# A Communicative Approach to Intercultural Dialogue on Ethics

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The aim of this presentation is to develop a communicative approach to intercultural dialogue on ethics. For the purpose of this presentation ethics will be defined as critical reflection on behavior in relation to ourselves (personal ethics), others (social ethics), and the world we live in (environmental ethics).

Three basic methodological approaches are utilized in the field of intercultural communication: (1) empirical approaches which attempt to describe cultures as they are, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods; (2) theoretical approaches which attempt to construct models and make generalizations about cultures based on empirical data; and (3) normative approaches which attempt to solve problems in intercultural situations.

Empirical and theoretical approaches gather facts and make generalizations about, for example, how people from different cultures view marriage and conduct business. Such knowledge does not indicate, however, how problems which arise in intercultural marriages or international joint ventures, for example, might be resolved. Normative approaches involve imagining creative solutions to such problems rather than simply describing or analyzing existing values and norms. The main problem for intercultural ethics, therefore, is how normative solutions can be arrived at across cultures, given the fact that different cultures have different values and norms—a problem which is receiving increased attention in the field of intercultural communcation (see the references included in the bibliography).

Traditional approaches to intercultural ethics can be divided into two types: Universalist approaches attempt to ground ethics variously in religion, nature, history, reason, etc. These approaches largely fail, however, because there is no agreement about what is religiously authoritative, natural, historical, or reasonable. Moreover, universalists often simply regard their own particular culture as "universal"—a problem which is especially prevalent in Western cultures ("global standards," for example, are frequently simply American standards writ large). Universalist approaches are connected with objective, foundational approaches to ethics, as well as to modernism, globalization, and a unilinear model of cultural development which sees all cultures as proceeding along a single line of development and converging on a single universal set of values and norms (e.g., Fukuyama's "end of history").

Particularist approaches to intercultural ethics deny that there can be a single universal set of values and norms, and instead relativize values and norms to particular individuals and/or groups. Ethical individualism—one example of which is the notion that economic decisions should be made on the basis of individual preferences rather than on the basis of some form of collective decision-making—contends that individuals are the final arbiters of value. Such a stance may be acceptable when deciding flavors of ice cream but is less acceptable when applied to the health, safety, and environmental impact of particular products. Cultural relativism similarly contends that since different cultural groups have different values and norms, it is impossible to formulate any values and norms which are valid across cultures. Particularism is connected with subjective, skeptical approaches to ethics, as well as to postmodernism, the preservation of local cultures and ethnic identities, and a multilinear model of cultural development which sees all cultures as proceeding along separate lines of development and diverging with respect to values and norms (e.g, Huntington's "clash of civilizations").

It is clear that neither the universalist nor the particularist approach offers an adequate framework for intercultural ethics. While universalist tendencies can still be widely found in the fields of international politics and economics, they have been largely discredited in the field of intercultural communication, where the emphasis has been on recognizing and preserving cultural differences rather than on creating a single, homogenous "global culture." Nonetheless, cultural relativism, which is widely accepted in the field of intercultural communication, is also problematic. Although it is obvious that various cultures construct ethical systems in ways which are often incommensurable, cultural relativism does not answer the question of how conflicts between cultures with different values and norms can be resolved. The solution most often proposed is that we should simply "understand" and "respect" different cultures—"When in Rome do as the Romans do." A distinction can be made, however, between cultural relativity (the fact that cultures are different) and cultural relativism (the value judgement that different cultures must simply be accepted as they are). Descriptive ethics (what is *actually* done in a particular culture) cannot be equated with normative ethics (this is what *should* be done). To equate the two commits the naturalistic fallacy, i.e., the attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is.* Hatch writes, "The fact of moral diversity no more compels our approval of other ways of life than the existence of cancer compels us to value ill-health" (1983, p. 68). Cultural relativism seems progressive but is in fact conservative and tradition-bound because it obligates us to simply accept the values and norms of other cultures rather than giving us the opportunity to critically reflect on them and make considered decisions about which values and norms are worthy of adoption. It regards culture in "essentialist" terms

(cultures have certain "essential" features which are fixed and unchanging) rather than in constructivist terms (cultures are human *constructs,* and therefore susceptible to creative change). From a purely practical perspective relativism offers no solution to intercultural conflicts. Simply contending that "you have your way and I have mine" makes it impossible for people from different cultures to work together cooperatively on problems of mutual concern.

A communicative approach to intercultural ethics may offer a viable alternative to both universalism and particularism. The communicative approach recognizes that while we are each situated in a particular culture and socialized into certain norms, we are nonetheless able to reflect back on those norms and change them if necessary. We are also able to critically reflect on the norms of other cultures and to selectively adopt (or reject) those norms which seem plausible to us. Such reflection results in greater objectivity, although never in pure, absolute objectivity—as humans we never have access to a "Gods-eye" view of the world. Dialogue on intercultural ethics can thus be seen as taking place between specific cultures in specific contexts in relation to specific problems. Although the context can be widened to include more than one culture, there are no "universals."

A communicative approach to intercultural ethics is also relational, seeing individuals as having relationships both with others in society and with one's natural environment (*cf.* Watsuji 1961). Ethical dialogue can take place at a variety of different levels: at the personal level there is intrapersonal communication through which decisions are made with respect to how we live our lives as individuals; at the social level there is interpersonal and intergroup communication through which decisions are made with respect to how we live together with others; at the global level there is international communication through which decisions are made with respect to the relations which exist between nations and wider cultural groups (*cf.* the distinction made in Apel 1980 between micro-, meso-, and macro-domains and in Singer 1987 between the interpersonal, intergroup, and international levels). Decisions are most appropriately made at the appropriate level. At the interpersonal level, for example, it is not necessary to formulate universal norms with respect to international marriages; such norms are more appropriately made by the marriage partners themselves and will vary from couple to couple. At the global level, however, it may be necessary to construct norms which are universal or near-universal in scope in order to address problems which cross cultural and national boundaries, such as global warming. It can be suggested that the main principle for deciding the level at which norms should be created is related to the scope of the consequences which a particular action has. Dower 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" (1998, p. 165). If my action only affects myself, then the decision should be purely personal. If my action affects others, then those who are affected should have the right to participate in the process by which a decision is reached regarding that action (this is a simplified statement of Habermas's discourse ethics; see Habermas 1989; 1993). For example, it may be all right to smoke in my own room, but not in a room full of people who find smoking objectionable; driving a car may no longer be appropriately regarded as a personal decision if the $CO_2$ emitted from my car contributes to global warming.

Finally, a communicative approach to intercultural ethics is pragmatic in that it is concerned, as mentioned previously, with solving particular problems faced by particular people in particular situations. As new problems emerge, new ethical solutions must be found; we cannot simply fall back on past ethical traditions for guidance. Ethical systems can be both abandoned and created. We no longer find slavery acceptable, for example, and we are constantly in the process of creating new ethical norms to deal with emergent problems, such as advances in medical technology and increased contact across cultures. Rather than see ethics as fixed and unchanging, a communicative approach see ethics as dynamic and creative. It can be associated with an ecological model of cultural development which recognizes that cultures may proceed along different lines of development but nonetheless co-evolve through communicative relations with other cultures.

A communicative approach to cross-cultural dialogue on ethics recognizes that intercultural situations are by their very nature anomic (*a-nom:* "without law") because the norms to govern behavior in such situations have not yet been created. The ethical norms we are socialized into accepting as individuals usually tell us how to deal with people in our own cultures, not how to deal with people from other cultures. The question for intercultural ethics, therefore, is: given a particular problem, what should people from different cultures with differing ethical traditions actually *do* about it? Various solutions are possible: (1) avoidance: we can avoid having contact with people from different cultures; (2) adaptation: one side is obliged to conform to the norms of the other side; (3) confrontation: each side insists that it alone is right; (4) domination: one side attempts to impose its views on the other; or (5) dialogue: the two sides communicate with each other about which norms should be adopted in a particular situation.

If dialogue is the preferred method for dealing with issues related to intercultural ethics, how can such dialogue be conducted? Ethnocentric approaches to cross-cultural dialogue typically take their own cultural values and norms as correct and view those of the opposite side as incorrect. Such a view rests on an Aristotelian logic which holds

that if a given proposition is true, its opposite cannot be true at the same time.  If individualism is "true," for example, then collectivism must be "false."  A more Hegelian, dialectical approach, however, would contend that within any point of view there are "positive" and "negative" features which can be differentiated from each other.  It may be agreed that a positive feature of individualism is its emphasis on self-reliance; a negative feature is its tendency towards egoism.  A positive feature of collectivism is its emphasis on cooperation; a negative feature is its tendency towards conformity.  What often happens in cross-cultural criticism, of course, is that the positive side of one position is used to criticize the negative side of the other position.  Self-reliance is seen as being superior to conformity and cooperation is seen as being superior to egoism.  It should, however, be possible to integrate the positive features of each of the positions into a new synthetic position, while discarding the negative features.  Self-reliance can be combined with cooperation without contradiction, while egoism and conformity can be discarded.  This new synthetic position constitutes a "third culture" which combines aspects from each of the original cultures but also transforms them in creative ways.  Third cultures have the potential to provide a common ground for coordinated action across cultures and can be applied to a wide variety of cultural disputes related to value differences.

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