Review - Ethics and Global Security

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Ethics and Global Security: A Cosmopolitan Approach
By Anthony Burke, Katrina Lee-Koo, Matt McDonald
Routledge, 2014

Anthony Burke, Katrina Lee-Koo and Matt McDonald are appalled – and rightly so. Their co-authored book,*Ethics and Global Security*, begins with a litany of security epidemics that characterized the twentieth century. And the first decade of the twenty-first, they add, has 'not started out well' (1). In a world characterized by profound global insecurity, they contend, ethics matters. To this end, Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald put forward a strong normative argument for a cosmopolitan approach which sees global security as a 'universal ultimate good' (9), and which has as its overarching end to secure all human beings and the ecosystems that they affect and depend on for survival (15).

Burke and his co-authors are emphatic about their cosmopolitanism. Taking a global and universalistic approach to security is, they argue, a 'strategic necessity'; without serious efforts to secure all, none can ever be secure (15). Thus, they articulate three principles that, together, serve as a basis for their ethics. While the first two principles set out the universal scope of moral responsibility in space and time, the latter is the substantive moral principle which guides the first two. Principle 3 articulates what the authors call the 'Global Categorical Imperative of Security' *(19)*:

All states and security actors bear a responsibility to act as if both the principles and consequences of their action or policy will become global, across space and through time, and to ensure that their actions will have positive consequences that can be borne by the world as a whole.

Even those with only the slimmest knowledge of moral philosophy will recognize this as a version of Kant's categorical imperative, which demands that all moral actors act only in accordance with those principles which could be 'willed' to be universal laws. But despite the explicit reliance on this principle, the authors seek to integrate a wide range of ethical theories into their thinking. They describe their approach as a hybrid of de-ontological, relational and consequentalist ethics that also looks to 'feminist, critical and postmodern models' and their moral discourse of 'joint mutual respect and care' (11). Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald also argue for sustained engagement with the "*politics* of security" while carving out a space for the voicing of a progressive alternative(21).

After setting up this normative framework, the authors proceed to think about what it might mean in a series of global security contexts – force, environment, terrorism and humanitarianism. Each of these chapters is rich in empirical detail, and sets out clearly the ways in which their cosmopolitan principles would inform and shape our collective moral responses.

No doubt the strongest criticism of this book's approach will be its so-called 'utopian' nature. Realists of all varieties will have little truck with pronouncements that '(s)tates must shift from being strategic competitors to having a shared responsibility to create a global peace and security system in which violent conflict is less common and less possible' (97). To their credit, the authors confront these potential charges head on, recognizing that there are those who will claim that their cosmopolitan approach will not be able to find 'sufficient ideological or institutional support in a world of states' (177). However, they refuse to be defeated by this objection, referring with optimism to the ways in which

the language of global moral obligation is finding its way into foreign policy statements and national security strategies, and to the possibilities for the development of new forms of institutional arrangements such as new global institutions or 'even a world government' (177). Furthermore, the authors make clear that they do not claim to have all of the answers to the difficult questions of developing and institutionalizing a cosmopolitan approach to global security (178), and that their approach should not be seen as the 'final word on security and ethics' (24).

Even as we assume a responsibility to advance a distinctive global security ethics that is better – that will lead to a more just and stable world – we do so in a global political context where moral pluralism is a fact. Debate among competing ethical perspectives is necessary and important (6).

Ethics and Global Security is a thoughtful, honest and timely book. It offers refreshingly optimistic thinking on security at a time when critical security studies seem unable to move beyond the impasse of securitization and desecuritization. And while some will criticize this optimism, and the 'utopian' nature of the authors' thinking in a decidedly 'realist' world, my main concern is not with this, but with the philosophical and political implications of their Kantian ethics.

It is in the ethics of Kant that we find the strongest and most widely-invoked statement of moral absolutism in Western philosophy. So influential is his understanding of ethics that it is the basis for the entire tradition of Anglo-American moral and political philosophy. When we follow Kant, we are getting on board with a tradition that sees ethics as a realm that is separate from the 'empirical' world of politics, and which is necessarily historically-contingent and context-dependent. The point of ethics on this view is to 'rein in' politics; this is done through the application of absolute principles of right action that we 'know' are right because they meet the test of universalizability. The implication, as Raymond Geuss points out, is that the existence of some final absolutist framework is necessary for there to be any form of valid knowledge or practical orientation in life at all (Geuss 2015: 13).

By relying on Kant in the formulation of their 'ideal' principles of cosmopolitan security ethics, Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald are entering philosophical territory which they may not actually want to enter, and which actually contradicts many of the claims they make about their approach. While there are many problems with Kant's ethics, among the most worrying are the denial of the importance of history and context in the generation of social-moral systems, the way in which the particular mode of reasoning of the moral judge is obscured by the claim of a transcendent view from nowhere, and the manner in which power is effaced from the realm of ethics. I am pretty sure that this is not the view of ethics (or politics) that Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald wish to promote; indeed, in their chapter on humanitarianism, they argue decisively that humanitarian action is 'always political' (155). However, by relying so heavily on Kant and 'ideal' cosmopolitan principles, they may not be able to escape from the strong implications of his theory.

As I read this compelling, intelligent book, however, I know these authors are cognizant of the dangers of any kind of 'final word' ethical framework, and of the importance of context and relationality in thinking about ethics. *Ethics and Global Security* reminds us that we cannot 'proceed as if the worlds of security and ethics are separate ones', and that we need to be clear about the ethical assumptions and implications of particular security conceptions and practices' (173). In so doing, it provides a timely reminder to the world of International Relations and Security Studies that ethics is not an "optional extra" (173); for this reason alone it should be required reading for anyone interested in, and concerned about, our common future.

References

Geuss, Raymond (2015) 'Realism and the Relativity of Judgement', *International Relations*, 29(1): 3-22.

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