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Research Statement

Intercultural Ethics, Bioethics, and Political Philosophy

Intercultural Ethics is a multicultural and interdisciplinary approach to moral philosophy and health care policy. 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. My current research is intercultural in that it approaches moral theory in a manner 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.

On the less theoretical and more practical side, the moral and political framework of *Intercultural Ethics* is applied to questions of medical ethics and political philosophy. For example, I am now completing a research project that focuses on Islam in Europe. This project focuses on the integration of Muslim patients, with their distinct worldviews and conceptions of medical ethics, into European national health care systems. Although I focus on Muslim patients

in particular, the practical suggestions for medical ethics and health care policy provide general guidance for the integration of different ethical worldviews within a shared health care system.

In addition to narrow questions of intercultural medical ethics, I am also interested in the broader questions of political philosophy. In particular, first, the idea of interculturalism needs to be distinguished from multiculturalism and liberalism. For example, the French approach to incorporating minority values in health care delivery is complicated by confusion in their official rejection of multiculturalism. The French discourse on the politics of multiculturalism (and French secularism, *Laïcité*) typically conflates integration and assimilation. In the name of a commitment to the integration of immigrant groups, French policy makers typically insist on a full assimilation of French cultural norms. This tendency was evident in the ban on Muslim headscarves in public schools. The debate on this issue consistently missed the possibility of a third position: multicultural integration, which I call interculturalism. Interculturalism is committed to harmonious relations between cultures based on an integration process that does not seek to eliminate differences.

Integration involves an understanding of social procedures and the ability to navigate one's way through society with ease and comfort. Integration does not require *assimilation*. To be assimilated is to become culturally and behaviorally similar to the dominant population and to internalize the cultural values of the dominant or majority culture. With assimilation, ethno-cultural differences are comparatively superficial, or at least subordinate, aspects of one's civil identity. *Multiculturalism*, in contrast to assimilation, embraces distinct minority subcultures within a broader society. Multiculturalism usually includes minority rights that help preserve and protect a subculture from the other (more dominant) cultural groups. *Interculturalism* strives for integration without assimilation. It is a form of multiculturalism that also emphasizes social cohesion and social unity between cultural sub-groups; it promotes integration without demanding assimilation or any form of internalized subordination.

Second, intercultural political philosophy is also committed to democratic pluralism. Democratic pluralism has two dimensions. First, substantive disagreement does not end at familiar religious or cultural boundaries. There are lively Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian internal debates about cultural norms and identity. The recognition of cultural differences should not be a social-political tool that works to erase dissent and diversity within a cultural group. Multicultural politics should avoid what Amartya Sen has called "plural monoculturalism." As

Kenan Malik has put the same point, multicultural politics should not be based on “the myth that society is made up of a series of distinct, homogeneous cultures.” Cultural traditions are instead alive with internal disputes about cultural norms, and they are fluid and porous at their borders. Intercultural pluralism recognizes and emphasizes the importance of the living heterogeneity of cultural traditions and identity. In addition to the importance of socially dominant cultures respecting subcultures, interculturalism also requires subcultures to respect both other cultures and internal dissent. Recent work on Confucian democracy and Islamic democracy provides a productive starting point for developing intercultural pluralism. In a forthcoming article, I have also developed an account of Buddhist democratic theory suitable for contemporary Buddhist societies. The next step is to develop a conception of intercultural pluralism that incorporates these discrete and distinct conceptions into an overlapping consensus.

In short, intercultural political philosophy extends intercultural applied ethics to questions about the basic structure of society, and defends both multicultural integration and intercultural pluralism.