

UNIVERSALIST, PARTICULARIST
AND CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES
TO INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE ON ETHICS

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Abstract

Given the fact that different communities have differing forms of rationality, knowledge, ethics, and so forth, how can ethical dialogue across cultures be conducted? The universalist solution to this question is to seek convergence on the basis of forms of rationality, knowledge, values, etc. which are assumed to be universally valid for all cultures. The particularist suggestion is that since all forms of rationality, knowledge, values, ethics, etc. are relative to particular cultures, no convergence is possible and cultural diversity should simply be accepted. After examining both of these positions, this paper will attempt to develop an alternative constructivist approach which considers how intercultural dialogue on ethics can be used to construct entirely new norms to govern relationships between people in cross-cultural situations.

Key words: Universalism, Particularism, Constructivism, Intercultural Ethics.

UNIVERSALIST APPROACHES
TO INTERCULTURAL ETHICS

Universalist approaches to intercultural dialogue on ethics frequently contend that it should be possible to formulate a

set of norms which are foundationally grounded and can thus be applied to all cultures equally. Ethical principles, variously derived from theology, metaphysics, or nature, are presumed to stand outside of all particular cultures, and thus provide the standard by which the norms of particular cultures can be compared and judged.

The chief difficulty with such foundational approaches is that it is not at all clear how ethical norms and principles are to be grounded in a way which might compel universal agreement. There is no "God's-eye" perspective from which cultural norms can be evaluated, or at least no "God's-eye" perspective that is available to humans, embedded as they are in particular cultures and particular historical periods. Attempts to see any given set of foundational norms or principles as "universal" often boils down to simply regarding the claims of one particular culture as having validity for all cultures, and thus involves the privileging of one particular worldview over all others.

More inductive approaches argue that even if a universal ethic cannot be foundationally grounded, it may nonetheless be possible to empirically discover a common core of ethical norms and principles which hold across cultures. K. Wiredu, for example, claims that "sympathetic impartiality" is a universal ethical principle found in all cultures (Wiredu 1996, chap. 3). D. Macer, in true empirical fashion, has conducted a wide-ranging sociological survey of attitudes across cultures on bioethical issues and concludes that the principle of "love of life" is universal to all cultures (Macer 1994).

One logical difficulty with any inductive approach is that a single exception is enough to disprove the particular value under consideration, and since it is impossible to survey all cultures throughout all periods of history, it is possible that exceptions may in fact exist. It is not unlikely that counterexamples could be found which disprove the universality of just about any principle that might be proposed, including the principles of "sympathetic impartiality" and

"love of life." Ultimately, however, the inductive view fails to provide a sound basis for intercultural ethics simply because a sociological description of existing values is no substitute for normative philosophical reflection — values do not become ethical simply by virtue of being widely held. A sociological survey of various cultural traditions may reveal, for example, that "love of war" is just as widespread as, and perhaps even more universal than, "love of life."

At present universalism is frequently associated with a modernist perspective, which historically originated in the Western Enlightenment tradition but is now embraced in varying degrees by non-Western cultures as well. The implications of such an outlook for intercultural communication are that since human beings all live in one world, global convergence should be possible on a single worldview (Western science), a single economic system (capitalist or socialist), and a single political system (liberal democracy or Marxism). Cultures as well should become increasingly homogenized. Precisely because the modernist view accepts the assumption that all human thought-processes are essentially the same, it tends to see progress in unilinear terms: all cultures are moving along a single line towards a single goal, with the so-called "advanced" cultures providing a model for "less-advanced" cultures to follow.

While the world may in some ultimate sense be the same for all observers, it is clear that different cultures build into and read out of the objective world different meanings. If what is taken as "rational" is itself subject to cultural variability, then it cannot simply be assumed on metaphysical grounds that people from different cultures will reason in exactly the same way. Rather, it must be recognized that individuals, groups, and political communities will take not only different constellations of beliefs and values, but also different modes of rationality, as their starting point. This does not mean that a common form of rationality cannot be arrived at cross-culturally, but rather that rationality itself is something that must be negotiated.

Modernism diminishes the capacity to criticize dominant forms of culture and consider alternative forms of knowledge, values, ethics, and so forth. If it is assumed that there is only one possible true way of viewing the world and that one particular culture (for example, the West) has found that way, the result may be that ideas which have arisen out of, and are embedded in, specific historical periods and cultural traditions come to be regarded as universal and valid for all historical periods and cultural traditions. One particular perspective is privileged as that which is to be embraced by the whole of humanity, while other perspectives, which may in fact have a measure of validity in their own right, are cut off and ignored. Western science, economics, and politics are not "universal;" rather they delineate particular ways of knowing, thinking, and acting. Despite the fact that they have been embraced to some extent by some non-Western countries, they represent only one possible line of cultural development. There is no single predetermined goal which all cultures should be seen as moving towards.

Particularist approaches to Intercultural Ethics

Particularist approaches to intercultural dialogue on ethics are based on the idea that each culture has its own particular values and norms which are incommensurable with those of other cultures. That different cultures conceptualize the world in different ways, hold to different forms of rationality, and construct different values and ethical systems can be taken as an empirical fact which is well-documented in the fields of both anthropology and intercultural communication (Condon and Yousef 1975). But the mere fact that cultural relativity exists does not necessitate the value judgement that cultural relativism should be adopted as a *norm*. In cross-cultural dialogue the relativist would ask us to simply adopt a tolerant attitude towards whatever differences exist between different cultures without further debate. Validity is determined by

the cultural system of which one is a part; hence, what is real, true, right, and beautiful in one particular cultural context may not be real, true, right, and beautiful in another cultural context.

Such a formulation commits the naturalistic fallacy, however, by shifting from a *descriptive* claim, which acknowledges that there are different ways in which people interpret the world, to a *prescriptive* claim, which holds that people must simply respect any differences which exist as they are. M. Hollis and S. Lukes suggest that this fallacy can be avoided by making a clear distinction between moral diversity, moral relativity, and moral relativism (Hollis and Lukes 1982, 5-6). Moral diversity merely registers the fact that different cultures have different values and ethical norms. Moral relativity suggests that such differences can be explained in relation to other variables found in particular cultural settings. Moral relativism involves the further claim either (1) that such differences must be accepted on their own terms, or (2) that no means of resolving these differences are available.

Moral diversity and moral relativity can both be accepted without difficulty – moral diversity because it is an empirical fact and moral relativity because specific differences which may not be immediately intelligible across cultures may nonetheless become intelligible when taken in the context of the cultural system of which they are a part. Moral relativism, however, can be rejected in both its forms. In the first instance, cultural relativism ultimately cuts off debate both within and between cultures as to whether the norms actually adopted by a particular culture are in fact worth endorsing. If the norms are already regarded as "valid" (because a culture pronounces them so), the implication is that not only outsiders but also people living within that culture are denied the opportunity to question them. The norms must be simply accepted and those who refuse to accept them can be effectively marginalized. The status quo cannot be challenged and existing forms of

power and authority are thereby legitimated. The final result is that genuine ethical reflection is guillotined and blind conformity to a given set of cultural norms is enforced.

In the second instance, relativism effectively precludes the possibility of persons from cultures with differing (“incommensurable”) ethical norms to ever work effectively with each other on mutual problems. If each culture has its own norms, with nothing in common between them, there is no basis for joint action, and without joint action no possibility for resolving mutually shared problems which are transcultural in character. It will not do to simply say “you have your way of thinking about these issues and we have ours.” Such a view can be maintained only in the case of complete cultural isolation. The fact that two or more cultures have come to be in contact with each other itself produces an *entirely new context* in which the norms which will govern the relationship between them, since they do not already exist, must be created. Even if the means for resolving differences are not readily available within existing cultural formulations, it may still be possible to generate new, more comprehensive frameworks which allow different cultural groups to successfully interact with each other.

Particularism is often associated with a postmodern perspective, which advances a post-positivist critique of foundationalism and argues that all attempts to converge on a single mode of rationality, knowledge, or values, or to see history as moving progressively toward a predetermined goal, are misguided (Bauman 1993). Postmodern writers such as J. Lyotard have argued that there can in principle be no single unified view of the world but only a multiplicity of language games, none of which can be privileged over the others. Discourses which purport to be universal – “metanarratives” in Lyotard’s terminology – are totalizing. They presume to embrace final, absolute truth and, therefore, seek to annihilate all dissenting opinions. Any attempt to arrive at a universal consensus is inherently

oppressive because it does “... violence to the heterogeneity of language games.” (Lyotard 1979, xxv)

A postmodern approach to intercultural communication would contend that since we all live in “different worlds” which are culturally constructed, no foundational, universal claims regarding knowledge, values, or ethics can be made; all are relative to the culture which makes them. Since discourses are the products of particular forms of life and thus incommensurable across cultures, meaningful dialogue across cultures is also impossible. Postmodernism’s cultural orientation is away from universalism towards particularism, while its political orientation is away from internationalism towards parochialism; there can be no unified economic, political, or cultural order. Rather than seek convergence, divergence is welcomed, indeed celebrated. Postmodernism is consistent with a multilinear view of cultural development, which sees cultures as developing distinct forms of life in relative isolation from each other. Such a perspective tends to regard globalization in all its manifestations as homogenizing and, therefore, as something to be resisted through a process of disengagement from the dominant culture. At its most extreme, particularism degenerates into various forms of racial, nationalist, and religious separatism.

Although cultural relativism is often regarded as “progressive,” based on its presumed promotion of tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding, ultimately it can be just as reactionary and authoritarian as those forms of universalism which attempt to imperialistically impose their own particular standards of truth, goodness, and beauty on the rest of the world. Moreover, cultural relativism ultimately absolves us from any responsibility to act in solidarity with victims in other cultures who may suffer from oppression. M. Midgley criticizes the “moral isolationism” which occurs when we think that the norms of another culture cannot be criticized. To cut off the possibility of making any criticisms whatsoever imposes a “general ban on moral reasoning.” (Midgley 1988, 589) The result is a “... world sharply divided

into separate societies, sealed units, each with its own system of thought.”(Midgley 1988, 587)

The solution, of course, is not for outsiders to attempt to *impose* their values on another culture (which merely substitutes one set of culturally derived norms for another), but rather to encourage active dialogue both within and between cultures about which ethical norms and principles should be adopted and why. An awareness of moral relativity merely sets the stage for such dialogue. Rather than simply accepting differences across cultures, dialogue on intercultural ethics has the prospect of offering both a radical critique of existing social arrangements and a creative imagining of new alternatives. By fostering a willingness to learn in a receptive but critical way from other traditions, cultures may also be able to achieve more synergetic relationships with each other. Such, in fact, is the goal of the constructivist approach to intercultural dialogue on ethics, which will be examined next.

A constructivist approach to Intercultural Ethics

As an alternative to both universalism and particularism, a constructivist approach to intercultural dialogue on ethics sees values and moral norms as arising out of specific cultures to regulate behavior within those cultures. As new situations emerge, however, it may become necessary to discard the old ethical norms in favor of new norms and principles which are better able to address new sets of problems. When problems are shared across cultures, new ethical formulations may also need to be created which not only take into account the differing values of the respective cultures but are also able to effectively address the common problems they face. Ethical norms can be constructed which govern the behavior of a given culture's members not only with respect to the relations they have among themselves, but also with respect to the relations they have with people from other cultures.

Essentials of constructivism. Rather than attempting to base ethics on foundational principles or simply relativizing morality to particular cultural traditions, constructivism employs a dialectical form of rationality which is not only self-reflexive but also able to engage itself with a variety of different cultural perspectives. While it cannot be assumed that individuals from different cultures will automatically arrive at a shared ethical perspective on the basis of preexisting understandings, values, or reasoning strategies, common ground can nonetheless be *constructed* through a dialogical process in which both sides critically reflect on what is positive and negative within their respective traditions and imaginatively seek to integrate positive aspects of both traditions into a wider conceptual framework (Evanoff 2006, 421-437). Entirely new ethical norms can be generated out of specific cross-cultural interactions and agreement can be arrived at independently from attempts to establish the validity of universal moral truths.

In the constructivist view knowledge, values, and ethics cannot be derived from theology, metaphysics, or nature, but are instead actively constructed. Humans formulate concepts not in isolation from, but through interactions with the external world. From this interactionist perspective meaning, knowledge, values, aesthetic beauty, as well as ethics, are not seen as being the exclusive property of an objective reality standing outside of all human perceptions and valuations (objectivism), nor as being merely the product of mental processes (subjectivism). The world in and of itself produces no concepts, just as the human mind in the absence of interaction with the world produces no concepts. Mind is constituted by the particular interactions it has with both its natural and its social environments and does not exist apart from them. In H. Putnam's metaphor, "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world."(Putnam 1981, xi) This interactionist perspective sees meaning, values, ethics, and so forth as arising out of the interplay between historically and culturally situated actors

on the one hand, and an objective reality on the other, which while itself historical and mediated through humanly constructed meanings, nonetheless exists apart from those meanings and is not exhausted by them.

By failing to recognize the constructed nature of human beliefs about the world, we may come to take these beliefs as simply "given" to us by the world or "human nature." Once norms have become reified in this manner it becomes difficult for people to question them and subject them to reflective thought. Constructivism attempts to make the process by which norms are arrived at more self-conscious. The point of such reflection is not to reach an archimedean point outside of culture but rather to critically evaluate norms which are already understood to be human creations. One implication of this view is that it is precisely because all norms are constructed that they can be reconstructed in ways which enable us to comprehend the world better and interact with it more successfully. A second implication is that if new norms can be constructed *within* cultures, there is no reason why they cannot also be constructed *across* cultures.

Constructivism and discourse ethics. The view that ethical norms can be constructed through a process of social dialogue is similar, in its broad features, both to J. Habermas's discourse ethics (Habermas 1989 and 1993) and to J. Rawls' concept of political constructivism (Rawls 1996). A unifying theme is the normative claim that decisions about how society is to be organized should be based on a process of public deliberation rather than on coercive power relations. Habermas contends that ethical norms cannot be metaphysically grounded but only legitimated through a process of dialogical interaction based on a rational, post-conventional critique of existing cultural norms. In Habermas's concept of an ideal speech situation social norms are seen as having universal validity if they are arrived at through a process of uncoerced dialogue in which everyone who is affected by the outcome of a decision has had an

equal opportunity to participate in the process by which that decision was made.

Discourse ethics contends that ethics is not a matter of "monological" individual reflection but rather a "dialogical" social process which, ideally, reaches conclusions on the basis of considered debate. The point is not that individuals cannot reflect on ethical matters for themselves or adopt purely personal norms with respect to their private lives but rather that, as far as *social* ethics is concerned, one person cannot decide *a priori* the principles and norms which will govern other people's actions. The goal of constructive dialogue, moreover, is not to harmonize the existing conceptions, positions, interests, and so forth individuals bring with them to the dialogue process (which in any event is probably an impossible task), but rather to engage in what S. Benhabib calls a process of "moral transformation" (Benhabib 1986, 316). Individuals both transform and are transformed by the various groups with which they engage in constructive dialogue, and out of this process it is possible for entirely new shared conceptions, positions, and interests to emerge. The upshot of discourse ethics is that no positions are exempt from reflective criticism; all must be tested in the arena of public debate; and all are open to negotiation.

The scope of the "universal." Habermas frequently speaks of norms which are arrived at through the dialogical process as being "universal." His use of this term is problematic, however, if "universal" is interpreted in its usual sense to refer to norms that are binding on all persons, at all times, and in all places. A constructivist approach to discourse ethics would refine this position by suggesting that the conception of "universality" must, on the one hand, be wide enough to accommodate all who are affected by a particular social decision and yet, on the other hand, still be context-sensitive. "Universal" should be understood, then, to refer not to norms which are applicable to all persons, at all times, and in all places, but rather to norms arrived at by a particular group of interrelated people, acting at a specific

moment in history, and in particular social and cultural contexts, whether these contexts be intra- or intercultural. Discourse ethics thus understood does not attempt to arrive at a set of acultural or ahistorical norms which apply to the whole of humanity; rather, norms are "universally" valid only within the context of the specific discourse community which formulates them.

Two principles can be proposed to govern the process of constructive dialogue. First, the communicative process should include everyone who will be affected by the consequences of a particular decision or policy (the principle of *inclusion*). It should be noted that one consequence of this view is that norms which have *not* been reached through an inclusive process involving everyone who is or will be affected by their adoption could be regarded, at least in principle, as morally non-binding for those who were excluded from participation. Second, the communication process should exclude those who will not be affected by a particular decision (the principle of *exclusion*). The principle of exclusion, which intentionally limits the "universality" of any adopted norm, is intended to prevent unwarranted meddling on the part of unconcerned individuals or groups. It should be added, however, that the principle of exclusion does not preclude individuals and groups from expressing empathy and solidarity with those who are oppressed, i.e., with those who are obliged to endure the consequences of others' actions without their consent. Nonetheless, even expressions of empathy and solidarity should, ideally, not be extended without the agreement of those who are the intended recipients.

In cases in which the actions of individuals have no consequences for others, it seems reasonable to conclude that individuals should be free to adopt whatever personal norms they choose. When the actions of individuals result in consequences for others, however, they become public and the norms which govern them must be negotiated with all those who are affected by them. In fact, there are good

reasons to keep the norms of each separate — the public sphere should not intrude on the private sphere, nor should private interests be allowed to dominate the public sphere. Norms must be constructed at the appropriate level to govern the specific relations involved, with a clear distinction being maintained between the private and public spheres.

Levels of dialogue on ethics. Dialogue on ethics can thus be conducted at several different levels. M. Singer, whose "perceptual approach" to intercultural communication draws on several theoretical perspectives, including constructivism, notes that communication can occur at any of the following levels: (1) the intrapersonal; (2) the interpersonal; (3) the intragroup; (4) the intergroup; (5) the intranational; and (6) the international (Singer 1987).

In applying Singer's framework to ethical dialogue, it is clear that norms can be constructed at each of these levels through a process of reflective activity and dialogue. Thus, there is (1) intrapersonal dialogue in which individuals critically question their own values and decide upon the norms they will adopt as individuals; (2) interpersonal dialogue in which two or more individuals negotiate the norms that will govern their specific relationships; (3) intragroup dialogue in which the members of a group negotiate the norms that will govern relationships within their group; (4) intergroup dialogue in which groups negotiate the norms that will govern relations between them; (5) intranational dialogue in which groups negotiate the norms they will live by in a given political society; and (6) international dialogue in which political societies negotiate the norms that will govern their interactions.

Dialogue at each of these levels is constructive. There is no attempt to "discover" certain *a priori*, universal truths, values, or norms which all individuals, groups, and political communities must adhere to. Rather than formulate ethical norms and principles which are believed to hold universally, norms and principles are constructed which suit the particular historical and cultural contexts

of the persons concerned and the problems they face. This means that norms and principles must be flexible and adaptive; they can change as historical circumstances change and vary according to the specific relationships the participants have with each other. The degree of universality depends on which relationships a given set of norms is intended to govern. In some situations universal, or near-universal, norms could be legitimately constructed (as with global environmental problems), whereas in other situations norms may have more limited scope and applicability.

Conclusion

From a constructivist perspective, nature offers innumerable possibilities for human action, and humans have the capacity to develop themselves and their cultures in a variety of different ways. Out of the total range of behavior that humans are capable of engaging in, cultures tend to direct behavior in certain directions and away from others. No culture is able to choose all viable options. Cultural experience is *always* a partial selection among a wide variety of potentially good and viable options. The very fact that all cultures are situated in specific historical and geographical contexts means that none can lay claim to universality. If all cultures are seen as placing limits on the range of human experience, this means that other possibilities are in fact always open to them. The purpose of intercultural dialogue on ethics is, therefore, not so much to arrive at "correct" ways of thinking or behaving but rather to show that all ways of thinking and behaving are contingent, that alternatives are always available, and, moreover, that it is often possible to give persuasive reasons why some of these alternatives might be better than others.

Rather than see norms and principles as transcendent truths to be discovered or as beliefs already shared in common by all people, constructivism sees them as being actively *produced* through the joint effort of particular individuals

engaged in a process of dialogue. Tolerance, from this perspective, means that the participants in a dialogue acknowledge the limitations of their own particular perspectives and remain open to the differing perspectives of others. Dialogue conducted in such a spirit allows the participants to change their respective views in light of what they learn from each other. In contrast to relativist views which simply respect cultural differences but do not seek to overcome them, constructivism offers a way to actively build bridges between people from different cultures. Constructivism thus avoids both the universalistic notion that all cultures should adopt the same set of norms and the particularist idea that cultures should remain more or less in discursive isolation from each other, bound only by their own cultural codes.

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ON LANGUAGE AND LOOKING IN HEIDEGGER: THE RELATIONAL ESSENCE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

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I. Introduction

The city of Hiroshima, Japan, thoughts of which have given rise to this essay, invites a meditation on the weaponry that once destroyed it and on ways of thinking that might prevent such destruction in the future. At stake, ultimately, is the dignity of the human being and our ability to recognize that dignity in others. But even if destruction of that magnitude cannot be prevented in the future, there is value in understanding the depth of humanity which that kind of destruction simply fails to recognize. For Martin Heidegger, the atomic bomb, like those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are symptomatic of a larger problem, the uprootedness of the human being. He even claims, notably, that there is no need for atomic bombs to uproot human beings because they have already uprooted themselves, through a kind of thinking which subjects human beings to a technical evaluation of their worth. Recognizing the dignity of the human being requires a new way of thinking about what it means to be human. Such recognition reveals a profound dimension within the human being, the depth of humanity in us, even as it magnifies the extent of the violence of atomic weaponry. The more respect we have for the dignity of the human person, the more we understand the tragedy of degrading that dignity.

My goal in this paper is to show that the dignity of human beings lies in their ability to use language to discern