

Editor's Note: People, Politics, and Principles

In their forthcoming book *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), a group of scholars led by Terry Nardin and David Mapel argue that “traditions” are a useful and inescapable organizing principle for the study of ethics and international affairs. “When we judge,” Nardin writes, “we do it within a tradition of ethical judgment.” That is, we enter into a dialogue with an “authoritative presence of a continually transmitted past.” This issue of *Ethics & International Affairs* proceeds from this premise. Leaving the comprehensive taxonomy of traditions to the forthcoming textbook, this edition offers a sample of the “traditions” approach as it applies to current events.

Although our lead section forms a discrete unit by virtue of its explicit treatment of “tradition” as a theme, all of the pieces included in this volume refer in some way to the durability and continuing relevance of age-old traditions and sources of morality. Even the most casual observer must note that today the language of politics and decision making is saturated with references to ethics and moral traditions. From the moral renewal implied in the changes in Eastern Europe to the reflexive reach for the just war tradition in legitimizing the use of force, the language of ethics carries great political weight. The challenge for us is to sort out and illuminate the use of these ethical arguments and the traditions from which they spring.

Our objective is to make these traditions into useful guideposts for decision makers rather than instruments of confusion, deception, or manipulation. What constitutes a tradition? And how are traditions used and abused? One approach that accommodates the diversity of traditions while insisting on the reality of convergence is an approach based on the idea of normative standards. By normative standards, we mean prescriptive principles of desirable behavior—principles to which most nations can and do agree. The shared set of assumptions that govern diplomacy and daily activity in international affairs are largely the product of

recognized traditions. These principles include the validity of sovereignty, human rights, and self-determination as embodied in international law; the idea of world order as explained by Confucius in the East and liberal theorists in the West; and the importance of historical circumstance and statesmanship as essential ingredients in the pursuit of right and good conduct. Many of these principles are expressed in documents such as the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (and their additional Protocols), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Newer vehicles such as the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer continue to make traditions and standards relevant to new problems. Our interest in traditions and normative standards focuses on understanding their implications for policy.

For example, in their article on humanitarian politics, Thomas G. Weiss and Larry Minear “explore the host of problems associated with attempting to put flesh on the evolving global ethical norm that entitles civilians, no matter where they are located, to international succor.” Similarly, Robert L. Phillips and Stephan Haggard discuss economic policy in terms of the just distribution and management of resources. They raise an issue of social justice that Phillips describes as steering “a middle course between the extremes of collectivism on the one hand and the unbridled individualism of rigid capitalism on the other.” All of our authors, in some fashion, explore the connection between moral traditions, normative standards, and the decision-making process. In his article on normative prudence, Alberto R. Coll gives special attention to the relationship between character, ethics, and decision-making. His insight regarding personal factors is built upon by Choyun Hsu, John E. Becker, Chris Brown, James H. Billington, Charles W. Kegley, Jr., Greg Russell, David A. Crocker, and Jerrold D. Green—all of whom note the salience of normative standards despite cultural and historical particularities. Much of their work sorts through the claims of parochialism and cultural relativity to highlight the threads that hold the international system together.

We conclude with a piece by Kenneth W. Thompson evaluating graduate-level educational efforts in this field. While there is much room for improvement on the institutional level, Thompson notes that the policy practitioners of the future need not enter their professional careers uninitiated to the theme of moral choice. Scholarship does exist on the great issues of power, diplomacy, and statesmanship—and their inseparability from moral considerations and traditions. According to Thompson, this scholarship merely needs to be recognized, encouraged, and heeded by the teachers, students, and practitioners of international affairs.