Intercultural Ethics: A Constructivist Approach

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Abstract

While a considerable amount of research in the field of intercultural communication has been devoted to empirical and theoretical studies on cultural differences, comparatively little work has been devoted to normative studies which consider how problems which arise because of cultural differences might be resolved (see, however, Evanoff 2004 for a bibliography of recent publications in this area). Normative research differs both from empirical research, which is basically concerned with describing existing patterns of beliefs, values, and behavior through the use of statistical data, interviews, case studies, and the like, and from theoretical studies, which attempt to make generalizations about cultural differences and how people respond to them by abstracting from such data. The methodology of ethics is neither empirical nor theoretical, but rather *normative,* which means that it basically concerns itself with a consideration of what beliefs, values, and forms of behavior might be plausibly adopted. Metaethics concerns itself with broader issues of how such decisions can be reasoned about, justified, and, indeed, debated across cultures.

The normative stance frequently encountered in the field of intercultural communication is that we should "understand and respect" other cultures. While this is certainly a laudable maxim, simply trying to understand and respect people from other cultures does not really tell us much about how we can actually work together on problems of mutual concern. The purpose of this paper is to lay the groundwork for a specifically constructivist approach to intercultural ethics. The paper begins with a critique of both modernist and postmodernist approaches to the problem of intercultural ethics, and then proceeds to develop an alternative constructivist approach which theorizes how people with differing cultural values might be able to reach a measure of agreement on the norms and principles that will govern relationships between them and enable them to work together on mutual problems.

Introduction

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 modernist solution is to seek convergence on the basis of assumed foundational, universalist forms of rationality, knowledge, and ethics in which the traditional--and other forms of divergence--are simply replaced by the modern. The postmodern solution to the problem of intercultural dialogue on ethics is to suggest that since all forms of rationality, knowledge, and ethics are relative and particular, no convergence is possible and we should simply accept divergence across cultures. After examining each of these positions, this paper will attempt to develop an alternative constructivist approach, which considers how intercultural dialogue on ethics can improve relations between people from different cultures and resolve problems of mutual concern.

Beyond modernism and postmodernism

Modernism and intercultural ethics. Modernism rests on a number of philosophical assumptions which historically originated in the West and were more fully developed in the Enlightenment tradition but are now embraced in varying degrees by non-Western cultures as well. The main assumption is that identical thought-processes confronting an identical world should produce identical conceptions of the world, with regard to both knowledge and morality (*cf*. Mannheim, 1936, p. 9). If the world is the same for all observers and if all human beings reason about the world in the same way, then no divergent conceptions should in principle be possible. If divergent conceptions do arise, they can be attributed either to faulty observation (the world has not been correctly observed) or faulty reasoning (thought-processes have not been correctly employed). Some conceptions, therefore, will be right and others will be wrong.

Achieving agreement, whether within or between cultures, is thus simply a matter of insuring that we employ the correct empirical methods for observing the world and the correct rational processes for thinking about it. From this perspective rationality and logic, knowledge and science, values and ethics, and aesthetics and religion can be foundationally grounded and are therefore universal. There may, of course, be a measure of selectivity within a particular philosophical tradition as to what can and cannot be foundationally grounded. Logical positivism, for example, would hold to a universal conception of rationality, logic, knowledge, and science, but regard values, ethics, aesthetics, and religion as relative (*cf*. Ayer, 1946). Other traditions, however, have specifically sought to ground ethics on a universal human nature (Aristotle and contemporary "virtue ethics"), a universal rationality (Kant and his successors), and a universal conception of human happiness (utilitarianism in both its classic form and

modern derivations). (See MacIntyre, 1985, and Bauman, 1993, for good overviews of

foundational approaches to ethics in Western thought.)

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). 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. It is clear,

however, that thought-processes are not identical across cultures. While the world as perceived

by different observers may in some ultimate sense be the same for all observers, different

cultures build into and read out of the objective world different meanings. There can be,

therefore, no single goal which all cultures are moving towards.

An additional problem with the modernist view is that it may diminish the capacity to

criticize one's own traditions and to 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 (e.g., the West) has found that way, the result may be that we come to

regard ideas that have arisen out of, and are embedded in, specific historical periods and cultural

traditions as universal and valid for all historical periods and cultural traditions. The part is

mistaken for the whole. 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 offer

but one set of responses to the common problems of human existence and represent only one

possible line of development.

        Postmodernism and intercultural ethics. Postmodern relativism 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 *telos,* are misguided (for a good summary of postmodern perspectives on ethics,

see Bauman, 1993). Expanding on Wittgenstein's (1958) view that "language games"

("discourses" or "narratives" in more recent parlance) arise out of specific "forms of life,"

postmodern writers such as Lyotard (1979) 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. To say, for example, that science is closer to the truth than

mythology is on a par with saying that chess is closer to the truth than checkers (Lyotard &

Thébaud, 1985, pp. 60-61). 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, p. xxv). Metanarratives should accordingly be regarded with

incredulity.

        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. Postmodernists would tend 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, postmodernism degenerates into various forms

of racial, nationalist, and religious separatism.

Postmodernism tends to see all socially constructed norms as inherently oppressive and

contends that the goal of ethics should simply be to free individuals from their strictures. In the

postmodern view, any attempt to create norms that are better than those which are currently

dominant would simply create a different, but equally oppressive status quo. While

postmodernism adopts a seemingly radical stance in its call for a disruption of the status quo, it

fails to adequately acknowledge the fact that the social interactions people have with each other

will *always* be normatively structured, albeit to a greater or lesser extent and in better or worse

ways. The question is not *whether* social relations will be normatively structured, but rather *how*

they will be structured, to *what* degree, for *what* ends, and *who* will determine what those

structures will be.

A constructive alternative

A constructive critique of modernism and postmodernism. Constructivism attempts to

steer a course between the Scylla of foundationalism inherited from the Western Enlightenment

tradition and the Charybdis of relativism that permeates much postmodernist thought. The

attempt to ground ethics on foundational principles dissuades individuals from making moral

judgements that deviate from those that are believed to be written into the metaphysical scheme

of things; to the extent that our existing morality is believed to be foundationally grounded the status quo cannot be effectively challenged. The postmodernist approach also dissuades individuals from making moral judgements that express solidarity with the oppressed in other cultures and offer alternatives to existing forms of domination; here too the status quo cannot be effectively challenged.

By complacently believing that the West's scientific, economic, and political ideas are grounded in foundational "truths" about the world, modernists fail to recognize their contingency. They fail, in other words, to see that their "truths" are only one possible way of describing the world and our place in it. Alternative descriptions and courses of action are also possible. The "superiority" of Western scientific rationality should not simply be assumed. A great deal of "conceptual pluralism" can, therefore, be accepted across cultures (*cf*. Norgaard, 1994, pp. 75*ff*.; Evanoff, 1997). Nonetheless, it is also necessary to remind postmodernists that since these alternative descriptions and courses of action are contingent, there is nothing sacrosanct about other traditions; they simply represent different possible lines of development and can be constructively criticized in the same way that the Western tradition can be constructively criticized.

Constructivists would contend that neither the modernist nor the postmodernist outlooks offer an adequate framework for intercultural dialogue on ethics. From either perspective there may be little incentive for engaging in intercultural dialogue--in the case of modernists because they have a clear conception of the particular direction they think cultures should be moving in; in the case of postmodernists because they think that each culture should be free to move in its own independent direction. Modernism frequently cannot get beyond an ethics of persuasion (attempting to persuade others of the rightness or desirability of modernization), while

postmodernism cannot get beyond an ethics of respect (simply respecting differences between cultures rather than working through them to resolve conflicts). It can be contended that we need to adopt a self-critical stance towards our own respective cultures which, on the one hand, subjects our existing beliefs, values, and so on to a more genuinely objective evaluation and, on the other, fosters a willingness to learn in a receptive but critical way from other traditions.

Intracultural ethics. It is evident that no society can function without at least some degree of intersubjective agreement among individuals with regard to their beliefs, values, and norms and some cohesive framework which regulates interactions between its members. Ethics can thus be seen as a means of coordinating human behavior, ideally in the pursuit of what the members of a given society take to be a "good" life. There can be a great deal of legitimate variety regarding what individuals take as "good," and there need be no perfectionist moral conception of what the "good" life consists of. A healthy pluralism with respect to the particular goods sought by particular individuals is, in fact, desirable because it produces a richer and more varied social existence, with more life-options available to everyone. In the constructivist view, each individual should therefore be free to adopt their own particular life-goals and personal values, at least to the extent that the pursuit of these goals and values does not conflict with the ability of others to pursue their own goals and values.

Insofar as the pursuit of one's goals and conception of a good life has no consequences for others, there can be no conflict between the individual and society: the individual does not attempt to impose his or her personal goals and values on others, and others in society should not attempt to impose their personal goals and values on the individual. But once the behavior of the individual has consequences for others, the construction of social, rather than purely personal norms, becomes necessary. Such norms cannot be based on a personal vision of how life should

lived but rather must be based on a collective vision of what the individuals concerned conceive

to be a good society. Collective visions are dialogically constructed images of society as we

would like it to be. The conception of a good society represents the end which a society strives

for, while the specific norms that are adopted constitute the means for structuring action so that

those visions can be achieved.

The postmodern argument that *any* attempt to construct social norms is repressive

because norms by their very nature limit individual action and, therefore, human freedom

ignores the fact that in the absence of such norms, relations are more likely to be based on

attempts on the part of powerful individuals and groups to dominate weaker individuals and

groups. Ethical norms, thus, serve to limit the freedom of the strong to oppress the weak. The

argument, then, is not over whether norms should be constructed or not, but rather over the

procedures by which such norms are constructed. Norms that are freely chosen on the basis of a

full and open discussion on the part of those who are expected to follow them *enable* rather than

constrain human freedom, to use terms drawn from Giddens' structuration theory (1984). Such

a view is neither nihilistic (social structures should be annihilated to preserve individual

freedoms) nor oppressive (individual freedoms should be sacrificed to maintain social structures)

but rather liberatory (individuals experience self-realization in the context of societies which are

governed by principles that they themselves have chosen).

In the constructivist view, then, it is impossible to reduce ethics to a matter of personal

choice. The view that values are completely subjective and arrived at purely through a process

of individual selection is simply false. To a large extent the values we hold as individuals will

have been instilled in us through a process of socialization. While some values are clearly

delineated and consciously recognized, others are rarely given explicit formulation. We are

seldom, if ever, aware of all of the values we hold and the norms we follow. As long as we remain unaware of them, however, we remain captivated by them. We can only, in Barnlund's words, "break out of the boundaries of [our] experiential worlds" (1975, p. 22) if we bring these values to the surface and consciously reflect on them. By doing so we are able to acquire a broader vision, which puts us in a better position to appreciate the values and norms of our own and other cultures and to choose for ourselves those values and norms that are best suited to our own circumstances.

Intercultural ethics. While it cannot simply be assumed that individuals from different cultures will automatically arrive at a shared perspective on the basis of shared understandings, values, or reasoning strategies, constructivism contends that common ground can nonetheless be constructed through a dialogical process in which both sides are willing to subject their views to critical scrutiny. Ethical norms and principles can be seen 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. Similarly, when cultures with differing values come into contact with each other, they may find that they share few ethical norms in common. The need may, thus, arise for entirely new norms and principles to be formulated to govern relations between them. The creation of such norms enables people from different cultures to interact successfully with each other and, hopefully, to also avoid various forms of conflict.

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 all of the ways that it is possible for us to act, however, we inevitably, both as individuals and as societies, pursue certain courses of action rather than others. As

individuals it is impossible within the scope of a single lifetime to engage in all of the activities

the world enables us to engage in. We make qualitative choices about the kinds of people we

would like to become given the possibilities offered to us by our biological constitution and by

our natural and social environments.

As societies we also make various choices, and in constructing one type of society we

forego the possibility of constructing a different type of society. Out of the innumerable options

which are available to any given cultural group, some ways of thinking and behaving will be

selected to the exclusion of others because they are regarded as either more viable or preferable

to other options. In short, among the myriad possibilities open to us both as individuals and as

societies, qualitative judgements must be made. No culture is able to choose all viable options;

some viable options will inevitably be chosen over other options that are also viable. It is

impossible, therefore, for any single culture to realize all possible goods; rather each culture

chooses a limited range of goods out of all the goods that are possible.

Cultures, therefore, simplify human experience: 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. In the constructivist view all cultural arrangements are regarded as contingent

rather than as necessary and, thus, subject not only to historical, but also to cultural variation.

As Bennett puts it, "... cultures differ fundamentally from one another in the way they maintain

patterns of differentiation" (1993, p. 22). Moreover, cultural differentiation is *always* based on a

simplification of reality. In the same way that individual cognition and behavior are directed by

what we presume to be our best interests, principles of selectivity are also employed at the

cultural level with regard to how the world should be thought about and acted in. It is precisely

because a total view is impossible that we select out those features which we will attend to and

those courses of actions which seem best to us. Certain cultures will, thus, be highly differentiated in certain areas of human experience and less differentiated, or perhaps not differentiated at all, in other areas.

If the creation of culture involves choosing certain possible ways of thinking and acting and excluding others, then by definition no culture is ever capable of attaining the whole. Cultural experience is *always* a partial selection among a wide variety of good and viable options. Qualitative judgements made at the social and cultural level place limits on the scope of human activity. The societies and cultures we choose to construct not only enable but also restrict the range of behavior that is available to us. Child defines socialization as "...the whole process by which an individual, born with behavioral potentialities of enormously wide range, is led to develop actual behavior which is confined within a much narrower range--the range of what is customary and acceptable for him according to the standards of his group" (1954, p. 655).

Because cultures limit the range of possible experience, they may even prevent us from realizing our fullest potential, both as individuals and as societies; they reflect merely one possible set of responses to the problem of how individuals should interact both with their environments and with others in society. Despite the myriads of alternatives we could choose for ourselves, both as individuals and as societies, we typically tend to follow the same patterns of thought and behavior into which we were originally socialized. These patterns become habitual and are no longer questioned. We may end up leading unreflected-upon lives that are not worth living (Thoreau's "lives of quiet desperation" [1950, p. 7]) or simply going along with what everyone else is doing (Nietzsche's "morality of the herd" [1967, pp. 156-162]). The only

way to avoid such results is to make the norms we follow, both as individuals and as societies, a matter of critical reflection and conscious choice.

Preserving cultural diversity. Since all cultures simplify the range of potential human experience, none can regard itself as "universal," and there can be no single culture which serves as a model for all others. No culture can presume itself to have had the final word on Truth, Justice, or Beauty. To assert that a given culture has achieved the whole, or even that it is on the right road to achieving the whole and, therefore, that all other cultures should follow it, deprives other cultures of the ability to choose among other options which are also viable and which they may find more satisfactory.

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. There is no reason why a different set of options might not be chosen. 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.

By engaging in intercultural dialogue we are, thus, able to extend the range of our own potential experience. Holenstein writes,

> Foreign cultures give us access to possibilities of development which are apparently at our disposal by nature and which only circumstances prevent from appearing in our own culture. Different cultures develop different human skills to varying degrees. (1995, p. 76)

It is neither necessary nor desirable for cultures to converge with each other in all respects; different cultural trajectories allow space for humans to experiment with different modes of living and to develop different skills. Nonetheless, to the extent that we share common problems, it is also both necessary and possible to forge common solutions.

Among interacting groups sufficient levels of divergence are needed so that cultural evolution can continue, but sufficient levels of convergence are also needed so that interacting cultures can successfully resolve problems of mutual concern and actively negotiate the ethical principles and norms that will govern interactions between them. Cultural evolution then becomes a "...process of increasing differentiation on the one hand and of increasing integration on the other" (Steiner, Dürrenberger & Ernste, 1993, p. 311). With increased differentiation greater cultural diversity becomes possible over time; with increased integration various forms of cooperation become possible. These two movements complement, rather than oppose, each other.

Discourse ethics and intercultural dialogue

Ethics and dialogue. As has been seen, postmodern philosophers typically see any attempt to impose a fixed vision of the future on the whole of humanity as repressive because it inhibits, rather than advances, individual creativity. Lyotard (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985, pp. 66-67) contends that injustice is not so much the failure to arrive at a single conception of justice, but rather the attempt to cut off dialogue about justice. Attempts to suppress opposing viewpoints is indeed a legitimate concern, and an open society is necessary if all viewpoints are to be allowed free expression. Nonetheless, it can be argued that attempts to construct norms to govern relationships between individuals or groups of individuals are not repressive if the people

who are affected by the adoption of these norms have the opportunity to participate in the

dialogical process by which the norms themselves are constructed and if those participating in

this process can reach a measure of agreement about the norms in question.

To the extent that a particular set of social arrangements is freely chosen on the basis of

considered reflection and are agreeable to the persons who make up a given society, they retain

political legitimacy; to the extent that they do not agree with these arrangements it is possible for

them to try to change them. From a constructivist perspective the legitimacy of a given social

order can only be established through a process of dialogue which involves the participation of

all of those who will participate in that society. The alternative to a legitimate social order is an

illegitimate social order which is maintained purely by force or coercion. The normative

political principle of "self-determination" cuts two ways: the people of a given society should

be able to adopt whatever form of governance they find most congenial without it being imposed

on them from powerful persons and groups either *outside* or *within* their own society.

As has already been argued, reflection on the kind of society to be created cannot be a

purely individual process because by definition it involves the participation of others in that

society. Thus, at the social level the process of reflection involves being able to engage in

constructive dialogue regarding the norms that will govern the society one is a part of. It

consists of critical reflection on existing norms, social structures, and institutions, and the ability

to propose alternatives. The process of reflection aims at as comprehensive a viewpoint as

possible. Hence, it is obliged to take both one's own reflected-upon interests and the

reflected-upon interests of others into account. In the first instance, it sees that the parameters of

what individuals are and can become are dependent on the kind of person that society enables

individuals to become. The self is not an isolated entity; rather it is to a large extent constituted

by and realizes itself through the relations it has with both its social and its natural environments. In the second instance, it recognizes that the activities individuals engage in can also have consequences on what others are able to be and become. Reflection, therefore, cannot limit itself to an exclusive concern for one's own interests, as with contractual approaches to ethics based on "rational self-interest," but rather must also take the interests of others into account.

Discourse ethics. The view that ethical norms are constructed through a process of social dialogue is similar, in its broad features, both to Habermas's discourse ethics (1989, 1993; see also Apel, 1980; Benhabib, 1986, 1992) and to Rawls' concept of political constructivism (1996). A unifying theme is the normative claim that decisions about how society is to be organized should be based on a process of conscious political deliberation--i.e., reflection at the political level--and not on coercive power relations. Habermas, whose views are considerably influenced by Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) constructivist account of moral development, contends that ethical norms cannot be metaphysically grounded but can only be 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 concerned has had an equal chance to participate.

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 that 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 Benhabib calls a process of "moral transformation" (1986, p. 316). That is, individuals both transform and are transformed by the various groups with whom 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.

In attempting to develop an intercultural approach to discourse ethics, Habermas's notion of an ideal speech situation can be specifically linked to Dower's notion that a global ethic should concern itself with everyone who may be affected by the consequences of our actions:

> ...where the lines of cause and effect run across nation-states, so do the lines of moral responsibility. To accept such a maxim is implicitly to endorse a "global ethic," according to which the whole world is one moral domain, and the network of moral relationships extends in principle across the world. (1998, p. 165)

Dialogue on ethics should, thus, include everyone whom we enter into relationships with, regardless of whether such relationships are intra- or intercultural and of whether they are direct or mediated through various political, economic, and social institutions. The consequentialist element in this view goes beyond Mill's harm principle--actions are permissible if they do not cause suffering to others--to suggest that *any* action which has consequences for others, whether for good or ill, can only be justified if those who are expected to perform it or those who are subjected to the consequences give their consent.

The scope of the "universal." Habermas frequently speaks of norms that 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 communicative 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.

Communicative 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 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,* which complements the principle of inclusion). 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

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 imposed without the agreement of

those who are the intended recipients.

As has been argued, 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, and a clear distinction maintained between the private and

public spheres.

Levels of dialogue on ethics. Dialogue on ethics can, thus, be conducted at several

different levels. Apel (1980, p. 227) distinguishes between a micro-domain, consisting of, for

example, the family and neighborhood; a meso-domain, consisting of larger political groupings

such as the nation; and a macro-domain, which concerns itself with humankind as a whole.

Singer (1987), whose "perceptual approach" to intercultural communication draws on several

theoretical perspectives, including constructivism, offers a somewhat fuller typology, noting 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.

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 relationship; (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 interaction.

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 at all times, in all places, and for all people, norms and principles are constructed which suit the particular historical and geo-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. Some norms may have universal or near-universal validity (as with global environmental problems), while others may be more limited in scope and applicability. At the interpersonal level, for example, there is no need to posit an essentialist, acultural definition of what constitutes a "good marriage" for all couples. Rather, different couples may construct

different norms to govern their own specific relationships. Moreover, there is no need for norms

to cover every aspect of a particular relationship, whether it be at the individual, group, or

political levels. There can and should be a healthy respect for the individuality and autonomy of

the partners in any relationship. The goal of ethics is to facilitate human interactions not to

homogenize differences by forcing everyone to act the same.

Intercultural dialogue on ethics. In the same way that no idea should be accepted simply

because it is part of a particular culture, so too no idea should be rejected simply because it is the

product of a particular culture. From a constructivist perspective *all* cultural ideas can be

subjected to reflective criticism, with each idea being considered on its own merits. While ideas

cannot be foundationally grounded they can nonetheless be judged according to both their

viability and desirability.

While it is impossible for us to transcend all cultural traditions and arrive at universal

truths that will be valid at all times, in all places, and for all people, we can nonetheless reflect

on what we find to be worthwhile in both our own and in other traditions. Putnam writes that in

intercultural dialogue

> ...we are not claiming to stand outside our own tradition, let alone outside of space and
>
> time, as some fear; we are standing within a tradition, and trying simultaneously to learn
>
> what in that tradition we are prepared to recommend to other traditions *and* to see what in
>
> that tradition may be inferior--inferior either to what other traditions have to offer, or to
>
> the best that we may be capable of. (1993, p. 155)

Rorty similarly contends that while we cannot base a conception of cross-cultural solidarity on the notion of a universal "human nature," cultural ideas can nonetheless be shared across communities:

Beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have. On the other hand, we can always enlarge the scope of "us" by regarding other people, or cultures, as members of the same community of inquiry as ourselves--by treating them as part of the group among whom unforced agreement is to be sought. What we can not do is to rise above all human communities. (1991, p. 38)

The emphasis on extending the boundaries of the moral community and attempting to "weave" insights from other cultures into our own beliefs can be explicitly related to the constructivist attempt to integrate ideas from various cultures into wider, more comprehensive schemas--one of the many topics requiring further investigation in the emerging field of intercultural ethics.

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