

Toward a Transcultural Ethics in a Multicultural World*

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I

Human history has always been a series of hostilities and conflicts. Indeed, Hobbes' famous proclamation that human nature is simply to act out 'bellum omnium contra omnes', the war of all against all, seems truer than ever. Yet, the long train of warfare notwithstanding, our history records an anguished longing for peace as well. We find that longing expressed in even the most proudly bellicose of cultures; in every time and every place, there are always voices – muffled, stifled, loud or soft, emotional or rational – all calling out that peace is an alternative to war, that it can exist. Many have spent their lives working to attain peace and security, yet both, when reached, are ephemeral, so much so that an unfulfilled dream of peace would appear to be as much a part of the human condition as is the human propensity for approaching conflict with violent rather than with peaceful means.

It may be that humans are biologically and psychologically constructed for waging war, that is, to follow our primal feelings of fear or greed and to lash out violently in defense of our goods or to take any object of our greed forcibly. But, if so, given our history of longing, then we must also assume that we are biologically and psychologically constructed to want peace, security, and a number of other things which can be manifest in calm, secure, peaceful states as they cannot in a warrior state. The crudest, simplest means of waging war are successful in causing human suffering, which, after all, is what war is meant to do. On the other hand, the means to wage peace call upon more complex human faculties and these are harder to marshal, harder still to imagine. Even so, throughout our histories, we have both known and imagined what peace must be, imagined too, and even tried, various means to attain or sustain peace in various areas of the world. So far, we have not been successful, yet the dream persists and has grown even more encompassing as our means for destruction have grown more thorough.

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Despite the history of longing for peace, it is fair to say that there is no ready-made set of ideas as to how the human race can live together in harmony. We sense it can be done. We have seen it here and there. We have examples enough and that gives us reason to say that the wisdom of how we can live together can be obtained through our daily life practices. For guidance today, we may certainly have recourse to any number of explicit teachings from every corner of the world and from the ancients to the present: Confucian teachings on *ren* or Kantian philosophy of perpetual peace to name but two from the vast array of history. That wise teachings such as theirs prove the universality of the concept of peace need not be debated, but the history of human learning has taught us that there seems to be no universally valid directives and no absolute ethical autonomy whatsoever for the problems which coexistence poses. Conflict, by which I mean simple opposition and disagreement, among humans is inevitable but the particulars of any conflict are bound to distinct times, places and communities. The peaceful means to resolving conflict in order to arrive at harmony and peace are also bound in the distinct ethics and morals of the communities involved. If we would strive, for example to attain Confucian *ren*, that state of authoritative conduct toward our fellow human beings that emanates from a process of growth in benevolence, we would need to engage in that growth process through interacting in the communities in which we live. As well, the governance of peace, like the governance of war, in the end, is shaped by social influences. And these, of course, are as conflicted as humankind itself.

Conflicted as the human race is by nature, we should note with some satisfaction that there are organizations devoted to searching out ways we can live together in peace and harmony in a free and just world where all citizens from all corners of the planet could enjoy every right to develop their potentialities and realize their capacities to the fullest. It is an extraordinary achievement of the human race that, at this point in our history, such organizations and movements now include the whole world in their focus on peace and harmony. The scope of such inclusiveness seems audacious to many even today and it is constantly contested, but it would have been unthinkable in earlier times. This expanded notion of inclusiveness, new as it is on the world stage, is a measure of how far we have come both in conceptualizing the nature of human conflict and in imagining the possibilities of solutions.

II

Natural or constructed differences of one sort or another have often been cited as the core of conflict. Despite such differences among human beings and the conflict waged in the name of difference, a wide assortment of various peoples inhabits the same earth. They sometimes coexist uneasily, sometimes in bloody conflict and sometimes in strained peacefulness. But, as a matter of fact, they coexist. There have been times in the history of humanity, even in the present day, when one group attempts to annihilate another. It is a matter of record that there have been times when one group has succeeded in annihilating another. Yet, at least in modern history, these attempts are viewed by much of the rest of the world as aberrations of humanity, heinous and shameful beyond words. Moreover, again from modern

history, we also know that whenever a group acts to utterly annihilate another group, some members of the aggressor group themselves condemn the act at the time, and, most certainly, an even greater number condemn it in hindsight. I stress that there are disagreements within a group of people to highlight something each of us knows but, nonetheless, forgets when we speak of how other groups – meaning all the people composing those groups – think or feel. We need to remember it however if we are to understand why, how and what sort of differences come to divide us in destructive ways.

Since all human beings are different from one another individually and collectively, we must ask what kind of differences call up the frenzied madness of genocide. And, since clearly our notions of differences change over time, we must today wonder why any differences can provoke the kind of destruction they do at all. Just as, even today, we must ask how and why it is that people can live together in peace and then suddenly be stirred to find long accommodated differences to be so intolerable that one group feels it must end the existence of another or die trying.

In modern times, we have explored these questions in varying degrees and from varying perspectives. In doing so, we have dispelled certain notions once held as plausible. For example, it was once considered reasonable to suggest that atavistic fears of the unknown arose whenever human beings who differed substantially from us in outward appearance arrived in our midst. Presumably we held the same atavistic fears about those who had different faiths. Some of the perpetrators of the most murderous conflicts today conjure up the notion that primordial fear of difference precipitated them. But the world at large, and, significantly, as noted above, members of the perpetrating group themselves, have gone to painful lengths to deny that reasoning. Some in the perpetrating group have given quite opposing reasons for taking part in the same oppressive deeds; while others refused to participate, claiming to find no justification for doing so. Differences in thoughts about a particular conflict among people in the group(s) on either side of the conflict have always existed. It is surely a truism that no matter what form of governance a group has; no matter how uniformly they conduct their actions, internal differences and disagreements exist in the group.

One of the reasons why modern humanity cannot claim vestiges of primordial fear of difference as viable cause for violence and conflict is that we humans share too much in common with each other in our societies. It is difficult to find any group or society that has not entered into some sort of cultural exchange with another. In this day and age, it is dissembling to posit that fear of difference kindles conflict in groups. Lust for power and control of the limited bounties of the earth are more likely candidates as the causes of intolerance of difference. Hobbes believed that humans wanted to enjoy the bounties of the earth but feared violent death from those who also wanted to enjoy earth's limited bounties. Greed and violence result from these two human propensities. From them as well are created ethnicities in which revenge is honorable and hatred of 'other' inevitable. However, especially in today's world, increasing cultural interactions among regions, accelerated by the ongoing globalization by way of trade, migrations and high-tech communication, have brazenly unmasked some of our cherished self-deceptions regarding the justification of violence toward those who are different. Yet strife exists between nations

and among different groups within nations. On the other hand, there are some countries which are trying out the movement of labor forces from one country to another in the interest of developing markets and finding that, in fact, they can do business, trade, work with and live near people who worship a different sort of deity, or none at all, and who may have distinctly different notions of family life and purpose. We need to study the policies of such countries and their practices and to look carefully at successes. There are those who argue that intra-country successes come only from careful recruitment of migrant workers and immigrants. There are also arguments asserting that groups of people from various cultures moving into a liberal society tend to erode the welfare state and thus cause conflict among those on the margins of society. Both of these arguments can garner evidence for their cases. But they each pose difficult questions about what sort of societies we really want to be. If only professional immigrants from a non-liberal culture are allowed, there may never be a clash of their ways of life with those of their adopted country. They will not drain the welfare state and they can afford to live quite separately from the general populace. Unfortunately, such 'outsider citizens' are suspect since September 11, 2001. As for the erosion of the welfare state, even more questions are raised, not the least of which suggests that the welfare state had been eroded for other reasons even before the influx of minority workers.

Global economics have ushered in new forms of multiculturalism, exacerbating old problems and setting up new ones. National and international multicultural policies need to be enacted that reflect the world we want to live in, the people we want to be. We can only rely on human agency here and the ethics we construct to guide it.

III

Can there be an ethics for peace that cuts across cultures? I stand with those who contend that we are already moving toward such an ethics and it is not an invisible hand that moves us, it is individual and collective agency. We have obligations though, as we never need have if we choose to believe that we are not responsible for decisions we make and the actions we take. Our obligations include examining the nature of societies in terms of their differences and similarities and in terms of how they change upon interaction. Especially, we need to look carefully at our pasts and how they have influenced our present. And as we imagine and undertake changes in the present, we must remember that these actions of the present become the future.

We are becoming more and more aware of devastating changes that take place in individual and cultural lifeworlds when cultural exchanges, if you will, take place through war, occupation, slavery and other forms of oppression, including overt and covert discrimination of minority cultural groups in a nation. I want here to isolate the process of change in a lifeworld by examining it as it might take place in benign circumstances like traveling to a foreign land to broaden oneself, studying and living in the land to understand it. I have always been fond of Alfred Schutz's ruminations on changes in the lifeworld and I lean heavily on him in my description of the process below. I do so, not because the traveler he speaks of no longer exists, but

because opportunities to experience other cultures in positive ways are broader now and, through media, can be more inclusive.

When one takes in elements of a local particular culture, one experiences a 'wide-worldization' of one's own home world. One might say it is a widening of the horizon of one's lifeworld. Whether it is a horizon-widening or wide-worldization, both may be called the 'mundialization of home.' Here, the term mundialization is not to be confused with globalization. While in French 'globalisation' and 'mondialisation' are used interchangeably, in English 'globalization' and 'mundialization' bear different connotations. Globalization coming from the Latin 'globus,' refers to the global shape of the earth, hence meaning a movement from one locality to another eventually spanning the entire sphere of the planet. Etymologically, since it denotes only shape, globe does not carry as much cultural, religious, historical significance. Globalization thus refers to the process or vehicle by which ideas, habits, worldviews travel from one culture to another and are transformed in the process. Generally globalization, these days, refers to market globalization. On the other hand, mundialization, derived from the Latin 'mundus,' refers to historical human society and the earth inhabited by humankind. In English, 'world' signifies far more than spatial dimension or geographic confines. When we speak of 'our world,' we usually mean the manners and customs, ideas, values, language and the like which make up our particular communities. When we speak of the world at large, we are referring to all the peoples and cultures around the globe. With these connotations in mind, we can see that mundialization, that is, the taking in of the outside world into our own lifeworlds, occurs through globalization, a process by which the ideas and customs of other cultures are transported into our homeworlds. In this process, what was once strange and unfamiliar is transformed into something comfortable and familiar. This is the process that is generally known as cultural assimilation and, by virtue of which the boundaries of our individual homeworlds become constantly widened. This phenomenon is called the 'mundialization of home.' What effects the mundialization of home is the mediation of common elements found in both the schemata of orientation of the homeworld and in that of the strange or alien world.

When we are in the strange world, after we have reckoned with its fundamental differences at a particular level, we are capable of accommodating the different cultural patterns we encounter into our schemata of orientation. This process refers to the adjustments we make and undergo when we are in new environments. The end result is that we finally are able to think and act in the manner of the other, commanding and interacting with the reality of the new environment much as the members of the once strange community do. We solve problems using the schemata of the new world with the same ease with which we once solved problems in our homeworlds. We are able to do this because, despite the differences, there are some transcultural, common elements. With these, we take on the other's schemata in such ways that they fit into our own homeworld schemata. Thus, they become objectifications of our own homeworlds as well. That is to say we interpret them and relate them to our surrounding world, reconstructing other schemata as we do so, and forging a new tool of interpretation in the process as well. With the constant process of mundialization, our schemata for interpreting the world undergo countless

transformations, which allow us to comprehend our reality more widely, more deeply and more wisely (Schutz, 1964).

Today, the process of the mundialization of individual lifeworlds has been multiplied and accelerated by the rapid proliferation of media technology, which also influences the other current vehicles of globalization. Cultural and sub-cultural intersubjectivity bases of communication have become, or at least have the potentiality to become conducive to the resolution of intolerance, animosity and conflicts among peoples of diverse cultures. The more we are able to mundialize elements of the strange world into our own, the more we are able to feel relatively at home with others from different communities. But, it must be remembered that Schutz's traveler is seeking to understand the foreign culture, to be able to function in it. Indeed, he wants to broaden his horizons. However, as we are all only too well aware from what have come to be called 'the culture wars' within nations as well as among them, media can be used to satisfy quite different desires; it can be used to foster a narrowing of horizons and it can be used to create divisions, hatreds and mayhem. We see this latter use in democracies which have opened their borders, but not their minds, hearts, or their nation's opportunities to workers from other nations and we see it in the way some nations portray the news involving other nations. We see it too in the present globalization of market schemes wherein long-developed nations try to monopolize the media industries in undeveloped and newly developed nations. The result of this kind of enterprise is that the populace of underdeveloped nations must view world news especially from perspectives which are not their own and/or, as is especially the case with newly developed nations, have movie and television content that reflects the life styles and world views of a powerful nation but not their own. An ethics for peace in a multicultural world must be able to offer guidance for these situations for they are situations that promote inequity among citizens in a nation and among nations.

IV

Alongside the opportunities for 'soft' oppression of peoples and other nations, advances in science and technology also serve as transmitters and catalysts for the many and varied cultural elements that promote the articulation of peace and social justice. Today, nearly all lifeworlds brim with potential schemata by which to form practices insuring human dignity and social justice for all individual human beings. These concepts have captured the moral imagination of citizens throughout the world because they resonate in all of our histories, all of our pasts. Ideas that are articulated from the outside, and are transferred to our homeworld may be recognized as different and analyzed as strange, but they have the capacity to become ours only if they connect in some way with the deep structures and schemata of our own value and belief systems. When an empathetic connection can be made, the concept is transformed so that it absorbs the features of our own culture. The process is rarely one-sided, for when cultural elements connect in this way, all involved are changed if only by expansion. This change is not a secret process known only to a few, it is a process sought by numerous groups whose members believe that the Asian concept

of harmony has an affinity with many western definitions of peace, for example. This kind of deliberate seeking of similarities with a goal to broadening and integrating is, perhaps, new to this era. One cannot help but say that this searching for affinities and connections is part of the ever growing movement toward harmony and peace.

It is worthwhile noting too, on a more practical note that, in trying to make their place in the current global economy, newly industrializing countries in East Asia are now in search of modernity affinities in aspects of their traditional cultures that could be used to build an ideal base for their economic structure. In Thailand efforts are being made to find an affinity to the rationality principle of science and technology in Buddhist teachings to be used by those associated with the modernization process of their country whereas China is taking the communitarian ideal from Confucian learning to form an alliance with its practice of market socialism with a view to solidifying its national integration. This search for empathetic cultural elements in traditional thoughts is an example of planned mundializations, if you will. Modernization for East Asia has come to be accepted as historical inevitability, not something imposed by the West. It is a stage of historical development that the region has to pass through in order to become part of world history. But the particular market reasoning now prevalent in global economics is not the solution regions with different traditional backgrounds need or desire to enter modernity. Nor do those regions stand alone in their resistance and search for alternatives to market logic. They are joined by intellectuals in various disciplines, some of whom have been associated with market globalization organizations and still call for reform in market globalization practices. They are also joined by a swelling membership of civil society from around the world, and more and more of that membership is from countries whose governing administrations are deeply entrenched in promoting market economies. All of these groups are seeking to infuse moral reasoning and social ethics into market development for good reason: the ever widening gap between rich and poor in every country. That gap is inevitable under the now dominating market rationale. Essentially, the rationale is the constantly resurrected notion of an invisible hand or power that guides the markets no matter what people do; markets, change though they will from one product to another, will prevail. Profit at the highest level is essential and all means to achieve it are deemed justified. Laborers who must be let go if machinery can do their work faster can be retrained to something else. (That they rarely are is another matter. The rhetoric never changes.) The market will go on and the profit will go on. The ends justify the means. No matter that historically, the means have always become the ends. People become used to the new ends and the old goals, which are always the ennobling ones, are lost. It is not a matter of being for market globalization or against it, though that is how the problem is often erroneously framed. And of course, there are no ethics that can serve in solving conflicts so conceived. Markets are not the problem, the problems lie deep in our conflicted human nature and that is the main source from which we construct any ethics.

V

That human nature is conflicted and oppositional, there can be no doubt. That is surely one thing that every society has discovered, just as every society discovers that whatever is decent, beautiful and just exists only because of societal living. Civil union can bring out the best and likely the worst in human beings, but without civil union, there is no humanity. Kant, who called our conflicted natures our 'unsocial sociability,' believed that the best social order is the fruit of the discipline imposed on our conflicted natures by our need to live in society. We may not feel as certain as Kant did at the close of the 18th century that the fairest social order will prevail, but we can agree that harmony can be achieved, that fairness can exist, that indeed the growth of concepts like human rights, equity, fair distribution and justice for all testify to their tenacity and power in civil union. Alas, the constant need for ethics to sustain them in changing contexts testifies to the durability of human unsocial sociability as well.

In this era of economic globalization, we face problems we have faced before. There has always, of course, been the problem of equitable distribution of the world's resources. And, there has always really been a problem of living together and working together with our differences. As societies grow larger and larger, these two factors become more constant. At this moment in history, many nations are having second thoughts about multiculturalism yet there seems no viable way to insist that we all be the same, nor is there any evidence to suggest that living in isolation with people only like ourselves is even possible.

If markets are central to the problems we are having, we might start with markets to solve them. And there is a similar context to examine that might help us here. The American philosopher, John Dewey (1859–1952), was much concerned with markets and equity and with multiculturalism which he called plurality. And he was much concerned with an ethics for the time.

Dewey did not believe in the supremacy of markets; in the supernatural hand that guided them. He certainly believed that industry and markets were essential, but markets must not be unfettered. For Dewey there could be no simple ends justifying means. Means *are* the ends and society must constantly assess both means and ends with that conflation in mind. Education is key to this endeavor for Dewey believed that critical thinking was everybody's job and right. Ends-in-view as he called ends, were not to be accepted uncritically or, for that matter, as if they were unchangeable. The future is indeterminate by nature. Unforeseen problems, like unexpected pollution, need to be dealt with at once. Plans changed if necessary. Dewey really expected that all members of society would have a say in plans as well and he saw people engaging in sociological or psychological studies about institutions and customs. His was a dream of living democracy, of being engaged in it.

However, he was definitely not talking about homogenous, rural areas or small towns, the world he knew was noisy and highly industrialized, and not at all democratic in the way he advised. Dewey's dreams were reform dreams. Plurality was present to be sure, but there was racial and ethnic strife in that plurality. Nonetheless, Dewey (1980a: 93) promoted diversity because he said our lives were

richer for associated living, our decisions and actions more meaningful when we considered the views of others.

These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his actions.

So important was plurality that Dewey (1980b: 204) believed homogeneity could curtail our futures.

Our unity cannot be a homogeneous thing . . . Rather, unity is created by drawing out and composing into a harmonious whole, the best, the most characteristic which each contributing race and people has to offer.

Though Dewey was highly influential in welfare reform programs during the Great Depression, his ideas on education were not fully or widely accepted. Yet they are read today as guidelines for change. I should say that they are more believed in than followed. They are more like the American Dream than the American reality, but that is the point in revisiting his writings. He once said that democracy must be taught anew to every generation. Kant would agree without a doubt. Our 'unsocial sociability' sees to that. Ethics need always to be renewed as situations change. Those governing the world seem to forget that. What brings us to renewal is the clamor for reform and the direness of our plight. Our hope flourishes now in the global civil society that works for change and even now articulates the very ethics needed for peace in our multicultural world.

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Notes

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