

Chapter 2

Some Thoughts on Richard Ned Lebow's *The Politics and Ethics of Identity*

Mervyn Frost

It has been a singular pleasure having Ned Lebow as a colleague here in the Department of War Studies at King's College, London. His extraordinarily wide range of academic interests and his encyclopedic knowledge of political thought and political thinkers, from the classical Greeks to the present day, is enriching for all of us in the department, staff and students alike. The benefit of his thinking and writing is not, of course, conferred on us alone, but is communicated to the discipline as a whole through his many publications. He is the only colleague in my experience who has had the distinction of having a book launch for three monographs on the same occasion—all of which were published by a major university press!

In this short contribution I shall explore the ethical outlook he develops in his book *Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves* (Lebow 2012). In it he examines the widespread belief that each of us may be conceived of as a self with a fixed identity. What puzzles him is that the belief is held in spite of the fact that “Most analytical philosophers and neuroscientists question the existence of the self” (Lebow 2012: 1). What is of particular interest to him is why so many persist in this belief. In a multi-disciplinary *tour de force* he sets out the arguments that throw doubt on the notion that each person is a self with a unique identity. Taken together they provide a convincing case. Why then, in the face of such evidence, do so many of us in the modern world cling to this notion? We do so, he says, in order to overcome a particularly modern problem, that of alienation. On his view, alienation is the result of an ongoing tension between two key features of modern society, on the one hand, the idea that we are autonomous beings capable of cultivating our interior lives and being reflexive about who we are in the world, and, on the other, that in our globalized world, in which there is a complex division of labor, individuals are required to play any number of different roles, not all of which cohere with one another, or with our preferred interior identity. The upshot of this tension

Mervyn Frost, DPhil, Professor for International Relations, Centre for International Relations, Department of War Studies, King's College, London; *Email*: mervyn.frost@kcl.ac.uk.

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is that it often transpires that the self we value as an autonomous person, is at odds with the roles we are required to play in society. The result is alienation.

In an illuminating argument Lebow discusses four different strategies that have been adopted in order to overcome alienation. He is critical of them all. Some have sought a return to a Golden Age. In many cases what informs this aspiration is a religious creed of one form or another. This kind of maneuver involves deliberately recreating a society that is pre-modern. The Amish provide an example here. Others, more future oriented, have proposed utopias that would be constructed in ways that would prevent alienation. Thomas More and Marx would be examples here. There have been many attempts to put Marx's proposed solution into practice. A problem with these two strategies for overcoming alienation is that what they propose doing, if realized, would end the multiplicity of identities that we currently hold. In such societies we would be compelled to suppress our reflective selves and adopt a single, socially imposed identity. A third strategy to end alienation is that presented by liberals and empiricists who present an account of the modern self as a rational being, who with others, can plan and create social orders to overcome alienation. With this in mind, they put forward proposals for the top-down construction of a just society. The most influential version of this in recent times has been the work of Rawls (1972) as set out in his *Theory of Justice*. A problem with this is that the 'self' envisaged here does not tally with the ways in which people in the contemporary world experience themselves as having multiple, overlapping, and often competing identities, some chosen after reflection and others imposed by social roles. Liberals approve of self-fashioning and value societies that provide role models that people can emulate or construct themselves through a process of mixing and matching. The fourth and final strategy for coping with alienation discussed by Lebow is the romantic one which involves solving the tension between externally imposed roles and autonomously chosen identities, by turning inwards. This involves rejecting the oppressive structures of modern society and turning to a contemplation of nature and turning inwards to discover one's "true self." Here alienation is overcome by refusing the roles required of us in a complex, globalized world, characterized by complex interdependence.

Lebow is critical of all four strategies for dealing with alienation. At its core his criticism is that they offer solutions built on an ethical premise stipulating the importance of one identity. They end up privileging a single identity at the cost of the multiplicity available to us.

Lebow challenges the move "to root ethics in identity" (2012: 7) and proposes an alternative ethical approach. It is to this that I now turn. He gives a number of indications of what he has in mind as an alternative ethical basis from which to confront the modern problem of alienation, but he does not present a comprehensive or detailed ethical theory. In what follows I seek to outline the ethical theory implicit in his book. I shall then briefly set out what I find attractive about Lebow's ethical alternative and what seems to be problematic.

In the Introduction Lebow asks:

Could we recognize ourselves as fragmented and question the status of the alleged selfhood on which our identities are based? If so, what would be the ethical consequences? (Lebow 2012: 1)

A little later he writes of an ethical potential that might arise in a world ... in which people could move beyond the illusion of consistent, unitary identities, even selfhood (Lebow 2012: 6).

He says, too:

Given our illusionary and multiple selves, turning to identity for ethical guidance is like looking for stability in a vortex. It invites great confusion and frustration or alternatively, a cramped focus on one form of self-identification with a correspondingly restricted ethical horizon. Much might be gained from liberating ethics and identity. Recognition of the fragmented nature of identity provides intellectual and emotional grounds for transcending many of the 'us' and 'other' distinctions that stand in the way of implementing any ethical commitments on a more universal basis (Lebow 2012: 7).

After having shown the failure of the standard attempts to make that case that each of us is a single self with a single identity, Lebow describes how we all have many different identities through the different roles we are required to play in society. A further source of multiple identities is to be found within us as we explore our interior life in a reflexive way. As a result of such interiority we are able to play with the idea of taking on a range of different identities. He illustrates this ability through a discussion of several of Mozart's operas, most notably *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan Tutte*, and *The Magic Flute*. The conclusion he reaches is that "At best, we have multiple forms of self-identification that shape our revolving understandings of who we are" (Lebow 2012: 38).

What ethical conclusions or proposals does Lebow develop from his conclusions about our holding multiple and fluid identities? As mentioned, he does not produce a comprehensive ethical code (or anything like it). In this book there is nowhere to be found an ethical theory comparable to that produced by, for example, liberal theorists such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Brian Barrie, Bruce Richard Ackerman, or Simon Caney. There is no attempt to set up a decision procedure akin to Rawls' "original position" from which might be derived fundamental principles of justice. Indeed, Lebow is overtly skeptical of any such exercise because they necessarily result in sets of abstract principles that can only be instituted in a top down manner which is unlikely to sit easily with us in our world of multiple, fluid and conflicting identities. Instead, of developing yet another highly abstract ethical theory, I read Lebow as developing an ethical position in a completely different way. He sets out to do, what it is often claimed, cannot be done, which is to derive an 'ought' (a set of ethical conclusions) from an 'is' (an largely empirical or social scientific inquiry). He does this by putting forward an empirically based and social scientifically endorsed analysis of the fluid and fractured identities we have in the contemporary world. From this essentially factual analysis, he suggests that certain ethical conclusions follow for those who read, understand and accept his analysis. Let me give some examples of his execution of this exercise. He writes:

We are members of as many communities as we have affiliations and roles and the self-identifications to which they give rights. It is a great mistake to allow politicians, religious leaders or others to define us as members of one community or convince us or others that any one community is the most important. Rather, we should come to understand our society, state, region and the world as a network of multiple and often interlocking communities that are within and cut across these levels of social, institutional or geographic aggregation (Lebow 2012: 319).

From this factual account of what we are it is an easy step to the ethical insight that:

...our multiple, inconsistent, labile and evolutionary selves have the potential to provide a new and critical perspective on the traditional binary between us and others. Recognition of our multiplicity and conflicting identification can lead to the recognition that the self-other dichotomy lies at least as much within us as it does between us and others. Whichever self-identifications we highlight, of necessity, elevates other self-identifications to the status of 'others.' As the hierarchy of identifications is unstable in the short term and evolves in the medium and longer terms, we have every incentive to respect these alter egos and to think of them as part of our identity. Recognition of the need to include some of our own 'others' as part of ourselves provides the foundation for extending this process to others (Lebow 2012: 321).

His argument, then, is that from this kind of factual explorations of the many identities we ourselves hold, from the insight that we ourselves have to accommodate a variety of selves within us, from the insight that other people will be doing these things too, we will be inclined to be accepting (tolerant) towards ourselves and towards others. In a phrase that I find marvelously fruitful he says that "Mutual incoherence is an important communality that might help to bridge other differences" (Lebow 2012: 321). In exploring this mutual incoherence we shall find that we share some of our identities with others. In this way, to echo a phrase that Andrew Linklater (1998) has often used, we shall be inclined to extend the scope of our moral concern to others.

The analysis given in the previous paragraph enables Lebow to avoid becoming trapped in the well-known cosmopolitan/communitarian debate. As the bearers of multiple identities that do not necessarily cohere, it is difficult to define ourselves as belonging to this community or that. Our different identities will link us to different communities. The only cosmopolitan feature of our situation is the diverse, incoherent and cross cutting nature of our identities. His analysis of identity leads him to espouse (and recommend to the reader) the ethical principle of tolerance. The facts about identity push towards this ethically liberal conclusion.

Lebow moves towards a second dimension of an ethical position by setting out his skepticism towards linear narratives. His portrayal of the fluidity and multiplicity of our identities leads him to be skeptical of a widespread propensity for people to construct linear stories of themselves in an attempt to bring order to their diverse identities. On his view such linear stories end up repressing, denying or warping some of the identities in play in a given person or group. Linear stories lead us towards being coercive towards ourselves and towards others. The narratives privilege some identities at the cost of repressing or obliterating others. The ethical consequence that flows from this skepticism towards linear narratives is an

endorsement of the value of anarchy as a positive value. This is in contrast to the negative notion of anarchy which understands it as the absence of order, the presence of chaos and consequently as something negative. In supporting the positive interpretation of anarchy Lebow writes:

Ethics might accordingly be facilitated by a certain incoherence of identity. Rather than taking refuge in imaginary and indefensible cosmic order, or searching in vain for a single self within us, in nature or our institutions, we must attempt to transcend the illusion of coherent identity and live, albeit never comfortably, with the conflicts and tensions within ourselves and between us and our societies (Lebow 2012: 324).

Put metaphorically we might say that he sees this internal incoherence as ethically enriching, as a feast rather than a mess. In his provocative book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Robert Nozick makes the ethical case for a minimal state that would not embody one version of the good, but would allow an array of different individuals to pursue different ideas of a good life both individually and in communities. Such a state would be a framework for utopias. In an entertaining passage he makes his point by providing a list of the kinds of people that he would like this framework to accommodate. It includes:

Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Taylor, Bertrand Russell, Thomas Merton, Yogi Berra, Allen Ginsburg, Harry Wolfson, Thoreau, Casy Strengel, The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Picasso, Moses, Einstein, Hugh Heffner, Socrates, Henry Ford, Lenny Bruce, Baba Ram Das, Ghandi, Sir Edmund Hillary, Raymond Lubitz, Buddha, Frank Sinatra, Columbus, Freud, Normal Mailer, Ayn Rand, Baron Rothschild, Ted Williams, Thomas Edison, H.L. Mencken, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Ellison, Bobby Fisher, Emma Goodman, Peter Kropotkin, you and your parents (Nozick 1974: 310).

It seems to me that Lebow might have made his argument using a similar list, but not of people other than oneself, but of the many different identities we might each individually seek to cultivate. My own list might include Frost the professor, the Englishman, the South African, the Afrikaner, the Christian, the rugby enthusiast, the classical music lover, the country and western fan, the puritan, the hedonist, and so on, through a long list. These identities do not easily cohere. Instead, as Lebow says a life is a “process of reflection that lives only in the present” (Lebow 2012: 324). There is no overriding order; it is rather a living anarchy. It is worth dwelling on the list that Nozick provides of the kinds of people he would like to include in his anarchy and on the list each of us could provide of the identities we might find, create and live. These lists are not merely descriptive, but are attractive to us. Nozick clearly wants his readers to see that a social arrangement that could accommodate his list would be a good one to live in. The attraction is to be found in the rich diversity it would offer its participants. Similarly, Lebow, in presenting his account of us as multiple identities “in process”, is putting forward a proposition that he thinks would be attractive to us. I certainly find it so. The alternatives that are implicitly being rejected by Nozick and Lebow are those which require that one of our identities be made dominant over the others. For example, this might be a puritan identity that calls on us to repress a host of other possible identities. These other identities, of course, would not go away, but would require ongoing

repression. They would require lives of ceaseless internal struggle. In sum, what we see then is from an empirical analysis, Lebow makes a case for embracing diversity both internally and externally. Freedom and diversity are the values being extolled here.

The value of diversity is taken up by Lebow again when he discusses social orders. Once again he makes his case by starting from the fact of individual and social identities in flux. He writes:

Civil order and psychological well-being require rules, but also frequent exceptions to them. Orders with loose, thin or ambiguous rules are invariably fortuitous as authorities of all kinds do their best to forestall such possibility. For this reason, successful orders are never the result of purposeful design. It is all the more ironic that so many intellectuals have nevertheless aspired to overcome alienation and injustice through the rational construction of orders (Lebow 2012: 302).

I understand the point to be that multi-identity autonomous actors will always find themselves at odds with social arrangements that seek to advance single identities—they would experience these as coercive. In order to avoid this, they will always seek ways around coercive rules in search of space in which to live out their diverse identities. What this suggests, of course, is: First, social arrangements that are loose and which allow ample space for people with diverse identities to live in harmony together are preferable to arrangements that are strict and confining. Second, social arrangements that come into being from the bottom up, rather than top down, are more likely to succeed. These would be the outcome of autonomous action by autonomous actors and accordingly would have wide legitimacy. Lebow is making the case for anarchy. He assumes, quite rightly I think, that the ethical case he is making for an anarchical order is one that will appeal to modern individuals as he has describes them. It is important to note that he is not going through an imaginary or hypothetical process as many modern liberal theorists do (Rawls 1972; Ackerman 1980, for example), in which they ask us to imagine ourselves in some carefully defined hypothetical decision situation from within which we shall be able to derive fundamental ethical principles to guide our constitution building. Instead, he gives a social scientifically backed account of who we are (people with multiple and changing identities) and on the basis of this he derives a set of ethical conclusions.

Lebow briefly introduces, but does not discuss in detail, a set of ethical values not often defended in contemporary political ethics. His analysis suggests that we ought to accept communication, friendship and empathy as ethical values relevant to contemporary international relations. Indicating these ethical values as important is in sharp contrast to contemporary preoccupations with deciding what personal and social borders it would be ethical to police and what means it would be ethical to use in the policing of these borders. Modern discussions of human rights and the rights of sovereign states are preoccupied with such questions. From a consideration of these, new doctrines have emerged such as those dealing with humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. Instead of the common, but narrow, focus on how to protect circumscribed selves, individual or collective, Lebow offers

an alternative based on his analysis of modern people as living with and through multiple selves:

Mutual incoherence is an important communality that might help to bridge other differences. Towards this end, it must be theorized and widely accepted as a social reality. People would almost certainly discover that they share self-identifications with other actors. These identifications arise, of course, from their roles and affiliations. They provide a basis for communication, friendship and empathy, and as a result the stretching of our horizons to include other actors within the circles of memberships that we think of as defining ourselves. To the degree this comes to pass, it would collapse the divide between cosmopolitans and communitarians (Lebow 2012: 321).

Here once again from an analysis of what we are in the modern world, he points towards ethical conclusions that he thinks will follow for those who understand his analysis. Our own multiple selves open up the possibility for a range of conversations, friendships and empathetic relationships that we do not often acknowledge in our search for our single authentic self.

It seems to me that another ethical value implicit in Lebow's analysis is that of play. Once we understand the range of identities we currently have, together with others we may yet come to have, the defense of our single self will no longer be our primary occupation. Instead, we shall be confronted with a domain of freedom in which we are free to consider a range of possible identities. It is not farfetched to suppose that doing this would be a playful exploration within ourselves and between ourselves and others. Lebow's exploration of the operas of Mozart and librettist Da Ponte demonstrates this point nicely.

The value of play is closely linked to another value I take to be implicit in Lebow's work and which is rarely discussed by political ethicists, creativity. Once we have moved on from the notion of a single self that needs to be disciplined and defended, we are then presented with a domain within which we can be creative about ourselves within the interior domain and creative about the relationship between our various selves and others in the external domain (including, of course, the international one). Some of what is possible in this creative realm might be achieved within oneself, but greater possibilities might be discovered in joint creative projects with others as demonstrated in Lebow's discussion of the operas. Another example of this in practice is provided by the thousands of students who study abroad during the course of their tertiary education. Here they move across and blur existing boundaries in an exploration of new friendships and creative projects. Their study abroad may be understood as a process that blurs cultural and identity related boundaries. Here the foreign 'other' is seen by many such students, not as a threat, but as a source of promise—the promise of friendship, creativity, innovation and new social liaisons.

The ethical position embedded in *The Politics and Ethics of Identity* is exciting, thought provoking and hopeful. It presents the reader with a picture of a possible world not preoccupied with the defense of boundaries and not filled with the fear that commonly accompanies such defensive stances, but filled with possibilities of friendship, play, and the expansion of our selves. It seems to me that only the narrow minded would object to this. Yet even for the majority who are convinced of

Lebow's case (I include myself in this group) some problems remain. The traditional approaches to political ethics typically consider problems relating to the following: justice, liberty, equality, human rights, intervention, non-intervention, migration, asylum seeking, constitution building, democracy, and the rule of law. Common to all of them is a concern with the problem of the allocation of scarce resources, on one hand, and, the creation, maintenance, and limits to be put on political authority, on the other. It is in connection with these that the problem of identity becomes most acute. Ethicists have been preoccupied with the question *Who Gets What When How?* (Lasswell 1936). Lebow cannot be faulted for having failed to consider all the standard ethical questions, because he did not set out to write theory of justice. However, were he to develop his highly attractive ethical suggestions into a fully-fledged ethical theory, he would have to take on these problems.

In closing, I would like to muse for a moment about the direction Lebow's argument might be taken by someone seeking to build a comprehensive ethical theory based on it. In outline I think such a theory would: first, make the case for anarchical institutions; second, put forward a theory of justice based on constrained transactions rather than a patterned template; third, it would endorse an arrangement in which first-generation human rights are respected; fourth, it would make a case for a minimal state rather than any maximalist state; fifth (and finally), it would build in, at every point, the possibility of open dialogue which would then facilitate the exploration of identity championed in this book.

The ethical sketch given in the previous paragraph is clearly not far removed from the outline given by Robert Nozick in his *Anarchy State and Utopia*. Yet Lebow's theory is more substantial than Nozick's in its starting point. Lebow carefully develops a foundation in fact, for the ethical conclusions which follow. In sharp contrast, Nozick simply starts with the assertion "Individuals have rights, and are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights)" (Nozick 1974: ix). The identities of the individuals of which Nozick speaks are empty. His starting suggests that Nozick's whole argument depends on blindly accepting the opening assertion that individuals have rights. He does not present reasons indicating why we should accept it. Lebow's book fills this emptiness in a convincing and enriching way.

In my own work I, too, have made the case for anarchical social orders. In *Ethics in International Relations* I make the claim that we already live in two global anarchical arrangements (Frost 1996). The first is the society of sovereign states and the second global civil society. They are anarchical in that neither has a central government and the participants in them (states, in the first one, individuals, in the second) relate to one another subject to freedom-preserving constraints. What distinguishes my account from Lebow's is the point of departure. He starts with a consideration of individual men and women. He explores the claim that they each have a single self and a fixed identity. In what I have written, I start with an exploration of the social wholes in which we are constituted as individuals. It has

been extraordinarily interesting for me to see how, although our starting positions are radically different, we both end up defending an ethical position extolling the virtue of anarchy.

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