Original Script of a Ted Talk on Intercultural Ethics

Richard Evanoff

〰〰〰〰〰〰
Note
〰〰〰〰〰〰

Original Script of a Ted Talk on Intercultural Ethics

Richard Evanoff*

Note

The following is the original script of a TED Talk on Intercultural Ethics held on March 2, 2016 at Tokyo Academics in Nishi-azabu, Tokyo. The talk was sponsored by TEDx Roppongi and organized by students in the Global Interdisciplinary Studies program at Hosei University. A video of the talk can be found at <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=osZr 7DLxs8A>. Although the script presented here was used as the basis for the talk, the talk itself was given extemporaneously. As a result, the language in the script and talk differs considerably. I thought it might be worthwhile to publish the script in its original form, however, since it provides what I hope is a useful introduction to some of the key concepts in the field of intercultural ethics that is readily accessible and easy to understand for both students and scholars, as well as the general public.

Script

Hello, my name is Richard Evanoff. I'm originally from the United States, but I've lived nearly all of my adult life in Japan and have long been interested in how people from different cultures interact with each other. Today I'm going to talk about intercultural ethics. The word *ethics* is derived from the Greek word *ethos,* which refers to a custom or habit. Ethics is concerned with the ideas we have about how we should

---

* Professor, School of International Politics, Economics and Communication, Aoyama Gakuin University

live, not only as individuals but also in relation to others in society and to the environments we inhabit. Ethics considers the judgments we make about what constitutes a good life and whether particular actions should be regarded as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" with respect to customs, and "right" or "wrong" with respect to morality. The aim of ethics is to arrive at shared standards of behavior that enable people to interact successfully with each other.

When I was growing up in the United States, I learned how to successfully interact with other American people. When each of you was growing up, you also learned how to successfully interact with people from your own culture. The process of learning how to successfully interact with people from one's own culture is called *socialization.* As we grow up we are socialized into accepting certain ideas about what we should believe, the things we should value, and how we should act in the particular culture we are living in. Such ideas are called *cultural norms,* and we learn these norms from our parents, teachers, friends, and others in our respective cultures.

The problem is that while the norms we learn as children teach us how to interact successfully with people from our own culture, they give us no guidance whatsoever about how to successfully interact with people from other cultures. When I was growing up in the United States my mother taught me how to get along with other Americans, not how to get along with Japanese people. In a globalizing world, however, people from different cultures are coming together as never before, and we need to learn how to get along with each other, despite having been socialized into different cultural norms.

Norms that are widely shared among the people of a given culture may not necessarily be shared *between* people from different cultures. What is considered proper behavior in the US is sometimes completely different from what is thought to be proper behavior in Japan. Americans shake hands and Japanese bow when they greet each other, for example.

The social sciences concern themselves with the empirical question: How *do* people from different cultures interact with each other? Empiri-

cal questions are questions that can be answered by observing people and describing their behavior. We might conduct a statistical survey, for example, and find out that, indeed, a majority of Americans shake hands when they greet each other and a majority of Japanese bow. The social science approach is often comparative, with the aim of describing how norms differ from culture to culture.

Philosophy, on the other hand, concerns itself with the question: How *should* people from different cultures interact with each other? Questions about what people *should* do in any given situation are not empirical but normative. We already know that Americans shake hands and Japanese bow, but which norm should be followed when an American and a Japanese person greet each other? Should the two persons shake hands or should they bow? Perhaps they decide to follow one custom or the other. Or perhaps they do both at the same time!

It is clear that nothing either the American or the Japanese have learned from their respective cultures tell them what they *should* do in this situation. And simply offering an empirical description of how people *do* act with others in their own culture tells us absolutely nothing about how people *should* act in intercultural situations. The emerging field of *intercultural ethics* considers not only how we should interact with people from our own cultures, but also how we should interact with people from other cultures.

The theoretical points I've been developing here can be applied to a wide range of cross-cultural interactions at a variety of levels. At the *interpersonal* level, for example, we might consider the norms that individuals from different cultures might adopt when they become friends or get married to each other. At the *intergroup* level, we might consider the norms that businesses adopt when they enter into joint ventures with companies from other countries or those that universities agree to when they have foreign exchange programs with each other. At the *international* level, we might consider the norms that are negotiated by different countries to deal with global problems, such as immigration, trade, development, climate change, and the environment.

While some of these norms may be concerned mainly with procedural

matters, others may be related to morality. For example, one of the most pressing questions at present is whether countries have a moral obligation to accept refugees from war-torn countries. And if refugees are accepted into another country, should they be expected to completely adapt themselves to the values and norms of their host cultures or should they be allowed to retain their own cultural values and norms?

Customs, such as those related to greetings, usually do not pose major problems when people from different cultures interact with each other. Differences in morality and ethical norms, however, can often be a source of conflict among people from different cultures. Child marriage might be regarded as an acceptable custom in some cultures, for example, but as a violation of human rights in others. The aim of intercultural ethics is to consider how people from different cultures might be able to interact successfully with each other and work together effectively to solve mutually shared problems in mutually satisfactory ways.

How, then, can people from different cultures get along with each other in a globalizing world, given the fact that they often have very different ideas about morality and different ethical norms? One approach to this question is *universalism,* which suggests that everyone should accept the same norms, regardless of culture. For example, the international relations scholar, Francis Fukuyama, contended that with the end of the Cold War, we have now reached what he refers to as "the end of history." Following the demise of Marxism and communism, a new world order is emerging in which all countries will embrace liberal democracy as the best political system and free-market capitalism as the best economic system. This vision is often accompanied by the modernist view that all countries should accept Western science and technology, and strive to create a global, cosmopolitan culture. Creating universally held global norms is also thought to be the best way to achieve world peace.

The main problem with universalism, however, is that it's very difficult to determine which norms are in fact universal. Anthropologists use the term *cultural universals* to refer to aspects of culture that can be found in every social group. It's true that all known societies have norms related to food and clothing, marriage and family systems, social and

gender roles, for example. It is equally true, however, that there is a great deal of variation with respect to the *kind* of food people think it is acceptable or unacceptable to eat, the *kind* of family systems found in different cultures, and so on.

One idea closely connected to universalism is *essentialism,* the view that all people share a universal human nature and hold certain norms in common. For example, if we think that people are basically competitive by nature, then we might be inclined to believe that capitalism is the best economic system. Conversely, if we think that people are basically cooperative by nature, we might be more inclined to believe that socialism is the best economic system. Since people can be both competitive and cooperative, however, it seems unlikely that either of these tendencies are part of human nature and, therefore, universal.

Universalism is also sometimes associated with *cultural imperialism,* the view that countries regarded as "inferior" should adopt the norms of cultures regarded as "superior." In the end, everyone will basically follow the norms of the supposedly "superior" culture. Cultural imperialism obviously is not a true universalism, however, because it involves simply taking the norms of one particular culture and trying to impose them on everyone else. A contemporary version of cultural imperialism is the notion that all so-called developing countries want to—and should—pursue industrialization and consumerism, and try to "catch up" with developed countries. In fact, there is no single line of development which everyone country must follow.

An alternative perspective, *cultural pluralism,* holds that there are many different ways in which cultural groups can create good lives for themselves. Rather than move toward a global monoculture in which everyone is the same, we should try to preserve distinct cultural traditions and maintain cultural diversity.

A second approach, then, to the question of how people from different cultures can get along with each other in a globalizing world is *particularism,* which holds that there are no universal norms. Rather, each culture has it own specific norms, which are different from those of other cultures. Particularism is the exact opposite of universalism, since it

embraces the pluralist view that different cultures can be good in different ways.

Particularism is often associated, however, with another, less attractive view known as *cultural relativism,* which contends that since every culture is different, there is no way to judge whether any given cultural norm is "better" or more "right" than another. From a relativist perspective, each culture should simply be accepted and respected as it is.

While understanding and respecting other cultures is certainly important, the main problem with particularism is that it offers us no guidance whatsoever about how people holding different cultural norms might be able to work together toward the resolution of mutually shared problems. In fact, particularism can lead to what another international relations scholar, Samuel P. Huntington, has called "the clash of civilizations." Huntington's thesis is that with the end of the Cold War, the primary conflicts between nations will no longer be over political or economic ideologies, but rather over culture. At the same time that globalization is creating global markets and global institutions, we can also witness the rise of nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

Cultural relativism is often regarded as progressive because it does not involve one culture trying to impose its values on other cultures. In fact, cultural relativism can be highly regressive because it also involves the idea that the norms of any given culture can never be criticized. Cultural norms must simply be accepted as they are, no matter how bad or repulsive we might find them to be. Moreover, if we are unable to criticize existing cultural norms, then we are prevented from trying to make improvements by coming up with norms that we think are better. Imprisoned by our own cultural traditions, we are also unable to learn anything new or valuable from other cultures.

A third approach to the question of how people from different cultures can get along with each other in a globalizing world is *constructivism,* which suggests that since the norms to govern relations between people from different cultures do not yet exist, they can only be created, or *constructed,* by engaging in dialogue with each other. We can't simply say, "You have your way of doing things and I have mine." Instead, we

need to find new ways to cooperate with each other across cultures that enable us to resolve mutually shared problems.

Intercultural situations are by their very nature *anomic,* a term derived from the French word *anomie,* which means "no law." In other words, the rules to tell us how people from different cultures should interact with each other do not yet exist. When we are interacting with people from our own culture, we know what to do. But when we step outside of our cultures and start to interact with people from a different culture whose norms are completely different from our own, we don't know what to do. The norms of the other culture may be so different from those we are accustomed to that we are overwhelmed and experience culture shock.

If we are living in a country which is different from our own, there are at least four different ways of trying to deal with the anomic nature of intercultural relations. First, we might embrace *ethnocentrism.* We think that our culture is "superior" to the other culture and simply continue to follow the norms of our own culture. An alternative, which is the exact opposite of ethnocentrism is *assimilation,* popularly expressed in the slogan, "When in Rome do as the Romans do." Rather than keep our own culture, we adapt ourselves to the other culture by accepting their norms as our own. A third possibility is *multiculturalism,* the view that people who live in cultures other than their own should be permitted to keep their own norms rather than adopt the norms of the host culture. A final idea is *integration,* which involves trying to arrive at a shared understanding between people from different cultures and constructing common ways of interacting with each other. Of these four approaches, constructivism in most interested in integration, since integration seems to be the best way for people from different cultures to interact successfully with each other.

Constructivism nonetheless accepts cultural pluralism, the view, mentioned previously, that there are a variety of ways in which cultures can be good. Constructivism does not say that we need to create a single universal set of cultural norms that are followed by everyone. Cultural diversity can be maintained when the norms of different cultural groups

do not come into conflict with each other. When we are trying to work together with people from other cultures, however, and our norms do come into conflict, then we need to negotiate the norms that will govern the relationship between us. We cannot simply take the norms of our own culture and impose them on others, but rather must jointly engage in the process of trying to construct *intercultural norms,* which both sides are able to agree with.

In order to participate effectively in intercultural dialogue, we need to give up both cultural universalism (the idea that everyone should embrace the same global, cosmopolitan culture) and cultural relativism (the view that existing cultural norms must simply be accepted as they are and never subjected to criticism). When engaging in intercultural dialogue we are instead obliged to take a critical stance toward both our own and the other culture. We also need to be open to the ideas of other cultures and to try to learn something from them. In some cases, we might even be able to incorporate the beliefs, values, and norms of other cultures into our own culture.

Let's take education as an example. It is well known that the Japanese educational system tends to place a high value on students learning facts, particularly as they prepare for university entrance exams. The American educational system, to the contrary, tends to place more value on giving students an opportunity to express their opinions on various matters. So, which is better: the Japanese educational system or the American educational system? This question is particularly relevant for international exchange students—for example, Japanese students who go abroad to study and foreign students who come to Japan.

We might be tempted to adopt the ethnocentric idea that our own system is better than the other. Japanese may think that it's more important for students to learn facts than to express their opinions, while Americans may think the opposite. But we might also adopt the critical perspective that while Japanese students are strong on learning facts, they're relatively weak when it comes to expressing opinions. American students are the opposite: they're strong on expressing opinions, but relatively weak when it comes to learning facts.

It seems obvious that both the Japanese and American educational systems could be improved if students are taught to do both. That is, it should be possible to combine the strengths of both systems—learning facts and expressing opinions—while rejecting the weaknesses. The problem can be reframed by thinking not in either–or terms (*either* the Japanese *or* the American system is better), but rather in both–and terms (there are aspects of *both* the Japanese *and* the American systems that are valuable).

Rather than see cultural differences as being in opposition to each other, we can work towards the creation of *third cultures,* which combine positive aspects of two (or more) cultures into a single framework, while rejecting the negative aspects. We do not need to look for a single universal educational system that should be adopted by all cultures. Nor do we need to say, with relativists, that of all of the educational systems in every country throughout the world are equally good and should simply be respected as they are. Instead, we can work toward the creation of third cultures, which allow us to come up with creative and imaginative solutions to cross-cultural differences.

It's clear that there are many cases in which constructing third cultures is impossible, impractical, or undesirable. In some cases we may simply want to reject certain cultural attitudes, such racism, sexism, and homophobia, in our own or other cultures. In other cases, however, it may be possible to integrate aspects of other cultures into our way of thinking. Constructivism contends that if the norms we are socialized into in our own cultures are constructed, then they can be reconstructed in ways that enable us to interact more effectively with each other and to work together toward the resolution of mutually shared problems in mutually satisfactory ways.