

The New Global Ethic

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The nation-state is in many ways becoming an antique, because the conditions of humanity have changed. Before, when you had 7 billion people living in 193 separate countries, it was like living on 193 separate boats. Hence, you only needed captains and crews to manage each boat as well as rules to make sure that the boats didn't collide with each other.

But now the 7 billion people no longer live in 193 separate boats. Instead they live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat. The problem with this global boat is that you have captains and crews managing each cabin. But you have no captain or crew managing the global boat as a whole. That's obviously a problem. In addition, if you live on the same boat, you clearly want to create a code of conduct among everyone to ensure that no one cabin's occupants are allowed to sink the boat, because if they do so, everybody else is going to sink too.

In this new situation, you cannot allow countries to say, "I'm doing it only for my national interest." Excuse me. You may be doing it for your national interest, you may be taking care of your cabin, but if you are going to damage the boat, the rest of the world has a right to protest. Hence, today we've got to balance national interests against global interests. I think that's the direction in which global ethics are going to go.

The good thing about ethical principles is that they are a few thousand years old and they are very similar in most cultures. Look at the oldest one: "Do unto others as thou wouldst have others do unto you." To apply that to my metaphor of the boat, you should take care of your cabin in the same way that you would like your neighbor to take care of his cabin. Surely, you don't want your neighbor to wash his cabin and spill all the dirty water out into the corridor and into your cabin. You want your neighbor to be responsible and be aware of the impact of his actions on your cabin.

That's what the new global ethic is going to be all about. When you live in a small, dense, interconnected world, whether you like it or not, whatever you do has an impact on other countries. So when America comes out with QE1, QE2, QE3 and pumps a lot of money into the global system, there will be global inflation. Everybody will be hurt. So you've got to think very hard: "Is that the right thing to do for everyone else in the world?" and not just say, "Hey, I've just got to do this for my national interest."

Every country has got to begin thinking in this way. For example, America is very worried about greenhouse gas emissions from China. They should be worried because the Chinese are going to buy cars in hundreds of thousands. Now, if you want the Chinese to be more responsible about acquiring cars, then America should say, "Okay, I am the richest country, I will take the lead and I will increase the price of gasoline by one dollar a gallon to reduce gasoline consumption, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and be a model for China."

That's what you need in the world. Americans cannot preach to the Chinese and ask them to cut down their greenhouse gas emissions if Americans themselves are not prepared to take the lead in doing so.

There are many ethical challenges that we face. But clearly, the number one ethical priority we should make today is to get everyone to be aware that we live in a small global community. When you live in a small global community, we should be aware of the impact of our actions on the rest of the people living in the same global community.

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