On "Crossing Cultural Borders: Towards an Ethics of International Communication"

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It was a pleasure as well as an honor to be invited to attend this symposium, and to be offered this opportunity to comment upon the presentations. Each of the papers was interesting in its own right. I learned many interesting details, and my many minor questions about each are hardly deserving of publication.

Rather, at this juncture, I should like to reiterate some overriding concerns which apply to the entire project. In brief, it seems that the fundamental issues that both unite and delimit the field of inquiry were never adequately elucidated or understood by many of our colleagues in this symposium. I am trained as a scholar of comparative religions and ethics, so my viewpoint naturally differs somewhat from that of the anthropologists who attended. Nevertheless, insofar as we desire to address questions of ethics, I think several issues need clarification, and it is for that purpose that I shall focus my critique. I should take this opportunity to clarify those questions, and suggest some directions for possible answers.

(1) Confusion of terminology--ethics, ethic, ethos, and ethnic

Several papers confused the above terms; others addressed problems only of ethos and ethnos rather than of ethics, as was specified in the symposium title. Let me briefly clarify, first by providing some definitions excerpted from the Oxford English Dictionary.

ethics (plural): the science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty; the rules of conduct required in certain associations or departments of human life.

ethic: pertaining to 'ethos' [social character] as opposed to 'pathos' [private/uncultivated emotion]

ethos: (after Aristotle's Rhetoric) the characteristic spirit, prevalent tone or sentiment, of a people or community; the genius of an institution or system.

ethnic: heathen, pagan; pertaining to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics, esp. designating a racial or other minority within a larger system.

Our symposium's focus on cultural borders led many speakers to discuss 'ethnicity,' in the sense of racial or cultural minorities within a larger (world) system. However, very few speakers addressed the issues of ethics directly, until Dr. Miyaji raised such concerns, sadly, near the end of the symposium. Moreover, some speakers continually confused the idea of ethos/ethic, in the sense of cultural tendencies, cultural sentiment, or culturally sanctioned behavior, with ethics, which refers to a more conscious or self-reflective consideration of duties and rules of conduct. This confusion, however, gives rise to the very questions most critical to the title of this symposium, viz.: are ethics indeed a science or system of principles, or merely ethnic ethos, the socially sanctioned behaviors of particular peoples?

(2)   Deductive ethics vs. descriptive ethics

From Plato through Kant, the dominant schools of western philosophers held the position that ethics follows universal laws, derivable from overruling principles. Of course, this position has been challenged by more relativistic philosophers such as Nietzsche and Foucault, not to mention by sociologists and anthropologists, who tend to see ethics as the rules imposed by particular societies. From this latter viewpoint, there is no standard of right or duty above that of particular societies; in the worst case, economic or military power remains the only arbiter of which ethics will prevail.

In the absence of a unified world-view or religion, then, the question that faces us scholars in search of 'an ethics of international communication' becomes: are there any common principles governing our duties in communication? The common answer has been like that of Jurgen Habermas, who argues that the 'ideal communication situation' requires of the participants various duties such as open-mindedness, equal opportunity to speak and listen, discussion based on reason, concentration on the correctness and implications of the content of the speech more than on the accidents of birth, class, sex, or character of the interlocutors. In discussion, some of our panelists suggested that culture-crossing communicators cannot achieve such 'ethical duties' --but this does not deny that they may remain desirable ideals. Conversely, if we deny the possibility of any set of principles upon which to ground our ideal of communication, then the whole topic to be addressed--'an ethics of international communication'-- becomes impossible.

Indeed, some argue that Habermas' presuppositions of equality, reason, open-mindedness, etc. are not only not universal, but pose impositions upon cultures that have long been hierarchical, dictatorial, discriminatory, or non-logical. However, it is not necessary to impose such standards of ethical communication upon the entire

world; it suffices that people who desire to transcend cultural borders must adopt some set of principles, or common ground-rules, in order to achieve meaningful and mutually satisfying interaction. It is important that these principles not conceal a cultural domination in their very formulation; that they be derived not from any *a priori* philosophy or religion, but rather from the goals that border-crossers hold in common.

(3)   Capitalist imperialism vs. cultural borrowing

Another area of common concern in our symposium was that of cultural imperialism. All the speakers worried that they not impose or project their values upon the cultures with which they interact. Significantly, traditional military-political colonialism has virtually disappeared within our lifetimes. Ironically, a species of economic imperialism has purveyed the culture of Hollywood and the New York Stock Exchange around the world. There is some reason to criticize Coca Cola sold in China, or Vietnamese laborers producing Japanese tennis shoes, as forms of imperialism. But the critical difference is that in such cases, it is the Chinese themselves who desire to drink Coca Cola enough to pay for it; and the Vietnamese laborers themselves who choose a life making Japanese tennis shoes in Hanoi rather than catching fish or growing rice. This is not to defend the many inequalities and injustices that multinational corporations impose upon weaker and poorer peoples. It is rather to emphasize that the desires to live in cities, drink cola, earn money, etc., are at the same time inner motivations by which weaker and poorer peoples choose to change or even destroy their own life styles.

Sadly, as the many peoples of the world collide and cross each other's borders, ethical principles, duties, and standards tend to be relativized if not discarded. The most obvious commonalities that link Chinese and African and American and Japanese are physical and animal. We all have bodies, so we like to eat tasty foods, to attract others with our clothing, to increase and to display our wealth and power, to act 'freely' as we will, without deferring to others' conflicting desires. Such tendencies are common to the animal kingdom as well--and it is precisely these tendencies that ethics have always been concerned to control and confine. In Aristotle's terms, the difference between human and animal is the difference between rational restraint and irrational self-indulgence, between ethos and pathos, between ethics and amorality. So, on the one hand, we may well criticize multinational corporations for exploiting the ignorance and desires of third world peoples. But, on the other hand, the problem will never be completely resolvable unless the third world peoples themselves come to believe that other values are more important than physical pleasures and acquisitions of wealth. In

many different ways, traditional civilizations have all praised people for reasons other than their wealth: reasons of personal character or abilities. This traditional appreciation of personal character and ability tends to get lost when urban industrialization rewards people for selling their time, energies, and even ideas with money alone.

So the challenge today, in crossing borders, remains to relocate ethics and respect in ways not dependent on mere material wealth. This is not easy. While Japanese samurai and English gentlemen each lived by deeply held codes of honor that both placed far above material wealth, each looked down on the other as ignorant of 'true' or 'real' honor. Neither code of honor functioned meaningfully outside of its own culture, nor was it possible to impose either code upon the rest of the world. Yet animalistic competition need not be the only alternative to all such traditional forms of honor. Given a sufficient understanding of each other's language and culture, it is possible (although personally challenging) for an English gentleman living in Japan to learn to behave in ways that can be respected by educated Japanese, as it is for a Japanese samurai to learn to behave as an English gentleman when living in England.

The further, and more difficult challenge, is that of crossing cultural borders within one's given nation. As often noted, there is a far greater gap between elders and youth, between educated and uneducated, between urban and rural within a single advanced country today, than between similarly educated urban elders in different countries. Similarly, the tendency to place value on physical satisfaction rather than in seeking higher moral ideals is also common among classes of lesser education within so-called 'educated countries.' Our symposium did not adequately address these issues, but the question of how to re-educate people to believe in honor, duty, ethics, and values other than money remains a question of how to cross cultural borders between educated and uneducated, believers and unbelievers--and poses a serious challenge to all us educators now and in the future.

(4) Possible grounds for an ethics of intercultural communication

In the absence of religious and traditional ethics, and with the understanding that pursuit of personal pleasure is in itself adequate neither as a foundation for society nor as a grounds for crossing cultural boundaries, then on what basis can an ethics of intercultural communication be imagined? Two possibilities were suggested in the discussions of our symposium.

One possibility is the common realization that environmental destruction knows no boundaries; that we share the same oceans and pollutions; that all countries and

cultures now drink of the same air and water and eat each other's produce. If we share this recognition, then our duties to preserve the earth, including humankind and biodiversity, come to take ethical priority over short-term self-satisfaction alone. Principles of a new bioethics need not be depend upon divine inspiration nor quasi-scientific observation of traditional social practices. Just as Habermas has derived principles of 'ideal communication' (however tentative and imperfect) from our presumed common desire to achieve mutual understanding, similarly it may be possible to derive principles of 'world preservation' from the minimal preconditions required to achieve our common desire to pass on a livable and diverse world to our grandchildren. To be sure, this presupposes a level of comprehension and commitment largely lacking in most populations, and will require long and serious education to accomplish.

Another possibility is the expression of caring best epitomized by Dr. Miyaji. While painfully aware of her inability to help the dying children of Djibouti, and well aware that her own experience was carefully prescribed by camp directors and the local politics of interethnic rivalries, nonetheless Dr. Miyaji exhibited an ability to cross borders ethically by exhibiting her desire to help, to share, and to care, with people who clearly desired her medical expertise. A large feminist literature already contrasts the ethics of care with the ethics of duty. But there is no need to choose one in total exclusion of the other. A consciousness of what the world requires of us for sustainable continuity, combined with a caring concern to answer the needs of people less fortunate than ourselves, may be one way of finding ideals of behavior in international communication, without surrendering unconditionally to the mores of the marketplace or short-sighted self-seeking alone.

(5) Responsible Scholarship

At least two meta-issues are raised by the term 'responsible scholarship.' The first, as discussed by many border-crossers in this symposium, is the duty, not only to avoid imposing one's own culture and values upon the culture that one is researching, but more importantly, not to deny the expressed needs of the people one encounters. There is already a wide body of literature and countless legal decisions prohibiting experimentation on humans without their prior informed consent. Yet much of anthropology continues to tend to treat 'others' as 'target cultures,' 'objects of research,' and desires to contrast the 'unusual behaviors' of some 'new people' with previously established behavior patterns in a known 'standard.' While not necessarily manipulative, such scholarship runs the risks of flaunting wealth and power in the face of the needy, without attempting to address the needs of the needy for everything from food to self-

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esteem. Several of our scholars explicitly recognized such dangers; others seemed less concerned or unaware.

The other meta-issue is that of scholarly presentation; the duty to clarify *ab initio* the purpose, methods, sources, and to a reasonable degree, the presuppositions of one's own work, especially in relation to the common theme of the conference or symposium. Some of the presentations in this particular symposium were confusing because they ignored such scholarly responsibilities; others failed to make clear their connections or commonalities with the overall theme. This problem might be mitigated to some degree by advance distribution of the central papers, allowing requests for rewriting or clarification; alternatively, the rewriting of the papers to connect to a common theme can be achieved after the conference in the process of editing the contributions into a coherent publication.

Finally, the very pronounced tendency to depend on and report first-hand experiences, while interesting and sometimes inevitable, nevertheless raises many questions of the generalizability and validity of some of the assertions made. A concern to ground generalizations in the scholarly literature is well evidenced in Dr. Inaga's paper, for example, but less evident in some of the others. I should like to conclude by pointing out that there is already a very massive body of literature concerning the topic of ethics of border-crossing and cross-cultural communication. I should like to introduce some of the major works and scholars in this field not mentioned by our symposium, in the hopes of giving both participants and readers a broader view of the scholarly domain.

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