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Current Research Project

Intercultural Ethics

Summary & Abstract

Intercultural Ethics is a multicultural and interdisciplinary approach to moral philosophy. Western conceptions of moral and political philosophy have developed without much dialogue with other non-Western conceptions. Similarly, theories of medical ethics and health care justice often simply assume an individualistic, rights-based approach. In reaction, there is emerging interest in other cultural traditions, including Islamic, Confucian, and Buddhist conceptions of ethics. *Intercultural Ethics* is premised on the need for more dialogue and integration of these often divergent perspectives.

Definitions of interculturalism emphasize the willingness and capacity of an organization to ensure that cultural difference is acknowledged, respected and provided for in a planned and systematic way. Interculturalism also refers to a policy or model that advocates or advances harmonious relations between cultures based on an integration process that does not seek to eliminate differences. This research project is intercultural in that it aims to develop a new moral theory that is responsive to, and incorporates contemporary Confucian, Buddhist, and Islamic objections to Western rights-based individualism. My conclusion and thesis is that an *intercultural* conception of ethics should embed individual human rights into a responsibility-based moral theory. *Intercultural Ethics* also integrates a (Buddhist or Confucian) relational conception of the self with a more Kantian conception of an agent; and it defends a conception of autonomy as a process of self-constitution through a shared and discursive process of reflective endorsement. These conclusions are explained more fully in the project narrative.

Narrative Description

Background and Previous Scholarship

My interest in interculturalism runs deep into my youth. As a young child, I lived in Rabat Morocco for several years. My Peace Corps, Unitarian, parents were set on my receiving a multi-cultural experience. To this end, I was sent to both a French Catholic school and Arabic and Qur'an classes. From this initial introduction, I have always remained captivated by other cultures and traditions. In college, I started school interested primarily in Asian philosophy but my academic training was almost exclusively in contemporary Western philosophy. Both my Doctoral degree in Philosophy and my M.A. in Political Science focused on Kantian ethics, liberalism and utilitarianism.

My first publications were all on Kantian ethics and consequentialism, which is the contemporary heir of utilitarianism. In addition to my book, *Kantian Consequentialism* (published by Oxford University Press, 1996), I have published articles discussing and responding to Gewirth, Rawls, Scanlon, Kamm, and Korsgaard (see CV). For the past eight years, however, I have been studying Islamic, Confucian, and Buddhist conceptions of ethics and integrating these alternative approaches into my research and teaching. I have secured a series of research grants and traveled to Asia each year. I have visited China five times, including two weeks in Tibet, Japan on several occasions, and presented papers at Beida (Peking University), Tsinghua University, the Kant in Asia Conference at Hong Kong Baptist University, the World Congress of Bioethics (Beijing China), the Asian Bioethics Association (Tsukuba University, Japan), and the Islamic Bioethics Association (Ankara University, Antalya Turkey). As part of a

joint Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin Colleges London program, I also lived in the UK for 6 months studying the British National Health System, and the French and Dutch social insurance health care systems. Most of my courses now integrate Western and Asian approaches to ethical theory, biomedical ethics and political theory. There is a core question motivating my research on alternative approaches to medical ethics: Are the conceptions of medical ethics and health care justice, which developed primarily in the Western democracies, also applicable in these other cultural traditions? How universal are the common principles of Western bioethics?

The research on these discrete worldviews and ethical systems is well under way. I have published six articles and drafted a book manuscript, titled *Global Medical Ethics: Confucian, Buddhist, and Islamic Perspectives*. *Global Medical Ethics* develops and explores competing conceptions of the core principles of medical ethics; conceptions of death and organ transplants; euthanasia, withdrawing life prolonging treatments and end of life care; reproductive rights, abortion, and genetic manipulations; and health care justice.

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My research on Confucian, Buddhist, and Islamic medical ethics has focused on the distinct approaches in isolation, so to speak, as independent and self contained ethical worldviews. I have only just begun to focus more substantially on their interrelations and relationship to contemporary Western philosophy. The next phase of my research project is to explore in greater depth the relationships of these distinct worldviews and the intersection and integration of these views in multicultural contexts. This new project, *Intercultural Ethics*, combines and integrates my continuing interest in Kantian ethics with my current interest in Asian ethics and Islamic ethics.

Roughly sketched, in the first part of this project, I respond to Confucian and Islamic objections to Kantian rights-based individualism, and defend a hybrid form of political liberalism that is responsibility-based and that permits more multicultural variability. There are, of course, important differences between secular Western ethics and Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian approaches to ethics. I argue, however, that these are not irreconcilable systems of ethics. For example, we see instead that Islam and Confucianism rightly emphasize our social relationships and social roles, but that liberal rights theory also rightly emphasizes the fundamental equality of persons. These are both right and appropriate, and indeed they are actually complementary. Despite the apparent disagreement, I argue that both approaches are partially right and each reveals an essential element of a just society. Confucian ethics, in particular, provides a model for relationships based on shared ends and common goals and of the responsibilities that come with our distinct social roles. Rights theory, on the other hand, is especially appropriate when, instead of an organic community, we have individuals or social groups, with plural and distinct conceptions of the good, who need to live and work together. Rights also check power in relationships and express the respect that is due each person. Properly situated, individual rights capture the element of mutual respect in harmonious relationships.

Second, I argue that one can combine a non-Western, Buddhist conception of the self with a (more Kantian) conception of agency as reason-responsiveness. Confucian ethics and Islamic ethics emphasize the relational character of ethics. Buddhism goes a step further and embraces a thoroughly relational conception of the self. The Buddhist conception of the self is complex and not easily summarized. The main idea, however, is that there is no unitary, essential self; and that instead the self is composed of interrelated and changing attributes. This Buddhist conception of the self is similar to the bundle conception of the self defended by David Hume and more recently by Derek Parfit. It also fits nicely with contemporary neuroscientific models

of the self. The philosophical question here is how, if there is no core essential self, are individuals still responsible for, and accountable for, their actions? Of course, Buddhism recognizes that, in some sense, we are responsible for our actions; otherwise the doctrine of Karma and the ability to follow the Path to enlightenment would have no basis. Whatever one's conception of the self, I argue that human responsibility must be based on our capacity to respond to reasons. Agency and responsibility require and presuppose reason-responsiveness.

Finally, third, I develop and defend a closely-related conception of autonomy, which is similar to Christine Korsgaard's Kantian conception of reflective self-constitution. Self-constitution, however, is not a solitary affair. If one accepts a conception of the self as essentially interconnected, interdependent, and socially embedded, then self-constitution necessarily has a social and discursive dimension. In conclusion, we see that a conception of agency as reason-responsiveness and autonomy as reflective, discursive self-constitution can provide a shared foundation for an intercultural conception of ethics.

The project will first take shape as four articles, which I plan to develop into a book manuscript. The first three articles correspond to the three parts of the project described above:

"A Responsibility-Based Justification of Human Rights"

"An Intercultural Conception of the Responsible Self"

"An Intercultural Conception of Autonomy"

The fourth article is a more focused look at Buddhist political thought and is tentatively titled

"Comparative Reflections on Buddhist Political Thought"

It will be completed March 2012 and is forthcoming in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. by Steven Emmanuel (Wiley-Blackwell Publisher).

I am on sabbatical leave from Bates College, for the 2011-12 academic year, and have secured a fellowship and research grants for travel. I am working on the integration of Islamic ethics, rights theory, and democracy in France during the fall of 2011 and again in the Netherlands during the spring of 2012. During the winter of 2012, I plan to work in Thailand, and Malaysia, and I would like to also visit Singapore. My focus is on the integration of Buddhist, Muslim, and Confucian worldviews in these semi-democratic political systems.

Significance

Intercultural Ethics will provide a significant contribution to Comparative Philosophy and the Humanities. It will present Western ethics in a compelling way to scholars in Asian cultures, thus building international understanding of American values. It will also introduce Americans to Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian worldviews in a way that connects directly with American political and ethical concerns. The ultimate goal is to increase intercultural understanding in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.