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The Role of Philosophy in Intercultural Relations

Presenter: Richard Evanoff

Most of my recent research, including the two articles I have published in the SIETAR Journal (Evanoff 2006; 2016), is concerned with the role that philosophy might be able to play in the field of intercultural relations. Whereas the social sciences empirically observe and describe how people from different cultures interact with each other, philosophy adopts a normative approach, which considers the norms that people from different cultures might plausibly adopt to govern relations between them.

Norms are widely shared ideas among the people of a given culture about what beliefs, values, and forms of behavior are regarded as acceptable. It is clear that the norms we are socialized into accepting as members of our own cultures may differ considerably from the norms adhered to by people from other cultures. One task of intercultural philosophy is to consider how conflicts which arise as a result of differences in cultural norms can be rationally reflected on and effectively resolved across cultures, particularly through the use of dialogue as a form of intercultural communication.

Normative approaches to intercultural relations differ from empirical approaches in terms of both the kind of questions they ask and the methods they use to answer them. Whereas empirical approaches (including both quantitative and qualitative research) are concerned with "the world as it is," i.e., how people actually do interact with each other across cultures, normative approaches are interested in the "world as it might be," i.e., how people from different culture should interact with each other in order to resolve the problems and conflicts they face.

Consider the kinds of difficulties that may arise when people from different cultures get married, do business, or engage in political negotiations with each other. The social sciences can usefully describe the values that people from different cultures bring with them to intercultural situations and theoretically analyze conflicts that may arise as a result of those differences, but they can offer little or no guidance about how such conflicts might be resolved. While understanding and respecting other cultures is undoubtedly important, further inquiry needs to be made into the processes of negotiation and dialogue that enable people to reach a normative agreement about how they should interact in relation to each other if they are to overcome their conflicts and work together effectively.

Arriving at normative solutions to intercultural conflicts involves having not only empirical knowledge about cross-cultural differences, but also being able to imagine a future state in which the conflict in question has been resolved. A transdisciplinary approach to cross-cultural conflicts must concern itself both with examining the hard, concrete facts about a problem (what the social sciences do) and with envisioning "ideal" situations in which the conflict has been resolved (what philosophy does). Such ideal situations, by their very nature, do not exist in the "real world" and, therefore, cannot be empirically observed. They exist only in our minds, but are nonetheless able to offer guidance about how we should act if our aim is to successfully interact with people from different cultures.

Unlike the social sciences, philosophy does not seek to provide evidence for its claims, but rather arguments in favor of one belief, value, or course of action over another. Dialogue is a transformative process, which involves being open to the views of others and willing to change our own views in light of any arguments we find persuasive. Rather than maintain an unbending allegiance to our own cultural traditions, we are able to critically examine the views of both our own and the other culture, and to selectively integrate what we take to be the best from each culture into our own way of thinking. The result is what researchers in the field of intercultural relations sometimes call a "third culture." Dialogue enables us to critique existing cultural norms and to creatively imagine entirely new norms that enable people from different cultures to effectively cooperate with each other towards the resolution of mutually shared problems.

References

Evanoff, Richard (2006). "Intercultural Ethics: A Constructivist Approach." *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 9:89–102.

Evanoff, Richard (2016). "Towards a Philosophy of Intercultural Norms." *Journal of Intercultural Communication 19*:129–150.
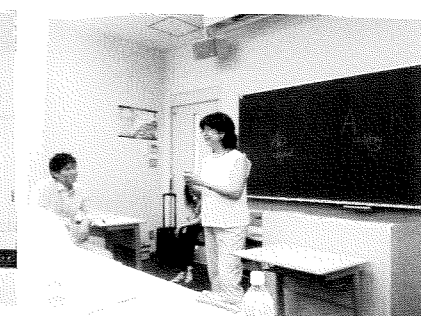
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