THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIVISM\(^{(1)}\)

Relativism is on the retreat on many fronts; much less clear is what its replacement is going to be. In the following discussion I focus on one kind of relativism—the notion that members of one culture should not "judge" those of others, especially that the West should not pass judgment on the policies and values of other societies. My main interest is in asking which conception might replace the notion of unbounded normative pluralism.

1. Cross-Cultural Relativism

Relativists oppose cross-cultural judgments on the grounds that there are no overarching moral truths, and that such judgments often reflect perceptions that one’s values are superior to those of others. Relativists further argue that all cultures have virtues of their own; and that only communities ought to be the arbitrators of the values to which their members are held accountable.

Relativists have a point. Notions of the general superiority of Western culture were widely held in early generations. Much of early anthropology was dedicated to convincing many, who believed that "we" were scientific and modern and "they" were primitive, that non-Western cultures were different but not inferior.\(^{(2)}\) Over the last two generations, many social scientists have continued to argue against cross-cultural criticism, even when it concerns forms of behavior considered to be extreme violations of shared values in the West. As Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban writes, "[T]hey have been unwilling to pass judgment on such forms of culturally-based homicide as the killing of infants or the aged. Some have withheld judgment on acts of communal violence, such as clashes between Hindus and Muslims or Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda...."\(^{(3)}\) James Q. Wilson observes that "The adoption of cultural relativism...made the word 'barbarian' not only pejorative but meaningless.... [Anthropologists] could discuss, dispassionately if not quite acceptingly, cannibalism and infanticide."\(^{(4)}\)

In political science, area studies specialists took a similar position, although on different methodological grounds, mainly objecting to universal grand theories and their cross-cultural "laws." They favored "immersion" in an area's culture rather than importation of external truths or generalizations.

Daniel A. Bell, a communitarian, argues that one culture should not lay moral claims on another. Bell notes approvingly that "voices in East Asia object to the very idea of human rights even as an end goal on the ground that the concept of `human rights' is a Western invention incompatible with East Asian traditions."\(^{(5)}\) Even the Muslim tradition of amputating a thief's hand is beyond cross-cultural challenge, according to this view.\(^{(6)}\) Bell does allow, though, that those who are morally outraged by this and other such practices might be able to find intra-cultural grounds for their objections.\(^{(7)}\) For instance, Islam presents several conditions that must be met before one can morally justify the amputation, which in practice are almost never met. The stress on the need to find such intra-cultural grounds is in part tactical, as it is perceived as a more effective way to appeal to virtues across cultures,\(^{(8)}\) but it also reflects the great reluctance to form cross-cultural judgments.\(^{(9)}\)

The objections to cross-cultural judgments were highlighted at a 1993 meeting of Asian leaders in Bangkok. The purpose of the meeting was to formulate an Asian stance on human
rights which would be represented at the upcoming World Conference on Human Rights. According to one report, "What surprised many observers...was the bold opposition to universal human rights...made on the grounds that human rights as such do not accord with 'Asian values.'" Asian intellectuals justify this opposition on the grounds that Western notions of human rights are founded on the idea of personal autonomy, which Asian culture does not hold as a fundamental virtue, if it embraces autonomy as a virtue at all.

In recent years, though, it has become increasingly agreed-upon--although far from universally--that a full-fledged relativistic position is untenable. If pushed to the extreme, it prevents one from making any moral judgments over the acts of others; and our moral sense strongly urges us to express our concerns about genocide, torture, rape and other such acts, wherever they occur. Nor have other nations been reluctant to express their moral judgments about what they perceive as the moral decay of the West.

To put it in an historical context, if one views early emphasis on cultural pluralism as a correction to the earlier Western sense of supremacy, one now realizes that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction: Many in the West have become too reticent to express their moral concerns when it comes to other nations. Before I can examine ideas that have been advanced to replace abject relativism, I need to attend to one argument relativists make most often, and how one may respond to it, to open the way to post-relativism.

2. First--Economic Development?

Among the numerous arguments in favor of cross-cultural relativism, none has carried more weight than the suggestion that the West is already economically developed and hence can "afford" political freedoms, but other countries must defer political development until they are economically developed. The former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, argues that:

As prime minister of Singapore, my first task was to lift my country out of degradation that poverty, ignorance, and disease had wrought. Since it was dire poverty that made for such low priority given to human life, all other things became secondary.

Julius Ihonvbere simply concludes that "for countries that have known no peace, stability or progress since their contact with the forces of Western imperialism, civil and political rights have no meaning."

The ethical question that is being raised, to put it starkly, is whether overcoming wanton death, plagues, and hunger trump rights such as freedom of speech and the right to vote. The question is often treated as if it were merely rhetorical and the answer self-evident, if only because people who are starving and ill are typically in no position to exercise their political rights. However, this way of approaching the subject disregards the fact that the Singapores of the world show little inclination to provide political freedoms once their citizens gain basic creature comforts. They keep "deferring" political freedoms as they seek an ever-higher level of affluence. The GNP per capita of Singapore exceeded $12,000 in 1990. The United States passed the $12,000 mark only in 1980.

Also, the people of countries that are politically under-developed are denied more than the "luxuries" of democracies, of which freedom of speech is given as a frequent example. People in some Third World countries are often tortured, sold as slaves, if not subjected to genocide. A strong case can hence be made that a basic respect for political human rights ought to be as, or even more, "basic" than creature comforts.
Moreover, as Rhoda Howard points out in her book *Human Rights in Commonwealth Africa*, without political development there is no assurance that the benefits of economic development will be widely shared or that economic development will be carried out without undue suffering caused by rigid ideology or capricious thinking.\(^{16}\)

The idea that economic development cannot be launched within a democratic framework in Asian countries is belied by the economic development of India, for example. One need not deny that there is more than one pathway to economic growth; however, these different means can be limited to those compatible with the democratic form of government.

Last but not least, some Asians point with horror to the social disorganization of the West, on the democratic polity of its societies. Kishore Mahbubani writes about "massive social decay" in the United States and adds, "Many a society shudders at the prospects of this happening on its shores."\(^{17}\) Some Islamic intellectuals share this view. Tunisian Mohamed Elhachmi Hamdi believes that "Western democracy appears...to be running amok. It is hard to see why lax Western mores that weaken or destroy the family...should be exported to the rest of the world...."\(^{18}\)

Actually, social order was intact in the West in, say, the early 1950s, long after the basic democratic institutions were well established, even if some segments of the population still had to fight to ensure that they would be encompassed. And recent social disorganization, which reflects the decline of moral values and the moral infrastructure, of families and communities, may well be corrected within the political framework of Western societies.\(^{19}\) In short, arguments that some societies should be exempted--whether temporarily or even completely--from the claim that their people should be allowed to gain political liberties seem indefensible. Societies may follow different pathways at different paces, but none is in principle free from the claims of democracy.

3. **Minimal Globalism**

As cultural relativists found it difficult to sustain their position, some offered to recognize a thin layer of global values to which all people and all cultures may be held accountable. Two anthropologists report:

No culture tolerates indiscriminate lying, stealing, or violence within the in-group. The essential universality of the incest taboo is well-known. No culture places a value upon suffering as an end in itself.... We know of no culture...where the fact of death is not ritualized.\(^{20}\)

And Alison Dundes Renteln points out that all cultures limit the number of deaths that may be inflicted in what they consider legitimate acts of revenge.\(^{21}\) Other global minimalists have pointed to the existence of the same categories in many different languages, even if they are given a rather different content. Rhoda Howard notes that even relativists agree that "The concept of human rights is universal, but the content (what, substantively, are or ought to be rights) varies among different societies."\(^{22}\)

Global minimalists have drawn normative conclusions from such data, arguing that we can hold people of different cultures to a set of values all cultures share because of the shared nature of these values, a kind of consensus test applied globally. A typical statement is one made about the Golden Rule. Marcus Singer writes, "The nearly universal acceptance of the Golden Rule and its promulgation by persons of considerable intelligence, though otherwise
of different outlook, would therefore provide some evidence for the claim that it is a fundamental ethical truth." Singer's caution is very much on the mark: Global endorsement provides only some normative justification. True, a moral ideal that all people respect has a stronger standing than one that is affirmed only by one people or culture, or even a handful. Something, though, is still clearly missing: If all societies, for instance, subscribe to a prejudice that in their eyes justifies treating women (or some other group, such as immigrants or the disabled) poorly, would this make it morally justified?

Moreover, to the extent that globalists rely merely on empirical observations, their criterion for judgment is weak and not well-grounded. The criterion is weak because it embraces only few values, such as condemning murder, theft, and rape. When one compares these global values to the extensive body of values (and the elaborate arguments in their support) found in many religious and secular ethical conceptions, such as the Old and New Testaments, or the works of Aristotle, Confucius, or Immanuel Kant, the paucity of minimal globalism stands out. And even for its short list of values, the evidence of global commitment is thin. The deliberate taking of a life--considered as offending the most global value--is legitimated in many cultures in one way or another, such as betrayal of religion or violation of select laws (in death sentences), even for members of one's own tribe. (Outsiders are often fair game in numerous societies.) Clearly, thin and data-driven globalism provides some solace, but it is not a satisfactory replacement for relativism.

4. Universal Human Rights

Claims that we should recognize a set of universal human rights represent an attempt to move beyond both relativism and minimal globalism to recognize a set of worldwide, overarching values to be respected in their own right and to serve as a basis for forming cross-cultural normative judgments. Specifically, human-rights globalists draw on the U.N. Charter, the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an evolving body of international law, and the statements of various international conferences such as those on the environment and on women. Among those who uphold this approach are authorities such as George Weigel and Thomas Donaldson, whose lists of global values include basic civil rights and political freedoms. Rhoda Howard also adds basic economic rights. Others extend the list much further.

The main difficulty with this approach is that U.N. documents, international law, and various declarations--in which the globalists find the values on which they seek to build--are not widely affirmed. This is largely the case because of the ways in which these documents have been crafted. They typically are not reflections of a truly democratic process of international bodies--or of the countries represented therein--nor do they reflect the result of worldwide consensus-building. Instead, for example, the notion that all people are entitled to the same socio-economic rights often reflect the claims some Third World countries wish to impose on the First and the Second World. Other global conceptions of human rights reflect moral claims that relatively small powers, such as Mexico and Sweden, try to lay on the more powerful nations. Indeed, it often seems that the resolutions of numerous international bodies are tolerated by many nations because it is known that these resolutions have little legal, political, or normative standing.

In short, notions of global human rights do not provide a reliable exit from relativism, although they do add a source of moral judgment across cultures, above and beyond that provided by the global minimalists.
5. Cross-societal Moral Dialogues

The weaknesses of claims for universal human rights cannot be overcome in a definitive way merely by redrafting the U.N. Charter, or by changing the voting patterns in the General Assembly, or by other such reforms in international institutions. Before one can expect to see global mores that command the compelling power of those that govern the inner life of well-formed societies, the citizens of the world will have to engage in worldwide moral dialogues and advance them to the point that a significant and compelling core of shared values will emerge.

Because the notion of moral dialogue is central to my argument but is not widely recognized, it deserves some additional elaboration here. Moral dialogues occur when a group of people engage in a process of sorting the values that will guide their lives. For example, in the USA there is an intensive dialogue over the question of whether or not the virtue of a color-blind (non-discriminating) society or of Affirmative Action (to correct for past and current injustices) should guide employment policies. And there is a moral dialogue over the question of whether the sanctity of unborn children or women’s right to choose should govern American abortion policy.

Built into my concept of moral dialogue are assumptions that not everyone shares—to put it mildly, assumptions that should be stated explicitly. Moral dialogues assume that societies need shared formulations of the good, and cannot function only on the basis of negotiated settlements of differences between individual formulations of the good. And such dialogues assume that the processes that leads to such shared formulations entail dialogues that concern values and not merely deliberations over empirical facts or logically derived notions. They are not merely a matter of reasonable people coming to terms, but of people of divergent convictions finding a common normative ground.

Such dialogues take place constantly in well-formed societies—which most democracies are—and that they frequently result in the affirmation of a new direction for the respective societies (albeit sometimes only after prolonged and painful discourse). For instance, they led in the 1960s to agreement that legal segregation had to be abolished and in the 1970s that we as a society must be much more responsible in our conduct toward the environment than we used to be. Society-wide dialogues come in two basic forms: The piecing together of a myriad of local dialogues through organizations that have local chapters, including numerous ethnic, religious and political associations, and--on national media such as call-in shows, televised town meeting, and panel discussions.

But can moral dialogues take place internationally and to what effect?

Moral dialogues do occur across national lines, in international meetings, student and many other people "exchanges", tourism, and on international media, CNN for instance. However, because they are typically much more diffuse and much more limited in scope than intra-national ones, they are as a rule much less consequential. Nevertheless they point to processes that, if further advanced, could provide a source for a thick global set of shared values. For example, there has been over the last few decades a worldwide dialogue about the extent to which "we" (that is, all nations, and in a sense the people of the world) ought to respect the environment. Of course, the dialogue is affected by numerous non-normative considerations, such as expressions of economic interests or power considerations. However, there is no need to rehash the debate between realpolitik and idealism to note that one factor involved is public opinion in countries other than one's own. And it, in turn, is affected by what people consider morally appropriate. Thus, one reason most countries try to avoid being perceived as environmentally irresponsible is that they do not wish to be
considered to be acting illegitimately in the eyes of other nations. This is reflected in a rising worldwide consensus on specific environmental matters such as limitations on whaling, an embargo on the ivory trade, acid rain, exportation of hazardous waste, and ozone depletion.\(^{(29)}\)

A case in point was the worldwide condemnation of the United States following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, a rather atypical summit that built on world-wide evolving consensus (as it served to amplify it) rather than try wantonly to assume or declare one. As a result, when the United States forced a weakening of the climate control treaty, and refused to sign the biodiversity treaty, it drew heavy criticism from all over the world, even from traditional allies such as Germany and Japan.\(^{(30)}\)

True, in some countries the participants in moral dialogues, are only a thin layer of intellectuals, select government officials, some civil servants, and a few others. And in some other countries the dialogue is distorted by religious fundamentalists (as in Iran) or hindered by limitations on cross-national communications (as in Cuba). But even in these countries limitations on cross-national communications are increasingly ineffectual and there exists some measure of public opinion that differs from the official line and often is closer to the worldwide one. When all is said and done, while worldwide moral dialogues are still nascent, they are far from ineffectual and they seem to be growing in significance. It follows that far from giving up on moral dialogues as one factor in cross-national relations, those who help to form and to amplify them should be encouraged, and others should join in, moving toward a world that relies less on both military and economic force, and more on dialogues about what is right and wrong.

6. Moral Voices

To help nourish global moral dialogues, one needs to move in the opposite direction from the one that cultural relativists have followed: namely, to argue that moral voices, especially when they truly reflect the people of the society that is raising them rather than a small elite, should be raised cross-culturally. By "moral voice" I mean laying claims in the name of a value one affirms. It offers appreciation for those who abide by one's values (say, introducing democratic forms of government) and censure for those who do not. Whether or not such claims are to be backed up by economic or military sanction is a wholly separate matter, examined in extensive writings elsewhere, for instance the literature on just wars.\(^{(31)}\) But even if one concludes that under most circumstances such actions are not justified, this does not mean that one needs to mute one's moral voice. Only those who believe in realpolitik imply that moral voices without backing (other than a people's normative appreciation and censure) are without effect.

I refer to moral voices in the plural to acknowledge that we do not enter global (or local) moral dialogues with one voice; otherwise, there would hardly be a need for a dialogue. However, the fact that initially there is a whole array of voices does not mean that no convergence of moral claims is possible. Indeed, the lesson of the last generation--especially the last decade--shows several such convergences. The decline in the legitimacy of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes as well as that of Marxism are obvious examples, as is the rise in the respect for the ideal of free politics and free economies.

It is necessary to raise moral voices across societal lines, to further advance the development of a thick core of globally shared values. To call on all people to respect the same set of core values does not entail arguing that all have to follow the same path of economic development, pray to the same gods, or have the same aesthetic values. At issue are core values such as respecting the human dignity of all, according basic political
freedoms to citizens, seeking to provide for basic creature comforts, and refraining from
violating other nations. It is here that communitarianism, which entails respecting local
values, and universalism can be joined. Community values should prevail on all matters not
covered by the universally shared core values, an approach the United States followed
domestically to good effect.

Indeed, it is counterproductive for international bodies to pass resolutions on one issue after
another, condemning this and that, and demanding this and that, as each participant adds
their normative wish list to the pile of cross-national moral claims. The long road to worldwide
shared values will be shortened somewhat if the focus were limited to a set of core values.

To raise cross-cultural moral voices entails respecting the right of others to lay moral claims
on one's society just as one claims the right to lay claims on others. Thus, the West should
realize that it is well within its legitimate, world-community-building role when it criticizes
China for its violation of human rights. And China should be viewed as equally legitimate
when it criticizes the American society for its neglect of filial duties. To reiterate, as long as
moral claims are laid as moral claims, rather than as justification for coercive measures, they
help to prime the needed moral dialogues.

To form cross-cultural judgments requires an appeal to shared global values, in the sense
that these values lay a claim on all and are not particular to any one society. Thus, as I see
it, individual rights do not reflect a Western value (even if historically they arose in the West)
but rather a global value that lays claims on all people. Far from being deterred or chastened
by the fact that the Chinese government, or some Asian intellectuals, protest when the West
applies this value to Asian cultures and regimes, I see--in their defensive protests--evidence
that such claims generate a recognition of the validity of the values evoked. And for the
same reason, I find several Asian criticisms of the West, for example, its disrespect of the
elderly, fully legitimate and compelling.

Cross-cultural moral claims are effective because they resonate with values we share but
have neglected, not because they introduce arbitrary claims out of thin air. This fact stands
out when one compares claims to treat all individuals with dignity to some other more
spurious claims. For instance, if one were to chastise Asians for using little sticks instead of
forks, rather than for violations of individual rights, they would hardly be perturbed. Similarly,
Asians make telling points when they criticize the West about its neglect of social order.
Compare the effect of such claims to a call by Muslims on the West to embrace their divorce
laws. Nobody would respond in a guilty furor, but people would ignore such normative
appeals or laugh them out of court. Not all cross-cultural moral claims elicit a response, and
it is rather evident which do. These reflect the evolving worldwide moral code.

Global moral dialogues are best perceived not as dialogues between given cultures--East
Asia and the West, for instance--as has been implied by the suggestion that we should aim
at a "fusion" of these cultures. Such an approach treats values as culturally bound, and
hence rejects, at least implicitly, the concept that values are either justifiable or should be
ignored, disregarding their historical origin or cultural base. The approach also implies that
the values of these geographic areas are monolithic, which is hardly the case. The treatment
of political freedoms, for instance, by Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan are hardly the same.
Most important, such an approach avoids exactly the kind of differentiation a worldwide
dialogue should be seeking: Which "Western" values or "Asian" ones we should endeavor to
encompass in the cross-national set of virtues? Surely we do not seek to combine the
materialism of the West with the authoritarianism of Singapore, but instead to combine
individual rights with a commitment to provide for socio-economic well-being of the

population. We do not seek to “fuse” MTV with opiates, but a free press with strong commitments to care for members of our communities.

There are other signs, aside from defensive reactions, that the cross-national moral voices do not fall on deaf ears. For example, after having ignored human rights issues for years, it has recently been reported that in Asian countries, “human rights were no longer dismissed as a tool of foreign oppression but were promoted as a means of asserting Asian distinctiveness...” (34) China seems to have reformed some of its most grievous orphanages and labor camps under pressure from Amnesty International and other “foreign” moral voices. And one hears now, even in countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar, voices that oppose authoritarian rule in the name of human rights and democracy that come from within rather than from Western critics. Thus, an opposition leader recently argued in Cambodia that "no human being should be asked to choose between bread and freedom." (35)

Recognizing the need to raise moral voices globally does not mean that one legitimates berating other people cross-culturally, any more than it is wise or productive to berate other members of one’s own community. The moral voice is most compelling when it is firm but not screeching; judging but not judgmental; critical if need be, but not self-righteous.

One can also acknowledge quite readily that those who champion global values themselves do not always heed their own call, but this observation does not invalidate the standing of one’s values as long as there is solid evidence that one truly endeavors to abide by these values and, at best, is making progress in doing so. Americans thus can both admit that race relations in America are not all they ought to be and, that we have made great progress in this area over the last sixty years. And one might recognize that there are universal values other than those for which a given party speaks, values which those societies that are being chastised on other grounds follow quite admirably, for which they may even provide a shining example. Thus, one can recognize that Japan’s treatment of minorities and women leaves much to be desired, while respecting their aesthetic values.

One may wonder if, when one lays moral claims, one should make allowances for the particular circumstances of a given society? Can we expect as much from a country under siege, for instance, as we can from one that has experienced a long period of international and domestic tranquility? The evolving world community should judge each case on its merits. Thus, the world community hardly condemned Britain when it suspended some long-established political freedoms when Nazi Germany threatened to invade the island, especially because Britain was quick to restore these protections when the war turned in its favor. The opposite holds for rather affluent developing countries that keep deferring even elementary political freedoms in the name of overcoming the poverty of their people. But, while many specific judgments might be difficult and contested, in principle there is no particular challenge here; taking into account circumstances is integral to forming moral judgments by most bodies of ethics.

One might also ask, how is one to rule when two or more evolving universal moral values clash? This is exactly the business of ethics, which rarely deals in clashes between right and wrong but rather focuses on the combination of two goods or rights. There are numerous procedures that apply, including ranking (e.g., under most circumstances the right to free speech is ranked higher than the right to privacy); appeal to a super-ordinating value (e.g., we call on both sides to yield for the sake of peace); and moral dialogues in which we try to find out which value should take precedence, or a way to avoid the clash of the values at issue.
None of the preceding observations about moral voices suggests that bringing strong substantive values to nascent worldwide moral dialogues is to be denied. On the contrary, they are all matters that concern ways to best advance such dialogues. At the same time, there is no reason to ignore the fact that so far, the "global village" is far from a village, and that cross-national dialogues have not yet advanced sufficiently to provide for a reliable and broad-based world-wide moral (not to mention legal) code. The growing recognition of the legitimacy of such moral dialogues, and the global moral consensus they seek to evolve, is the best way out of abject relativism.

1. I am indebted to Frank Lovett, for research assistance on this article. The comments of David E. Carney on a previous draft were particularly helpful. Amitai Etzioni, The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society (New York: Basic Books, forthcoming)


27. For a justification of this point, see Etzioni, *Golden Rule*.


