

# Morality and Culture: Are Ethics Culture-Dependent?<sup>1</sup>

## ERDEM VE KÜLTÜR: ETİK KÜLTÜRE BAĞLI MIDIR?

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### Summary

In this paper, it is my contention that cultural diversity is a value akin to biological diversity. As such, it is desirable or at least unobjectionable for a thousand and one cultural flowers to bloom. Moreover, no culture qua culture is either superior or inferior to any other culture. Moral diversity, however, is not a desirable value and universalizability remains the chief identification mark of a genuine moral imperative. Divergence of moral opinion, both within and between cultures is, nevertheless, a palpable fact. Such divergence in my opinion is attributable to human limitations, ego-centrism and fallibility. Moreover, moral divergence over particular issues in no way cancels the broad moral consensus, evident across all human cultures, over fundamental and general moral imperatives. Genuine moral progress at the global level would, no doubt, seem capable of leading to a narrowing in the gaps of moral divergence, although divergence itself may never completely be eliminated. Ethics, therefore, may tend to be culture-dependent but ought not to be culture-dependent; rather should cultures be ethics-dependent, in the sense that every culture or particular aspects thereof, like all other things human, is justifiable only when not in flagrant violation of morality.

**Key Words:** Morality, Culture, Ethics

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### Özet

Bu makalede, kültürel çeşitliliğin biyolojik çeşitliliğe benzeyen bir değer olduğu savım yer almaktadır. Sadece istenilir ya da hiç değilse aleyhinde denilecek bir şey olmayan 1001 çeşit kültür vardır. Şu da var ki, hiçbir kültür diğer bir kültürün üstünde ya da altında değildir. Ahlaki çeşitlilik her ne kadar istenilen bir değer ve genelleme olmasa da, gerçek ahlaki zorunluluğun belirlenmesinde başta gelen işaret olarak durmaktadır. Hem kültürlerin içinde, hem de arasındaki ahlaki görüş ayrımı yine de belirgin bir olgu değildir. Görüşüme göre bunun gibi bir ayrım; insan sınırları, egosentrizm ve yanılma payına atfolunabilir. Bundan başka, özel sorunlar üzerindeki ahlaki ayrım; genel ahlaki fikirleri, belirgin görünen tüm insan kültürlerini, bütün önemli ve genel ahlaki zorunlulukları geçersiz kılar. Küresel seviyede gerçek ahlaki ilerlemenin, ayrımın kendisi hiçbir zaman tamamen çıkarılmasa da hiç şüphesiz ahlaki ayrımın ayrılıklarında sınırlamaya rehberlik etme yeteneği olduğu görülmektedir. Bu yüzden etik kültüre bağlı olmasa da, kültüre bağlı olmaya yönelebilir, kültürlerin etiğe bağlı olması gerekse de. Bir anlamda her kültür ya da özel görüş, diğer insani şeyler gibi sadece erdemın bariz ihlali olmadığında savunulabilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Erdem, Kültür, etik

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*Wisdom is scattered in tinny little morsels  
throughout the world*

- African adage -

Culture is basically a way of life of a group of people, underpinned by adaptation to a common environment, similar ways of thinking and acting and doing, similar attitudes and expectations, similar ideas, beliefs and practices, etc. There is a re-

markable diversity and variety in the human cultures of the world and in the ecological niches in which cultures flourish. This diversity, an observable fact, is analogous to the equally remarkable diversity of the biological world, of the different biological species that populate the earth. Cultures and sub-cultures are like concentric circles (1) and there is no human being who does not fall within at least more than one such circle, as the nuclear family or, more ideally, the extended family in its Af-

rican conception, could, in fact, be considered as delimiting the smallest of such cultural circles. Like biological diversity, cultural diversity is thus a datum of our existence with which we may tinker in the hope or with the aim of giving it a particular shape, colour or direction. Such tinkering is as liable to achieve satisfactory beneficial results as unbeneficial or harmful ones. For this reason, cultures, like living things, may, over time, flourish or atrophy. But to attempt introducing biological or cultural changes that are too sudden or too drastic is to run the risk of achieving more disastrous than beneficial results.

Unlike culture, morality is grounded on human rationality and common biological nature, and on human basic needs which, being common to all, irrespective of culture, may be considered as defining what it is to be human. For this reason, divergence of moral opinion, both within and across cultures, is a descriptive fact which is a short-falling from the prescriptive ideal. Moral imperatives are necessarily universal. But moral thinking and practices may differ from culture to culture and even from person to person within the same culture, because of human limitations, including the impossibility of perceiving from more than a single point of view, the impossibility of being an experiential participant of all human existential situations, coupled with human ego-centrism and human fallibility.

### **No Human Culture is Perfect**

Human ego-centrism naturally leads individuals to perceive their own culture as *the* culture, but critical observation and reflection can help to correct such mistaken perception. Professor Michael Novak in his book, *The Experience of Nothingness* (2) remarks that every culture differs from others according to the 'constellation of myths' which shapes its attention, attitudes and practices. In his view, it is impossible for any one culture to perceive human experience in a universal, direct way.

*...each culture selects from the overwhelming experience of being human certain salient particulars. One culture differs from another in the meaning it attaches to various kinds of experience, in its image of the accomplished man, in the stories by which it structures its perceptions.*

*Of course, men are not fully aware that their own values are shaped by myths. Myths are what men in other cultures believe in; in our own culture we deal with reality. In brief, the word "myth" has a different meaning depending upon whether one speaks of other cultures or of one's own. When we speak of others, a myth is a set of stories, images and symbols by which human perceptions, attitudes, values and actions are given shape and significance. When we speak of our own culture, the ordinary sense of reality performs the same function. In order to identify the myths of one's own culture, therefore, it suffices to ask: What constitutes my culture's sense of reality? (2).*

Culture is like congenital tinted spectacles through which we look at reality. We inevitably impose our particular cultural tint on everything we perceive, but critical awareness can lead us to the realization that 'objective reality' is multi-coloured. No human culture or community is perfect although that is not to say that some may not be more advanced or better-off in some respects than others. This would be a matter of critical appraisal. There may be activities/skills at which each culture is 'better' than all the others, but a culture in general cannot be described as being 'superior' or 'inferior' to another on that basis. The French, for example, may be better at wine making or some other such activity than the Germans, but it cannot on that account be said that French culture is superior to German culture. To say that one culture qua culture is 'better' or 'superior' to another culture is like saying that a donkey is better than or superior to a horse. A donkey qua donkey cannot be superior or inferior to a horse qua horse because a donkey is not a horse nor vice versa. The

claim that French wine is better than German wine is a meaningful claim, which may be true or false, but the claim that French culture is superior to or better than German culture is a nonsensical claim, equivalent to the claim that a donkey is better than or superior to a horse.

Cultures qua cultures can be said to be equal in the same sense in which human beings are equal, in spite of great differences in their individual and individuating attributes and characteristics. We could qualify such equality as 'moral' equality, not to be confused with other senses of equality. All human cultures are, however, perfectible, because none is perfect; and none can be perfect, given that human beings, the creators of culture, are imperfect beings. Particular cultures or even human culture in general can, however, with time, progress or retrogress in relation to some putative inter-subjective standard of perfection.

The limitations of cultures are directly related to the limitations of human beings who, both as individuals and as communities, are the creators of culture. Human limitations, especially human fallibility, are impossible of complete eradication, in spite of the very strong impulse, present to varying degrees within all individuals and all cultures, to strive for certainty and infallibility under the invincible impulse and optical illusion that they can be achieved. Such an impulse euphemistically may be described as 'the desire to be God'. However, human limitations need not be a hindrance to striving for perfection or to making clearly recognizable moral or cultural progress.

Susan Sherwin (3) has suggested that we consider conflicting moral theories and differing theoretical perspectives as alternative 'frameworks' or 'templates' through which we attempt to perceive and evaluate problems, through which we may gain complementary and overlapping but necessarily partial perspectives, but certainly not definitive exhaustive truths. We can consider cultures in the same light. Cultures are like tinted spectacles through which we view reality, which we thus

necessarily perceive as if 'through a glass darkly'. Sherwin (3) further uses the image of 'lenses', which can be readily switched or even layered on top of one another to get a different 'view' of things. I believe that the attempt to 'change', 'switch' or 'superimpose' cultural 'lenses' is very enriching for the individual and salutary for human culture in general. However, western culture, because of its sheer material success and global dominance, its proselytizing character and evangelical impulse, its high sense of self-righteousness and justificationist approach to actions, admittedly and understandably, has greater inertia in experimenting with cultural lens-changing/switching exercises.

### Morality and Cultures

The main difference between morality and culture is that while morality is necessarily universal in its outlook and concerns, every particular culture, as a way of life of a group of people, is inevitably relative and limited, to that particular group or people. Moral rules are different from all other types of rules. They are general, applying to a wide variety of particular cases and instances and are *perceived* as universal and timeless, not as timely or context-bound. Moral rules, injunctions or imperatives may, of course, be expressed in, mingled/mixed with, or reflected in laws, societal customs, cultural practices, taboos, etiquette etc., but they should not be confused with these other operational structures of society. Morality is based on simple human rationality, not on any specialized knowledge and it is uncompromising in its demands, superceding man-made laws, political expediency, economic considerations and social customs and practices.

A moral reason is always a good and sufficient justification for changing or abolishing a law, political programme, economic project, social custom or practice, but none of these latter can morally be justified by simply claiming that that is what it is, that is, a law, custom, project or programme.

Moreover, universalizability is the chief identification mark of a moral judgment or imperative in the sense that, to qualify a statement or judgment as 'moral' is to imply that it is based on considerations other than the particularistic, the self-interested or egoistic, the timely or the expedient. However, morality is not absolute and moral rules are not exception-less. Moral rules are conceived and formulated by human beings and human beings are epistemologically limited and also fallible beings.

### Knowledge and Dancing Masquerades

In my opinion, all human cultures, like all human beings themselves, are *morally* equal, in spite of great differences in their material conditions, power and influence. Individual human beings come from the hand of God/Nature in multifarious shapes, sizes and colours, but, qua human, they are all equal. To use an idea and image popularized by the African novelist, Chinua Achebe, we can consider morality and cultures as dancing masquerades. A dancing masquerade cannot fully and completely be viewed by any single spectator. To have an adequate but necessarily partial view of a dancing masquerade, it is not possible to remain sitting or even standing on the same spot; moving around to change the viewing position and perspective is necessary.

In the global dance of human cultures, Western culture, the proprietor of modern bio and other technologies, has reached out to all other cultures from a firmly seated position, on account of which it has developed a high sense of transcendentalism. It may be in the interest of all of humanity that Western culture should develop the habit of also standing up and moving around a bit, to view the dancing masquerades from different perspectives; or else, it is to be feared that Western culture, its technology and especially biotechnology, if they continue with their present thrust and momentum, to the total exclusion or disregard of the wisdom of

other cultures, could easily occasion the death and burial of human culture in general.

There is a little tale from African folklore, related by Ulli Beier (4), a remarkable German, who overcame his cultural ego-centrism and drank deeply from the cultural wisdom of an African people, the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria:

*Although Ijapa was cleverer than anybody else on earth, he was so greedy and power-hungry that he wanted to own the entire wisdom of the world. One day he sneaked into heaven and stole the calabash in which Olodumare (God) had locked up all the wisdom. He hung the calabash on his neck and set out on his way home. When he had nearly reached his house in the forest, he came upon a huge tree that had fallen across the path. Three times he tried to climb over the trunk, three times he fell off. He was really surprised, because he had climbed thicker tree trunks before. All this time a little bird had been watching him. Now it laughed aloud and called: "You fool! Don't you notice that the calabash prevents you from climbing over the tree? If you would tie it on your back, instead of letting it hang from your neck, you would cross that log easily." Then Ijapa became so ashamed and enraged about his own stupidity that he took the calabash off his neck and smashed it on the tree trunk. This is how wisdom was scattered in tiny little morsels throughout the world.*

African wisdom forbids any direct attempt at interpreting the above tale or trying in analytic fashion exhaustively to draw out its lessons. To do that would be either to show oneself a fool or to take one's audience for fools, or both. Ulli Beier himself draws one of the consequences of the above folk tale in the domain of religion for the different groups of worshipers of different deities (*olorisa*) in the following terms: "Unlike Christian churches, these groups of *olorisa* do not compete with each other, nor do they go out to make converts. It is the *orisa* (deity) himself who selects his devotee. All *orisa* acknowledge the fact that **no one** can be in the sole possession of all truth, nor is

there such a thing as a single absolute truth. There are many *parallel truths* and only the combined wisdom and understanding of all the cult groups will ensure the harmonious and peaceful existence of the town.” (4). The moral here for the so-called great world religions, which in their uncompromising rivalry have sometimes turned parts of the earth into a veritable hell, is too obvious to require drawing out.

### Conclusion

Let me conclude by stretching some of the consequences of these African metaphors and parables to what preoccupies and obsesses all of us at moment – the war and its aftermath on/in Iraq. All individual human beings and all individual human cultures dream their dreams. And dreaming, at both the individual and collective levels, is harmless, provided there is no possibility or means of translating such dreams into reality. Recently, I dreamt of grabbing U.S. President, George Bush, and U.K. Prime Minister, Tony Blair, by the throat in each of my strong hands and throttling and shaking them like rat moles, and knocking their heads together, to dissuade them from going to war in Iraq. That is as far as my pacifist, anti-war obsession, thoughts and action would go: a harmless dream. But, if there were the slightest possibility or means of translating such a dream into reality, it would become a dangerous dream which should perhaps not be dreamed.

And, talking about the war on/in Iraq, it is necessary, before historical amnesia sets in, to recognize, without any equivocation, that the war had no moral justification. If Hitler had won the Second World War, his victory would not have been devoid of celebratory chanting and dancing all over the world or of some good consequences, such as transforming the world into an orderly earthly paradise, according to some putative Nazi conceptual blueprint. War cannot be justified solely on grounds of its purported good consequences. But, even relying solely on consequences, it is quite hard to accept that the inno-

cent victims of the war in/on Iraq – including those of ‘friendly fire’, sheer accidents and collateral damage, let alone the enormous physical destruction – were a justifiable price for the elimination of Saddam Hussein or the overthrow of his dictatorial and murderous regime, objectives which certainly could have been achieved at less cost.

The Iraq war was the result of a day-dream of omnipotence, part of whose advertised objective was to turn Iraq into an earthly paradise. But the dream has turned rather into a nightmare, as Iraq evolves into a hell worse than that over which Saddam reigned. Had there been reliance on the collective wisdom of all countries, all cultures, there would have been no war in Iraq. And the United Nations Organization, in spite of its weaknesses and shortcomings, is well-placed as a forum for harnessing the collective wisdom of all countries and all cultures, provided some of its members are not accorded preeminence or permanence on grounds other than their sagacious endowments.

You don’t need a club to kill a mosquito; we kill a mosquito with a small clap between the palms of the hands. If a mosquito should perch on the tip of my nose, and, because you love me and hate the mosquito as much as I do, and because you possess an arsenal of hammers, you smash my face with a sledge hammer to kill the hated mosquito, with or without a promise to rebuild it afterwards, you have gravely failed in your rationality. The war on/in Iraq, in spite of its unfolding good or evil consequences, could signify a grievous failure in human rationality, the more so for having been the coldly calculated action of greatest leaders of some of the most self-conscious/self-righteous human cultures.

Persons and cultures with the possibility, capability and means of transforming their dreams into reality need to dream their dreams very carefully. And this is as true in the domain of war as in that of biotechnology or any other.

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