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A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Relationship Between Science and Bioethics

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This paper attempts to address an emerging debate regarding whether science can provide objective grounds for resolving cross-cultural differences on bioethical issues, such as organ transplants and global warming. On one side are arguments which suggest that if science could only provide us with a precise understanding of the issue at hand, cultural differences over morality could be transcended and a universal moral code established. On the other side are relativist counterarguments which suggest that since ethical decision-making is purely a matter of personal or cultural choice, there can never be a universal morality. Rather than defend either side in this debate, I would suggest as an alternative that while ethical decision-making across cultures can indeed be informed by science, science itself cannot arbitrate cross-cultural ethical disputes. I will argue that since science and ethics are both cultural phenomena, the strategy of appealing to scientific evidence to resolve cross-cultural differences on ethics is fundamentally flawed. I will further argue, however, that relativism can be avoided by adopting a constructivist approach to cross-cultural dialogue. Since my concerns are with cross-cultural methodology rather than with the specific issues of organ transplants or global warming, I will try to cast my arguments in a way that applies generally to the field of bioethics.

There are two main arguments against the view that cross-cultural disputes over ethics can be resolved by appealing to science. The first, which is fairly uncontroversial, is that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is," or more precisely, that statements of value cannot be derived from statements of fact, an argument first advanced by David Hume over 250 years ago (Hume 1739 see also Moore 1971). Science concerns itself with how we are to understand the world, ethics with how we are to live in it—hence, the division of labor between science as an empirical discipline and ethics as a normative discipline. Precisely because human action is not determined by how things exist in the world, there is room for a variety of choices in how we act in particular situations. The fact that different choices are made by different individuals and cultures leads some to the conclusion that ethics is purely subjective and relative. The standard liberal view is that it is inappropriate for one individual or culture to tell another individual or culture what to do rather, freedom and autonomy must be protected. Ironically, relativism itself commits the naturalistic fallacy by suggesting that simply because cultural differences exist (a factual claim), they should be accepted (a moral claim).

A second, more controversial argument against the view that cross-cultural disputes over ethics can be resolved by appealing to scientific evidence rests on the constructivist claim that science, as much as ethics, is a cultural product and a matter of conceptual choice (*cf*. Putnam 1985). The language we use to describe the world does not represent the world as it is but rather the world as we have chosen to conceptualize it. This view has had a widespread following among philosophers and sociologists of science ever since the publication of Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* in 1962 (Kuhn 1962; see also Quine 1969; Barnes 1974; Bloor 1976; Goodman 1978; Fraassen 1980; Hesse 1980; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Putnam 1988; Cole 1992; Arbib and Hesse 1993). Constructivism challenges the older realist view that science in some way reveals absolute or universal truth about the world. Realism has its origins in the European Enlightenment of the 18th century, which sought to conquer the darkness of tradition and superstition with the light of science and rationality. The Enlightenment view continues in the modernist assumption that science and technology will lead the world into a glorious future. Unity will achieved by encouraging all

countries to proceed along the same lines of cultural, political, and economic development, characterized by a global market, global decision-making bodies, and global standards for everything, presumably including bioethics.

There has been a growing backlash against the modernist view, however, fueled in part by developments in the philosophy of science noted above. An alternative worldview, postmodernism, decries the homogenizing effects of modernism and seeks instead to foster cultural diversity, emphasizing local rather than global forms of culture (Lyotard 1979; Lash 1990; Featherstone 1991; Crook, Pakulski, and Waters 1992). According to this view, there is no reason for the world to unite around a single political order, a global market, or universal systems of knowledge and ethics. Postmodern ethicists argue that no universal ethics is possible and that each culture, or community of discourse, creates its own standards (Bauman 1993). Development theorists, informed by postmodern epistemology, argue that indigenous forms of knowledge, including knowledge embedded in myth and tradition, are just as valid as Western science (Warren, Slikkerveer, and Brokensha 1995; Brush and Stabinsky 1996).

Neither modernism nor postmodernism offer an adequate view of the relationship between science and ethics, however. The difficulty with the modernist view is that it simply assumes that science and ethics are—or in principle should be—universal and invariant across cultures. The difficulty with the postmodernist view, on the other hand, is that it simply invites us to accept cultural differences, while failing to provide us with the means to resolve cross-cultural disputes, even in cases, such as global warming, which require joint action across cultures. A third alternative, and the one argued for here, is a constructivist approach which acknowledges cultural diversity with respect to both knowledge and ethics, yet suggests that agreement can achieved when necessary through a process of cross-cultural dialogue.

Constructivism draws on Habermas's concept of communicative rationality (Habermas 1984-7; Dryzek 1990), and differs from both modern realism and postmodern idealism. Realists hold that judgements about truth and value can be foundationally grounded in objective scientific data. Medicine, for example, can give us certain knowledge of the exact moment of death; ecologists can tell us what constitutes a healthy natural environment. On the basis of this knowledge, realists believe that we can obtain clear moral guidance about how to deal with practical problems such as organ transplants and deforestation. Postmodernists, on the other hand, suggest that terms such as "death" and "nature" are social constructions which have no objective, transcultural meaning (Cronon 1996; Descola 1996; Eder 1996; Ellen and Fukui 1996; Robertson et al. 1996; Vogel 1996; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). In this view, it is pretty much up to each culture to decide for itself what to do with respect to bioethical issues.

Communicative rationality, however, suggests that knowledge and values are neither objective nor subjective. Rather, they are the product of intersubjective agreement both within and between cultures about how reality will be described and acted in. For example, the Japanese word *"shizen"* is usually translated as "nature" in English, but it is clear that what Japanese mean by the word *"shizen"* is different from what Americans take "nature" to mean. The Japanese conception is based on particular historical interactions with particular geographical landscapes, and is informed by cultural practices, such as painting and literature, which give the word *"shizen"* its particular flavor. The American conception is likewise based on particular historical interactions with particular landscapes and informed by its own cultural traditions. What a Japanese person is thinking when he says the word *"shizen"* differs from what an American person is thinking when he says the word "nature." A common meaning, therefore, cannot be grounded in the mental image we have when we use these words nor can it be grounded by reference to physical reality, given the actual physical differences between the Japanese and American landscapes.

If meaning cannot be grounded in either subjective understandings nor in objective reality, then a common understanding of what words such as *"shizen"* and "nature" mean can

only be intersubjectively constructed through a process in which the Japanese and American both have (1) a direct experience of each other's landscapes (i.e., encounters with objective reality), and (2) dialogue about the sorts of responses we have to these landscapes (i.e., a sharing of subjective interpretations). In addition to achieving a common understanding of how words are to be used in ordinary discourse as well as in science, intersubjective agreement can also be reached on ethical questions concerning what should be done in any problematic situation.

An issue that is important for constructivism, and undoubtedly also for bioethics, concerns who is permitted to participate in the process of arriving at intersubjectively shared knowledge and values. Should this process be dominated by society or left entirely up to individuals? Liberal individualism, the dominant view in the West, suggests that individuals should retain final decision-making power, while communitarianism, the dominant view in much of Asia, contends that since individuals can only be understood as part of the social and natural environments they inhabit, the group should take priority. (Individualism is, of course, making inroads in Asian thought and a number of Western philosophers are also moving towards a more communitarian position (*cf*. Walzer 1983; MacIntyre 1985; Sandel 1998). Neither of these positions is entirely satisfactory, however. Individualism becomes oppressive when individuals are permitted to dominate groups communitarianism becomes oppressive when groups are permitted to dominate individuals. A position which seems superior to both individualism and communitarianism is one which posits a dialectical relationship between individuals, society, and nature, i.e., individuals both influence and are influenced by nature and society (Evanoff 1998; 2000).

In the constructivist view there are a variety of levels at which decisions can be made. Habermas's discourse ethics contends that a moral claim can be considered justified only if everyone who is affected by a particular decision has the opportunity to participate in the process by which that decision is made (Habermas 1989; 1993; see also Apel 1980; Benhabib 1986). Accordingly, decisions which have consequences only for the individual should be made by the individual alone. When decisions made by an individual have consequences for others, however, then those others should also be consulted. If a decision affects larger groups or society as a whole, then all of those affected should be allowed to engage in the decision-making process. Indeed, if decisions have consequences which cross national boundaries, then cross-cultural dialogue is no longer an option but a necessity. It should be noted that this position is opposed to the view that decisions should be made by "experts," whether in government, science, or even bioethics. Rather, the role of politics, science, and ethics is to inform and illuminate the choices which the relevant moral agents themselves must make.

In this light of these considerations, I would suggest that since decisions related to brain death and organ transplants have no consequences for others (in most instances), that each culture be permitted to develop its own ethical stance on such issues. In fact, I would probably go further and suggest that most bioethical decisions related to brain death, euthanasia, and similar issues can be plausibly made by individuals, their families, and doctors alone, in the absence of government control. The only role the state can legitimately play in such cases is to guarantee that any agreement reached among the relevant moral agents has been arrived at in a fair and inclusive manner.

Purely local environmental problems should also be handled at the local level. The tendency of international bodies, such as the U.N. Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 (a follow-up report can be found in Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life 1996), to see local environments as part of a "global commons" to be globally managed is a stance which simply permits the first world to continue plundering third-world resources, rather than attempting to move both the first and third worlds towards

local sustainability. Each culture should have both the right and the responsibility to care for its own local resources and environments.

However, when the consequences of an action cut across cultural boundaries, then global decision-making is indeed appropriate. I would argue that much of what we at present consider to be matters of personal choice in fact necessitate international decision-making. Decisions about automobile use, for example, should be made at the social level rather than at the individual level, given the fact that automobiles consume scarce energy resources (unequally distributed throughout the world) and emit greenhouse gases which cause global warming. An international protocol banning private automobile use would be entirely justified in this view. At present, however, decision-making power has been delegated to global institutions such as the World Trade Organization, which have the semblance of acting in the interests of all but in fact favor the interests of multinational corporations and investors over the interests of those who are concerned about the environment, health, human rights, and social justice. It is precisely because the majority have been excluded from the global decision-making process that worldwide protests against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund are increasing (for critiques of these institutions see Hancock 1989; Nader et al. 1993; Chatterjee 1994; Chatterjee and Finger 1994; Danaher 1994; Rich 1994; Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Merrett 1996; Chossudovsky 1997; Martin and Schumann 1997; Madeley 1999; Dunkley 2000).

It can be concluded that precisely because the world can be variously interpreted and acted in, there can be no universal science or ethics in the modernist sense. Postmodern relativism is equally unattractive as an alternative, however, because it provides no guidance for resolving problems which transcend cultural boundaries. A constructivist approach, however, both respects cultural diversity by allowing local cultures to make decisions which affect only themselves and encourages cross-cultural decision-making when the consequences of actions are transnational in scope.

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