Global Values, Moral Boundaries

A Pilot Survey

conducted at the
State of the World Forum
San Francisco
October 3–6, 1996

by the

Institute for Global Ethics

William E. Loges, Ph.D.
Baylor University

Rushworth M. Kidder, Ph.D.
The Institute for Global Ethics

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To obtain copies, contact:

Institute for Global Ethics
P.O. Box 563
Camden, Maine 04843
Phone: 207-236-6658
Fax: 207-236-4014
E-mail: ethics@globalethics.org

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Copyeditor: Paula Blanchard
Designer: Tim Seymour
Cover Designer: Carol Gillette
Illustrator: Christopher Cart

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Table of Contents

Interviews

List of Figures and Tables

Not all percentages shown in tables add up to 100 percent due to rounding of figures.

Preface

Is there a global core of shared moral values?

That question has been at the center of our work at the Institute for Global Ethics since its founding in 1990. It first arose because, as we discussed ways to provide instruction in ethical matters in the schools—something Americans increasingly think is important—we were regularly met with the question, "But whose values will you teach?" The assumption behind the question was that everyone has different values, and that any attempt to teach ethics was simply an effort to impose someone's values on someone else. If the assumption were valid, everything from character education to corporate ethics training, from codes of campaign ethics to statements of journalistic standards and practices, would have to be set aside as essentially worthless.

But was it valid? Are moral values and ethical precepts shaped wholly by culture, race, ethnicity, religion, economic status, gender, and the host of other variables that determine human attitudes? Are they, in other words, artifacts of a particular place and time, with such personal orientations that each individual has a different set? Or is there a deeper and more crosscutting body of values that we possess, not because we are from this or that background or live in this or that circumstance, but simply because we are human? Are there values, that is, that unite us across all our other differences?

The Institute's first effort to investigate those questions resulted in a book titled *Shared Values for a Troubled World: Conversations with Men and Women of Conscience* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994). There, 24 interviewees from 16 countries were asked, "If you could help create a global code of ethics, what would be on it?" We also began asking participants in each of our Ethical Fitness seminars to spend several hours around the table generating a set of moral values they would like to hand on to children in the future. In both efforts, we saw individuals from very different backgrounds converge with striking consensus around a shared core of values.

This report adds another dimension to this research. By bringing the increased rigor of survey research methodology to bear on these questions, it moves the process beyond

individual interviews or focus-group activities into something closer to generalizable findings. It also provides sharper insight into the moral boundaries within which individuals operate, and into the ethical decision-making principles they use.

A principal focus of this study is on *values*. Those who have studied human values over the years have realized that it is fruitless to begin with the assumption that some people have values and others don't. Instead, we have learned that there is a universe of human values of a manageable size, and that people are more likely to differ according to the importance of particular values to them. Furthermore, not all values are particularly concerned with morality. People certainly consider morality important, but they also consider competence important. Milton Rokeach, this century's leading scholar of the social psychology of values, related morality and competence to *goodness* and *greatness*. Ethics is focused on goodness, and in this survey we have paid attention to that part of the universe of values in which moral values are clustered.

We believe that the method of dilemma resolution offers an efficient way to observe ethics in action. It is the connection between values and ethical dilemmas we explore here that offers great potential for further research. We see this survey as the first of a series probing similar issues in different countries, professions, and socio-economic groupings. We hope the accumulating body of data will, in time, provide increasingly refined insights into the conceptual structures underlying everyday ethical decisions—and deepening understanding of those things about which people say, "That's not ethical!"

A project of this magnitude has benefited from conversations with far more people than we can hope to list here. It began in the early 1990s as an idea discussed by the Institute's board, who had the foresight to keep the project alive until the means could be found to implement it. It was shaped in its formative years by conversations with several members of the Institute's advisory council, including Daniel Yankelovich and Sissela Bok. It was refined by the work of Frank Walker and Chris Everett of Walker Information in Indianapolis, who piloted an earlier version in India, Japan, and the United States. In its current form, it was nurtured forward by James Garrison and Amy Vossbrinck of the State of the World

Forum in San Francisco, who helped provide the venue for the survey; by Robert F. Lehman of the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, who hosted a seminal meeting and provided key seed funding; by Winston O. Franklin of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, and Duane Elgin, Paul Ray, Robert Schwartz, and Tom Callanan, who all helped shape its contents; and by Don Clifton and Richard Burkholder of the Gallup Organization, who offered important counsel and assisted with formatting and printing of the survey instrument. The results were entered and analyzed with the highly professional assistance of Dr. Gina Agostinelli and Dr. Lisa Thomas. Arrangements for the interviews at the State of the World Forum were ably managed by Len Traubman. Publication of this report was masterfully overseen by Beth Schuman of the Institute, with help from Paula Blanchard and Jane Babbitt.

Special thanks are also due to three other individuals. Joel Orosz of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation early saw the potential for this project, and helped steer it toward major funding from the Foundation. Graham Phaup of the Institute managed the project with wonderful clarity and intuition, from the drafting of the survey to the final analysis of the data. And Robert Pratt, an Institute board member with decades of experience in survey research, poured countless voluntary hours of discussion, thought, and travel into this project and kept our focus on our overall objectives.

Rushworth M. Kidder
Camden, Maine

William E. Loges
Waco, Texas

Executive Summary

This five–page summary gives an overview of the main points and conclusion of this report.

In October 1996, the Institute for Global Ethics conducted a Global Values Survey at the State of the World Forum's annual meeting in San Francisco. The 272 participants are well educated, cosmopolitan, accomplished, and thoughtful. They represented 40 countries and more than 50 different faith communities, had an average age of 51 years, and were 57 percent male. More than half had some graduate education. On a scale from "not at all religious" to "strongly religious," they leaned toward the latter (2.8 on a scale of 4). By occupation, 36 percent were in education/research or in the nonprofit-volunteer sectors, while 32 percent were in business, finance, or consulting. The full survey is reproduced in the Appendix.

Moral Values. Part I of the survey asked the respondents to choose the five *moral values* from a list of 15 that are most important to them. The most frequent choice, Truth, was chosen 169 times. The top three values, Truth, Compassion, and Responsibility, were frequently chosen in a cluster. The respondents were also asked to select the single most important value. Compassion topped that list. Fairness, however, served as a point of distinction across groups. Chosen 100 times overall, Fairness was preferred by men, Jews and Moslems, businesspeople, and the not-very-religious and non-religious. In general, however, the choice of values was not related to such characteristics as nationality, sex, religion, age, or social status. Our values apparently transcend these demographic characteristics.

Moral Boundaries. The second section referred to the respondents' *moral boundaries*, beyond which they might feel less impulse to extend their moral concerns. It also probed the extent to which they perceived that their social environments encouraged and rewarded their values-based behavior. More than 75 percent of the participants agreed that "People can use values other than my own and still make what I consider to be

appeared to select the resolution principle most appropriate to the case at hand. By the end of this section, the utilitarian perspective had been chosen 49 percent of the time, followed by the Golden Rule (39 percent) and the Kantian categorical imperative (12 percent).

Values and Television. Part III asked about *values and television,* focusing at one point on the frequency with which television programs struck participants as effective in teaching children values similar to their own. On a scale of one to six where one equals never and six equals very frequently, 90 percent chose a number lower than three. Responses to this question did not correlate significantly with living inside or outside the United States. Neither was sex, education, nor age related to any attitudes toward TV. People in the education sector, however, gave TV higher marks for teaching useful moral lessons, while those in the nonprofit sector gave it a lower score.

Based on the replies from these respondents' surveys, we would suggest that the following hypotheses warrant future survey work:

1) There is a small set of core moral values that is cross-cultural and universal.

While knowledge about shared values doesn't help predict particular behaviors, it is useful in other ways. Such knowledge can provide a framework for proposing values-based social change that, because it accords with shared values, stands a better chance of acceptance. It can provide a powerful rejoinder to those who challenge the teaching of ethics by asking, "Whose values will you teach?" Finally, it can combat the ethical and cultural relativism of those who insist that each individual has his or her own unique set of values.

2) One value, Fairness, does differentiate respondents from one another.

Those who chose Fairness were slightly less likely than other respondents to choose Truth, Compassion, and Responsibility, less trusting of religion and religious figures, more business oriented, and more apt to endorse strictly rational rather than emotional or empathetic attitudes. Those respondents represented a sizable minority concerned less with outcomes than with processes. They tended to guard their rights more, and they were skeptical of emotion as a grounds for decision making.

ethical decisions." The same proportion felt they could provide for their families and be good citizens by living according to their values. Yet only 64 percent agreed that "My community rewards me when I live according to my values," while 77 percent agreed that "Living in my community makes it hard to live according to my values." But when asked whether they could "live at peace" with people whose values were fundamentally different from their own, nearly 87 percent said they could.

Sources of Authority. Respondents were then asked about their *sources of authority,* or the people and institutions they relied on for knowing what is morally right. The respondents ranked six possible sources of authority: modern science, religious leaders, best friends, personal experience, God's word, and government. The most striking result was the tremendous importance given to personal experience. God's word was a very distant second. Government was far and away the least important source. Again, there was little relationship between demographic variables and the ranks given here.

Resolving Moral Dilemmas. Part II asked how the participants would *resolve moral dilemmas* in the face of four "right-versus-right" cases involving the use of an agricultural pesticide in their country, a private charitable organization's plan to build an orphanage near their home, a poor person's shoplifting in a store plagued by crime, and a friend at work who was sabotaging new machines in order to protect jobs. After choosing a course of action, respondents were asked to explain their choices by selecting from among three resolution principles: utilitarianism (maximizing benefits for the greatest number of people), the Kantian categorical imperative (establishing a rule that everyone should follow), or the Golden Rule (reflecting the way the respondent would like to be treated by others).

Only rarely were their earlier choices of values significantly related either to the courses of action they selected or to the principles they used to explain their selections. Nor did they feel consistently wedded to any single principle, but

3) Individuals holding the same core values may use different moral principles to resolve their dilemmas.

The fact that the choice of resolution principles showed no correlation to the choice of values may be vitally important. Moral philosophies cannot, apparently, be ranked in an enduring system according to their fundamental goodness. Otherwise, people holding the most broadly shared values (like Compassion or Truth) would be found to gravitate toward a single "grand" principle, while others with less widely held values would gather around the two "lesser" principles. In fact, each of the three resolution principles provides a valid moral platform.

4) Single individuals may engage a variety of resolution principles as they move from dilemma to dilemma.

Individuals shift principles freely from dilemma to dilemma. Were that not the case, the choice of resolution principles in these four cases would have shown nearly identical percentages—a kind of straight-ticket voting.

5) The Golden Rule is far more widely used than the categorical imperative.

Until recently, many American ethics textbooks essentially ignored the Golden Rule, focusing on only two principles—utilitarianism and the categorical imperative—in teaching ethical decision making. Yet the Golden Rule was selected more than three times as frequently as the categorical imperative.

6) These respondents are willing to put their values into practice across a broad range of moral boundaries.

In general, respondents were unwilling to erect barriers to moral inclusiveness. They showed overwhelming support for the idea that people with values other than their own could still make ethical decisions and were worthy of inclusion within their perimeter of moral concern. Moral boundaries were found to operate, however, in distinguishing a "close-in" group of family members, educators, and clergy from more distant groups that included businesspeople, journalists, government officials, and military officers. The commonality of responses here adds weight to the argument that there is a fairly universal global ethic, within which individuals select various philosophical principles.

7) The most powerful source of authority for knowing right from wrong is personal experience.

These participants ranked ethical self-reliance far ahead of a reliance on God's word, science, or government. This finding may suggest hubris. But given that respondents from all backgrounds, educational levels, and religions chose personal experience, it may signal a conviction that ethics must be made personal, tangible, and experiential, instead of being determined by scientific logic, clerical advice, or governmental policy.

8) Television is generally unsuitable for providing moral instruction.

With broad unanimity, these respondents dismissed television—one of the most pervasive media in the global culture—as unable to teach anything valuable to children. That finding held true across nationalities, genders, age, education levels, and choices of core values.

The need, now, is for further global values research to test these hypotheses. Will country-specific surveys turn up sharp distinctions among cultures, or will global commonality be reinforced? Will the results from such surveys lead us to build a basis for conflict resolution and mediation? Will they give impetus to the assertions about global oneness that are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its offshoots? If so, further work on global values is surely worth undertaking.

The Occasion

On the evening of Thursday, October 3, 1996, the Institute for Global Ethics distributed a Global Values Survey to more than 650 participants at the State of the World Forum's annual meeting in San Francisco. This Forum, cochaired by Mikhail Gorbachev, Ruud Lubbers, Oscar Arias, and others drew together a number of world leaders and interested participants "to consider those principles, values, and actions which should guide humanity as it moves towards the next century." The survey instrument was written by the Institute for Global Ethics, with assistance from the State of the World Forum, the Institute of Noetic Sciences, and the Fetzer Institute. The survey form was designed and printed by the Gallup Organization. Respondents returned their completed surveys between October 3 and October 6 in boxes placed in several locations.

Ultimately, 272 people (42 percent) completed and returned the survey. Since our intention was to receive a response from the entire population of Forum participants, this response does not qualify as a random sample of the Forum participants. We have no way of knowing whether our respondents are older or younger than the entire Forum population, or if our respondents are likely to be from a particular country or education level.

There was a good deal of cooperation from our respondents; that is, most completed the survey, carefully following the directions. We received responses from people representing a very diverse range of nationalities, religions, and professional backgrounds, and a wide age range (due in part to the presence of a contingent of youths invited by the Forum).

During the four-day meeting, Rushworth Kidder conducted personal interviews with a number of Forum participants, including a group of young people from around the world. Edited extracts from these interviews appear in sidebars throughout this report.

The Survey

The survey had three parts.

Part I asked the respondents to choose the five *moral values* from a list of 15 that are most important to them in their daily lives. The list of 15 values had been generated from the experience of the Institute in asking a similar question of participants in its ethics seminars, from a review of literature on the study of human values in social psychology, and from pretests of the survey instrument.

Touching the Principles

Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Haiti), *elected president in Haiti's first free and fair election in 1990, was deposed and exiled in 1991 and then reinstated as president from 1994 to 1996.*

I think [the question of ethics] is a very serious issue for the next century, because if we keep the focus on economic growth, without putting the focus on human development, we may go too slowly. And once we promote human development, we touch principles. How could I promote human development if I don't respect you? Once I respect you, I will pay attention to what you are telling me. I may disagree with you, but at least you will be happy because you will be aware that I respect you.

If we address ethical issues, principles, we may also feel the necessity of asking questions about love. A human being cannot survive without love. Does someone say he is happy when he doesn't have anyone to love and nobody loves him? I think the same way we need breath, the same way we need love.

[Love and respect] are universal values that transcend culture. You can be Haitian, you can be American, you can be French. But you will always need people to love you, and need to love people, to promote your own growth and human development, as interconnected people.

I'm full of hope—not because I don't see misery around my country, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and one of the 20 poorest countries in the world. Our goal is simple: moving from that misery to poverty with dignity. This is our hope.

[Young people around the world] want to improve the quality of life, and they are asking to put the focus on values, on the necessity of loving each other, respecting each other. Yes, they care about education. Yes, they care about business. But they also care about the quality of relationship, asking us to face that kind of ethical crisis with the light of principles.

The next section asked about the respondents' *moral boundaries*, i.e., the extent to which they felt that their behavior and beliefs need to conform to their values when they interact with a variety of people and in a variety of situations. It also asked the extent to which they perceived that their social environments encourage and reward their values-based behavior.

Respondents were then asked about their sources of *authority*, i.e., the people and institutions they rely on for knowing what is morally right. The respondents were asked to rank six possible sources of authority: modern science, religious leaders, best friends, personal experience, God's word, and government.

Part II asked how the participants would *resolve moral dilemmas*. Respondents were presented with four dilemmas, offered a variety of potential resolutions, and asked to choose the resolution that most closely resembled the action they would take. They were then asked to describe a reason for their choice by selecting one of three statements designed to summarize three philosophical approaches:

- utilitarianism, in which a solution is sought that maximizes benefits for the greatest number of people;
- the Kantian categorical imperative, in which a solution is intended to establish a rule that everyone should follow in all such situations, regardless of the consequences; and
- the Golden Rule, in which a solution is sought that reflects the way the respondent would like to be treated in such a situation.

Finally, the respondents were asked in this section to identify the resolution they felt most other people in their country would choose for the dilemma.

Part III asked about *values and television*, presenting 13 questions focusing on the frequency with which the television programs in the participants' home countries struck them as effective in teaching children values similar to their own. Besides a general question, 12 more specific questions were asked about television's role in such things as teaching proper social behavior and providing valuable lessons about how to spend money.

Demographics

The survey also asked a series of demographic questions regarding household size, number of children, age, gender, education level, occupation, native country, present home country, language spoken at home, religion, and level of religiosity.

From the respondents' answers, the following demographic profile emerges:

- *Age.* The average age of all respondents was 51, with respondents ranging in age from 15 to 79. There was no difference in the average age of the men and women. (Twelve people did not respond to this question.)
- *Gender.* There were 155 male respondents (57 percent) and 108 females (40 percent), with 9 respondents not indicating their gender.
- *Education.* Four options were offered to respondents to indicate their levels of schooling: primary (0–6 years), secondary (7–12 years), university (13–16 years), and postgraduate (17+ years). More than half the Forum respondents had some graduate education. Since the level of education among men was about the same as that of women, there was no significant gender differential in educational attainment of the respondents.
- *Native and Home Country.* There were responses from natives of 40 countries, who reported living in 28 countries. Two-thirds of the respondents were natives of the United States (164 people), and 74 percent of the respondents (179 people) were living in the United States. A total of 80 people reported being born outside the United States. (Thirty respondents did not answer the question on native country and two responses were illegible, while 29 respondents did not reply about their current country of residence and three responses were illegible.) With no country other than the United States represented by a significant number of respondents, most analyses of responses that distinguish among nationalities were done according to a U.S./non-U.S. breakdown. Men were slightly more likely than women to have been born outside the United States, but there was no significant difference in the distribution of men and women living in the United States. U.S. natives and those living in the United States were slightly better educated, on the average, than those born or living outside the United States.

- *Language.* There were 60 respondents who did not list English as a language spoken at home. Since the conference was conducted in English, and since the survey was only available in English, we assume that these respondents knew enough English to understand and respond to the questions. Even if some respondents do not speak English fluently, their written responses are still worth noting. There were no gender differences between those who listed English as spoken at home and those who did not.
- *Religion.* There was a great variety of responses to the question regarding religion. While 60 people (25 percent of respondents to this question) specifically indicated having no religion and 30 people did not answer this question, the remaining 182 respondents occupied a broad religious terrain. There were 70 respondents who identified themselves as Protestants or Catholics. Twenty-nine respondents were Jews. Nine were Moslems, eight were Buddhists (with several additional respondents listing Buddhism with other religions, such as "Jewish/Buddhist"), and four were Hindus.

  Aside from these familiar world religions, there were another 62 responses that were not so easily classifiable. Twelve of the nontraditional responses were a variant on the concept of spirituality, or indicated a willingness to be spiritual without being religious. Five respondents wrote "eclectic" in the space provided for their religion.

  Moslem respondents tended to be natives of countries other than the United States, as well as non-U.S. residents. This was true of Catholics as well. Those whose responses fell into the "other" category were slightly more likely to have been born in the United States than elsewhere. The Catholic respondents were disproportionately male, while women were more likely to indicate that they had no religion or to fall into the "other" category. Education was not related to the respondents' religion.

  It was clear from the way respondents took care to answer this question that they felt it was important that we have a clear indication of their beliefs.

- *Religiosity.* On a four-point scale from "not at all religious" to "strongly religious," responses averaged 2.8, with 4 being the most religious. Dozens of respondents scribbled out the word *religious* and wrote the word *spiritual,* or some variation. This action was taken as a positive response to what we intended the original question to ask; i.e., is there some level of devotion to a divinity that transcends oneself? Those responding "not at all religious" or "not very religious" totaled 32 percent, while 54 percent said they were "moderately religious" or "strongly religious." Men did not differ from women significantly in their average scores for religiosity.

Among the various religions, the highest average religiosity score was found among Moslems (3.33) and those in the "other" category (3.31). Not surprisingly, those who

Peace is a Conscious Choice

John Denver (United States), *who was one of the top recording artists in the history of the music industry, cofounded the Windstar Foundation in Aspen, Colorado, to focus on issues of global sustainability.*

There's one piece of advice my dad gave me when he dropped me off at college. He said, "You've got the talent. You can sing and play guitar. That doesn't make you any better than anyone else."

And that's where I really come from. There's an aspect of human nature in which we want to think we're better than somebody else. They're a different color. They speak a different language. They have a different name for the Creator. Whatever it is, that makes it okay for me to hate them, to try to get some of their land or some of their resources.

We must begin to make what I call "conscious choices," and to really recognize that we are the same. It's from that place in my heart that I write my songs. And it's a conscious choice. Peace is a conscious choice.

I believe that we are here for each other, not against each other. Everything comes from an understanding that you are a gift in my life—whoever you are, whatever our differences.

I would so much like young people to have a sense of the gift that they are. Not many of them feel like that. We don't teach kids how to feel, we don't give them the words to go by. I think the biggest problem in the world is that we have a generation of young people, and maybe two, who don't think it's going to get any better.

I would make my job a work of art. I would like whatever it is that I'm doing—everyone's experience of me, everyone's interaction with me, everyone's discussion, conversation, relationship with me—[to be] an event within which they get to see who they are. I would make of my life a work of art.

responded "none" for their religion had the lowest average religiosity score (2.12).

There were no correlations between religiosity and native country, home country, use of English as the language spoken at home, education, or age.

- *Occupation.* Respondents were asked to indicate their occupations in an open-ended question. More people (14 percent) declined to respond to this question than any of the other demographic questions. Of those who responded, 36 percent were in either the education/research sector of society (as teachers, administrators, or students) or the nonprofit/volunteer sector. Business, finance (banking, investment, and insurance), and consulting represented another 32 percent of respondents. Just under 7 percent were retired. Occupations not classified as education, business, or consulting included the following: "president," "public affairs," "graphic design," "ecologist," "computer operator," and "chemist."

  Those in government and students were slightly more likely to have been born or to be living outside the United States, while the self-employed were disproportionately U.S. residents and/or natives. Men were more likely than women to be in business, while women were disproportionately likely to be found in the voluntary or nonprofit sector. There were no significant differences among the occupational sectors in their levels of religiosity.

IN SUMMARY, the respondents are well-educated, cosmopolitan, accomplished, and thoughtful. They took the task of describing themselves in response to this survey seriously, taking care to edit it to suit their sense of themselves, and offering clarifying information when given the opportunity. They represent a wide age range, but are predominantly middle-aged.

The respondents are clearly unlike the "average" person living on the earth today, who is younger, less well educated, less affluent, and less idiosyncratic in his or her religious orientation. The respondents are also disproportionately male and disproportionately natives and residents of the United States.

Without a census of the State of the World Forum's members, it is impossible to know whether or not our respondents are reasonably representative of that organization. But in any

case, these respondents constitute an interesting group of people by themselves. While they do not much resemble the "average" person on earth, they are also not necessarily similar to one another. The variety of their faiths, national origins, ages, and occupations suggests that these respondents would differ from one another on many of the questions in this survey.