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Universalist, relativist, and constructivist approaches to intercultural ethics

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Abstract

Three approaches to the problem of how intercultural dialogue on ethics can be effectively conducted among people who embrace different cultural beliefs and values are examined. Universalist approaches contend that it is possible to formulate a set of norms which apply to all cultures equally, but fail as a framework for intercultural dialogue on ethics because there is in fact no agreement across cultures about what is “universal.” Relativist approaches are based on the idea that each culture has its own particular values and norms, which are incommensurable with those of other cultures, but also fail because they provide no real way for people from different cultures to effectively work together in resolving common problems. The paper argues in favor of a third approach, constructivism, which suggests that since the rules necessary to govern cross-cultural interactions do not yet exist, they can only be created through a dialogical process in which the participants attempt to critique existing norms and arrive at a more adequate set of norms which are capable of resolving the specific problems they face.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature within the field of intercultural communication which is specifically concerned with the ethical dimensions of cross-cultural interactions (Condon & Saito, 1976; Johannesen, 1978; Asuncion-Lande, 1979; Hatch, 1983; Jaska & Pritchard, 1988; Cortese, 1990; Kale, 1991; Casmir, 1997). These studies can be distinguished from more descriptive accounts of cross-cultural values (e.g., Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Nishida, 1981; Hofstede, 1984) in terms of both method and focus. Whereas the latter are primarily concerned with empirical research and theoretical analysis of the value-orientations of existing cultures, the former attempt, in various ways, to address the problem of how persons from different cultures can successfully interact with each other in ethical ways. The descriptive approach is undoubtedly useful in pointing out the tremendous diversity of values which exist in various cultures in the world, but does not speak directly to the problem of how ethical dilemmas arising out of cross-cultural encounters can be successfully resolved. In order to address this problem, the scientific study of cultural values can be profitably supplemented with a more explicitly philosophical approach to intercultural ethics.

In a paper entitled “The Cross-Cultural Arena: An Ethical Void,” Barnlund (1979) specifically called for a new metaethic which he hoped would provide a superordinate set of guidelines to govern communication between cultures. Of course, no such metaethic as yet exists, at least none which has won universal or near-universal support. It can nonetheless be asked how such a metaethic might in principle be arrived at. The central question this paper investigates is how dialogue on ethics can be effectively conducted across cultures, given the fact that different communities have differing forms of rationality, knowledge, values, and so forth.

The universalist solution to this question is to seek convergence on the basis of foundational forms of rationality, knowledge, values, etc. which are assumed to be universally valid for all cultures. The relativist 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. The claims of the universalist who thinks that at bottom “everyone’s the same” and the relativist who urges us to simply “accept cultural differences” are both facile, however. On the one hand, deep exposure to different thought patterns, values, and ethical beliefs presents a real and significant challenge to the notion that everyone is, in the final analysis, the same. On the other hand, it is equally impossible for individuals who have been exposed to these differences to simply accept them all on equal terms. Inevitably, distinctions will be made between what is considered to be “good” and “bad” in any given culture.

This paper argues, therefore, that an adequate framework for intercultural dialogue on ethics is provided by neither universalist nor relativist approaches, and proposes an alternative constructivist approach which holds that since the norms individuals initially bring with them to cross-cultural encounters tell them how to deal with people from their own culture and not with people from other cultures whose norms are different, there is the need to construct entirely new norms to

govern relationships between people in cross-cultural encounters. The paper begins by examining both universalist and relativist approaches to the problem of dialogue on intercultural ethics, and then proceeds to develop a specifically constructivist approach.

2. Universalist approaches to intercultural ethics

This section will consider, and argue against, three broad strategies for attempting to establish a universal approach to intercultural dialogue on ethics: (1) deductive approaches, which attempt to ground ethics on transcendental norms; (2) inductive approaches, which look for a “common core” of values presumed to be present in all cultures; and (3) rationalist approaches, which assume that universal norms can be arrived at on the basis of a universal human rationality.

2.1. *Deductive approaches*

Deductive, foundationalist approaches to the problem of formulating a cross-cultural metaethic argue that it is possible to arrive at a set of transcendent norms and principles, variously derived from theology, metaphysics, or nature, which are presumed to stand outside all particular cultures and historical periods, and which the norms and principles of particular cultures and historical periods can then be compared against and judged by. Following [Holenstein \(1995\)](#) we might label this general tendency the “Platonic” method, although the same idea runs throughout much of the history of Western thought and can also be seen in Aristotle’s attempt to ground ethics on a universal human nature, Kant on a universal conception of personhood, utilitarianism on a universal conception of human happiness, and so forth (for good overviews and critiques of foundational approaches in Western ethics see [MacIntyre, 1985](#); [Bauman, 1993](#)). The common idea which each of these traditions share is the notion that ethics can be based on a set of universal principles and norms which hold true for all persons, in all places, and at all times, regardless of any real differences that may obtain between individuals, cultures, or historical periods. Ethics in this view is essentially acultural and ahistorical.

The difficulty with this approach is that it is not at all clear how such transcendent norms are to be found in the first place and, assuming they could be found, how they could compel universal agreement. The attempt to arrive at a set of universal norms that are transcendent to all particular cultures and historical periods must face the problem that *any* set of principles presumed to be so discovered can in fact be relativized to the particular cultures and historical periods which produced them. The universalist might reply that the origin of an idea has nothing to do with its ultimate validity—to argue that it does commit the genetic fallacy (a mistake that is in fact frequently made by relativists). The issue, however, is not where an idea originates, but rather how the validity of an idea that originates in a particular culture can be established across cultures. 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. Shifting from a search for universal ethical norms to a search for universal metaethical principles does not really solve the problem but simply removes it one step. Universal “meta-principles” can only be established by appealing to other, more transcendent “meta-principles,” resulting in an infinite regress. The attempt to see any given set of foundational norms or principles as “universal” simply takes the claims of one particular culture as holding for all cultures and historical periods, and thus involves the privileging of one particular worldview over all others.

2.2. *Inductive approaches*

It may be possible to acknowledge the contingent nature of cultural values and yet argue that a universal ethic can nonetheless be arrived at by adopting an inductive approach which grounds itself on values common to all cultures. While cultural differences can be acknowledged, it may nonetheless be possible to empirically discover a common core of values which already exist between cultures. Anthropologists and sociologists, of course, have documented a number of “cultural universals”: all known cultures use language, have kinship systems, engage in religious rituals, exchange gifts, produce artwork, and so on (Giddens, 1989, pp. 39–40). Some writers on ethics have concluded that there may also be certain universal ethical principles which hold across cultures as well. Wiredu (1996, chap. 3), for example, speaks of “sympathetic impartiality” as a universal ethical principle. Macer (1994), 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.

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 (this argument does not apply, of course, to deductive approaches, which would explain deviations from a universal norm simply as a failure on the part of a culture to recognize its universal validity). It is likely, moreover, that anthropologists would quickly be able to find counterexamples which disproved the universality of just about any principle that was proposed, including the principles of sympathetic impartiality and the love of life. Nonetheless, inductive approaches make an important contribution to cross-cultural dialogue by shifting attention away from attempts to justify the universality of certain values on metaphysical grounds to an empirical investigation of whether “cultural universals” actually exist. While one cannot simply *assume* the existence of cultural universals on metaphysical grounds, one can plausibly look and see if people have in fact tended to think and act in the same ways. To the extent that they have we can legitimately speak of cultural universals.

The problem of whether “cultural universals” exist or not is therefore primarily an empirical rather than a metaphysical question. If we take one common definition of culture (e.g., Segall, 1979, p. 17)—the view that culture is that which is learned and

transmitted across generations (and therefore contingent) rather than that which is biological and innate (and therefore necessary)—it is easy to see why there would be a great deal of variety with regard to cultural behavior and a higher degree of universality with respect to biological behavior. The case for “biological universals” can thus be more readily established than the case for “cultural universals.” While the existence of a similarity across two or more cultures with respect to a given idea or behavior does not necessarily prove that it is universal to all cultures, the existence of a difference can be taken as evidence that the idea or behavior in question is neither innate nor universal.

It can nonetheless be acknowledged that in most cross-cultural encounters, the participants will be able to find similarities as well as differences between their respective cultural perspectives, and that some of these similarities may as a matter of empirical fact be universal to all cultures. In actual dialogues between people from two or more cultures, any existing similarities (even if they are not necessarily universal to all cultures) can indeed provide a useful starting point for cross-cultural dialogue. Ultimately, however, it is not the similarities but the differences which are problematic in intercultural communication and must be worked through (cf. Bennett, 1993). Even if it can be proved that everyone already adheres to a given set of universal ethical principles, the fact that disputes continue to arise over cross-cultural ethics shows that whatever those principles might be, they are simply not sufficient to resolve outstanding differences. The problem may simply be one of finding out how such principles should be applied in specific cultural and historical contexts, but even so, despite the fact that there may be, at a fairly abstract level, certain values which seem to be widely shared across cultures, there is very little if anything that is universal about the specific forms which these values take. Eating, thinking, creating works of art, and constructing ethical systems are universals in the sense that such activities can be found, and are valued in, all cultures, but the kinds of food we eat, the types of thinking we engage in, the styles of art we create, and the forms of ethical systems we construct are highly variable from culture to culture.

Thus, even if a set of “least-common-denominator” values could be found which are present in all cultures, it is doubtful that they would be able to solve more than a limited range of problems. The more general and abstract a value is (e.g., “love of life”), the less it tells us about how to act in specific situations. We may be able to find more specific universal, or near-universal, norms, but these are likely to be irrelevant to our emergent concerns. We may find that all cultures have norms against having sexual relations with siblings, for example, but that there is little or nothing in common on how to deal with the problem of global warming.

Ultimately, however, the inductive view fails to provide a sound basis for cross-cultural 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. Even if a majority of people in a given society think that genocide against certain ethnic groups is morally permissible, for example, that does not make genocide morally justified. Ultimately, statistics are irrelevant. Greed may turn out to be a more universal human disposition than altruism, for example, but that does not make it more ethical. A sociological survey of various

cultural traditions may reveal that “love of war” is just as widespread as, and perhaps even more universal than, “love of life.”

2.3. *A universal rationality?*

A final strategy for establishing universal principles may hold that even if the *content* of knowledge, values, and the rest may differ across cultures, we can nonetheless assume that the *rational procedures* by which the debate is conducted will be the same across cultures. Hollis and Lukes argue in favor of a universal and context-independent criteria of truth and rationality which can serve as a “bridgehead” between cultures. Without such a “common core,” they argue, no communication between cultures is even possible (Lukes, 1979, 1982; Hollis 1979a, b, 1982; see also Lukes, 1973, 1974; Wiredu, 1996). An example, cited by each of these writers, is the principle of non-contradiction, the notion that a sentence cannot be both true and false at the same time.

It is not at all clear, however, that all cultures hold to the same standards of rationality any more than they all hold to the same values. Researchers in the field of intercultural communication have identified a variety of cultural differences not only with regard to the cognitive schemes that are employed in communication but also with regard to their logical form (Applegate & Sypher, 1988). Condon and Yousef (1975) have demonstrated that both “epistemic structures” (the way arguments are built) and rhetorical patterns (the way arguments are presented) are subject to cultural variation. The claim that rationality is variable across cultures is, therefore, also not a matter of metaphysical speculation but of simple empirical fact. Given the well-documented differences in reasoning strategies used by different cultural groups, it is doubtful that there is a single form of rationality which can be appealed to in cross-cultural dialogue. Rather, from the outset, 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. 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. 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.

Based on the arguments presented in the preceding sections it can be concluded that universalistic approaches do not provide an adequate framework for cross-cultural dialogue on ethics both because universalism can be neither deductively nor inductively established, and because a universal rationality for arriving at a shared perspective cannot simply be assumed.

3. **Relativistic approaches to intercultural ethics**

It may be thought that any position which denies not only the universality of ethical norms but also the universality of any rational procedure by which

cross-cultural dialogue can be effectively conducted would result in a radically relativist view of the possibilities for engaging in intercultural dialogue on ethics. In this section, however, we will attempt to show that relativism also fails as a normative position for intercultural dialogue on ethics. Nonetheless, it is also our contention that if the problem of relativism is to be overcome, it must be met head-on by first acknowledging the genuine depth of the differences that exist between cultures. Cross-cultural dialogue can only proceed once these differences have been brought to the surface and critically examined.

3.1. *The problem with relativism*

Hollis and Lukes (1982, pp. 5–12) offer a taxonomy of relativisms, several of which are relevant to any prospect for cross-cultural understanding and solidarity. Their list identifies five different types: moral relativism, conceptual relativism, perceptual relativism, relativism of truth, and relativism of reason. Relativism in many other areas, such as religion, politics, aesthetics, values, emotions, customs, and so forth could no doubt also be readily identified. The problem of relativism can be simplified somewhat by suggesting that *any* area of human experience which is cultural rather than biological is potentially subject to variation across cultures, precisely because such behavior is learned rather than biologically determined.

That different cultures conceptualize the world in different ways, hold to different forms of rationality, and construct different value and ethical systems can be taken as an empirical fact that is well-documented in the fields of both anthropology and intercultural communication (for a good overview see Condon & 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* (cf. Hatch, 1983, pp. 67–68). 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 my particular cultural context may not be real, true, right, and beautiful for someone else in their particular culture. The problem with this way of thinking about the matter is that a shift has occurred from making a descriptive claim which acknowledges that there are different ways in which people interpret the world to making a prescriptive claim which holds that people must simply *respect* any differences which exist as they are.

Such a stance has a “progressive” air about it in that it attempts to overcome ethnocentrism and to promote the values of respect and mutual understanding. No doubt classic expressions of cultural relativism (Westermarck 1924, 1960; Herskovits, 1949, 1973) were “progressive” insofar as their intention was to move Western anthropology beyond ethnocentrism. As Cook (1978) points out, however, cultural relativism can itself be an ethnocentric notion. While ethnocentrism was originally linked to unfair or unwarranted judgements about a foreign culture, it later came to be associated with any form of cross-cultural criticism whatsoever. What relativists often fail to realize is that their view implies the normative claim that “...the code of any culture really does create moral obligations

for its members, that we really *are* obligated by the code of culture—*whatever it may be*” (1978, p. 296).

Relativism is typically defended in one of two ways. First, it is sometimes argued that the competing claims of different cultures should be equally regarded as true, in which case the best that can be hoped for is an ethic which respects cultural differences without trying to overcome them. While the attempt may also be made to justify relativism on the grounds that all claims are social constructs, there is no necessary relation between social constructivism and relativism. In fact, the constructivist position would seem to preclude any possibility of relativism by suggesting that it is precisely because claims are socially constructed that they can always be contested; there is no reason why we must simply *accept* the socially constructed claims of one culture or another. The arguments of many contemporary relativists ironically seem to fall back on an essentialist view of culture: the norms of a given culture are seen as being fixed and unchanging precisely to the extent that those norms are seen as being “valid.” A genuinely non-essentialist approach would contend that the norms of a given culture can never be regarded as “valid” in any final sense. Because there is no fixed way cultures must be, not even when these ways are chosen or self-imposed, a more dynamic view of human possibilities is needed. There is always room for development and change. Relativism, by regarding the norms a culture already accepts as “valid” denies the possibility that something better can be hoped for or worked towards.

A second strategy for defending relativism is to accept the non-essentialist position we have just outlined and proceed to argue that the competing claims of different cultures should therefore both be regarded as false, in which case there is no possibility for constructing any ethical norms whatsoever. The difficulty with this view is that it ignores the fact that social constructs are nonetheless useful tools for creating a meaningful life for ourselves; it is impossible to avoid making choices between alternative courses of action and hence of making judgements, whether implicitly or explicitly, that some courses of action are “better” than others. From a constructivist perspective, it can be agreed with relativists that no constructions are “absolutely true,” but nonetheless be argued that competing constructions can be evaluated according to the pragmatic criterion of how well they enable us to get along in the world. A recognition that no social constructions are “absolutely true” can lead either to a melancholy cynicism or to the revolutionary possibility that entirely new values can be created.

A distinction made by Hollis and Lukes (1982, pp. 5–6) between moral diversity, moral relativity, and moral relativism can be generalized to distinguish between virtually all forms of cultural diversity, relativity, and relativism. The first, diversity, merely registers the fact that differences exist between cultures. The second, relativity, suggests that differences can be explained in relation to other variables found in particular cultural settings. The third, 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.

The first two of these claims can be accepted without difficulty—diversity because it is an empirical fact and 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. The third claim, that of relativism, can be rejected, however, in both its forms. First, as we have already contended, all differences can be subjected to reflective criticism; none need simply be accepted on their own terms (nor need they simply be rejected on “our terms”). Second, as we will argue further below, even if the means for resolving differences are not already available within existing cultural formulations, the same process of reflective criticism can generate new, more comprehensive frameworks in which resolutions might be possible.

3.2. From relativism to solidarity

Despite the various philosophical arguments which can be made against it, cultural relativism continues to be fashionable, based on its presumed promotion of tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding. Cultural universalism, to the contrary, is frequently seen as being intolerant and disrespectful of other cultures, and as little more than an attempt (usually on the part of the West) to imperialistically impose one’s own standards of truth, goodness, and beauty on the rest of the world. While universalism indeed may foster such an attitude, it is clear that relativism can be ultimately just as reactionary and authoritarian as universalism. Relativism can be appealed to as a means for cutting off debate and avoiding any criticism of the status quo (a strategy sometimes used, for example, to defend political authoritarianism as a “cultural value”). If distinct cultures are regarded as the ultimate locus of norms, then these norms must by implication be passively accepted (i.e., “respected”) without protest or criticism not only by outsiders but also by people living within those cultures. The final result is that genuine ethical reflection is guillotined and blind conformity to a given set of cultural norms is enforced. Seen in this light, cultural relativism turns out to be much less “progressive” than some may originally have thought.

The ultimate effect of cultural relativism is to cut off debate both within and between cultures as to whether or not the norms actually adopted by a particular culture are worth endorsing. If the norms of a given culture are already regarded as “valid” (because a culture pronounces them so), the implication is that individuals within that culture are denied the opportunity to question those norms. 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.

Moreover, cultural relativism absolves us from any responsibility to act in solidarity with victims in other cultures who may suffer from oppression. Midgley (1988, p. 587) 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,” which itself can result in a “programme of immoralism” (1988, p. 589). The result is a “...world sharply divided into separate societies, sealed units, each with its own system of thought” (1988, p. 587). Those forms of relativism which emphasize

intra- over intergroup solidarity fail to address any forms of oppression which do not directly concern their particular groups.

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 reflection on the basic questions of what should be done and why. Moral suasion can still be regarded as a legitimate tactic in cross-cultural dialogue, provided that all sides are allowed to fully participate in the process in an open and uncoerced manner (Habermas, 1989, 1993; Kale, 1991). One outcome of the dialogical process is that the consciousness of the participants is raised, precisely because they are exposed to a wider range of alternatives than those which exist in their own cultures. People come to see, for example, that it is not *inevitable* that children be sacrificed to the Aztec gods, that samurai be given the right to lop off the heads of innocent peasants, or that young women be subjected to female circumcision. Exposure to other cultures helps the victims of such practices see that they are culturally contingent and that alternatives are thus available. Instead of passively accepting the norms of their culture, resistance becomes possible. It is also possible for people outside those cultures to express their solidarity with the victims in their struggles despite the fact that there are no universal norms which can be foundationally grounded (Rorty, 1989, chap. 9).

The problem of cultural relativism becomes more acute when the actions of one culture result in negative consequences for another culture. Inequity of resource consumption between the first and third worlds and global pollution problems, such as acid rain, are examples. The relativist position 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 the two 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. While each of the cultures may have something to contribute to the resolution of the problem, each may also be lacking in certain conceptual and normative resources. Dialogue between cultures can help to overcome at least some of these deficiencies. The success of the dialogue process ultimately depends upon whether the problem is satisfactorily resolved or not.

To sum up, the mere fact of cultural relativity does not necessarily require a commitment to the norm of cultural relativism. Cultural relativity simply explores existing differences without evaluating their ultimate status; cultural relativism, however, insists that the differences must be normatively accepted, at least within the framework of their own cultural settings. The contention here is that an awareness of cultural relativity merely sets the stage for further cross-cultural dialogue on normative issues. Cross-cultural encounters stimulate a reflective process in which individuals are able to combine the best from two or more cultural perspectives into

their own way of thinking and behavior. This approach does not advocate simply accepting differences, but rather suggests that cross-cultural dialogue can be used as a means for critiquing existing normative positions within given cultures and, perhaps also, for integrating them dialectically into new normative structures.

4. A constructivist approach to intercultural ethics

An alternative to both universalist and relativist approaches to the problem of arriving at a cross-cultural metaethic, this section will offer a constructivist approach which sees ethics as arising out of the particular form of life shared by people within a given culture at a particular moment in history. As new forms of life emerge, new ethical principles and norms also emerge. When problems are shared across cultures, new ethical formulations are needed which not only take into account the differing forms of life 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.

4.1. 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 perspective on the basis of shared 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. 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 Putnam's (1981, p. xi) metaphor, "the mind and the world

jointly make up the mind and the world”. Stigler, Shweder, and Herdt (1990, p. viii) argue that cultural psychology is “...a three-body problem in which self, society, and nature jointly make up self, society, and nature”. 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 way 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 we already understand 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 *between* cultures.

4.2. *A transactional view of communication*

Constructivism is compatible with a transactional view of communication which sees meaning as being generated out of a process of communication (Barnlund, 1970). In the transactional model, meanings are not transmitted unproblematically between sender and receiver but rather must be negotiated. Meaning does not reside in language itself, but rather in the intentions of the speaker. Although language enables individuals to express their intentions, the meaning of any given word, phrase, or statement is never fixed—a problem which is exacerbated, of course, in cross-cultural situations. If the speaker’s intentions are not clear, the receiver must ask the speaker to clarify the intended meaning. The process is one of constant feedback in which the responses of the receiver indicate whether the intended meaning of the sender has in fact been received. Scollon and Scollon (1995, p. 6) elaborate:

The meanings we exchange by speaking and by writing are not given in the words and sentences alone but are also constructed partly out of what our listeners and our readers interpret them to mean. To put this quite another way, meaning in language is jointly constructed by the participants in communication.

Perfect communication may be impossible; the receiver may never understand the message in exactly the same way that the sender does. But communication is adequate, in a pragmatic sense, when enough of the intended message has gotten through to enable an effective response on the part of the receiver (and not the extent to which it conforms to preconceived standards of logic or pragmatics). Language

functions as a tool enabling individuals to both exchange information and coordinate their activities with each other. Meaning, in this view, does not arise out of phenomena itself but rather must be negotiated through a process of dialogue aimed at reaching intersubjective agreement on how language should be used in any given objective situation. On the one hand, meaning cannot be grounded in objects themselves, because of the variability of the objects and experiences that are designated by particular terms. On the other hand, meaning cannot be psychologically grounded because different individuals—particularly individuals with different cultural backgrounds—may have different mental concepts of what is meant by any given word or sentence.

It is essential for intercultural communication, as much as for intracultural communication, that intersubjective agreements be reached by which certain shared experiences can be designated with similar terms. Whorf (1956, p. 215) speaks in terms of calibrating our conceptual schemes: “All observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated”. Words will come to be used in a similar way and to have similar meanings to the extent that the individuals who use them share, or come to share, a similar “form of life” (cf. Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 88). The more that experiences are shared, the more likely it will be for individuals to reach intersubjective agreement on how those experiences are to be talked about. The same insight holds across cultures. To the extent that two cultures share similar forms of life, they will be able to develop similar ways of thinking and talking about those experiences; to the extent that their forms of life differ their conceptual systems will also tend to differ.

4.3. *Learning from other cultures*

In the absence of shared experiences it may be impossible to calibrate how concepts are to be used across cultures. Cross-cultural understanding, if it is to go beyond the superficial, involves understanding not only the concepts of another culture but also how these concepts are used in relation to particular types of experiences. To the degree that direct experience is obtained, the whole issue of conceptual relativism across cultures begins to dissolve. Effective judgements cannot be made by simply comparing concepts across cultures but only by comparing those concepts *in relation to experience*. It is shared experience which provides the objective reference point for the varying constructions of the world made by people from different cultures.

Even though foreign concepts initially may seem strange to us, incommensurable with our own conceptual schemes, and so forth, they can nonetheless in principle be learned. We can, to adapt a line from Quine (1960, p. 47), learn not only the native language, but also the native culture, “directly as an infant might.” To deny that the ways of alien cultures can be learned is to commit ourselves to the problematic view that people from one culture are biologically incapable of thinking, acting, or feeling in the ways of another culture. Precisely because human nature is not immutable we always have the *capacity* to learn new ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. Such a

view coincides with the contention of cognitive psychologists that “...there has evolved in the human species an innately determined brain system whose principle function is the acquisition, exercise, and imparting of culture” (Talmy, 1995, p. 80). While research indicates that there is a critical age beyond which the learning of a culture is an acquired rather than a natural process (which is why adult learners of foreign languages always speak with an accent, for example; cf. Minoura, 1992), in principle it is possible for any normal human being to learn the various beliefs, values, and modes of rationality found in various cultures.

The significance of these findings for cross-cultural dialogue is, first, that we do not need to posit a “common core” of rationality across cultures to account for why cross-cultural understanding is possible; the “common core” sought after by writers such as Hollis and Lukes may be nothing more than the near-universal human capacity to learn culture. The view that rationality is innate fails to explain why misunderstandings continue to occur even when procedures to eliminate them have been applied.

Second, if rationality is instead a part of that which is culturally transmitted, i.e., that which can be taught, then the rationality of a given culture can in principle be learned by *anyone*, even by those who are not members of that culture. The same holds for other cultural beliefs, as well as for values and ethics.

Third, if cross-cultural understanding itself is possible, then it follows that to the extent that the experiences of another culture become *our own* experiences, we are also able to critically reflect on them and to make plausible judgements as to their worth without falling into the ethnocentric trap of judging them simply by the standards of our own original culture. Midgley (1988) similarly distinguishes between crude opinions about another culture, based on an inadequate understanding of it, and considered opinions which presuppose a fairly high degree of familiarity with it.

Recognizing that a variety of different forms of rationality can be employed in cross-cultural dialogue does not entail a denial of rationality itself, nor should it lead to the relativist conclusion that because there is no “common core” of rationality able to reconcile “incommensurable” differences across cultures, that cross-cultural dialogue itself is impossible. The constructivist contention is that even when “bridgeheads” for engaging in cross-cultural dialogue are lacking, new “bridgeheads” can be constructed. Not only the content (i.e., substantive norms) but also the ground rules for conducting the dialogue (i.e., pragmatic rules) can be negotiated in a way that enables a shared perspective on what counts as “rational” to emerge. Such a move explicitly does not involve falling back on acultural or foundational conceptions of rationality; it simply subjects existing standards of rationality to further reflection and seeks to create common ground where none existed before. Noe (1995, p. 50), who rejects the idea that Western rationality can simply be adopted wholesale by all the various cultures of the world, speaks of cultural universals as “endless tasks”.

It can be readily agreed that there is no absolutely “right” way of conceptualizing the world and that different cultures can legitimately conceptualize the world in different ways. When conceptual, rational, and moral differences become significant

for intercultural encounters, however—i.e., when the concepts, rationality, or morality of one culture have consequential effects on other cultures—it then becomes necessary to *construct* a common understanding where before one was lacking. What distinguishes the constructivist position from a relativist position is that in the process of forging such a common understanding, it is not feasible to simply *accept* such differences and claim that they can never be challenged. Rather, the constructivist position is that the way in which any given phenomenon is construed can *always* be challenged. Dialogue then becomes the pragmatic matter of deciding which set of constructs enables us to best get along in the world—not which is *right* but which is *better*.

4.4. *Constructing new ethical norms*

In contrast to foundational approaches which attempt to ground ethics in universal, immutable, and ahistorical principles, constructivism argues for a more pragmatic approach which sees the development of particular moral codes as practical solutions to specific problems arising in particular socio-historical contexts. Whereas foundational approaches start with a given set of principles and then proceed to apply these principles to concrete situations, the constructivist approach does the reverse: it begins by looking at the problems presented in concrete situations and then proceeds to look for—or construct—solutions to these problems. Theorizing follows rather than precedes the solutions which are proposed to solve these problems.

From this pragmatic perspective, the function of ethics is to help people successfully interact both with each other and with the world. As social practices or environmental conditions change, the old norms lose their validity and new norms must be constructed. Ethical formulations can thus be seen as evolving in response to changing social and environmental circumstances. In societies which do not have the institution of property, for example, there is no need to establish laws against stealing. But once property has been established as a social institution the need arises to construct rules which protect property. Norms against stealing are neither God-given nor “natural” but socially constructed and it is only within the matrix of a particular social structure that a norm gains force. Moral statements can only be judged as right or wrong within the context of a particular moral scheme; they cannot be true in any absolute sense.

When problems transcend cultural boundaries, an ethical basis for common action can be constructed through cross-cultural dialogue. Such dialogue is important because it enables people from different cultures to work together on problems of mutual concern. Dower (1998, p. 165) has suggested the following maxim for intercultural ethics: “...where the lines of cause and effect run across nation-states, so do the lines of moral responsibility”. This idea is not the same as universalism in the foundational sense but rather simply contends that the lines of ethical responsibility should extend as far as the consequences of our actions. Whenever we stand in relations with others, regardless of whether we share their particular forms of discourse or not, a new context is formed which necessitates the creation of

new norms to govern that context. The old norms, developed in relatively isolated socio-historical contexts, may be entirely inadequate to the task. The success of cross-cultural dialogue can be judged in part by the pragmatic criterion of whether or not the problems the participants jointly face are in fact solved.

Such an approach does not abandon contextualism but extends it. A genuinely contextual approach would acknowledge the fact that cross-cultural encounters bring into being new contexts which transcend the particular contexts of the respective cultures. If the norms to govern relations between people from different cultural backgrounds do not yet exist, then they must be constructed. In contrast to relativist views which simply respect cultural differences but do not seek to overcome them, constructivism offers a way to actually 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 relativist idea that cultures should remain more or less in discursive isolation from each other, bound only by their own cultural codes.

Even from a contextual and relational perspective there is a need to construct narratives which are “meta” enough to cover common problems faced by people who may otherwise be heterogeneous. In some situations universal, or near-universal norms could be legitimately be constructed (with regard to global warming, for example), whereas in other situations the norms would remain purely local. Sufficient *convergence* is necessary for the joint resolution of mutually shared problems, and yet sufficient *divergence* in non-problematic areas is also desirable because it allows for the uninterrupted evolution of new ideas and cultural forms. From a constructivist perspective norms can only become “universal” through a process of constructive dialogue and choice. The scope of “universality” depends on the particular issues to be addressed and the degree to which such principles and norms could gain consent within a given culture, or across cultures as the case may be. In a global context it is entirely plausible to expect that certain universal or near-universal norms and principles could be proposed that would be effective in dealing with global problems and that, at least in principle, could win majority support among the world’s people.

The constructivist position is not opposed to universalism per se but rather to the notion that such universalism can be established on the basis of foundational principles. Rather than see norms and principles as transcendent truths to be discovered or as beliefs already shared in common by all people or as the inevitable product of a universal rationality, 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 some cases, the dialogical process may also lead to the creation of entirely new perspectives which go beyond the positions initially held by the participants. The task of creating new norms and values is indeed never-ending.

4.5. *Cross-cultural dialogue on human rights as an example*

The differences between the universalist, relativist, and constructivist approaches can be illustrated by considering the highly contentious debate between Western and Asian cultures on the issue of human rights. The West typically takes a universalist stance in this debate, arguing that human rights are “God-given” or “natural,” while Asian critics often adopt the relativist view that human rights are a Western cultural construct which the West has no right to imperialistically impose on the East (see, for example, the remarks of Lee Kuan Yew in [Zakaria, 1994](#)). Constructivism would initially agree with the relativist position that, as a matter of historical fact, human rights are not “natural” but rather originated within the Western political tradition. The choice to adopt a concept of human rights in a given society is, moreover, a matter of reaching social agreement, not of obeying “natural law.”

Constructivism would further contend, against relativists, that simply because human rights are of Western origin, it does not follow that they should not be given serious consideration in non-Western cultures. Precisely because ethics is a matter of social agreement, all ethical proposals should receive a fair hearing by those who are expected to agree to them. The attempt on the part of some Asian leaders and intellectuals to cut off any consideration of Western human rights and insist that only “Asian values” be adopted in Asia may be equally guilty of seeking to impose a particular set of values on people. Asians as a whole, not just leaders and intellectuals, should be given the opportunity to decide if they prefer to stick to Asian values—or perhaps to embrace Western human rights or selectively combine the two. Norms which are simply imposed on, rather than freely embraced by, a cultural group lack legitimacy.

A constructive alternative would be for both Asians and Westerners to critically examine their respective traditions to see what they regard as being of genuine value in each and what should perhaps be discarded. At the same time, it may be possible for each side to selectively adopt aspects of the other culture which they also find valuable. Through this process Asians may begin to expand their ethical framework to include a concept of human rights, while Westerners may also be able to include some Asian values in their ethical framework. Asian values are not simply “relative” to Asia; they can also be adopted in the West, just as Western conceptions of human rights can be adopted in Asia. Moreover, Western conceptions of human rights are not “universal”; they can also be profitably supplemented by considering the values of non-Western cultures. The moral schemas of both Asia and the West could be enlarged by integrating values found in each of these traditions into their own respective ethical frameworks.

Constructivism has the prospect of offering a more robust defense of human rights than naturalism, which in any event has lost much of its persuasive value. It is precisely because the concept of human rights is *not* “natural” but a social construct that it can in principle be adopted by *any* cultural tradition which wishes to adopt it. Human rights can be argued for not on the grounds that they are “natural,” but rather on purely practical grounds, e.g., that they allow everyone in a given society an opportunity to realize their full potential, they avoid the domination of some

groups over others, and so forth. Reasons such as these are not foundational—they do not provide knock-down arguments for why a society should adopt a concept of human rights—but they can nonetheless be used by those who wish to suggest that it may be preferable to live in a society which is based on human rights than in one which is not.

From a constructivist perspective, the language of the UN Declaration of Human Rights can thus be regarded as performative rather than as descriptive, i.e., human rights are not “natural” but rather brought into being through a process of political debate and social agreement. Human rights cannot be regarded as universal in the descriptive sense since there is no society which in fact embraces all of the rights which the Declaration sets forth. The Declaration nonetheless offers a collective moral vision of an ideal society, which simultaneously provides a standard against which existing cultures can be measured. This standard, moreover, is capable of expanding and refining itself as humanity’s collective conception of what constitutes good and just societies also expands and refines itself. Rights can thus be extended to more groups and wider areas of human activity, as in fact has historically been the case. This process is, as we have argued, essentially *constructive*.

5. Conclusion

Cross-cultural dialogue on ethics is important because it enables us to work out the specific principles and norms which can govern relations between cultures. Cross-cultural encounters create entirely new social situations which may be highly anomic, in the sense that there may be few, if any, already-agreed-upon customs, norms, or precedents for the participants to fall back upon. The cultural norms we initially bring with us to cross-cultural encounters tell us how to deal with people from our own culture, not with people from another culture whose norms are different. In many cases entirely new ethical frameworks will need to be negotiated through a process of cross-cultural dialogue which draws on, but does not remain bound by, the ethical insights contained in any one tradition. Reaching an agreement requires a dialectical process of reflection in which the participants attempt to critique existing ethical principles and norms, to integrate positive features of those principles and norms in new ways, and to create entirely new principles and norms to effectively deal with anomic situations.

Since the rules necessary to govern cross-cultural interactions do not yet exist, they can *only* be created through a dialogical process in which, ideally, all sides are given equal opportunities to participate. It is insufficient for one group to simply force its own norms on other groups or for one group to uncritically adopt the norms of another because the relationship between the two groups would then be based on domination and control, i.e., the imposition/acceptance of one view to the exclusion of other potentially better views. Dialogue allows all potentially good views to receive a fair hearing and thus enables the groups to find ways of interacting with each other that are mutually satisfactory and sufficient for joint action on mutually shared problems. Dialogue itself may not be able to resolve all problems, of course,

but the alternative to dialogue is a situation in which relationships between different cultural groups deteriorate or their mutually shared problems remain unresolved.

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