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Michael Ignatieff
THE ORDINARY VIRTUES
Moral order in a divided world
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This book has deep roots. As a child, Michael Ignatieff lived for two years in Yugoslavia. He had no idea who was a Serb, a Bosnian, or a Croat; it didn't come up. In 1991, when Serbia invaded Croatia, he went back as a journalist, spending time on the front lines of a genocidal war. How could friends and neighbours turn against each other? Had the lessons of the Holocaust, partly enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, not been learned?

In 2014, Ignatieff raised this question on a larger scale. As part of the Centennial Project of the Carnegie Council for Ethics, he would travel to six countries in four continents over three years, tracing the fate of human rights as a global ethics, a source of unity and moral convergence in a post-imperial world. The result is a selective moral progress report, an "intimate sociology and anthropology of ethics" that is engaging, articulate, and richly descriptive.

Ignatieff's deft histories, vivid sketches and fascinating interviews are the soul of this important book. They take us from Los Angeles to Rio de Janeiro, to Bosnia, Myanmar, South Africa and Japan; and they inform his answer to its guiding question. For Ignatieff, the ideology of human rights has fallen short. What sustains the fragile flourishing of global cities and diverse communities is not faith in human rights but the "ordinary virtues" of tolerance, forgiveness, resilience and trust, made possible by adequate maintenance of the rule of law. The ordinary virtues are an open-source operating system, a moral vernacular by which members of different ethnic and religious groups are able to live, if not together, then side by side.

The closest we get to a success story is Jackson Heights, in Queens, New York. With more racial, ethnic and religious groups than any other county in the United States, it is held together by "a code of tacit mutual acceptance". However fragile, it "represents an especially modern kind of hope: that we can master globalization itself by showing that peoples from every corner of the earth, without coercion or force, can evolve a moral order that coheres, endures, and protects the ordinary virtues". (The fragility is real. When he composed this book, Ignatieff could write that in the US, "legislated discrimination against immigrants is a thing of the past", a sentence that might give him pause today.)

If the ordinary virtues are the operating system of the functioning global city, what makes them ordinary and how do they operate? Ignatieff contrasts the ordinary virtues with the "heroic and exceptional"; he contrasts their unreflective operation with more theoretical manifestations of moral thought; and he contrasts their parochial tendency to favour friends and family over strangers with the universalism of human rights. Although he presents them as a package deal, however, these features of ordinary virtue come apart, and they do so in ways that matter.

Ordinary virtue is not heroic or exceptional. Yet describing the laborious, painstaking work of teams in Bosnia digging up shallow graves, testing DNA, and reburial of the lost dead, Ignatieff writes that "this is what ordinary virtue does in the face of atrocity" and that he "cannot grasp what quiet dispassion and disciplining of rage, despair, and futility is required to keep at the recovery and burial of remains day after day, year after year". Extraordinary virtue can be untheoretical, too.

Ordinary virtue is not systematic, unlike the abstract framework of human rights: "ordinary people do not generalize or systematize their thinking. A global ethics, applicable to all mankind, is essentially unimaginable and irrelevant". That is why the project of human rights was bound to fall short as a basis for moral convergence. Its principles are too arid and impersonal to form the fabric of everyday life.

Ignatieff's picture of ordinary moral thinking is plausible enough. It is a picture of implicit, spontaneous responsiveness that is shared by philosophers from David Hume to Iris Murdoch and Bernard Williams. But its application to human rights is curious. After all, the distinctive discourse of human rights emerging from the UN Declaration in 1948 was overtly political: a doctrine of the rights of individuals against the state, not a model for interpersonal morality. Who would expect it to replace, or encourage, the ordinary virtues?

At times, Ignatieff seems to conflate the novel concept of human rights as political claims not limited by the laws of any state with the older idea of natural rights, or the "rights of man", our rights against one another as human beings. "For most of the people we talked to on our long global journey, human rights entered their moral perspective chiefly as an inchoate belief that all human beings, as individuals, are equal." As Ignatieff argues, however, our equal rights are too schematic to constitute a moral code: they "define the outer limit of moral permissibility, not the detailed inner core which decides the mundane choices that most people have to make".

So far, it might seem that the ordinary virtues fill the gaps in an explicit but abstract commitment to natural and human rights. In the most challenging parts of his book, Ignatieff suggests that this conclusion is too sanguine. There is an unreconciled tension between the universalism of natural and human rights and the perspective of ordinary virtue, in which "the us-versus-them distinction [is] the first consideration, the starting point of moral decision making". Ordinary virtue is not universalist but parochial, choosing us over them.

This makes sense as a description of partiality towards friends and family, or the desire to associate with one's ethnic or religious group. But if it is to represent a conflict between ordinary virtues and universal rights, it must involve some tendency to deny or violate the rights of strangers. That tendency is witnessed by the atrocities in Bosnia and Myanmar and South Africa that Ignatieff documents. But I am not convinced that an indifference to "the frail, vulnerable, universal human being" is inherent in the ordinary virtues he describes, or that they would deserve to be called "virtues" if it is. When Ignatieff makes this case, he emphasizes that ordinary people rarely use the language of human rights or moral equality, which may be true. But a disdain for theoretic-

cal language is not a disdain for the values it reflects. He contrasts belief in the "universal equality in all human beings" with ordinary virtue's insistence that there is "no general obligation to tolerate anyone. Its motto is 'take people one at a time'". But the contrast is opaque. What would an untheoretical expression of faith in human equality look like if not a willingness to take people one at a time? When his Bosnian translator refuses to generalize about Serbs, Ignatieff writes: "This is the deep logic of ordinary virtue, the tolerance that comes from taking people as they come". At the limit, there is no difference between treating others as unique individuals and believing that all human beings are, morally speaking, just the same.

The more profound conflict, as Ignatieff sees, is between equal rights and forms of democratic self-determination that permit the tyranny of ethnic or religious majorities. Ignatieff calls the right to self-determination the "first human right", invoked by colonized peoples. In fact, it is absent from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is about the claims of individuals; the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples dates from 1960. These declarations clash in the human rights abuses of decolonized or newly self-determining nations. At the same time, the ideology of human rights has made more impact on political equality, what Ignatieff calls "equal voice", than economic justice. The result is that economic and political conditions are apt for a resurgence of nationalism in its more destructive forms.

Ignatieff is right to press the limitations of human rights discourse, but ordinary virtue is limited, too. Its remit is inherently conservative, resilience not transformation, and its stability depends on a decent expectation that police and authorities will not be too corrupt. The tone of Ignatieff's book is not despairing but humane. He wants us to appreciate the achievements of cities like New York, not take them for granted. But if his intimate anthropology is right, our prospects are not good. Our situation is fragile on precisely the dimensions that make us vulnerable to the coming catastrophes of climate change. We see this already in Syria, where the uprising, civil war and refugee crisis followed the worst drought in 900 years. We will need more than ordinary virtue to see us through the next century without disaster. Ordinary virtues may ensure the bare survival of humanity. But any hope of flourishing will rest on extraordinary virtues, or on theoretical innovations like human rights, visions fierce and fluent enough to motivate radical change.