Cross-cultural Communication and International Development Ethics

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Is cross-cultural communication and criticism possible? This question is important question, since, if such cross-cultural practice is not possible, then development ethics, which applies ethical reflection to the ends and means of development, could only be used by citizens of a given country to think critically about their *own* country's development goals and strategies. By contrast, if cross-cultural communication *is* possible, then *everyone* – citizens of a nation, as well as its allies, friends, and foes—can understand and evaluate social change. Non-Iraquis could weigh in on whether democracy is a good thing for Iraq and how is should be promoted. Non-Americans would not be out of place in assessing US treatment of prisoners at home or abroad. It would not be illegitimate for International aid organizations would to assess a poor nation's efforts to reduce deprivation and expand opportunity

The Ethnocentric Challenge and Three Responses

The question of cross-cultural communication is usually framed as part of the ethnocentrism/anti-ethnocentrism controversy. It is widely believed, especially by those living in rich and powerful countries, that appropriate development models, policies, and projects should reflect the North American , or Western development experience.   This belief increasingly is seen, especially by those living in "developing countries," as ethnocentrism. Here "ethnocentrism" means two things. First, Northern/Western ethnocentrics employ their *own* cultural norms in evaluating foreign practices. Second, these ethnocentrics employ their standards to make *invidious* comparisons between their countries' "successes" and the "failures" of so-called backward countries. When the ethicist comes from the rich North or West to assess development ends and means in the poor South or East, she is likely to judge "Third World" development in terms of her own societal norms and propose development goals and strategies to help "them" become like "us." This practice of ethnocentricism is countered by three types of arguments.

The particularist anti-ethnocentrist. Particularist anti-ethnocentrism rejects the exporting of foreign development models and practices; this view also sometimes repudiates the very idea of development. According to this perspective, each "developing" society or region should define desirable social change according to its own (and only its own) standards and traditions. A foreign development ethicist would have a role in an another culture's debate only if she embraced local standards or if there were some overlap in the traditions of the two countries. Sometimes this kind of anti-ethnocentrism is supported on nationalistic grounds; sometimes it relies on thin universal moral grounds: each society has the right to determine its own

path -- free from foreign influence, let alone economic domination or military intervention. The more strident versions of this position are explicitly separatist: foreigners are not welcome in the society's debate about its development path.

Much of this view deserves thoughtful consideration. Within limits, group self-determination should be respected. It does not follow, however, that foreigners, even from the North or West, cannot play a positive role in another region's development dialogue. Moreover, the issue is not that of foreigner versus native. Some foreigners are more a part of the "alien" society than some of that society's own members, and certainly there are morally significant distinctions to be made among the society's own members.

The universalist anti-ethnocentrist. Universalist anti-ethnocentrism, a second response to ethnocentrism, seeks to get beyond all cultural bias, regardless whether it is of the North/South or First World/Third World varieties. Instead, the universalist anti-ethnocentrist ascends to an ahistorical, transcendent Archimedean point to argue for the existence of the timeless Truth about desirable social change, which can be discerned (or constructed) and then applied to societies at different stages of the one development path. According to this view, ethnocentrism can be reduced, if not eliminated, by replacing cultural bias with impartial Reason. Common to these universalist approaches is the belief that the Truth transcends human history or is deeply rooted in knowledge of the essential aspects of human nature. Rational investigators can get outside all development vocabularies, compare them with (or construct) the Truth, and rationally select the vocabulary that matches--or at least best approximates-- the universal, transcultural Truth about what development should be. Foreigners are on an equal footing with compatriots if and when they equally transcend their cultural identity. Truth, thus, is nation-blind and culture-blind, and it is equally open to culture-transcending and knowing minds in touch with the Truth "out there" or "in here."

The trouble with the universalist critique of ethnocentrism is that arguably universalism (1) cannot, except by begging the question, establish itself or any non-vacuous truth; (2) provides no conclusive means of deciding among candidates for the "True" development model; and (3) opens the door to domination of others by those who think they have the Truth.

The anti anti-ethnocentrist. Finally, anti anti-ethnocentrism, bites the bullet and both rejects universalism's pretensions and affirms that ethnocentrism is desirable as well as unavoidable. The philosopher Richard Rorty, for example, contends that we cannot but evaluate by our own standards and make invidious comparisons between our society and others. And even if we could do so, we shouldn't. Foreign development ethicists should be loyal to their own communities and moral traditions. A more ambitious form

of anti anti-ethnocentrism affirms that "our" ethics -- where "our" refers to "we relatively rich, liberal North Americans and Europeans" -- is an ethic with global pretensions. Loyalty to our historical community (rather than to ahistorical Reason) requires that this society's development ethic be spread to -- if not imposed on -- other cultures.

This sophisticated endorsement of ethnocentrism has much to recommend it. It rightly gives up on ahistorical grounding and recognizes that we cannot avoid evaluating by our own cultural norms. But it goes too far (or in the wrong direction)in making historically-grounded evaluation impervious to change and in assuming the inevitability of invidious comparison in favor of one's own society. Finally, in this interpretation, one finds little hope that a development ethicist from a "developed" society would ever be convinced that a "developing" society offers some progressive ideas for the ethicist's *own* society.

Each of the three responses to ethnocentrism in development ethics has merits and deficiencies. However, rather than trying to devise an eclectic or mediating position that retains each position's strengths while avoiding its weaknesses, the issue of cross-cultural communication and development ethics can be recast.

Insiders and Outsiders

Instead of focusing on the role of foreigners in a country's development debate, let us reframe the issue and distinguish between social insiders and social outsiders. Both terms refer to persons in relation to other persons or to groups rather than to persons as unrelated individuals. An insider is one who is recognized or accepted, by herself and the other group members, as belonging to the group. One is so identified on the basis of such things as shared beliefs, desires, memories, and hopes. Accordingly, one is an outsider with respect to a group just in case she is not counted -- by herself or the group members -- as belonging to the group, due to lack of shared beliefs, memories, hopes, and so forth. This insider/outsider distinction also applies to situations as well as to groups. Some people, for example, feel "at home" in villages but alien in a megacity. It is important to underscore that the insider/outsider distinction does not coincide with the distinction of native/ foreigner or citizen/foreigner. On the one hand, one can be outside the group formally but really be an insider, for example, a long-time resident "alien" who is considered by all to be a good American. On the other hand, the newly naturalized citizen may not (yet) be an insider in her new country.

We are all insiders and outsiders in a multitude of ways in relation to various groups, societies, and situations. Even within the same group, a person can be both an insider and an outsider insofar as that person identifies herself with only *some* of the groups's values and practices; she may feel ambiguous about a value, practice,

3

or belief. The insider/outsider distinction is better understood as a continuum or as lying in a spectrum rather than as a rigid dichotomy whose categories are permanently established and mutually exclusive. Time spent in another country can make one less an outsider to the "adopted" country; sometimes one becomes more an outsider to one's own country as one takes on some of the commitments of the adopted country and slowly extinguishes values of one's home country. Pure cases of being an insider could be construed only as a hypothetical, because the groups with which we identify have diverse and often antagonistic factions that pull us in different directions.

One's status as an insider or outsider is fluid. A person may find himself thinking more like a member of one group and less like a member of another. Choice is also a possible factor. An immigrant, or exile commonly "reinvents" herself, consciously taking on some of the values of the new homeland without giving up insider status in the old country. Refugees and immigrants often resist complete identification with the "host" country in order to retain some of the beliefs, practices, and insider views of the homeland. An ex-patriot typically takes on the values of a new homeland, while working consciously to give up his insider status in his country of origin.

Insider Development Ethics

How should we evaluate insider versus outsider status as they apply to cross-cultural communication and development ethics? One finds distinctive benefits and harms, opportunities and temptations, advantages and disadvantages related to either status. Groups are of varying size and scales of importance in development. One can be part of a local neighborhood, as well as larger groups—such as a social class, ethnic group, an entire culture--and right up to membership in the "global community." One also finds the possibility for both good and evil, depending on the moral character and relative power of the groups from which one comes and to which one goes. Certainly, to be outside a despicable group and inside an admirable group is morally desirable; a move in the opposite direction is not.

With respect to any of these groups, one must ask the crucial question: What opportunities and dangers does an insider face *by virtue of being an insider?* The development ethicist who is an insider enjoys at least three distinct advantages. First, because the insider development ethicist shares in the community's vocabulary, practices, possibly in its ideals, the insider can understand and appreciate nuance in meaning and differences among values within the community. This advantage is particularly important insofar as the ethicist is committed to an ethics that takes into account and contributes to the community's aspirations and beliefs. As part of the "we," the insider-ethicist also has the capacity not only to understand but also to make herself

understood as a conversation partner in the group's dialogue about its identity. Because development ethics should be done in a contextually sensitive way, with an understanding not just of actual facts, but also of interpreted meanings and shared values, an outsider might entirely miss the real meaning of a past event, present policy, or future option. Consequently, any ethical evaluation might be flawed, or completely off the mark.

Second, in addition to knowing the "interpreted" facts, the insider-ethicist's moral judgments about the community's past, present, and future will be in terms *accessible* to the community in question. It will not always be clear which norm to appeal to, and sometimes two communal norms will be in tension or conflict. But the insider-ethicist has an advantage over the outsider because the insider can more easily appeal to a presumed set of moral assumptions, even when that set involves ambiguity and inconsistency. An ethicist growing up in a society priding itself on progress toward racial equality may realize how deeply resonant are her condemnations of current racial discrimination (even though some defended it by appeal to the value of liberty). Iraqi victims of torture at the hands of US military or civilians know better than their American abusers how humiliating it is to be paraded nude, especially in front of women.

Third, insider standing confers to the ethicist a *prima facie* right to criticize the group's development path, identify costs and benefits of current development strategy, and recommend what he or she considers better alternatives for the future. This "right to evaluate" is based not only on the insider's contribution to the group but also on the likelihood that the insider knows the facts, as interpreted by the group, the values that inform the group, and the desires that its members express.

But insiders also face definite disadvantages and dangers. An insider may be oblivious to constitutive meanings in her community precisely because they are so omnipresent. Like a fish unaware of the water in which it continually swims, the insider may be too close to get things into the focus requisite for ethical assessment.

Further, depending on the purity and exclusivity of their inside status, insider-ethicists are more or less limited to the vocabularies and notions of value understood by their group. To become an insider in a group, particularly when the group is a "melting pot," may require giving up alternative perspectives and becoming an outsider to one's former allegiances. This has costs both for the group and the ethicist. The group may desperately need new ideas to replace stale ones that exist only because of dogmatic preservation. The ethicist may find herself confined to and even trapped in familiar and conventional concepts -- unable to expand the horizons of the possible and desirable. The insider-ethicist may purchase "relevance" at the price

5

of needed novelty. The danger is that the insider will give the community comforting reassurances about past achievements rather than imaginative challenges for future greatness.

Insiders face a final limitation and related risk. To be an insider is to live in the midst of loyalties, debts, favors, obligation, promises -- things which the insider owes to others and which she is owed. Such debts may be compromising or corrupting. Although group membership might give one the right to criticize and propose alternatives, loyalties and debts to co-members may inhibit the exercise of responsibilities. In such cases the temptation may be too great; it may be too much to expect insiders to be sufficiently and properly impartial. In contrast, the outsider may be able to say what the group needs to hear, but none of the members dare say.

Outsider Development Ethics

Like insiders, outsiders face certain liabilities and temptations, as well as enjoy advantages and opportunities. Often outsiders are ignorant about what is going on in the group -- what things mean -- and about the group's normative resources. The third world is littered with development models, policies, and projects invented by societal outsiders and properly abandoned by societal insiders. Second, while the insider-ethicist is usually accorded the right to evaluate present structures and future options, doors are often closed to the outsider-ethicist, especially when this outsider comes from a "developed" and powerful group. If the group's development debate is about its own identity, only members of the group may be viewed as having a right to participate -- especially if outsiders come from a dominating or occupying group.

Commonly enough, when an outsider-ethicist is invited to speak to a community's development needs, then the outsider-ethicist typically takes on the role of expert. Particularly when she is from a rich and powerful area or group, she tends to give her own ideas more weight than they deserve or, worse, to *assume* that her ideas are more worthy than those of the weak, "underdeveloped," or traditional insider. Similarly, the ethicist inside a peripheral group might tend to respond to the outsider's ethics by giving that ethical view more weight than it merits and even by assuming that ethical stance is correct. These dangers are all the more pronounced when outsider proposals are accompanied by economic inducements or stipulations, or when there exist strong traditions of host hospitality. The outsider-ethicist from the "developed" area or group runs serious risk of having undue influence and exerting subtle coercion; the insider-ethicist from the "less developed" periphery runs the contrary risk of being insufficiently self-reliant and bold.

Outsiders also can err in the opposite direction. The outsider-ethicist, aware of his or her own nation's history

of cultural imperialism, may refrain from negative evaluations in favor of fawning approval of the host group's norms and practices. It is tempting to slide from an affirmation of the insider's right of self-determination to the view that the insider cannot make mistakes, and is somehow more inherently "good" or "pure" in motive or action.

Although outsiders are are challenged by distinctive disadvantages and temptations, they have the opportunity to make real and positive contributions to an alien group. Outsider-ethicist strengths are the mirror image of insider-ethicist weaknesses. The outsider-ethicist may see and reveal things that an insider misses; we know *what-is* by contrast with *what-is-not*, and the outsider's very different experience may provide a "perspicuous contrast"—in the words of philosopher Charles Taylor--with what is hidden or obscure to the insider. One way for the outsider to accomplish this is to *clarify* the debate over social identity that is taking place within that alien group. The outsider can be a sort of mirror -- not a mirror to gain access to transcendental Truth, but a mirror to reflect back to the group its own internal dialogue. As a result, insiders may come to see more clearly what they share with, and where they diverge from, others in their society.

Moreover, by drawing on her own quite different traditions, vocabulary, and experience, the outsider can inject new and sometimes needed ideas into an alien group's development deliberations. The outsider may provide a new way of integrating prevailing commitments. Perhaps more frequently, the outsider-ethicist, after immersion in an alien culture and on the basis of her own "lights," may appeal to one part of the culture or tradition in order to criticize another part. Finally, drawing on the resources of his or her own tradition, the outsider ethicist can introduce moral ideas unanticipated in another society.

Finally, outsiders enjoy an advantage over an insider counterpart because she is free from the insider's prior commitments and loyalties. This freedom can enhance the outsider's ability and willingness to say what needs to be said in the assessment of development options. This positive role can prove crucial when it enables a weak or repressed group to gain a voice in relation to a hegemonic and oppressive group.

The Hybrid Development Ethicist

In light of the strengths and weaknesses of development ethicists who are insiders, versus those who are outsiders, one can inquire into the implications for the conduct of cross-cultural communication, the virtues of international development ethicists, and the kind of ethics these ethicists should practice.

Cross-cultural dialogue partners and development ethicists should be insider-outsider hybrids. The ethicist who is not a member of a given group can still be an insider in the sense that he can immerse himself in this new, and different form of life, grasp some of what is going on, and be accepted as dialogue partners. At the same time, the development ethicists from one culture should retain and take advantage of their outsider status in order to reflect an "alien" culture back to its insiders, call attention to the omnipresent obvious by contrasting it with their different experience, bring in new ideas, mediate between various factions, help the vulnerable gain a voice, and speak the truth made elusive by group loyalties. As they retain such aspects of their outsider status, the hybrid development ethicist should not deceive herself or mislead others by pretending to ascend to what is an impossible standpoint: a view of the inside from an ahistorical, transcendent, objective outside. No such "view from nowhere" exists. To assume it does breeds both dominance on the part of those who think they have the Truth and servility on the part of those who long for it.

Development ethicists should also cultivate a certain kind of insider-outsider mix in encounters with their own groups. They should strive to develop and outsider perspective in order to be able to learn from other groups and develop a clearer understanding of the limitations in one's own group and its ways of doing things, as well as suggest better ideas learned from "abroad." But this outsider perspective supplements an abiding insider membership, which requires some loyalty to the ethicist's own group. Travelers are tempted to escape from the "grey in grey" of their own societies to the creative instability of exotic places. Insider status not only provides a starting point for moral reflection, but it also gives ethicist the responsibility to return to her own society's ongoing debate about what it should be and how it should relate to other groups. Moreover, one does not have to be an outsider in one's own culture so long as avenues exist for social transformation with which one can subsequently identify. One can remain or become again an insider to one's self and one's group by working for desirable change in one's self and society.

Ethnocentrics and particularists begin and end inside their own groups. Universalists yearn to attain an impossible standpoint beyond all particularity. Like so many traditional philosophical problems, the particularist/universalist debate remains – as currently defined -- unsolved. Rather than attempting to resolve the controversy, one can recast it. With the insider/outsider distinction, the theoretical problem can be transformed into a practical task. Development ethicists must seize the opportunities and avoid the dangers of being outsiders as well as insiders in relation to various groups. They must strive to become optimal insider-outsider combinations in relation to existing groups. They also must promote the emergence of a world community that contributes to and is guided by a global development ethics. They begin in their groups and return to their groups. In between, they may benefit and learn from other groups. As insider-outsiders, they

can become more complete persons, better cross-cultural communicators and development ethicists and, thereby, help build a better world.

I close by illustrating my argument with brief descriptions of the life and work of two hybrid, cross-cultural development ethicists. Chilean novelist, essayist, and playwright Ariel Dorfman, a national outsider to Argentina and a cultural outsider to indigenous cultures, spent time in the 1980's with abused and the forcibly relocated Matacos Indians in Argentina's inhospitable Gran Chaco. One result of Dorfman's visit with the Matacos was that this previously nomadic tribe was prompted to come to grips with the problems and opportunities of their new life as small farmers. Writing about the plight of the Matacos, Dorfman also was able to challenge the Argentine government to compensate the Matacos for past injury (at the hands of the government and private citizens) as well as "encourage" foreign development agencies to assist the Matacos in their efforts to survive both economically and culturally.

Returning to Chile from his exile in the United States during the Pinochet years, Dorfman contributed to Chile's *own* progress in reckoning with the wrongs committed during the Pinochet era. He also took advantage of his hybrid (US/Chile) status when – prior to the UN invasion in Iraq in 2003 – he argued that the US would be just as wrong to invade Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein as it would have been to invade Chile to end Pinochet's rule. Both were brutal dictators who killed and tortured their opponents. But regime change and democracy building, argued Dorfman in the *New York Times*, are most effectively accomplished not when outsiders invade, occupy, and impose democratic institutions but when those victimized by and fed up with tyranny take matters into their own hands.

 U.S. citizen Paula Palmer offers another example of the virtuous insider-outsider. Initially a *gringa* outsider, for fifteen years she immersed herself in Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast and helped the region's poor and vulnerable blacks and Bri Bri Indians articulate their traditions and protect their threatened way of life. Her own writing in both English and Spanish helped Costa Ricans throughout the country understand the both the material poverty and cultural wealth of Talamanca, a hitherto neglected part of the country. Returning to Boulder, Colorado Palmer has worked for more than a decade in improving the opportunities of Colorado's latino and native populations. Moreover, through the non-governmental organization *Global Response,* Palmer provides a channel through which U.S. school children can become informed about and protest to leaders the environmental and cultural destruction occurring in both the developed and developing world. The outsider-turned hybrid, who contributed to needed reforms in Central America and learned much from her fellow Talamancans, returned to her own America to help realize its promise of justice for all.

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