

The Cross-Cultural Arena: An Ethical Void

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Explorers of tropical areas of the world once employed what were called "dew driers" who preceded them into the jungle and facilitated their exploration by drying the dew that accumulated on the heavy foliage the previous night. They also cut away the less substantial underbrush so that the tougher and more tenacious obstacles that blocked the way might be visible. It is this role of dew drier that I have chosen to assume today; even should I succeed, however, we shall only stand in clearer appreciation of the tenuous path before us. And which I hope my colleagues will then cut through.

This conference is far from premature. It is evident from the words of our philosophers, our politicians, our scientists and technicians, that life in the twentieth century has acquired a new dimension; that we are, in effect, rushing into a new world order with no more than the slightest idea of where we are headed or how

From Ethical Perspectives and Critical Issues in Intercultural Communication, edited by Nobleza C. Asuncion-Lande. Reprinted by permission of the Speech Communication Association and the author. Professor Barnlund teaches at San Francisco State University.

to manage the transition. There is only a growing suspicion that the cultural enclaves of the past—our clans, tribes, villages, cities and states, self-sustaining and independent of the rest of humanity—are no longer adequate. Whether our preoccupation is with the management of physical resources—of water, oil, food, space, or weather—or with the management of symbolic resources—information, media, ideas, morality—these can no longer be entrusted to the unilateral decisions of any single source.

Yet the record of the past reveals a tedious and tragic picture of accommodation to conflicting ideologies. Every age has sought novel solutions to this problem. It is discouraging to note, however, that new methods of arbitrating cultural differences have rarely replaced earlier ones; they have only multiplied the alternatives available. The physical destruction of other cultures through war is still with us; domination through occupation and police control is still with us; exploitation of land and resources is still with us; alteration of cultural identity through religious or political conversion is still with us. And our new technology would appear to make the control of cultures even more feasible now through the manipulation of information and ideas. The promise of such agencies as the League of Nations and the United Nations is still unfulfilled. It is not an attractive or encouraging picture.

Nor is the picture any brighter with respect to the management of relations between persons of different cultural identities. Over a billion people were on the move on this planet last year; nearly a quarter of a billion traveled to foreign countries; millions took up residence temporarily or permanently in an alien culture. Yet to date there has been no serious exploration of the ethics of interpersonal encounters of the cultural kind. There have been few international conferences devoted to the subject, and even less research undertaken to propose guidelines.

Consider even the simplest dimensions of this problem: there are almost no limitations—

other than financial—on the right to travel; no compensating sensitivity or set of responsibilities accompanies this right. Discharging a thousand cruise ship passengers on islands populated by a few dozen Cuna Indians is seen as no more than a problem in logistics. There are a number of places in the world, often some of the most appealing, where the number of visitors in a single week exceeds the total permanent population; no one has yet articulated a critical threshold for cultural extinction or proposed protective legislation. Are the only endangered species to be nonhuman? Or is the loss of a life style, an art form, a language, or a religious experience at least as precious and perhaps as critical to our survival?

Nor has anyone yet, except as a private individual, examined the moral aspects of such commonplace activities as eating, drinking, dressing, working, playing, worshipping, rearing children when these are carried out in the context of an alien culture. Yet sensitive residents of foreign cultures are constantly reminded that even their most mundane activities—unconsciously performed in their home cultures—may not only embarrass members of other cultures but may powerfully undermine the system of values that shape the ethos of that culture.

Technical innovations and scientific discoveries have been found to produce severe dislocations when transplanted into other cultures; less visible, but no less profound, may be the shock waves flowing from introducing alien patterns of friendship, of male-female relations, of attitudes toward work, of unfamiliar modes of decision-making. The dissemination of short-grain wheat may have less disastrous moral consequences than the dissemination of attitudes toward child-rearing; barbed wire fences may be more easily assimilated than the refusal to conform to status and sex differences.

Communication between any two persons involves a certain risk, for exposure to new meanings can vitalize or undermine existing values and behavior patterns. When such en-

counters take place within a culture there is some protection in the fact that communicants employ symbols with some consistency, but more importantly that they share a system of rules governing such encounters. When these encounters involve persons of different cultures this protection is largely lacking; communicants interact not only in an unfamiliar medium, but each brings to the situation a divergent set of contextual rules. The magnitude of risk, and the possibility of harmful interaction, is therefore multiplied. In cross-cultural communications psychic and social injury may result from the highest motives; demoralizing consequences often accompany the most laudable intentions.

It might be helpful to examine some of the parallels between the intercultural and the therapeutic encounter. In professional therapy two or more people converse about significant events in ways designed to promote introspective examination of their assumptions and values leading to some reorganization of the personality. It should be noted that this type of interaction, prevalent in some form in most cultures of the world, is regarded as so serious a form of communication that it is restricted to a body of highly trained professionals and surrounded by a set of legal and moral restraints. Training in intercultural communication, and intercultural encounters themselves, commonly provoke the same sort of introspective examination of underlying assumptions and values and frequently trigger some reorganization of the personality. As of yet the cross-cultural encounter is protected by no standards of ethical adequacy. (I am aware of important differences between therapeutic and intercultural encounters, and by no means would argue for a parallel set of restrictions, but people participating in intercultural encounters often go through intensive, and insightful or destructive, experiences that are not unlike those occurring in professional therapy.)

All of this is more or less familiar, depending on the length and depth of our immersion in

other cultures. But is there anything distinctive, anything unprecedented, about the ethical issues that arise in cross-cultural work? Are they any different than those that confront a person, anywhere or anytime, who is trying to act with respect and compassion for others? Human acts always involve choices and some estimate of their consequences. Are these decisions any more complicated when they arise in cross-cultural contexts?

They are, indeed. At least in my present view. The moral issues that attend intercultural encounters are not simply more complicated, they are of an entirely new dimension. Despite the pervasiveness of cross-cultural contact, these complications remain overlooked and unexplored in any systematic way.¹ The ethical vacuum that confronts us reflects not merely a failure of specialists within this evolving field, nor the negligence of outside agencies to give support to such ethical study, but is due in large part to difficulties that are inherent in the cross-cultural context.

The number of these complications may be very great, but there are five that can be identified in some detail at this time. The first, perhaps the foremost, complication is that no commonly shared metaethic exists to which members of diverse cultures can repair when facing dilemmas of action arising out of conflicting frames of references.

Cultures are, in effect, systems. Perhaps the most complex of all structures created by human beings. They are comprised of many elements and variables, most of which have a sensitive and deep dependence upon each other. Damage to or removal of any critical feature—physical or symbolic—can impair or strengthen the viability of that system. But our intercultural sophistication is scarcely of an order yet that permits us to forecast even the short-range repercussions of such disturbances to a culture.

As with every system, cultures create and maintain boundaries. Sometimes they are territorial, but more often psychological. The most critical of these may be the communicative

boundaries within which human interaction is decipherable and meaningful; outside of which it becomes indecipherable and meaningless. The *sine qua non* of any human organization is the creation and maintenance of these patterns of meaning. What we call "morals" or "values" are simply the particular set of meanings involving evaluation, invested with more than ordinary emotional significance, that members of a particular culture share. They are, in a sense, the most meaningful of our meanings. They provide the motive for thought and action; they surround and make intelligible every communicative act.

Meanings and morals, however, tend to stop at the borders of every society; ethical principles represent, in a sense, a territorial imperative. Within a community of persons one acts with consideration, for moral consequences tend to inhere in a context of shared meanings. Acts have a more or less consistent interpretation, and tend to be viewed from the same ethical premises. Outside these boundaries the consequences are difficult to predict, and evaluations rest upon a multiplicity of often conflicting ethical premises.

It is not surprising that one of the great intellectual enterprises in every culture has been the articulation of a set of ethical precepts. Some of these frames of reference have been economic—feudalism, communism, capitalism, socialism; others have been philosophical—idealism, hedonism, rationalism, pragmatism; still others have been religious—Hinduism, Animism, Christianity, Buddhism. Each of them, through their appeal to human needs, their impassioned advocacy, or their forceful imposition, have diffused across diverse cultures. Generally they have had the negative effect of homogenizing cultures coming under their sphere of influence, and the positive effect of providing a common moral climate for evaluating human actions. But even the most extensive and influential of these ethical structures has failed to supply an ethic for more than a tenth of the world's population, and in these

instances did so only through the application of one kind of force or another.

Morality tends to be culture-specific, as arbitrary and as bound to culture as all our symbols and meanings are. When people communicate across cultures they tend to approach moral dilemmas in one of two ways: one is to evaluate the behavior of the other by adopting the perspective of their own moral assumptions, that is by assuming an external frame of reference and moralizing about their behavior; the second is to evaluate the behavior of the other by adopting the perspective of their moral assumptions, that is by assuming an internal frame of reference and empathizing with them. Either fosters a truncated morality that is incomplete and ethnocentric for it subordinates the ethical premises of one culture or the other. And it thereby fails to fully illuminate or to fairly adjudicate conflicts in which people of different moral orientations must accommodate their differences and create ways of collaborating on common tasks. (Those who have worked abroad are familiar with such dilemmas: to bribe or not to bribe; to respect class distinctions or resist them; to employ deception or to insist upon honesty; to express differences or to remain silent.)

The formulation of what is ethically responsible in intercultural encounters is as formidable as it is indispensable in the years ahead. The ethical systems we know are each tied to and reflect the premises of a particular body of people, and few of them enjoy the loyalty of more than a minority of the world's population. Until a metaethic—one that prescribes standards for relations between cultures—can be articulated in ways that gain wide allegiance, or until a common ethic emerges from the thousands of daily confrontations, confusions, and antagonisms that now characterize such encounters, we shall continue to conduct intercultural affairs in a moral vacuum.

Which brings me to the second condition that complicates the formulation of such an ethic. Moral vacuums are transient affairs; they

tend to be filled at once by moralists of one persuasion or another. But the cultures which might make important contributions to such an ethical dialogue are far from equal in power or influence, and the validity of their claims tends to be proportionate to the importance of their geography, resources, level of technology, and capacity of military destruction. Specialists in communication are well aware of the difficulty of collaborating—or even of achieving understanding—when communicants are grossly unequal not only in power, knowledge, and experience, but when they also control the channels of communication. An intercultural dialogue requires that those with something to say be given access to the platform and be taken seriously by those who might listen. Freedom to participate in such a global discourse is relatively meaningless today for such access is limited to nations with the financial resources, the technological facilities, and the sophistication to employ the media effectively. There is not merely an unfavorable balance of trade in material goods, but a more serious unfavorable balance of trade in ideas. Such a mutual exchange of ideas cannot develop, according to Hidetoshi Kato, until the channels of influence open to cultures of only thirty material objects compare more favorably with those open to cultures of five hundred thousand objects.² The unaided human voice is without much impact in a world dominated by those who control television, radio, and the press.

Related to the disproportionate influence that cultures have upon intercultural relations is the extent to which cultures are accessible to such influence. If ethical dialogue can be monopolized, it can also be blocked. Not all cultures of the world agree upon the desirability of exposing their values to the scrutiny of, or commerce with, alien moralities.

Societies differ, in short, in the degree to which they constitute open or closed systems. In some the cultural ethic is nearly unknowable by outsiders, for control of the social system and its rules regarding interpersonal relations

are in the hands of a minority of the population. In others the underlying ethic derives from a philosophy or religion that is monolithic in character and cannot tolerate the relativistic assumption on which collaboration depends. In still others, morality has derived from actions that have acquired a deeply sacred character that places such principles beyond the range of rational deliberation. And in others ethical standards are so woven into the economic and familial fabric of society that exposure to alternatives may threaten the entire system.

It should not be surprising therefore that there are cultures which do not permit the entry of any outsiders; others which permit entry only of aliens capable of providing critical skills and information. Some cultures open their borders, but control the movements of aliens; others regulate the frequency and occasions of interaction with their own people. In some it is dangerous for the outsider to speak openly; in others it is dangerous for citizens to listen or be seen with foreigners. In very few societies today is it possible to be legally accepted as a citizen with full political and economic rights, or to be psychologically accepted with full social privileges and opportunities.

It is impossible of course to explore the moral aspects of intercultural encounters when they are not permitted to occur; but it is not automatically possible even when they are. We must be wary of assuming the world is populated with cultures all of whom are eager for moral dialogue. Even in encounters between two people both of whom were nurtured in societies that are open and tolerant the exploration of differing moral standards is still imbued with deep feelings that often trigger defensive reactions. How much more difficult or impossible such discussion becomes when one or both parties present closed systems of thought. Yet every culture is, to some extent and on some issues, resistant to alternative views; strong identification with and commitment to cultural values are deeply rooted in even the most tolerant of people. Any viable intercultural ethic

will have to take into account such political and personal realities.

Seemingly outside the scope of this paper, but unfortunately not irrelevant to the issues it explores, is the interdependence of intercultural and international relationships. It is appealing to pretend that they can be separated—intercultural communication focusing upon the informal encounters between citizens of differing cultural identities, and international communication focusing upon formal encounters in which official representatives of national interests make political and economic policy—but they cannot. No such neat line of demarcation divides the two areas ethically. Many of the conditions that promote and stifle communication—the movement of people, the occasions for interaction, the topics to be discussed, the alliances and marriages that result—are seen to have political implications and are assumed to be the rightful province of government.

There is even a complication within this complication. Is the same ethical stance appropriate toward cultures ruled by a minority through force and cultures in which the will of the people is capable of affecting public policy? In popular governments, official actions tend more or less to reflect majority sentiment; in unpopular governments the majority may be silenced through military or police control. At what point is outside influence or intervention ethically justified, and at what point is such interference unethical and destructive of cultural values? Are there differences ethically between a popular and unpopular dictatorship, a temporary or permanent dictatorship? Few countries contain a single and homogeneous culture within their borders: Are the same ethical principles to apply when subcultures support or threaten national unity?

The intercultural dialogue we seek concerning ethical standards is compounded, finally, by our diverse concepts of the nature and potential of communication in mediating these values. The rhetorical premises of the West—our belief in the value of rational discourse, our faith in

the emergence of truth from competing arguments, our confidence in the values of collaboration—do not enjoy universal respect. Setting aside for the moment those cultures who refuse to contribute to such a dialogue, there remain many others who claim an intuitive truth that is higher than reason, who reject collaboration (especially among equals), who are unimpressed with arguments and mistrustful of words. If the content of such an ethical dialogue—that is the diverse opinions we have of what constitutes moral human behavior—were the only diversity, our task might be easier. But it is not. Even the processes through which these issues might be explored reflect a multiplicity of approaches, and these, too, carry ethical implications.

While this is not the occasion to articulate a set of ethical specifics, in the face of such urgency and complexity can some modest recommendations be made? Perhaps. One of them is to expand the number of such conferences and the variety of cultures participating in them. People who have experienced ethical dilemmas arising from their residence, their study, or their research in foreign cultures need to share these conflicts in a setting that supports such exploration.

Much more needs to be done to stimulate research on the communicative styles of various cultures so we may become familiar with their dynamics and their cross-cultural consequences. We need to identify the underlying commonalities among cultures whose outward forms and practices differ, and to discover differences that lie beneath the surfaces of cultures whose institutions and behavior are superficially alike. To formulate any truly humane ethic in the absence of such knowledge seems predestined to fail.

Finally we need to confront a task that is as delicate as it is formidable. And that is to create—or to synthesize from existing cultures—a superordinate set of guidelines for regulating communication between cultures. And one that can attract popular support from the widest

number of cultures possible. The metaethic should incorporate the minimal consensus required to discourage the grossest forms of destructive interaction while promoting the widest variations of behavior within cultures. Such a beginning might curtail the most injurious forms of intercultural contact that originate in a moral void while leaving space and time for more constructive alternatives to evolve.

Notes

1. An exception to this may be found in the "Symposium of Humane Responsibility in Intercultural Communication" held at International Christian University, January, 1976, Tokyo, Japan. The papers presented at this Symposium are published in John C. Condon and Mitsuko Saito (Eds.), *Communicating Across Cultures for What?* Tokyo: Simul Press, 1976.

2. Kato, Hidetoshi, "Are Materials Immaterial?" in John C. Condon and Mitsuko Saito (Eds.), *Communication Across Cultures for What?* Tokyo: Simul Press, 1976, p. 109.