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JOHN TESSITORE: Hello, and welcome. I'm John Tessitore, editor of *Ethics & International Affairs*, the quarterly journal of the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, headquartered in New York City.

The goal of the journal is to help close the gap between theory and practice by publishing works that integrate the principles of ethics and justice into discussions of practical issues of the day. Indeed, today I hope to do exactly that, as we are fortunate to have with us one of our journal contributors, Mathias Risse, professor of philosophy and public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Welcome, Mathias.

MATHIAS RISSE: Thank you, John. It's good to be here.

JOHN TESSITORE: Professor Risse has published widely on issues related to global social justice, with a particular focus on issues of immigration, labor rights, trade, and human rights. His writing evinces a rare blend of scholarly rigor, combined with a fierce moral urgency, and in doing so, he appeals both to our intellect and to what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature."

Professor Risse is currently working on a book entitled *The Grounds of Justice*, an inquiry about the state and global perspective. His articles have appeared in many journals, including *Ethics, Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, and, of course, *Ethics & International Affairs*.

Again, we welcome you, Mathias, and thank you for joining us today.

MATHIAS RISSE: Thanks for having me.

JOHN TESSITORE: Simply put, what do you think is the most important ethical issue in international affairs today? And tell us why.

MATHIAS RISSE: The most important ethical issue in international affairs is to get a clear understanding of what justice requires at the international level. This is a question that philosophers traditionally have neglected.

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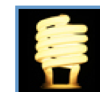

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Traditionally, we have thought a lot about what justice requires within the state. A lot of theorizing has been applied to what justice requires within given states or to what citizens owe to each other.

In more recent times there has also been a certain reaction to that that I would characterize as basically throwing out the baby with the bath water. Namely, to take a particular kind of position on what justice requires at the global level is just going way too far. That is a position called cosmopolitanism, which thinks that membership in states is ultimately morally irrelevant and thinks that justice applies pretty much indiscriminately among all of us, either because we are all human beings or because we are all members of a global political and economic order.

These are two rather extreme views: Justice is either limited to members of a state or fellow citizens, or justice applies indiscriminately among everybody. The challenge for philosophers is to work out a more sensible, plausible, and intellectually persuasive intermediate view that works out how justice applies in more differentiated ways.

What I mean by that is to work out a system such that there are certain principles of justice that apply within states, among fellow citizens, and there are other principles of justice that apply, for example, because we are sharing a trading system or principles of justice that apply because we are, as human beings, also co-owners of the planet earth. These are respectively different principles of justice.

To come back to the original wording of the question—what is the most important challenge in international affairs for philosophers, for political philosophers, these days?

It's really to understand the way in which justice applies in nuanced ways, depending on what particular context we are thinking about.

JOHN TESSITORE: I'm tempted to ask you, are you looking for something that you might call "cosmopolitanism-light," or would you want to just move away from cosmopolitanism altogether? Are we looking for some new terminology, some new language?

MATHIAS RISSE: The term "cosmopolitan" has been around for a long time. It has also been used for a drink for a long time. There is certainly a use for the term. I don't want to do away with the term, if by that we mean a certain kind of intercultural attitude, a certain mode of being as a person who has a good understanding of different cultures, knows how to move around among different cultures, and knows how to treat different cultures respectfully. So a "cosmopolitan" of a cultural sort is certainly a viable term that does important work.

But "cosmopolitanism" as an attitude towards global justice has basically outlived its purpose, because the basic lesson from cosmopolitanism as a position about justice has been learned—namely, that all human beings have a certain kind of moral equality. At the moral level, all human beings are equal. But it's perfectly compatible also with saying that among particular political structures, such as a state, such as the trading system, additional obligations of justice apply that don't just apply because we are human, but do apply because we are sharing particular structures, political and economic structures.

The term "cosmopolitanism" is really just not fine-grained enough to capture the importance of relationships, of contexts that not any two human beings will share with each other.

JOHN TESSITORE: You talk about common ownership of the earth—that is, the equal claim of each person to the planet and its resources. In what sense does humanity own the earth? How do we do so collectively?

MATHIAS RISSE: This idea that humanity collectively owns the earth is an idea that a few hundred years ago, was the guiding theme of political thought. It does sound a little bit strange to the contemporary reader or listener, and it sounds equally strange to contemporary philosophers as to contemporary laymen interested in philosophy, simply because it hasn't been in the running too much recently.

But in the 17th century, this was an enormously influential idea. One can easily understand why this would be so in the 17th century, because that was the time when European colonialism really came into its own, expansionism got going, and there was a lot of thought that went into questions of what exactly could be done with territories that allegedly Europeans discovered, what kinds of ownership claims could be made to the sea, and so on.

This was a time when this was very much a European debate that really neglected the interests of whose territories these were. This also was the standpoint that in the 17th century was very much built on the Old Testament. The starting point was this point in the Book of Genesis, that God had given the earth to humanity in common. That was the point of departure for a lot of theorizing in the 17th century.

JOHN TESSITORE: Is that coming primarily from theologians, philosophers, political scientists, or all of the above?

MATHIAS RISSE: At the time there wasn't that much of a difference. In the 17th century, you would have had a difficult time if you wanted to characterize yourself as a decided non-theological philosopher or political scientist. That might be the safest way to a rather sad fate. You basically had to work within a theological framework.

There was much disagreement about what exactly this framework amounted to in the 17th century, because this was also the time of vicious religious wars. But one reason why this idea of collective ownership of the earth was so attractive to people then was that the idea of this was based in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament was a pretty stable starting point for such disagreements.

Today, if we want to work with this, we have to leave behind any kind of colonial, expansionist baggage, and we have to do this without any reference to the Old Testament. This can be done.

JOHN TESSITORE: That's exactly my question. How did you follow this road to a fundamentally egalitarian view in the 21st century?

MATHIAS RISSE: The starting points for this approach are pretty easy to come by here. You can obtain these starting points without resorting to any kind of theological view.

What we are observing is that the spaces and resources of the earth are simply there. A little thought operation is going in there, so we are subtracting from the earth all the human contributions that have been made. The earth, minus human contributions, simply is there. We don't have to go into any explanations about why it is, but as far as human beings are concerned, the earth is simply there. Nobody has any special entitlements to that. That's the first observation.

The second observation is that these resources and spaces of the earth are needed by each one of us for all human purposes, including simply the purpose of survival.

So there are no human entitlements attached to it, and we all need it. That leads me to a position that says, look, there is a fundamental symmetry with regard to all the entitlements that human beings have. Any two human beings have symmetrical entitlements to the earth.

Then the next question—and this is really where it becomes difficult and where a lot of philosophical labor needs to be done. The question is, exactly what does the symmetry amount to? That's where a philosopher would come in to distinguish different ways of spelling this out. Then the business of the philosopher would be to say which of these is the most plausible development of that thought.

JOHN TESSITORE: So symmetry is not synonymous with perfect equality.

MATHIAS RISSE: The reason why I am reluctant to use the word "equality" here is because it might give too specific a connotation. Basically, what we can safely derive here from a minimal starting point is this idea of symmetry. It becomes much more difficult to spell out exactly what this means.

My own preferred version of that is actually a position that I call common ownership. The idea there is that humanity has the same kind of relationship to the earth that in the old days, say, the citizens of Cambridge had to the Cambridge common.

In England there are these commons. Sometimes they are called the greens. Nowadays they are parks. People go there and hang out. But in the old days, this was where the citizens of a given city—but only those people—could take their cattle. People living in Cambridge could take their cattle to the Cambridge common. If you lived in Boston, you were not entitled to do that. But the citizens of Cambridge held these commons in what I call common ownership, which basically amounts to a kind of equal opportunity in using those areas.

A parallel theory applies to the relationship of humanity vis-à-vis the earth. There has to be a guarantee for an equal opportunity to use the earth, which is equality in that sense.

Some people who agree with this idea that there is this collective ownership of the earth have a different idea. They think we can somehow divide all the spaces and resources of the earth into equal shares. That would be a more substantive idea of equality. Each person then has a claim to one of those. But that is a theory that at the end of the day doesn't work.

JOHN TESSITORE: That leads directly into my next question: How can we reconcile this common-ownership principle with the brute fact of resource inequality, the simple fact that some countries have more access to natural resources than others?

MATHIAS RISSE: One way we also have to update this approach compared to the 17th century is that we have to think here not just about square mileage or anything like that. If we are interested in comparing areas, what we really need is an understanding of the overall usefulness for human purposes of particular regions of the earth. So the size of an area matters, of course, but some areas contain a lot of desert and not arable territories.

JOHN TESSITORE: We need fresh water to survive. How do we justify or reconcile the differences between those areas that are rich in fresh water and those that might have none?

MATHIAS RISSE: Let me illustrate that in terms of where this would be going for immigration. If we have this idea that humanity collectively owns the earth, then a very natural follow-up thought to that is to say, okay, this means that not any small number of people can do as they please with any chunk of three-dimensional space that is part of this collectively owned earth.

In terms of an illustration that I like to use, suppose the population of the United States shrinks to two. Suppose there are just you and I left. Nothing else changes in the rest of the world. For some mysterious reason, everybody

else disappears. But you and I have access to sophisticated border surveillance mechanisms, so we are, effectively, in a position to keep other people out.

In a situation like that, you want to say there is something really wrong with this. If we are keeping everybody else out under these circumstances, then this is highly morally problematic. If that's right, then this is supportive of the idea of thinking about immigration in terms of finding situations where the use of given parts of the earth is proportionate. The number of people living there is proportionate to the overall usefulness for human purposes of that particular chunk of three-dimensional space.

What is really needed at this stage is input from empirical scientists. There is very little relevant empirical work that has been done about the question of how we actually compare the value for human purposes, the overall usefulness for human purposes, of different chunks of three-dimensional space.

We find a little bit of that in the work of economists. When they think about the net value of a country, they don't just think of that in terms of gross domestic product, but they also think of that in terms of the kind of nature assets and things like that. These are the beginnings of such work.

This is now really a task for empirical sciences, to come up with ways of measuring the overall usefulness of chunks of three-dimensional space for human purposes so that we can actually compare two areas in terms of that and then also get a sense of what this idea of proportionate use would amount to.

JOHN TESSITORE: That's fascinating. Is that being done at any stage? Is there even an embryonic process to make that kind of evaluation, to your knowledge?

MATHIAS RISSE: No, not to my knowledge. As I said, there is some work of the sort that tries to go beyond just gross domestic product by way of assessing, in a way, the value of a country, if you want to put it like that.

JOHN TESSITORE: For example, the Human Development Report, which includes other factors.

MATHIAS RISSE: Actually, the last United Nations Development Report [2009] was concerned with immigration. I actually had been commissioned to write an ethics background report for that, because some people on that team were actually quite interested in this ownership approach. It generates a standpoint from which we can see that immigration is not just a matter for the discretion of individual states.

As the United States, for example, or as Canada, we couldn't just think about what is best for us, what kinds of immigrants we want, how many immigrants we want. We can't just think of that as a self-interest operation. We really have to think of immigration also from a moral standpoint, and therefore integrate the question of, in terms of our immigration policies, what we owe to other people who are not part of our country already.

Unfortunately, at the end of the day, the Development Programme decided not to integrate that standpoint after all, so it did get cut out at the end.

JOHN TESSITORE: I'm sure you realize that your principle does pose some kind of challenge to the fundamental organizing principle of international relations, which is, of course, state sovereignty. Is there a way to reconcile the two principles, to your mind?

MATHIAS RISSE: The thrust of my approach, the "Grounds of Justice" approach, the idea that there are these different contexts that people are sharing, where respectively different principles apply, is not inconsistent with state sovereignty, but it leads to a qualification of state sovereignty. If we are claiming a certain chunk of three-dimensional space for us—we are in a state—then we have to do that in a way that is acceptable to the rest of

humanity.

For example, in terms of immigration, we have to make sure that we are satisfying conditions of proportionate use, that there are a proportionate number of people living in this part of the world—proportionate to the overall usefulness of the area that we are occupying.

What are we saying to Mexican immigrants who are trying to cross in to the United States and the American Southwest? How do you explain to them that we have adopted the policy to keep them out?

It is entirely insufficient to say we have decided that it is better for the United States of America to keep you out. That we can't say. The reason why we can't say it is, again, we are claiming a certain, rather substantial chunk of territory, and we must be able to explain to people who want to get in that we are already proportionately using it.

JOHN TESSITORE: Let me follow up, then. In the Fall 2009 issue of *Ethics & International Affairs*, you wrote "I won't talk about the people from Mexico," but you did write about small island nations that lose their land to the rise of oceans due to global warming. You say that the people who live along such coasts have a right to relocation in other countries because their displacement was not due to any fault of their own.

Can you describe what you have called "the right to relocation," whether it's coming from an island or coming from a border nation, as in Mexico? What is this right to relocation?

MATHIAS RISSE: A guiding idea about immigration that comes out of this approach is that countries have to make proportionate use of that part of three-dimensional space that they are claiming for themselves. One way in which you are really not making proportionate use, but you are increasingly claiming a disproportionately small part of the earth, is if your part of the land of the earth actually disappears into the ocean.

What we have in the case of a country whose territory is swallowed up by the ocean is one where the ratio of people divided by the land gets ever more unfavorable. They, at some point, will be in the position of massive overuse of what is left to them.

In a situation like that, they have to complain to other countries and say, "Look, compared to you other guys, we are massively deprived of land and useful resources here for the number of people we have. But we are collectively owning the earth, so the sharing system that we have worked out has to be reconsidered here. We actually have a claim to move elsewhere. You are having disproportionately too much compared to our disproportionately too little."

This ownership standpoint makes it not a matter of charity, where they can then say, "Can we join you?" but it's a right that they have in virtue of being co-owners of the earth.

JOHN TESSITORE: Where do you think these displaced people ought to go? Do you have a recipe for this kind of relocation?

MATHIAS RISSE: If you are just looking at matters of immigration in isolation, then the strongest claim the people from the disappearing islands would have is against those people who have proportionately much space. That's where the claim would be strongest.

One thing, John, about the "Grounds of Justice" approach—the idea being different contexts that people may or may not share, where respectively different principles of justice apply—this generates an overall picture of global justice where people have obligations that come from different sources and

apply for different reasons. There are also obligations vis-à-vis climate change. There are obligations to future generations.

At the end of the day, when we are thinking about implementation, there will be a certain understanding of burden-sharing coming out of this. The burdens overall will have to be shared. It's quite possible, for example, for Australia to say, "We are going to take in a lot of people from these Pacific Island nations that are now disappearing," but that might actually be more than they just have to do in terms of immigration and would go a long way in terms of Australia satisfying also other obligations.

JOHN TESSITORE: I was actually thinking about the authority that would oversee such relocation. I understand that this is very early on, in terms of your evolving thinking on this. Do you envision it taking place under some kind of supranational authority? For example, do you think the UN might have the capacity to undertake such an operation? Or would you like to see something wholly new created? Any thoughts on that?

MATHIAS RISSE: There is the philosophical question about what is a vision for the future that is plausible in terms of what human beings actually owe to each other. There is a philosophical blueprint that can serve also as guidance for institutional reform. Then there is the hard political question of how we would possibly go about this, in particular since this involves strong countries, like the United States in particular, surrendering authority to some extent or, in any event, being willing to go along and to carry prescriptions out by themselves.

JOHN TESSITORE: It has certainly been a pleasure to speak with you, Mathias.

MATHIAS RISSE: Thank you, John.

JOHN TESSITORE: Thank you. And I look forward to the next time.

I've been speaking with Mathias Risse, professor of philosophy and public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. I'm John Tessitore, editor of the quarterly journal *Ethics & International Affairs*. On behalf of the journal's publisher, the Carnegie Council, I thank you for listening.

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David Chester 1 week ago

Mathias,

have you ever heard or or read the works of Henry George? The claim of the earth's bounty being something we all have an equal right to, or better expressed by the opportunity right to, is something that George was aware of more than 130 years ago. In his seminal book on the effect of land monopoly on the lack of progress and growing poverty of nations, George proposes to give everyone an equal chance. This would be achieved by taxing land values. It is particularly the ethical aspects that concern me and about which I believe you should place emphasis.

This idea is being debated by macroeconomists today after its suppression for many years. I can't go into details here, but you should examine some material from http://www.progress.org and its

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