

## UNIVERSALISM OF ETHICAL VALUES VERSUS RELATIVITY OF CULTURES

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## PROBLEMATIQUE

- The title of my presentation involves assumptions I hope to render plausible and questions we will together attempt answering
- Are ethical values/principles universal or contextual and relative?
- Is a universal culture possible?

## DIALECTIC TENSION

- Between the universal and the particular (“the problem of Universals”)
- For Plato universals (objective, independent, permanent, eternal) are more real than particulars; but for Aristotle universals depend on particulars (a smile could not exist without a face)
- Between the absolute and the relative
- Between the individual and the communal
- In a sense, every universal tends towards the particular and every particular tends towards the universal

## What are values?

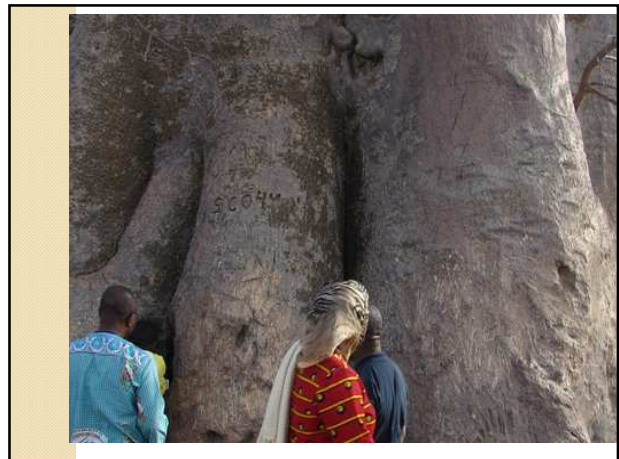
- A belief/conviction about the worth/importance of something
- Values may manifest in actions, behaviour, practices
- Values are immaterial and intangible and belong to the ‘ought’ side of the ‘is/ought’ dichotomy, the fact/value dichotomy
- A value system is a set of norms, goals, expectations and recommendations binding a social group

## What is a principle?

- A general rule or formula that applies to many particular cases/instances
- It is universal rather than particular
- It is abstract rather than concrete
- It is a standard of reference
- It needs to be plastically firm rather than cast-iron rigid

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

- Culture is the ‘way of life’ of a people; cultures are social forms analogous to biological entities; cultural diversity is similar to biological diversity
- Underpinned by adaptation to a common ecological niche or environment
- Held together by a common ‘world-view’, similar ideas, beliefs, attitudes, ways of thinking and doing, common expectations, practices
- Cultures form partly overlapping and intersecting concentric circles



**Whence the various cultures and their value systems?**

- ‘Solar theory of history’ (Ali A. Mazrui)
- Significance of the sun in the belief system and cultural practices of peoples
- Sun-worship versus time-worship
- Is climate at the basis of our beliefs and practices?
- Individualism/communalism, monogamy/polygamy

**CULTURE MATTERS?**

- A collection of human beings cannot live together in a given environment without developing and sharing a common culture, even if it be only a culture of silence and non-involvement with one another
- Culture is necessarily relative; it is basically the result of the adaptation of a group of human beings to a given environment at a given time; from within, such adaptation may be described as more or less adequate or satisfactory but, from without, no adaptation can be described as being better or worse than another; no culture qua culture is either superior or inferior to any other, just as no human being qua human is either superior or inferior to any other
- Morality is necessarily universal; the litmus test of genuine moral judgment is its universalizability and appearance of being spatially and timelessly valid; it primarily addresses the question: “What ought I/We to do or not to do?”

**CULTURE MATTERS? Cont’d**

- Morality/Ethics is not about ‘winning strategies’, not about being clever, pragmatic, economically wise, or prudential but simply about doing what ought to be done in a given situation/circumstances
- Not an easy task. We could get it wrong no matter our good intentions and seriousness of purpose, no matter how ‘advanced’ we may be
- Morality is the life-blood which animates cultures and religions
- Religion-less morality holds the key to the solution of the problems created when politics and religion blend inseparably to create problems that can only be solved by going to war

## CONTRASTING AFRICAN AND WESTERN CULTURES

### AFRICAN CULTURE

- Predominantly an oral culture
- Eco-bio-communitarian
- Marked by great variety and diversity
- United by certain metaphysico-religious ideas, values, attitudes, practices and experiences
- Tolerant, cautious, non-aggressive, non-proselytizing, inward-looking
- "Be and let be, live and let live"

### WESTERN CULTURE

- Predominantly a literate culture
- Anthropocentric, (androcentric?): Genesis myth
- Technologically advanced
- Certainty-driven
- Manichean syndrome
- Dominant/domineering, proselytizing, outward-looking
- "We know all there is to know; what we do not know does not count as knowledge"

## ETHICS AND CULTURE

- Ethics refers to the actively discussed aspects of morality and the set of principles that can be conceived to regulate and by reference to which such discussion is carried out
- Ethics is a forensic science, whereas morality as such tends towards the latent and is more closely identified with cultures
- Moral discourse, articulate moral reasoning, argumentation/debate, belong in the domain of ethics
- Morality as such tends to be quietly practiced and integrated into customs, laws, ethos, ways of life, practices, etc.

## ETHICS AND CULTURE Cont'd

- Morality is basically the same for all humans everywhere at all times; what is morally right or wrong cannot be conceived as differing from place to place or from time to time; moral diversity and disagreement are reflective of human limitations
- Recall the six blind men of Hindostan
- Ethics, because it is the discursive and debated aspect of morality, may be culture-tinted, place/time-sensitive and even coloured by particular interests and circumstances

## FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

- A principle is a general rule or formula which acts as a standard of reference
- It is fundamental if it is foundational and the basis on which many particular instances and cases are evaluated
- It is ethical if it has to do with matters of right/wrong, good/bad in human actions or behaviour
- Principles are necessarily universal and abstract
- Ideally, ethical principles are plastically firm rather than cast-iron rigid
- They are universal in their applicability but they are not absolute and can permit violation under justifiable circumstances

## FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS

- Four fundamental/basic principles of ethics have usually been recognized and widely discussed in moral literature
- These principles are: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice
- The *Belmont Report* (1979) does not mention non-maleficence!
- In simple terms, these principles have to do with respect for all other humans as moral equals, making sure that our actions are well-intended/motivated and calculated to achieve good ends or results, avoiding the infliction of harm, and treating others with fairness and equity
- Read: Tom L. Beauchamp and James f. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Fifth Edition), New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

## SCOPE AND APPLICABILITY OF THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

- The four fundamental principles of ethics are equally relevant and important in medical ethics, clinical ethics, bioethics, in the research review process and morality generally, within all possible contexts and perspectives
- They are cross-culturally valid, although the emphasis given to each and the way they are operationalized may differ slightly from culture to culture, from place to place, from context to context, and even from time to time within the same context

### Scope and applicability cont'd

- The four principles, in the terms, language and idioms they are discussed in extant literature are, of course, very much a paradigm of the western industrialized world, where their relevance and urgent applicability have been made abundantly manifest by various activities that violated or that run the risk of violating them.
- They, nevertheless, remain equally important even where they seem to be lying dormant, for want of stakes requiring urgent discussion and application.

### Scope and applicability cont'd

- You may not have heard of these principles or thought about them in these terms, but if you reflect on the traditional moral ideas and practices of your own traditional society you will realize that they are recognized and taken into consideration in day to day living
- The isolation and recognition of these principles is the fruit of careful, systematic critical thinking

### WHAT IS GLOBALIZATION?

- As a descriptive process, globalization has been made possible and inevitable by advances in science and technology, especially loco-motion and communication technologies
- The net result of these advances has been increased contact between the various peoples and cultures that populate the world
- Thanks to this state of affairs, the world is today, unlike yesterday, is gradually becoming a 'global village'

### What is Globalisation-cont'd

- As a prescriptive process, globalization arises from increasing awareness of both the diversity and interdependence of the various parts, peoples and cultures of the world. Globalisation in this sense, is essentially a moral concept, at the value end of the is/ought, fact/value dichotomy
- Underlying such blueprints of globalisation as the Biodiversity Convention and the Human Genome Project, are clear ethical impulses, concerns and imperatives.
- See 'Globalisation or Westernisation? Ethical Concerns in the whole Bio-Business', *Bioethics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 and 4, pp. 218-226, July 1999

### WESTERNIZATION?

- As a descriptive process, globalization has its roots in the European Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries
- This revolution drew its impetus from the slogan that 'knowledge is power' (Bacon) convertible into commercial value, from the idea that all knowledge is unqualifiedly good, from the belief that nature is, in principle at least, completely knowable and controllable, and from perception of the universe as something which should be explored, subdued, dominated and exploited by human beings

### Westernisation- cont'd

- Coupled with the history and reality of Western colonisation of non-Westerners, domination and insensitivity to non-Western considerations, some hold that globalization is no more than Westernization (Europeanization) or even just Americanization.
- In this light, globalization is equated with Macdonalization and Cocacolarization of the world, which may precede or follow 'democratization'
- In little more than a century Western culture has over run the whole world and other cultures

## PERVERSIVE NATURE OF RELIGION

- Religion is a means of facing human limitations: imperfection, fallibility, finitude, vulnerability, mortality
- In this sense, a religion-less individual, community/society/culture, is a practical impossibility
- Second only to language, religion is an important/indispensable aspect of every culture
- Atheism is, of course, possible to the same extent that a godless religion is possible
- The spectacular aspects of religion and politics are like twins in all cultures
- Religion, politics and culture are deadly allies

## RELIGION AND POLITICS

- Religion and politics have been mutually self-empowering road companions from time immemorial
- In spite of occasional mutual criticism of each other they are indispensable to each other
- This is nowhere more evident than among two of the great world religions – Judaeo-Christianity and Judaeo-Islam – each of which sustains a political superstructure with far reaching global ambitions
- This situation has important implications for world peace

## RELIGION AND POLITICS- Cont'd

- Both religions loudly and clearly preach universal love and peace
- But world peace in our epoch is not possible without reconciliation between Christian and Islamic influences
- The current parameters of the problem include: nine eleven, the war on terror, the war in Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict
- At the centre of this situation are the chosen people of Yaweh, descendants of Abraham/Isaac/Jacob/Moses
- They hold the key to world peace

## WHY WORLD PEACE SEEMS NOT LIKELY IN OUR EPOCH

- Christianity and Islam literally rule the world
- Both are doctrinaire and xenophobic religions
- Committed to proselytization and acquisition of land, property and converts world-wide
- With an attitude and tendency towards fundamentalism and incorrigible self-righteousness
- Both suffer from an irremediable epistemological overconfidence and Manichean syndrome
- Reconciliation is thus a remote possibility and war recommends itself as an easier if not only way of settling differences
- But war is the greatest of evils with unpredictable consequences

## NINE ELEVEN AND ITS AFTERMATH

- September 11, 2001, was a turning point in World history
- Suicide terrorism is an incomprehensible mystery, conceivable only against a fundamentalist religious background
- It calls for deep reflection, prayer, confessional self-examination, and exorcism
- The most powerful nation on earth reacted to 9/11 by attempting to 'kill a mosquito with a sledge hammer'
- Animated by extreme, unbending, overconfident rhetoric – a secular equivalent of religious fundamentalism
- The world has been almost polarized along two Manichean axis, with good and evil located according to which side of the axis one finds one's self

## CONTRASTING ATR WITH CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

### African Paganism

- Non-Revealed religion
- No divine founder
- No sacred texts/books
- Non-organized
- No systematic, coherent body of doctrines/dogmas
- No clergy or preachers, no proselytization
- No cathedrals/churches
- Non-acquisitive, non-discriminatory
- No identifiable faithful/adherents
- Extra paganismus salus!

### Christianity/Islam

- 'Revealed' religions
- Revered holy founders
- 'Sacred' scriptures
- Highly organized/systematized body of doctrines/dogmas
- Well trained clergy/preachers
- Monumental places of worship
- Highly acquisitive/possessive spirit
- Millions of faithful/adherents
- Hierarchical/authoritarian
- Extra ecclesia nulla salus!

### ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES, PARADIGMS/TEMPLATES

- Globalization, if not confused with Westernization offers great opportunities for discovering and appreciating other different perspectives, paradigms and frameworks
- Western culture is materially the most successful human culture; with a big mouth but small ears
- It is time for deep listening
- What about Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Taoism? What about Paganism?
- One hand cannot tie a bundle; one culture cannot fix the world
- Cultures are dancing masquerades

### PAGANISM TO THE RESCUE

- When the 'pagan' priest prays, s/he prays for everybody, present or absent; for universal peace, harmony and prosperity for all; for health and fecundity for humans, plants and animals
- Christianity and Islam are about the 'chosen' who alone deserve salvation; in prayer they heap praises on God, emphasize their privileged situation before God as against 'unbelievers' and assume a posture of righteousness scarcely humanly possible
- The spirit of truth and reconciliation: witness South Africa
- The metaphors of *Tabaski* and *Love thy enemies!*
- Ecumenism and Dialogue?

### Plural/Multicultural Societies

- A plural society is one in which the different communities exist side by side and mix without necessarily merging
- Multicultural societies are unitary in principle and in the public domain but they encourage and maintain diversity in cultural practices and religions
- Most modern societies are plural, multicultural societies in which tolerance, sympathetic understanding and open dialogue about cultural, religious and moral differences constitute the greatest challenges

### CONCLUSION: UNIVERSALISM OR RELATIVISM?

- Culture is necessarily relative; it is basically the result of the adaptation of a group of human beings to a given environment at a given time
- All human cultures are equal in the same sense in which all human beings are equal.
- Ethics (morality) is necessarily universal in its intentions; the litmus test of genuine moral judgment is its universalizability and appearance of being spatially and timelessly valid; it primarily addresses the question: "*What ought I/We to do or not to do?*" and not one about what others ought or ought not to do, except secondarily by analogy

### THE MYTH OF IJAPA

Wisdom is scattered in tiny little bits all over the world amongst all peoples and cultures

*Thank you for listening!*

