



Communiqué

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AT THE UNITED NATIONS "EARTH SUMMIT"/RIBBON INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

The EARTH SUMMIT is the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, to be held in Brazil, June 1-12, 1992. The RIBBON INTERNATIONAL consists of ever-growing numbers of yard-by-half-yard pictures, sewn or painted on fabric, showing what each individual maker loves most and wants to protect by ending wars and global pollution.

The ES/RI project is asking classes or groups of students in schools and colleges to consider making 159 Ribbon panels, one for each of the 159 nations in the United Nations. Students can then look for names and addresses in each of those nations through discussions with their families about their own connections to foreign lands, looking around local communities for contacts to various nations, and writing to organizations or embassies. Ribbon panels can then be mailed to each of the individuals or organizations located, with the suggestion that a panel be made and sent in exchange for the one received.

Early 159 exchanges is a goal that may be hard to achieve, but the research involved and the connections made in each case should be interesting, fun and involve creativity and initiative on many fronts.

Through the process described above, collections of international Ribbons can be gathered in schools and colleges. The collections can be displayed locally in town halls, libraries, etc., to make visible humanity's need and desire to protect Earth's life and to build peace.

These panels can be exhibited around the World, June 1-12, 1992, to express diverse individual's concern and support for the goals of the first Earth Summit.

For more information contact Ribbon Around the Earth, Anita Helgesdöner, Esbjömsv. 14B, S-77800, Norberg, Sweden; or International Ribbon Exchange, % St. Anne's Church, Fair Lawn, New Jersey 07410 USA; or The Ribbon International, 235 East 22nd St., #11J, New York, NY 10010, USA.

THE RESEARCH CONNECTION ETHICS AND THE IMPOTENT INTERCULTURALIST

by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D., The American University, Washington, DC, USA

Dr. Barry Brummett (1981) has written an article which speaks directly to interculturalists regarding the fundamental yet oftentimes sticky issue of "ethics." I have used this article for years both as a guide for my own work across cultural boundaries and in my teaching and training in intercultural communication. I would like to discuss this issue of ethics in terms of our work in the intercultural arena from the insights and perspective advanced by Dr. Brummett. Of course, any errors, extensions, etc. of Dr. Brummett's position are my responsibility.

Ethics, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, means "the study of standards of conduct and moral judgement" while morals are defined as "dealing with or capable of distinguishing between right and wrong." When we talk about ethics, then, we are essentially talking about what people do—human actions—and the "rightness or wrongness" (the judgement) of those actions. These kinds of ideas are oftentimes called ethical values.

For centuries, writers have pointed out that different societies uphold very different and often conflicting notions of what is right and wrong—ethical values. The study of these different ethical values is called descriptive ethics and the idea that different societies have different ethical values is not, as such, controversial. However, controversy does arise when we think about how our own and others's ethical values are legitimated—what makes a particular ethical value true or good or right? Brummett suggests two opposing answers to this important question.

The absolute position believes that some higher being or concept legitimates an ethical value. Values not legitimated by this higher being or concept are deemed wrong. For example, the absolutist position

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A TRIBUTE TO THOMAS P. NUNNELLEY, 1946-1992

by Bill Gay, Professor of TESOL, Temple University Japan

We lost a colleague, but most of all a friend, when Tom Nunnelley passed away on February 9, 1992 in Birmingham, Alabama. At the memorial service held in Tokyo on February 16, approximately 150 friends, colleagues, and students gathered to honor him and to remember his warmth, his indefatigable sense of humor, his caring for others, his interculturalism, and so much more. Those who knew him are realizing that an important piece is missing from the puzzle of our lives. We'll miss the fun, the laughs, the tears, everything.

Besides English as a Foreign Language, Tom also taught intercultural communication. Japanese was his second language, and Japan was

his second culture. He was one of the founding members of SIETAR Japan and served on the governing council of SIETAR International. He often made presentations at conferences about teaching intercultural communication, and he lived what he taught, a truly intercultural person.

Tom and I had several important things in common, and this may partly explain why we became close friends almost immediately after meeting. We share the same birthday and we both graduated from Baylor University. For several years we have celebrated our birthday together, and it was great fun. He was still in Tokyo on January 11 this year, so some of our closest friends joined us on that occasion. It was a bittersweet affair because we knew it might be our last celebration with him, and indeed it was. He left Japan on January 18, and now we look for him but he is not here, we wait for his phone call but it does not come, we long for his humor and good sense and comfort but those things must be found elsewhere now. Sayonara, dear friend. We miss you very much.

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may argue that it is universally wrong to commit parent-child suicide. Therefore, it is proper to judge cultures that have parent-child suicide as wrong.

The ethical/cultural relativist position believes that cultures are the legitimating grounds of ethical values. The result is that different societies can live in different moral worlds. Cultural relativists might argue, for instance, that while parent-child suicide can be judged as wrong in American society, it should be judged as right in those societies which have legitimized this human action.

The difficulty with the absolutist position is that it can easily lead to tyranny (my way is the right way, your way is the wrong way). Further, the absolutist position does not adequately address the question, what happens when one's moral (absolute) position conflicts with another's moral view?

For this reason, the more common position taken among most interculturalists is that of the cultural or ethical relativist. For example, the SIETAR International Code of Ethics (*Communiqué*, April, 1985) states: "SIETAR International members view the world as a set of interdependent cultures which are equal in value and offer a variety of approaches to living in a global community."

The difficulty for the interculturalist who maintains the cultural relativist position is one of asserting ethical judgements across cultural boundaries. Can we, as interculturalists who take the relativists' view, judge wife-beating as it occurs, for instance, in Yanamomo society? For some of us, our first inclination may be to condemn this human action (to judge it as morally wrong). We therefore face an uncomfortable dilemma. Do we say something to others who are engaging in an act we morally wrong or do we perhaps, say nothing and view the act from a relativistic position?

As cultural relativists, I believe we have generally taken in our public life the "say nothing" approach. Yet it is paradoxical that while we believe in and attempt to live up to the notion of intercultural communication (i.e., meeting, interacting, talking with people from different cultures), when we face ethical value differences which are truly meaningful to us, we often become interculturalistically impotent. For example, as members of SIETAR International, how often have we publicly spoken out or spoken to other members from our organization who are from different cultures about practices we judge as wrong? If we have, how often have we been accused of violating the sanctity of the other culture? Is there an ethical position we interculturalists can adopt which respects the notion of cultural relativism yet at the same time permits us to assert our own ethical judgements across cultural boundaries? I believe Brummett outlines just such a perspective.

We should perhaps begin with the question: What is it in "culture" that legitimizes ethical values? Culture is not some monolithic, unchangeable, and concretized building. When we use the term culture, we are using a social construction, a concept we conveniently employ to label certain aspects of our social world. Second, it is not "culture" per se which creates and legitimizes ethical values. Rather, it is communication. Reason-giving discourse (called rhetoric by those in the communication field) is the active ingredient in culture through which ethical values are created, sustained, legitimized and changed. People do not have ethical values because they live in a culture; they have ethical values because they have been persuaded to those values. The corollary to this is that ethical values over time in a society do, in fact, change through communication (e.g., the use of torture to extract confessions during the Inquisition).

Accepting this, a cultural relativist who views ethical values as generated in communication would see these values as fundamentally negotiable. Ethical values created through communication are by defini-

tion potentially changeable and subject to communicative discourse. Because ethical values are created and changed through persuasive communication, the cultural relativist has the same moral responsibility as anyone else to participate in the public dialogue: to assert one's own ethical judgements across cultural boundaries. Further, it can be argued that asserting one's own ethical values across cultural boundaries is necessary because human societies in today's world are *communicatively interconnected*. In this sense, the Yanamomo Indians and SIETAR interculturalists do belong to the larger, communicatively connected global community. Foreign policy, international aid and relief efforts, international telecommunications and global travel would be impossible if this were not the case.

Yet the cultural relativist must also accept that because he/she is persuaded to a particular position, he/she can also be persuaded to another ethical value stance as well. Therefore, the relativist's behavior of asserting his/her ethical values across cultures in the public arena is based on conviction; not dogma. As Brummett says:

Because individuals have been persuaded that their standards are correct, they hold them with courage and conviction. But just because they have been persuaded, rather than favored with a direct heavenly revelation, and because they understand that the ethical standards of others have the same status, they urge their standards upon others through communication and persuasion. Those who hold different standards are, they believe, mistaken even though the standards are at present legitimated for those others. But they are justified in communicating to others why they should change those standards, because such communication is their ethical responsibility given their convictions (p. 295).

This position of cultural relativism as grounded in communication does not address all questions of ethics. For example, it does not adequately answer the question, what do you do when public discourse fails? That is, when you confront a practice in which discourse does not seem to be stopping an activity which you feel cannot continue in the short run? The position outlined here does not, however, hinder decisions we make everyday concerning actions we feel must be stopped. These decisions are made regardless of one's ethical position as communicatively grounded.

Its strength is that it provides an ethical stance for interculturalists to communicatively engage others in the most difficult kind of human dialogue: the discourse of ethical values. Viewing ethical values as communicatively grounded eliminates a kind of interaction impotence interculturalists sometimes find themselves in. This is, in and of itself, an important contribution to our field.

References

Brummett, B. (1981). A defense of ethical relativism as rhetorically grounded. *The Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 45, 286-298.

MEMBERS' FORUM

A Survey of Intercultural Communication Courses

Included with this issue is a 4-page questionnaire which forms part of a survey to learn about Intercultural Communication Courses and the forms they take. Because the primary audience is SIETAR International's membership, we seek your help in identifying other individuals and/or institutions for inclusion in this project. Feel free to copy this form for others in the field, or, if you prefer, send a list of names and addresses to: Avino Fantini, School for International Training, Brattleboro, VT 05302, USA. Preliminary results will be disseminated to respondents in Fall 1992, and eventually through SIETAR publications. This questionnaire was paid for with funds donated from the Nathaniel T. Winthrop Fellowships Program. Thank you.