importantly interwoven, but they are not synonymous. Christianity and Islam began as the religions of the utterly weak, not religions of state power;


13 David Forgas (ed.), A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1919–1935 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988). The glossary of entries on ‘common sense’ (p. 421) and ‘hegemony’ (pp. 422–4) give detailed references to Gramsci’s writings on these themes.


and democracy and anti-colonial nationalism began as political ideas shared by a few dissidents, not as the dreams of emperors. Power is sometimes in the idea, rather than the idea being in the interests of the contingently powerful.  

Despite the emphasis so far on the marginalization of ethics in mainstream thinking about international politics, the discipline conventionally originated and was nourished in the normative commitment of the idealists who helped shape its development in the early inter-war years. But soon an increasingly stubborn resistance developed. Important students of world affairs rejected the idea that ethics belonged in the international arena; this was hardly surprising during what Winston Churchill famously called ‘the gathering storm’ of international affairs in the 1930s, and then its cataclysmic aftermath in a World War of unparalleled destruction. The academic discipline gathered serious momentum after 1945, and in historic conditions that confirmed rather than undermined realist certainties about the primacy of power and the dangers of dreamers. During the years in which the Cold War intensified, the doctrine of realism seemed to provide a thoroughly plausible rationale for understanding and countering the Soviet threat. But the historical dynamics were always much more complex than the orthodox account propagated—as were the theoretical implications. Realist accounts imply that there is an independent real world that directly generates our explanation of events; we observe, as social scientists, and describe. But this viewpoint does not recognize the extent to which ideas constitute the fabric of the social world. In the Cold War realism provided both a language and a set of policy prescriptions for operating in a world of its own making; its exponents did not see the way in which the theory they claimed was explaining state behaviour was actually helping to constitute that very behaviour. It was self-fulfilling. The almost half-century of bipolarity after 1945, characterized by a sense of constant danger, with the balance of power resting on the threat of Mutual Assured Destruction, was not explained by realism; it was the product of a particularly totalizing form of traditional realist thinking about international politics.

Accounts of how realism came to dominate the study of International Relations have been told many times. It is important to stress here the extent to which a particular form of scientific realism developed in the United States after 1945. The research infrastructure of the major foundations was directed to funding strategic studies and the scientific study of foreign policy. Normative concerns were largely put on hold. That said, there were some notable exceptions. It is important not to exaggerate the extent to which the discipline ignored ethical issues. Peace research was very explicitly value-driven even when it relied on positivist methods. As in the

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19 This argument is made by Miles Kahler, ‘Inventing International Relations Theory after 1945’, in Michael Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (eds.), New Thinking in International Relations Theory (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).
inter-war years international law was the point of departure for many normative theorists. This included some notable participants in the World Order Models Project, which was established as an explicitly value-oriented scholarly approach to world politics.\textsuperscript{21} Some interest in human rights was evident throughout the era of realist hegemony,\textsuperscript{22} and there were analyses of the moral practices of statecraft, particularly in relation to the threat and use of nuclear weapons and the ancient doctrine of Just War. In addition, in Britain a group of scholars set themselves the task of attempting to elucidate the rules, institutions and obligations that distinguished modern international society from earlier states-systems; this was a task that had important ethical as well as historical dimensions.\textsuperscript{23} Although the realist domination of the subject was considerable—with its views about the autonomy of the domestic and international realms, and its associated assumptions about domestic politics being an arena of choice while international politics is one of necessity—these examples show that normative traditions never died out in the discipline, even though the agenda was overwhelmingly set by the concerns of the realists. An important and positive turning point in this history of the separation of the ethical and the international came with the publication of Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* in 1977.\textsuperscript{24} In this volume a distinguished political philosopher turned his attention to the subject matter that had given birth to the academic discipline of International Relations.

Realism and neo-realism continue to hold their sway in important centres where the discipline is professed, especially in the United States. Even so, there are many departments and institutes where academic International Relations is studied, and even some foreign ministries where it is practised, in which it is recognized that we have to understand ethics in world politics and not ethics and world politics. Ethics are not separate. They cannot be mixed in and stirred; every foreign policy is an ethical one.

The scholarly examination of questions concerning the principles that guide and ought to guide the conduct of world affairs at all levels have become much more respectable in International Relations. To an important degree, the subject has come home to its normative beginnings, though with much greater sophistication than was the case in the 1920s. Important contributions to this development through the 1990s were Chris Brown’s *International Theory: New Normative Approaches* and Andrew Linklater’s *The Transformation of Political Community*.\textsuperscript{25} This momentum helped contribute to a livelier state of thinking about ethics in world politics at the cusp of the new century; however, like realism’s rise a half-century earlier, this development has been importantly contextual. The ending of the Cold War seemed

to open up more space for normative thinking, while the new century focused thinking on the convergence of global problems. This volume attempts to make a small contribution to this body of literature.

In the choice of areas to explore, the editors necessarily had to be selective. Several key areas had to be omitted, for reasons of space or circumstance. The aim was to open up issues rather than attempt to provide policy prescriptions, though the latter is of interest to all students of International Relations, and for the most part why we are interested in theory and ethics: not for their own sake, but for what they can contribute to how people live. If policy prescriptions are not an outcome of this volume, there are some common themes running through the contributions. We do not wish to impose any artificial uniformity on the essays, but would point to several arguments that figure in the contributions to a greater or lesser degree. These are: the value of thinking holistically, though the decks are usually stacked against such an approach; a rejection of determinism in human society, as opposed to an emphasis on human choice, construction, and the opening up of possibility; the inevitability of moral reasoning for the ‘ethical primate’; the mutuality of politics and ethics; the tension between moral universalism and political particularism, marked by an ancient debate over the limits of justice in terms of political boundaries and a more recent debate over the referents for justice; the sense that the decades ahead will be particularly significant in human history because of changing material realities—globalization and all its works; the importance of practical reasoning in the context of ethical sophistication; and the false opposition of wholes and parts in world politics—cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, universalism and particularism—and the need to better negotiate the theoretical and practical common ground.

One idea suggested by several contributors later is the view that cosmopolitan writing over time has become more sophisticated. Defenders of such thinking have sometimes had their own work labelled as ‘Kantian’, which for some critics implies the embracing of an out-of-date package of ‘Enlightenment’ outlooks (with all this implies for their views about international politics, including an untenable universalism). It is instructive however, to compare the stereotyping of cosmopolitan thinking with the nuance in the actual arguments made by those making the case for thinking universally. Note, for example: Mary Midgley’s criticism of the exclusivist humanism and reductive scientific thinking identified with the Enlightenment; the criticism by both Philip Allott and Kimberley Hutchings of the way universalist thinking about human rights can hide particularist interests; Onora O’Neill’s clear understanding of the strengths of communitarian ethics; and Michael Doyle’s acceptance of the limitations on Kantian thinking about international politics. In the ‘cosmopolitan’ arguments in this volume there is no agreement about the institutions to deliver it, no facile optimism about the prospects for humanity, and no other-worldliness about the real world of politics.

Taking the point of view of the universe—Henry Sidgwick’s phrase mentioned earlier—necessarily involves ethical perspectives that are truly all-embracing, including duties to the non-sentient world, as well as to sentient beings, and this is the approach endorsed in the first essay, by Mary Midgley. It is an approach she emphasizes as being anything but other-worldly: it is, she argues, eminently practical and urgent. Hence, her essay explores ethical questions on the broadest stage of all. The argument is that our duties should not be confined within human or even animal
boundaries, but that the condition of global affairs is such that we should think more seriously—indeed with urgency—about duties to the non-animal world as well.

Despite talk about ‘the environment’ as a problem in international relations since the 1970s, it is still not treated sufficiently seriously in Midgley’s opinion. It is generally seen as an issue at the level of foreign policy rather than being the comprehensive global problem the essay seeks to emphasize. She sees serious thought from this perspective as having been the almost exclusive preserve of global civil society. At the level of states exceptions are rare, and have mostly occurred in the governments of small nations.

The focus of Midgley’s essay is the idea of Gaia, and her belief that this is not some New Age fantasy, but a ‘really useful idea’. She believes that Gaia—the conception of ‘life on earth being a self-sustaining natural system’—is a ‘cure’ for the problems created by current world-views. Current ways of thinking, she argues, trap us in seventeenth-century images of social life, which she sums up as ‘crude and arid’, in both their Christian and secular forms; such images have generally been exclusively tailored to cater for human aspirations, and this means that the thought that we might have a duty to something so clearly non-human as the whole natural system of the earth is a difficult one to comprehend. Nevertheless, such would be a more realistic view of the earth, and she believes that this can give us a more realistic view of ourselves.

After explaining Gaian thinking today, Midgley argues that the imaginative vision behind it is very old and is recognizable in many cultures. However, the holistic perspective it represents has been abused by atomistic and reductive explanations in much modern science. She does not underestimate the difficulty of changing our minds, but says the world is simply too rich and complex for reductive strait-jacketing. The latter has been powerful in science and elsewhere, but she sees the growing environmental crisis as a critical factor helping to bring about the needed shift in thinking. She does not offer political solutions in this essay, but rather emphasizes that there is a need for change, and that change is possible. This entails moving from reductivism to holism, from the curiosity of the researcher (though this must be kept) to the imagination of the artist, and from the dualistic notion of ourselves as detached observers separate from the physical world to seeing ourselves as an integral part of it, and it of us. Humans have been urged to wage a war against nature over the centuries, and so we are unable to think of nature as vulnerable, capable of injury and sickness. But the living processes that have kept the natural system working have now been seriously disturbed.

The central message of Midgley’s essay is that we—the global we—desperately need to see the problem we face as a whole, and she argues that James Lovelock’s metaphor of ‘Gaia’ is an important way forward. While noting some of the problems in the idea—not least the connotations of the very word ‘Gaia’ itself—Midgley looks at the positive aspects of conceiving the earth as functioning as an organic whole. She notes the growing scientific acceptability of this outlook, and relates it to a tradition of great scientists who have seen no incompatibility between their scientific research, religious talk, and reverence for the vastness of the issues with which they were grappling.\[26\]

\[26\] The belief that categories such as wonder and awe are the only possible responses to the natural world in which we find ourselves has long been a theme of Mary Midgley’s: see her *Wisdom, Information and Wonder: What is Knowledge For?* (London: Routledge, 1989).
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Scientific thinking has not been the only factor inhibiting proper attitudes towards the earth. Midgley identifies others. One has been the humanistic creed which has claimed that only people have value, with the non-human world not mattering except for its relevance for the human. The thought that we might owe a direct duty to the biosphere is therefore seen as puzzling. Another inhibition has been the strength of social contract thinking, which conceptually rules out dealings with anything non-human. So, if duties are conceived as essentially contractual, how can we possibly have duties to the rain forest or Antarctica? Not only is this tradition injurious in terms of dealing with the environmental crisis; according to Midgley, the contract model is notoriously inadequate even within human society.

On a more positive note, she believes that more people—including some scientists—are coming to realize that the human drama is now taking place on the widest stage. She notes: ‘The Darwinian perspective on evolution places us firmly in a wider kinship than Descartes or Hobbes ever dreamed of. We know that we belong on this earth.’ There is a great deal of ‘we’ in the essay, but Midgely recognizes that in global terms it does not (yet?) represent most people. Nevertheless, she argues that direct concern about our destruction of nature is a natural, spontaneous feeling and one that we no longer have any good reason to suppress. This sense of shock and outrage is the energy source which makes change possible, but it has not been tapped yet. Only when the threat of a territorial emergency is accepted will there be little doubt about the duty it imposes upon us, and hence will be influential in policy-making. In the meantime, Midgley stresses that selfishness is a surprisingly inefficient guide to policy, and as long as this is dominant, economics will remain a more important science than ecology. In advocating the urgency of transcending the narrow ethos of contract ethics in order to grasp the potentialities of Gaia, Midgley sees the earlier work of John Rawls as having been the definitive statement of contract ethics; but at the same time she believes that it marked the end of the era when such an approach could pass as adequate. This view links directly to an important theme in the following essay, by Onora O’Neill, which discusses one aspect of the work of John Rawls, one of the most prominent political theorists of the past thirty years and one who has extended his earlier theorizing into the international. Aspects of his work are discussed by O’Neill in relation to Kant, the one philosopher from whom nobody can hide when it comes to thinking about ethics in a global context.

The ancient questions O’Neill examines in relation to the work of Rawls and Kant are those relating to the scope of justice. Since earliest times the politically dominating view has held that the context of justice must have boundaries; in parallel with this view has been an alternative perspective arguing that justice by its nature should be cosmopolitan, owed to other humans regardless of contingencies such as location, race or culture. O’Neill considers that framing the ethical debate in terms of cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism is more complex than usually assumed. She argues, for example, that a commitment to cosmopolitan principles does not entail—though it may not rule out—commitment to cosmopolitan political institutions. Accordingly, world government may not necessarily be the most valid institutional expression of universal ethical ideals. In fact, she argues, cosmopolitan justice may be hindered by cosmopolitan institutions, as they risk concentrating global power, with all the problems that raises. Cosmopolitan ideals might well be better served by a separation of powers. Alternatively, bounded institutions may
institutionalize justice in ways that exclude some from its benefits and on no better grounds than that some people live on the wrong side of a historically constructed political boundary.

In terms of what she calls ‘justice beyond borders’, O’Neill begins her comparison by arguing that Kant and Rawls are alert to the claims of both bounded institutions and universal principles. Neither supports the setting up of a world state, but each thinks justice requires more than can be delivered by the internal institutions of states. She offers a strong set of arguments in favour of communitarian thought about justice, but concludes that the ‘everyday assumptions’ of communitarianism actually undermine its plausibility. Inverting chronology, she first examines the work of Rawls rather than Kant, to see whether he has the answer to the problem of international justice.

In his recent writing, Rawls has explicitly rejected the underlying assumption of the communitarian project. The basis of his argument is that pluralism is the natural outcome of human reason under enduring free institutions. Within each bounded society reasonable persons will not come to complete agreement about ethical matters; they will have different ‘conceptions of the good’. As reasonable persons, they may be expected to accept a form of reciprocity. Reasonable persons, committed to a conception of public reason, will attempt to develop workable institutions and justice, despite their irresolvable ethical differences. The key, therefore, is that Rawls’s conception of public reason does not assume the shared culture that communitarian reasoning presupposes; it does however presuppose shared political arrangements, including boundaries and (for just societies) liberal democracy and citizenship. The important question O’Neill poses is whether these are state boundaries. The answer offered in Law of Peoples by Rawls is that boundaries are important, and prior to justice, but that these boundaries are neither state boundaries nor those set by cultural traditions; what matters for him are liberal peoples. This, for O’Neill, is where his approach becomes problematic for she argues that Rawls’s conception of a people, on whom he builds his account of justice beyond borders, is in fact remarkably state-like. She believes that there is little to distinguish liberal peoples from liberal states; and since Rawls holds that peoples can be reasonable whereas states are wedded to rational self-interest, she draws the conclusion that there is a fundamental tension challenging the whole coherence of his argument. She believes that Rawls is anchoring his account of justice in agents who are not well exemplified in the real world, but if they were so exemplified, they would need the (realist state-like) capacities from which he seeks to detach his agents.

Turning to Kant and his account of public reason as freedom without lawlessness, O’Neill discusses his favourite image, that of scholarly communication with the world at large. She expresses her worries about the applicability of this image, and wonders whether a global communication regime could live up to the Kantian ideal of public reason any better than actual communication among scholars. The requirements of reasoned communication themselves need clarifying, and Kant offers some ideas, such as it having to be communicable. Kant of course was addressing his attack against distinct targets in his own time, and O’Neill suggests that Kant’s targets today might include post-modernists, new-agers and deconstructionists. The unstructured liberation of thought, Kant believed, would be a disaster and an illusion.