**Creating Global Moral Iconicity:**

**The Nobel Prizes and the Constitution of World Moral Culture**

**Abstract**

Since at least the late 19th century, a world-level moral culture has developed, providing a space for certain persons to be presented as global moral icons. This global moral space was already pointed to by Kant as an emergent form, and was later theorized by Durkheim. This paper shows how an important institutionalisation of global moral culture was enacted by the founding, and subsequent mutations of, the Nobel Prizes. These, and other awards which imitated them, are performative in a profound sense: they simultaneously reflect and help bring into being a planet-spanning culture which demands moral icons which both exemplify and partly constitute it. How the Nobel prizes and their imitators work to create globally-relevant moral iconicity is explored. The case of Gandhi is taken as an example of how, despite not being awarded a Nobel prize, some moral icons are also brought into being through symbolic contact with other such icons, including Nobel winners. The paper considers the lingering, powerful, but generally invisible, influence today on world moral culture of the innovations pursued by the early Nobel prize committees.

Keywords: global, globalization, morality, icons, iconicity, performativity, Nobel prizes, Gandhi, Kant, Durkheim

One of the most eye-catching phenomena of the early 21st century is the number of candidates from the world of entertainment seeking to be regarded as globally-recognised moral icons, embodying boundless sympathy for the wretched of the earth, acute intellectual capacities that diagnose the ills of the world, and the dynamism, social capital, and political clout to change the globe for the better. Since Bob Geldof’s elevation in the 1980s to the status of ‘Saint Bob’, secular patron saint of the starving of Africa, other entertainment figures have sought to reach the same seemingly exalted level, such as the musician Bono and the actress Angelina Jolie. But attempts by such figures and their media cheerleaders to achieve global moral icon status can often be bitterly contested by other interested parties. Angelina Jolie’s appointment as a visiting professor at the London School of Economics in 2016 was greeted with a chorus of protests from those who regarded her as ersatz intellectual and fake moral icon. A figure like Nelson Mandela seems for many people to have far more genuine claim to iconicity than a mere film star.

Such controversies may seem trivial. But they point to the existence of what I here will call a ‘global moral culture’, which both produces and requires for its operation global moral icons. These are individuals whose public personas are widely understood across the world to embody the highest human(e) values. Such figures enjoying mostly indisputable credentials in this regard include Gandhi, Mandela and Martin Luther King, all apparent apogees of humanity’s highest moral achievements. The global moral culture within which these persons’ reputations are situated is in part constituted by those reputations, and by the ongoing forms of remembrance that work to burnish their reputations as moral icons for present-day and future generations. This world-spanning moral culture has existed in an institutionalised way since at least the late 19th century, when it was (obliquely) theorized by Émile Durkheim. It was also gestured towards by Immanuel Kant in the late 18th century. Below I consider how the Kant-Durkheim lineage of thinking helps us understand that culture and the roles played within it by the category of global moral iconicity. Additionally, one must recognise that global moral culture is a field, in both Weber’s and Bourdieu’s senses: namely, an arena of contestation, whereby different actors seek to have their preferred candidates elevated to the status of global moral icons, with various benefits accruing to both candidates and cheerleaders if this ‘reputational entrepreneurship’ is successful (Fine, 2003). Such a field also involves struggles between different actors and often bitter denunciations of those taken to be mere pretenders to moral iconicity.

As with other cultural fields, the global moral cultural field is structured to a significant extent by prizes and award ceremonies. There is a plethora of awards now in existence, based in different parts of the world, in addition to such mechanisms of recognition as the awarding of honorary doctorates, freedoms of the city, and streets and buildings being named after those defined to be of exemplary moral and political character. Prizes and awards vary in perceived stature from the very parochial to the (apparently) unquestionably global (Heinich, 2009). At the summit of these sit the Nobel prizes, apparently ‘the ultimate institutionalized expression of regard, praise and admiration’ than can be paid to anyone on the planet (Mulkay, 1984: 534). The crowning glory of any would-be global moral icon today surely would be the awarding of either the Nobel prize for literature or for peace. The Nobel prizes were one of the earliest and still most powerful institutionalisations of the global moral cultural field. By creating prizes with global pretensions, the Nobel Foundation helped to crystallize a very significant part of ‘world culture’, other elements of which were also taking shape at the time (Boli and Thomas, 1997).

This paper highlights various issues. First, that the Nobel prizes are performative phenomena *par excellence*. They have helped to bring into existence that which they claim simply to recognise, i.e. globally-recognisable morality which transcends national and regional borders and limitations, and those person(a)s which are taken to be icons of it. Second, those who fail to win a Nobel prize may nonetheless attain global icon status by other routes, such as being defined as morally great by others who have won the Nobel honour, as the case of Gandhi, examined below, attests. Third, the awarding of high status prizes to those persons that some interested parties regard as unworthy, generates criticism which, instead of undermining belief in the existence of global moral culture and its concomitant iconicity, often in fact both stimulates searches for alternative persons to be so consecrated, and leads to projects to set up new prizes which also aim to consecrate globally-recognisable moral icons. I also suggest that the nature of global moral iconicity today is still strongly shaped by the innovations of the early Nobel prize-awarding committees which operated before WWI.

**Theorizing Global Moral Culture**

To understand the nature of global moral culture, one can turn to the cosmopolitan political theorizing of Immanuel Kant, and the elaboration of it offered by Émile Durkheim. Taken together, the ideas of Kant and Durkheim provide an account of the central features of the genesis and operation of the world-level moral cultural field (Author, 2013).

For Kant (1963b)[[1]](#endnote-1), world history involves an initial human dispersal across the whole planet, followed by increasing levels of interconnection between geographically disparate social groups. Warfare is for centuries endemic between these groups, encouraged by ‘differences of language and of religion’, these breeding ‘mutual hatred and pretexts for war’ (1963b: 111). However, humans ‘cannot infinitely disperse’ across the planet, and so must eventually ‘tolerate the presence of each other’ (1963b: 103). In the very long run, the experiences of long and bloody warfare eventually teach humans ‘that which reason could have told them at the beginning and with far less sad experience ... to step from the lawless condition of savages into a league of nations ... [where] even the smallest state could expect security and justice’, a situation eventually pertaining throughout the world (1963a: 19, 20). Over time, trade among different groups develops, and diverse states ‘unite because of mutual interest. The spirit of commerce, which is incompatible with war, sooner or later gains the upper hand in every state’ (1963b: 114). Ever more world-spanning trading relations lead to a situation where ‘understanding, conventions and peaceable relations [are] established among [even] the most distant peoples’ (1963b: 110).

Kant discerned in his own time ‘a rising feeling which each [state or nation] has for the preservation of the whole [world]’, such that ‘a universal cosmopolitan condition [is] com[ing] into being’ (1963a: 23). In this emergent, world-spanning moral culture, ‘a violation of rights in one place is felt *throughout the world*’ (1963b: 105; emphasis added). This is an anticipation of later ideas about a world-spanning moral culture centred upon human rights regimes (Elliott, 2007). For Kant, this culture is based around, and generates, sentiments which condemn any actions which undermine globally-recognised human rights. Wherever those actions may have occurred, the condemnation which follows is literally *global* in nature and scope, both because it comes from all over the planet, and because it is in a certain way the response of *the whole world itself*, operating as a single moral entity (1963b: 103). The opinion-forming capacities of what would later be called ‘global civil society’ (Keane, 2003) are made possible by media such as newspapers. These disseminate information, especially that condemning wrong-doing, across borders and thus help construct world-level public opinion. The converse is also implicit in Kant’s claims. Such media can also play an important role in presenting persons and institutions that are recognisable around the world as exemplars of virtue, that possess such outstanding moral qualities that the whole world should take notice, and who should be recognised as role-models.

Some of these themes were later taken up Durkheim. It is perhaps rather surprising that nowhere in his work does Durkheim explicitly discuss phenomena of emergent world moral culture of his own time as the re-establishment of the Olympic Games and the founding of the Nobel prizes. Other thinkers who were influenced by Comte, like the Saint-Simonians, explicitly analysed the emergence of a new, morally-based world order (Iggers, 1970). However, the younger Durkheim (1964 [1893]: 369) did consider how relations of organic solidarity between different nations both produce, and require regulation by, moral regulations binding upon all the participants. These regulations are ‘cosmopolitan’ because they are emergent properties derived from interactions between different groups and irreducible to the social conditions of any particular group.

Moreover, trends towards the appearance of a world moral culture, which was beginning to regulate the very trans-national social conditions which had produced it, were analysed more directly in addresses Durkheim gave in the early years of the 20th century (Lukes, 1973: 350). Durkheim (1992: 74) proposed that in each ‘civilized’ state, a situation was emerging whereby national citizens’ ‘civic duties … [are] only a particular form of the general obligations of humanity’. The latter was the core of emergent world moral culture. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (2001 [1912]: 322) claimed that today:

… there is no people, no state, that is not involved with another society that is more or less unlimited and includes all peoples ... There is no national life that is not dominated by an inherently international collective life. As we go forward in history, these international groupings take on greater importance and scope.

In that book Durkheim considers Australian aboriginal religions as demonstrating a more general evolutionary trend, whereby over time hitherto separate social groups come into relations of denser interconnectivity. Echoing Kant, neighbouring groups over time cannot avoid contact with each other, and become ever more systematically inter-linked through multiple mechanisms, especially trade and inter-marriage. They become more conscious of what they have in common. ‘[M]utual [cultural] borrowings ... serve to reinforce’ the experience of ‘international’ commonality ((2001 [1912]: 321). Particular gods come to be recognised by multiple groups, and thus their cults are literally ‘international’. These ‘international gods’ are not connected ‘to any geographically fixed society’ (ibid.), for the geography they correspond to is inter-societal, does not have distinct borders, and is ‘spread over an unlimited area’. Thus ‘their sphere of influence is not circumscribed; they glide above the particular tribes and above space’ (ibid.). These gods are literally ‘global’ in their reach, and the icons which represent them are globally recognised and respected. They are cosmopolitan entities, enjoying universal respect and endowed with trans-national moral force. Durkheim adds that such gods are the outcomes of the hybridization of distinct cultural traditions, and are particularly created in and through rituals held at ‘intertribal assemblies’, where differing groups are in intense relations of sociability. It is at such assemblies where attachments to these trans-national icons are evoked and revitalised. I think that this analysis is Durkheim’s oblique attempt to chart the significance of then-recent institutions with explicitly global aims, like the re-founded Olympic Games, centred around internationalist rhetoric of peace between states, and the founding of the Nobel prizes, which awarded persons construed as being of global moral significance.

This account of global moral culture and its icons glosses over power imbalances between the different groups whose interactions are understood to generate it and are regulated by it. The uneven playing field faced by different sorts of players, endowed with greater or lesser resources, in the field of global moral culture, is side-lined, as are hierarchies of ethnicity, region, gender, and so on. Instead, one must recognise that the realm of global moral culture and iconicity is a *field*,characterised by conflicts over who is allowed to enjoy renown and legitimacy within it, and who is not. One must also consider the differing levels of resources and qualifications possessed by different actors, upon which claims to legitimacy rest. These are themes that derive both from Bourdieu’s (1993) account of cultural fields, and Weber’s analysis of claims to legitimacy and the dynamics of orthodoxy and heterodoxy within cultural worlds (Schroeder, 1992). As in other fields, varying parties – ‘reputational entrepreneurs’ in Fine’s (2001) terms - struggle to get their own preferred candidates to be widely perceived as embodying the virtues held up as the most important ones in the field, while they also seek to define which virtues are indeed the most laudable.

Despite these caveats, the line of thought opened up by Kant and Durkheim still points to the existence of such a field, and gives a general sense both of how it has been created through mechanisms of trans-national social interaction, and also of the means and elements by which it operates. These include globally recognised (if not necessarily universally-valorised) icons and person(a)s (‘international gods’), and ceremonies that claim global scope and significance, within which awards and prizes are given to those deemed to be virtuous in literally ‘world’-level and globe-spanning ways. Those person(a)s are thought to embody and exhibit the highest moral values, which are themselves understood to be globally shared. Their personality, reputation and activities are thought to be significant for the whole world, and worthy of global, rather than ‘merely’ local or national, forms of recognition.

When Nelson Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1993, it was these sorts of phenomena that were at work. The consecration was intended to be a form of global recognition of those virtues of Mandela’s that were felt to be truly globally significant (Faflik, 2012). Mandela’s status as a global moral icon was not brought into being by the ceremony alone, but was certainly thoroughly cemented by it. The Nobel awarding ritual is in Durkheim’s terms an inter-tribal assembly which recognizes forms of virtuousness that (try to) go beyond any particular national or regional culture. It is precisely the *globality* of the status conferred on Mandela by the Nobel ceremonialization of his virtues, and his further elevation to global moral icon stature, which is pointed to by Durkheim’s analysis. It is the notion of outrages against the codes of common humanity, embodied and enshrined in global moral culture, being felt *everywhere* and *anywhere* across the planet, that is Kant’s contribution to understanding such matters. In this instance, the crimes of the Apartheid regime against which Mandela fought, and to which he became a martyr in prison for decades, were the outrages against which *the whole world* (was said to have) reacted and came to condemn. The globally-recognised outrageousness of the Apartheid regime constituted the counterpoint against which Mandela’s globally-recognisable virtuousness was created, made discernible to a global audience, and rendered worthy of honour. The Kant/Durkheim line of thinking about global moral culture finds its prototypical object of analysis in the consecration of Mandela. Such thinking sets out the conditions of possibility - involving moral transgressions, iconicity, consecration, and inter-group ceremonials - that allow for, and demand, global moral icons like the Prisoner of Robben Islandto be created in the first place.

**Global Moral Culture Institutionalised: The Nobel Prizes**

We can now turn to examine in more detail the institutionalisation - as well as performance and reproduction - of global moral culture through the mechanism of the Nobel prizes, which I think are part of the complex of phenomena gestured towards by Durkheim.

It has often been noted by analysts of prizes and prize-giving - most notably English (2005) - that prizes can operate as very effective means of transforming one form of capital into another. The case of Alfred Nobel is exemplary here, and perhaps the most spectacular instance ever of capital conversion through the inauguration of prizes. It is an over-simplification to say that Nobel somehow ‘whitewashed’ the vast sums of money he accrued through sales of armaments and explosives by setting up in the terms of his will the famous prizes for the sciences, literature and peace work. Nobel was in fact a committed supporter of the peace movement of the late 19th century, and the humanitarian impulse behind the founding of the prizes was genuinely felt. As English (2005: 55) notes, Nobel was also not particularly innovative by the standards of his time and place - to set up prizes and cash awards for explicitly humanitarian purposes was a relatively obvious idea in the late 19th century for making respectable use of vast industrialist fortunes. What Nobel *seems* to have had in mind - a matter of some controversy, given the notoriously vague specifications in his will - was a project that was both ambitious and modest at the same time. The former, because of the size of the financial endowment underpinning the prizes (about US$ 9 Million in 1896, or about a quarter of a billion Dollars now); and the latter, because in the case of the peace prize, he likely saw it as a straightforward form of recognition of a relatively small number of fellow Europeans prominent in the peace movement of which he was a supporter. The literature prize was also initially understood in a narrow way, as rewarding authors who wrote edifying humanist prose, especially those who contributed to the peace movement. The scope of both prizes seems to have been initially relatively modest.

The broader - and ultimately global - significance of Nobel and the prizes set up in his will instead came more from a series of later innovations than from the explicit intentions of the founder. Nobel’s will provided for five prizes to be awarded annually to those who had served mankind ‘the best’ in the previous year. The first three were to go to researchers in physics, chemistry, and medicine, and the fourth was for idealistic literary accomplishment – a criterion associated with ‘peace-making’, albeit in ways open to interpretation. These were to be awarded by Swedish institutions. The fifth prize, to be awarded by a committee elected by the lower house of the Norwegian parliament, was for ‘the one who had worked the most or the best for the fraternity among peoples and the abolition or reduction of permanent armies, as well as the establishment and promotion of peace congresses’ (Abrams, 1962: 226). The sheer size of the financial bequest made this original vague scheme workable, in that it gave sufficient scope to those on the committees that administered the awards after Nobel’s death to innovate in ways that went beyond the terms of the will and to extend greatly the scope and ambition of the prizes and their mechanisms of consecration. This is not surprising given the habitus of the Swedes and Norwegians who ran the Nobel apparatus in its earliest days. They hailed from a regional context where there was strong support for entities like the International Red Cross. Such entities were the expressions of an earlier burst of institutionalisation of global moral culture which was carried out by bourgeois Europeans in the mid-19th century, stimulated by the experience of the horrors of European wars of the time. This period of institutionalisation created the conditions of possibility for the more broad and systematic projects of the end of the century, of which the Nobels are just the most widely remembered example today (Arnason and Wittrock, 2012).

The Norwegian administrators of the Peace prize began to innovate soon after Nobel’s death. Nobel’s will indicated that a prize awarded in a given year was to reward a person’s good works in the previous year only, but the administrators rejected this as impractical, and so the scope of the prize was widened to include their total past performance, enormously opening up the field of who could be considered worthy. Nobel had also intended the very generous cash sum attendant upon receiving a prize to free up the time of individuals so honoured, so that they could do more good works in the immediate future. But over time the prize criteria shifted more in the direction of ‘lifetime achievement’ awards, rewarding more elderly candidates towards the end of their careers rather than those in the middle of them (English, 2005).

Here, then, was a shift towards recognising more ‘elder statesmen’ types rather than those in mid-career, equating globally-recognisable virtue with the wisdom that supposedly goes with age. The quasi-anthropological themes here - that the most globally virtuous persons are like the ‘tribal’ elders of the putative ‘global village’ - have proven remarkably resilient over time as well. A group made up of former Peace prize winners, and other worthies consecrated in similar ways, with leadership by (mostly) undisputed global moral icon Nelson Mandela, was founded in the 1990s under the self-conscious title of ‘Global Village Elders’ and given the task of sorting out some of the world’s greatest problems.[[2]](#endnote-2) The somewhat ersatz nomenclature points back to the sorts of aboriginal symbolism and nomenclature examined by Durkheim, but with a slick media-friendly gloss added. Once the Nobel prizes had moved towards a retroactive form of recognition, often recognising grand old men (and later on, sometimes women) rather than those at the forefront of contemporary activities, it set up the possibility, subsequently actualised, of creating global moral icons out of the relatively elderly rather than the younger, and creating a kind of ancestor worship where iconicity seems synonymous with grey hair and other conventional and cross-culturally recognisable features of ageing. This is an underlying reason why efforts to present someone like the 40-something Angelina Jolie as being worthy to be mentioned in the exalted company of the likes of Mandela, are often met with such derision.

The manner in which the scope of the Nobel prizes was expanded by their early administrators had other curious, unintentional, but long-lasting consequences. Nobel seems to have expected the Peace prize to go to a quite narrow cadre of peace workers drawn from Euro-American social elites, whom in the early days of the prize he would have often been personally acquainted with. But the Prize committee early on widened the remit of nominees to include statesmen and politicians, the very type of person thought by peace activists of the time to be the war-mongering antitheses of the codes of global moral culture. One consequence of this was that it became common for politicians to nominate each other for the Peace prize, creating loud protests of denunciation from other actors in the field (Abrams, 1962).[[3]](#endnote-3) Each such expansion of the scope of the Prize has fuelled controversy, indicating the very antagonistic nature of the global moral culture field.

While Nobel’s will indicated that only individuals could be nominated, the committee specified that institutions could be nominees too, and early awards indeed went to bodies such as the International Red Cross - itself an agent of the institutionalisation of world moral culture a generation before the instantiation of the Nobel prizes - and the Institute of International Law. This was an important shift in scope. By allowing for the possibility that collective entities could be invested with a halo of virtuousness that was presented as world-spanning in reach, it also meant that those institutions which upheld, elaborated and in certain senses ‘ran’ global moral culture, could be consecrated, recognised and praised for doing just that. The Nobel Foundation started to work as an institution of global moral culture with the power to pick out and recognise other institutions concerned with that culture, legitimating them and extending their prestige accordingly. As their prestige and moral charisma were expanded, so too could their pragmatic operations become more wide-ranging, in terms of what they did and in which parts of the world they did it. Their codifications of what global moral culture’s codes, precepts and principles were, could become more elaborated and more potentially influential on modes of action in the world. This is part of the process of massive expansion of putatively global rules and regulations that contemporary theorists of ‘world culture’ depict as occurring in and from centres in Europe and North America from the end of the 19th century onwards (Elliott, 2007). The institutionalization of global moral culture was given a tremendous boost both by the existence of the Nobels, and by the prizes’ capacity to confer positive attention and legitimacy onto institutions engaged in formulating universalising codes of conduct as to how the world was to be run.

The Nobel prizes, like all awards and prize-givings, are performative phenomena (English, 2005). They have significantly assisted in bringing into existence that which they claim merely to recognise, i.e. global morality and the persons who are icons of that morality. The elements of their performativity are various. First, over time they have, in terms of the prestige they can bestow, gone well beyond the level enjoyed by national academies of arts and sciences, the major consecrating institutions of the 17th to 19th centuries in the Euro-American cultural area (Inhaber and Przednowek, 1976). They have transcended what have become seen as ‘merely’ national honours, precisely because of their perceived global reach – and in that way of thinking, prestige which is truly global must perforce be of greater value than a form which is ‘only’ national in scope.

Here a curious form of social alchemy has taken place. Despite being administered within the nation-states of Sweden and Norway, apparatchiks from these countries have been able to take on the mantle of *global consecrators*, their national origins being effaced by the globe-spanning charisma of the prizes themselves and of the virtuous icons the prizes themselves have helped to create. The national administrative basis of the global morality the prizes embody and claim to reward, only comes forcibly into view when criticisms are sometimes made of the alleged Nordic or European bias of the judges and the administrative procedures and apparatuses in the decision-making and awarding process. It has been a long-time complaint of African and Chinese critics that the judging processes are far from being truly universal, but rather rooted in all sorts of regional prejudices. But such critique in turn has stimulated those awarding the prizes since at least the 1970s to be ever more self-consciously ‘globalist’ in their thinking, awarding ever more prizes to individuals from hitherto under-represented or ignored regions and countries. In this way, the administrators have sought to make the prizes approximate ever more in actuality the promise that they contain of truly *global* modes of recognition, which in turn brings into being more forcefully than before the idea that there *is* a global moral cultural realm that the prizes are simply responses to. Belief in the global moral level of human affairs is stimulated each time it is alleged that the Nobel prizes fail to live up to it, for it is assumed that there is indeed such a thing to live up to.

At another level, the Nobel prizes are performative in that they can be transformative. Awarding of a prize can ‘generate a worldwide reputation’ for those who do not yet enjoy one, as well as confirm and extend such reputations for those who already have them (Heinich, 2009: 86). Both recipients and prize-givers usually benefit from the awarding process. At the ceremonies, the award-givers stress the global significance of the awardee and their doings, thus framing both person and actions as global in stature. But in turn, the speeches and subsequent public declarations of recipients use terminology that is in a global register. ‘This is the highest honour that could be conferred on me’ and suchlike statements reproduce the idea that the Nobels recognise the pinnacle of achievements globally and are themselves of global significance. So how the reward is *received* is as important as how it is *given* in terms of constantly evoking the global status of the prizes, above which there can be nothing else, for this is apparently the most truly universal recognition that the whole planet itself can muster (Mulkay, 1984). In turn, the award-givers win prestige of their own, being associated not only with the world’s most prestigious prizes, but also the prestige of the winners whose globally-recognised value is now confirmed by the very winning of the prize (Best, 2008). As with all prizes, the award-givers implicitly but forcefully claim the right to endow persons with virtue, and in so doing win virtue for themselves (Strauss, 1982). With the Nobel prizes, and then with the advent of their scores of imitators, this process took on planetary dimensions, which involves a kind of performativity *of* the global. This involves the reconfirmation of global moral culture, which is already assumed to exist, as well as an invoking of it which simultaneously reproduces and perpetuates it while projecting its continuing existence into the future.

**Nobel Imitation and Proliferation**

The Nobel prizes sit at the apex of a global hierarchy of prestige in terms of awards given to the virtuous (Heinich, 2009). Since their inception, there has been a notable ‘Nobel effect’, involving the creation of ever greater numbers of prizes made in the image of the Nobel awards, and this proliferation has been at the root of the further deepening and extension of the institutionalisation of world moral culture.

Within three years of the first Nobel ceremony, a range of prestigious prizes were invented in Europe and America, such as the Goncourt and Femina prizes in France, and the Pulitzer in the US, in more or less explicit imitation of the Nobel model. Such prizes often fused together two separable categories of virtue – artistic and/or professional excellence on the one hand, and the humanitarian contribution of the artist and her works on the other (Heinich, 2009). This was a fusion of categories already pioneered by the Nobel prize for literature, where artistic quality was rewarded only if the works, and thus the author’s persona, exhibited a high level of moral edification ‘for the good of humanity’. In this way, the realms of world moral culture and the arts were conjoined and to a certain extent fused, taking the former into the social system of art and thus extending its social reach still further (cf. Luhmann, 2000). This mingling of aesthetic and world moral cultural considerations and principles has continued into more recent times, for example in the inauguration of awards such as the Lennon-Ono Grant for Peace, the Princess of Asturias prizes for humanistic achievements, and in multiple humanitarian awards for globally-recognised artistic luminaries like Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison and Günther Grass (English, 2005: 28, 59, 60).

Actors intent on imitating the Nobel prizes have been driven by various motives. ‘Nobel envy’ has been a powerful motivation, for the global reputation of the prizes has seemed to indicate how as seemingly an unpalatable figure as ‘a dynamite and munitions manufacturer … [could make] his name a virtual synonym for cultural prestige’ and moral edification (English, 2005: 64). Sometimes the Nobels have been copied positively, and at other times more negatively. When a particular group feels that the cultural or political domain it is especially concerned with needs to be legitimated through the means of giving prizes to particularly laudable persons or institutions within that domain, it can depict the new award as the equivalent of the Nobel prize for that realm (Best, 2008). Conversely, as the world moral culture field is an antagonistic one, criticism of the Nobels by particular interested parties has driven the creation of alternative prizes, which present themselves as more genuinely virtuous and more truly global than the Nobels.

The criticism is not of the assumptions underpinning the Nobels as such. The idea of prizes with global scope is rarely, if ever, challenged, which is why Nobel and Nobel-like prizes continue to enjoy prestige and moral force over time. Instead, criticism focuses on two levels. First, and more specifically, the awarding committee in a given year is alleged to have made an erroneous judgement and given the prize to an unworthy candidate, i.e. someone who is not truly globally recognisable. This sort of criticism leaves untouched, and indeed confirms, the category of global worthiness. Second, and more generally, such shortcomings are said to be indicative of biases in the Nobel administration itself, driven by the Nordic, or European, or Global Northern, habitus of the Nobel personnel (Best, 2008). Judging panels and the Nobel bureaucracy can be challenged on the grounds of failing to live up to both their own globalist rhetoric, and the world moral cultural precepts that they are supposed to abide by and embody, but allegedly do not. Criticism of the alleged failings of how the Nobels actually operate has taken on various different objects of grievance. Some critics have pointed out a severe gender imbalance (Misztal, 2009). Others have taken to task the Nobel authorities for historically favouring persons drawn from high social elites and narrow national and ethnic backgrounds (Volz and Lee, 2012, Berry, 1981, Zuckerman, 1977). Such critiques can be used by interested parties as justificatory rhetorical tools used to demand alternative prizes which reward the hitherto excluded types of person, awarding them for their putatively global virtues too, replicating the Nobel consecration process in social domains it hitherto had not penetrated.

Particularly striking are claims made by aggrieved governments that the Nobel apparatus is biased against persons from their country. For example, there is widespread dissatisfaction among scientific groups and governments around the world that the science prize committees are biased towards those born or resident in the US, and that unfair lobbying goes on to the benefit of US candidates and the detriment of people from other regions (Heinich, 2009). Such grievances can lead to strenuous government-sponsored attempts to win prizes. This can be seen in the case of recent Chinese government actions. The intention has not just been to win a global reputation for Chinese science. It has also been to take domestic and global attention away from the Nobel committee’s tendency to reward Chinese dissidents and in so doing to highlight offences against human rights in China that such dissidents want to bring to world-level attention (Cao, 2004). On this logic, a Chinese-resident winning a globally-recognised science prize would diminish the challenge of the opprobrium potentially heaped upon the Chinese government when someone it persecutes is honoured by the Nobel peace or literature prizes. The global honour for the winning individual produces an equally global form of dishonour that is experienced by the state officials who are seen to persecute that person. But the winning of a science prize by a state-approved scientist may compensate for or neutralise the problems attendant upon a dissident winning a literature or peace prize.

Governments have sometimes rejected the whole Nobel paraphernalia as hopelessly corrupt and launch its own alternative gauge of global moral worth. The USSR’s post-war Stalin Prize for Peace is a particularly striking expression of this tendency (Abrams, 1962). But in the more densely and complexly globalized world of the early 21st century, such a strategy of Nobel-withdrawal seems plausible only for North Korea and any states strongly defined as ‘rogue’ by the institutions of world moral culture and/or by more powerful and vocal national governments. Today the awarding of a Nobel prize to a dissident may well lead to some sort of settlement between a government and external institutions. The honouring of the imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi with a Nobel peace prize undoubtedly conferred upon her an enhanced level of moral authority that was important in the process leading to her release by the Burmese military regime. Her elevation from national-level dissident to global icon of political probity certainly played an important role in the (limited) transformation of political conditions in her country, in the direction of becoming more acceptable to the standards of world moral culture.

The Nobel prizes have spawned large numbers of imitators, and they stand at the top of a prestige hierarchy of prizes and awards that in a certain sense they themselves have brought about. This growth in the number of Nobel-like prizes has had at least two major facets. First, the institutionalisation and ceremonialization of world moral culture has been extended and deepened tremendously over the last century precisely through the means of post-Nobel prize proliferation. Second, with a vast increase in the number of awards seeking to reward virtue, there are now a huge number of mechanisms of consecration, enjoying greater or lesser levels of prestige and recognition themselves, As the media profile and perceived praiseworthiness of a recipient increases the more such prizes are accrued by them, it is likely that they will attain even more awards, as other groups of consecrators seek to be associated with the charismatic glow associated with previous rounds of consecration. This is a phenomenon of reputational spiralling famously analysed by Robert Merton (1968). The pluralization of means of consecration paradoxically tends towards a sort of narrowing of the range of who gets honoured. A small number of certain particularly privileged recipients tend to pick up large numbers of awards. A clutch of smaller awards for a person may pique the attention of nominators for Nobel prizes. Conversely, the awarding of a Nobel prize will almost certainly lead to the conferment of other awards, and in the case of the most high-profile icons, very many prizes and other honours indeed.

For example, the list of awards conferred upon Nelson Mandela runs to over 250, and ranges in the Pre-Nobel period from the Nehru Prize for International Understanding, and the Bruno Kreisky Award for human rights, to UNESCO’s Simon Bolivar prize. After his winning of the Nobel Peace prize in 1993, there was a very significant upward swing in awards and honours, an indicative sample being prizes such as the Anne Frank medal for human rights and tolerance, the Sheikh Yusuf Peace Award of the Muslim Women’s Federation, the Indira Gandhi Award for International Justice and Harmony – all national or regional imitators of the Nobel prizes – as well as a dizzying array of honorary doctorates, freedoms of cities, and suchlike.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Both newly inaugurated prizes, or established ones which the current organisers are seeking to raise the global profile of, require the presence of prestigious judges to seem sufficiently prestigious, and thus to warrant respect and attention beyond relatively narrow audiences. Those who have already been consecrated by other mechanisms are sought out to be the public faces of further consecrating devices. Nobel prize winners are a particularly sought-after commodity, and their participation keeps the global prize-giving apparatus of world moral culture operating (English, 2005). The charismatic power to consecrate that a particular person enjoys, which is afforded by receiving a Nobel prize and/or its derivatives, exists in a historical chain. S/he who has been consecrated by an earlier cohort of prestigious consecrators will subsequently consecrate others in turn, contributing to the ongoing collective production of global moral icons.

**Gandhi: Iconicity Without Nobel Recognition?**

Some important issues concerning the production of global moral icons are well dramatized in the case of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi’s status as a - perhaps *the* quintessential - global moral icon seems today almost unimpeachable. He is a figure who has certainly operated as a template for later persons who would seek to achieve, or have been given, that mantle. But this reputation seems, at least on the surface, to have developed *ex nihilo*. This is not least because he never won a Nobel prize, although it was widely thought towards the end of his life that he should receive one. Consideration of his case illustrates some of the mechanisms whereby global moral iconicity can be achieved without the *direct* intervention of Nobel consecration.

The standard Western accounts of his rise to pre-eminence take the view that Gandhi’s rise to global recognition was just a simple function of straightforward global recognition of innate virtue, a moral worthiness which drove and was embodied in an ultimately successful campaign of non-violence to win Indian independence from British colonial control. This account was monumentalized in Richard Attenborough’s 1982 biopic *Gandhi*, which peddled many of the simplifying accounts of Gandhi’s life offered by Western intellectuals since the 1920s, brought them to the attention of a much wider global audience than hitherto, and reaped a clutch of Oscars. The film won prestige through association with Gandhi’s apparently unquestionable global iconicity, while further cementing and mythologizing that iconicity.

Yet such accounts inevitably occlude many factors, presenting a kind of secular saint, deprived of the complex relation to Hindu religious beliefs that some Indian perspectives on his life highlight (Markovits, 2004). Generally glossed over too is the large-scale and media-savvy organisational entity Gandhi created around himself in seeking to realise his explicit aim of drawing the whole world’s attention to the abuses of British colonial rule and the humiliation meted out to Indians as a subject people. ‘I want *world* sympathy in this battle of Right against Might’, wrote Gandhi at the time of the famous Salt March protests in the 1920s (cited at Losurdo: 2015: 80; emphasis added). This is exactly the sort of strategy to appeal to the court of global moral opinion that Kant had foreseen 150 years before.

Yet Gandhi’s global moral iconicity did not arise out of a vacuum, however much a Western liberal interpretation of his activities may claim. Gandhi achieved such a status in significant part through the work of various well-placed reputational entrepreneurs, including as one of the most significant the recipient of a Nobel Prize. At exactly the same time as Durkheim was excoriating the German state for reneging on its commitments to world moral culture, the French pacifist author Romain Rolland received the Nobel prize for literature, in part because of the lofty humanist prose favoured by the Nobel committee of the time, and partly because he was one of the few major intellectuals in the combatant countries publicly to condemn the war throughout the period of hostilities. Such was the moral prestige enjoyed by Rolland in the immediate post-war period, burnished and amplified by the Nobel honour, that praise from him as to the virtuous qualities of a particular person, carried a great deal of weight in Europe and North America, for at the time it seemed he truly was prophet, sage and moral beacon of global standing (Desai, 2010).

When Rolland allegedly praised a novel of the Chinese author Lu Xun, he endowed it, and Chinese writing more generally, both with global rather than merely national significance, and with a claim to be counted as truly part of the exalted realm of ‘world literature’, a domain closely connected to world moral culture. His reported remarks also excited many members of the Chinese intelligentsia to believe that Lu Xun was truly worthy of receiving the Nobel prize for literature, the same honour that Rolland himself had achieved (Foster, 2001). Rolland’s prestige and global status and reach were so great in the 1920s that a few words of praise by him were sufficient to create a Nobel-seeking trend within Chinese literary circles, and apparently to confer on Lu Xun a significant level of Nobel-standard literary/moral charisma by association.

When Rolland began to take a great interest in Gandhi’s political activities, and published a brief biographical account of the Indian campaigner’s activities in 1924, this gave a huge boost to Gandhi’s profile outside of India, and helped to turn the tide of British propaganda against him amongst foreign audiences. This contribution in large part gave ‘the Gandhian legend its truly global dimension’ (Markovits, 2004: 17), with Rolland claiming that only Gandhi’s conception of non-violence ‘could bring salvation to a crime-ridden world, its past crimes, its future crimes’ (cited at Markovits, 2004: 18). Rolland presented Gandhism as a variant of Christianity, and Gandhi himself as more genuinely Christian than Tolstoy, another figure who earlier had been a contender for Nobel recognition, but proved too controversial for the Nordic bureaucracy. Rolland was one of the first to connect Gandhi’s teachings about the means to Indian independence, which were at this period very specific to the Indian political context, to the Western intelligentsia’s concerns for world peace after the horrors of the Great War. This was not a self-evident link by any means (Losurdo, 2015).

In this way, Rolland significantly participated in taking the figure of Gandhi beyond the confines of a national liberation movement, towards a global icon of peace and brotherly love. In so doing, Gandhi’s persona was freed from the realm of everyday politics, ensuring that his name and image could float free – like one of Durkheim’s gods – in global moral space, even decades after the socio-political context in which he had operated had dissolved and been forgotten by people outside of India (Markovits, 2004: 20). It is that free-floating nature which may be the essence of a global moral icon whose reputation as embodiment of virtue seems to later generations almost completely beyond question, just as the holiness of a particularly venerated ‘international god’ is thought to be beyond dispute by believers.[[5]](#endnote-5) The passing on of moral charisma from the Nobel-winning Rolland to Gandhi is the occluded link between the Mahatma and the Nobel prizes. Both are important components of institutionalised global moral culture: Gandhi as a prototype of what counts as world-level and world-changing virtue, and the prizes as the consecrating mechanism which claims simply to recognise such virtue but in fact partly brings it into existence, then globally circulates and justifies it.

The Gandhian charisma was in part created by the Nobel mechanism even though he never was awarded a Nobel prize himself. Moreover, the failure of the Nobel committee to award Gandhi the Peace prize has been one of the major criticisms offered by Developing World intellectuals of the Nobel institute, and a driving justification for the creation of new awards by groups in parts of the globe that have felt deeply under-represented by the Western-based consecration institutions (Abrams, 1962: 241). In this way, the memory of the alleged insult to Gandhi has stimulated prize proliferation, creating the forms of prestige conferment that were so voluminously given to Nelson Mandela in the years after his Nobel win. In that sense, world moral culture is strongly informed by passing of the batons and the transference of moral charisma, either more directly or indirectly, between earlier and later global moral icons. This is exemplified in the case of the Rolland-Gandhi-Mandela chain set out here. Within such a cultural complex, comparisons of earlier to later icons or would-be icons is endemic. Aung San Suu Kyi is frequently compared in public discourses to Gandhi and Mandela. The best hope for Angelina Jolie, Bono and others like them to reach the status of icon is to receive awards from panels that have the likes of Kyi on them, such that sufficient moral charisma is passed onto them that will in turn attract the attention of other such panels.

**Conclusion**

This paper has considered various elements of how prize-giving works within the field of global moral culture, and how global moral iconicity is constructed and reproduced, a factor which in turn helps to reconstitute the field itself over time. Various issues have become apparent.

The influential innovator in the field of global moral culture was not Alfred Nobel but the early Nobel committees made up of Nordic apparatchiks. They reshaped the terms of Nobel’s will such that a) the recognition of extraordinary merit was extended to organisations rather than to individuals alone, b) particularly meritorious individuals were assumed to be relatively elderly, and c) politicians were admissible as Nobel candidates. In the case of a), the Nobel mechanism could consecrate and bestow with moral charisma organisations like the International Red Cross, which like the Nobel Foundation also helped create and institutionalise global moral culture. Such awards brought mutually reinforcing benefits for both awarders and awardees, as well as the further institutionalisation of global moral culture and a strengthening of its depth and scope. In the case of b), the notion of global moral iconicity being associated with relatively advanced age was established, leading to the eventual development of bodies like the Global Village Elders, and to a situation where younger candidates might well struggle to attain iconic status.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In terms of both a) and c), the redefinition of who or what was eligible for consecration created grounds for controversy, with allegedly unworthy organisations and individuals being recognised – the Peace prizes for Barack Obama and the European Union being recent examples. But controversy is often productive, for it stimulates new prizes in response to perceived failures by established prizes to award the truly virtuous. More prizes mean more potential candidates for icon status, drawn from hitherto under-represented groups. Ever more types of people are drawn into the orbit of global moral culture and its institutions, and there is a proliferation of those institutions themselves, as ever more bodies award prizes. Controversies seem to reinforce and extend global moral culture more than they undermine it.

Finally, someone like Aung San Suu Kyi is today almost never compared to Romain Rolland or other ‘forgotten’ Nobel winners.[[7]](#endnote-7) The mechanisms of collective memory have failed to keep his iconicity alive, raising the interesting question of why twilight comes to envelop some icons of global virtue but not others. This has been a question posed by analysts of reputations in general (Fine, 2003). It now needs to be pursued further, as we seek to understand more about the often peculiar operations of global moral iconicity and culture - a culture which was significantly shaped by the deliberations more than 100 years ago of now-obscure Nordic bureaucrats

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1. I here concentrate on the cosmopolitan theory of Kant. On the vexed question of how his cosmopolitan reflections connect to his ‘racism’, see Allais (2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See http://theelders.org/global-village [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The controversy over the merits or otherwise of Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace prize in 2009 illustrates the volatile nature of giving such prizes to politicians currently in office. The awarding of the peace prize to the EU raises similar issues about prizes awarded to organisations. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The very large number of more local and regional prizes accrued by Mother Teresa before she achieved the Nobel peace prize in 1979 provides a comparable example to that of Mandela (Alpion, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This apparent indisputability may derive from the fact that that god is an emergent product of inter-group dynamics, and so is – and is seen to be - irreducible to the concerns of any one particular society or group. So too may Gandhi seem like an unquestionable global moral icon precisely because his reputation in that regard was inter-nationally produced, not generated in and by the Indian context alone, and therefore irreducible to the sordid concerns of empirical politics in that context. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The moral charisma ascribed to Malala Yousafzai, awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2014 at age 17, the youngest eever winner, derives significantly from the fact that she has bucked the century-long trend towards aged recipients. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. One reason may be that while there was a major film about Gandhi, there has never been an equivalent concerning the life of Rolland. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)