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Finding a Place for Philosophy in Intercultural Relations¹

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Globalization and intercultural norms

As globalization brings people from different cultures into greater contact with each other, they quickly realize that while they indeed share many similarities, they may also have completely different sets of beliefs, held either implicitly or explicitly, about how people *should* think and act. Such beliefs are called *norms*. Even a limited amount of cross-cultural experience makes one aware that there is a great deal of variety in the norms held by people from different cultures, not only with respect to customs and communication styles, but also with respect to questions traditionally studied by philosophy: what is "real" or "unreal" (metaphysics), "true" or "false" (epistemology), "good" or "bad" (value theory), "beautiful" or "ugly" (aesthetics), "right" or "wrong" (ethics), and so forth. The emerging field of intercultural philosophy² can be regarded as an area of applied philosophy, which addresses the practical problems that arise in a global context when people holding different cultural norms interact with each other.

Cross-cultural encounters are by their very nature *anomic*, which literally means "without law," or in a looser translation "without norms." Every culture has certain norms regarding what are considered to be "appropriate" and "inappropriate" ways of thinking and behaving, which function to govern the interactions people have with each other in the context of that culture. The norms that we learn in our respective cultures teach us how to interact successfully with people from our own cultures, but they tell us little or nothing about how to get along with people from other cultures whose norms may be quite different

from ours. When conflicts arise over differing cultural norms we need to be able to negotiate these differences in ways that allow people from different cultures to successfully interact with each other and address mutually shared problems.

It can be argued that globalization is creating entirely new forms of cross-cultural interaction which require the construction of entirely new *intercultural* norms to govern relationships between people from different cultures. The central question which must be asked, then, is how dialogue on such norms can be effectively conducted, given the fact that different cultures have differing forms of rationality, knowledge, values, ethics, and so forth, which often seem incommensurable with each other. A constructivist approach to this question would suggest that since many of the norms which might be used to govern cross-cultural interactions do not yet exist, they can only be created—or *constructed*—through a dialogical process in which the participants attempt to critique existing norms in both their own and other cultures, and to arrive at a more adequate set of norms which can facilitate the relationships they have both with each other and with the world they jointly inhabit.

Rather than see the different forms of rationality, knowledge, values, ethics, and the like which have been developed by different cultures as sources of conflict, it may be better to treat them as conceptual resources that can be used to widen our view of the multifarious ways in which it is possible for humans to think about and act in the world. Constructivism approaches intercultural dialogue from a dialectical perspective, which attempts to critically evaluate and integrate insights from a variety of cultures for use in specific cross-cultural interactions. Since all norms are constructed in particular historical, geographical, and cultural settings, none captures the full range of possibilities for human thought or action. By acknowledging the contingency of all cultural constructions, intercultural dialogue can proceed through a dialectical communicative process, which reflects back on

existing cultural constructions, evaluates them in accordance with their adequacy for dealing with shared problems, and constructs new conceptual frameworks which draw on insights from a variety of cultural sources. Intercultural dialogue can work towards the effective integration of ideas that on the surface appear incommensurable and, moreover, towards the generation of entirely new norms appropriate to newly emergent problems.

Normative judgments in intercultural relations

Intercultural relations can be studied from a variety of academic disciplines in the social sciences, as well as by philosophy. With respect to cross-cultural norms, while the social sciences use empirical and theoretical methods to describe the various norms that exist within different cultures, philosophy adopts a normative approach which considers how such norms can be talked about, analyzed, and argued for (or against) in the context of a free and open dialogue. Rather than simply empirically observe and theoretically analyze human thought and behavior across cultures, as the social sciences do, normative approaches consider how problems that may arise as a result of such cultural differences might be resolved. The problems may concern purely practical matters or involve deeper conflicts over beliefs, values, and norms, and may occur at a variety of levels, from the interpersonal to the inter-organizational to the international.

Consider, for example, the types of conflicts that might emerge in an intercultural marriage, a joint venture between companies from different cultures, or political negotiations between two countries. Empirically observing and theoretically analyzing the cultural differences which lead to such conflicts is undoubtedly important. Yet, neither an empirical nor a theoretical approach can tell us anything whatsoever about how these conflicts might be resolved. The two sides in an intercultural conflict may be able to see and understand the problems they are facing and what is causing them very clearly. What

is needed, however, are solutions to the conflict, and such solutions cannot be found by simply observing and analyzing the cultural differences which exist between them. Rather, solutions to cross-cultural conflicts can only be arrived at through a process of dialogue and negotiation, the aim of which is to reach a normative agreement about how the two sides are to interact with each other. Philosophy can be one tool, among others, that helps us to reach such agreements.

Normative positions are essential to the formulation of social, economic, and political policy, which require judgments to be made not only with respect to "what the problems are," but also with respect to "what should be done about them." While trying to maintain scientific objectivity by looking solely at the "facts," unclouded by a researcher's personal value judgments, is a commendable methodological stance, it is clear that normative positions are an inseparable, if often unacknowledged, part of every social science. Psychologists, sociologists, economists, and political scientists routinely make prescriptions about "what should be done," based on the norms they hold about what constitutes a "good" mind, society, economy, or political order. Researchers in the field of intercultural relations typically adopt normative stances against ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and the like. Value judgments permeate even the most "objective" research, a point which should not be glossed over but reflexively acknowledged.³

A useful distinction can be made between *methodological relativism*, which involves suspending one's own beliefs and value judgments in order to give a fair and impartial description of another culture's beliefs and values to the extent possible, and *normative relativism*, which is the normative stance that all cultural beliefs and values are equally valid.⁴ One implicit value orientation frequently found among those involved in intercultural relations is a form of cultural relativism, which holds that people in intercultural situations should simply "understand and respect" other cultures. The idea is

that cultural differences should be accepted as they are and, moreover, that any attempt to engage in critical reflection on the validity of different cultural practices should be avoided. This view is frequently supported by the philosophical argument that since there is no absolute, universal, or objective viewpoint outside of one's own culture from which other cultures can be judged, no value judgments of other cultures can be made.

Such a stance is itself normative, however, because it implies that cultural differences *should* be understood and respected. While the admonition to understand and respect other cultures has the laudable intention of encouraging us to avoid ethnocentrism and to see other cultures on their own terms, it does not really tell us much about how we can actually work together, or even have dialogue, across cultures on problems of mutual concern. Simply saying that "you have your way of doing things and we have ours," even when based on mutual understanding and respect, precludes the possibility of actively creating common ground on which cooperation across cultures becomes possible. While understanding and respect may be important starting points in helping us to interact successfully with people from different cultures, they do not go far enough.

Constructive solutions to cross-cultural problems

How exactly might constructive solutions to cross-cultural problems be arrived at? Whereas empirical and theoretical studies in the field of intercultural relations are primarily concerned with giving an account of the world *as it is*, normative studies can be characterized as attempting to give an account of the world *as it might be*. By confining themselves to a scientific consideration of the world as it is, empirical and theoretical approaches are by their very nature prevented from giving any consideration to solutions that do not already exist. Finding a normative solution to a problem, however, involves relying not only on observation and analysis, but also on the ability to imagine a future

state in which the problem has been resolved. By opening up possibilities for a philosophical consideration of the world as it might be, normative approaches are able to offer solutions that may never have existed before or even been thought of.

Rather than simply observe and describe how things actually stand in the "real" world, a constructivist approach to problems that may arise when people from different cultures interact with each other attempts to envision "ideal" situations which provide models for how those problems might be successfully resolved. We need not remain captive to our existing cultural norms, but instead can imaginatively explore new solutions which are outside the framework of those norms. Such a move allows us to employ *divergent thinking* to brainstorm possible solutions, and then to use *convergent thinking* to consider their potential results, choose which of the proposed solutions is best, implement the solution we have decided on, and then evaluate the results.

This reliance on the imagination may lead some to dismiss philosophical, normative approaches to intercultural interactions on the ground that they are merely "speculative," "impractical," "unrealistic," and outside the scope of "genuine" science. Certainly, normative solutions to concrete problems cannot be merely utopian; they must be capable of being actually implemented in the real world. The success of any proposed solutions can, thus, be tested against the criteria of whether they are actually able to solve the problems at hand or not. Even if an imagined solution cannot be implemented in its entirety, however, it may still be able to provide a standard by which progress can be measured. In the absence of such a standard, there is no reason why one course of action should be preferred over any other.

Note also that the formation of an "ideal" solution to a problem does not necessarily mean achieving the "best of all possible worlds," but simply the best that can be hoped for under a given set of actual circumstances. As these circumstances change entirely new

ideals may be formulated to deal with them. Arriving at normative solutions in cross-cultural situations is not a matter of clinging to single absolute standards set in stone for all time, nor of simply respecting existing cultural norms, but rather a process of negotiation in which those who are affected by a problem jointly seek to solve it. No attempt need be made to formulate norms which are valid for all people in all places and at all times. Rather the norms are contextualized to resolve conflicts occurring among particular groups of people dealing with particular problems in particular situations, both within and between cultures.

The goal of a constructivist approach to intercultural philosophy is to consider how inclusive dialogue among people having different beliefs, values, and norms might be conducted. To say that normative positions should be excluded from intercultural dialogue is to miss the point: the purpose of intercultural dialogue is not only to understand each other's positions better but also to determine what joint action *should* be taken to resolve the issue at hand. The normative positions themselves are part of the subject matter of the dialogue. A willingness to subject our own view to an open examination and discussion precludes the participants in a dialogue from obstinately clinging to their own views without argument or justification, and simultaneously prevents one side in a dialogue from imposing their views on others. While one side may or may not find the arguments of the other side to be persuasive, the only "force" that can be used in intercultural dialogue is the force of a better argument. Silencing the other side, by definition, means that the two sides are no longer having a dialogue with each other.

In sum, intercultural philosophy has the potential to raise new questions and open up new areas of research in the field of intercultural relations, as well as to contribute to the resolution of problems that arise as a result of differences in cross-cultural norms.

Notes

¹ This paper is excerpted with revisions from Evanoff (2014).

² Recent works include Mall (2000) and Wallner, Schmidtsberger, and Wimmer (2010).

³ See Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Clifford and Marcus (2010).

⁴ For a general introduction to the various forms of relativism, see Baghramian (2014). Methodological relativism is discussed by Hunt (2007).

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