

Eight Substrates for a Possible Universal Axiology

Written by Nayef Al-Rodhan

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NAYEF AL-RODHAN, OCT 21 2014

In our era of accelerating globalisation, there are few greater threats to harmony and inter-cultural understanding than essentialism. In this context, reflections on axiology, the study of values (what makes something good or bad), appear equally problematic as socio-cultural diversity presupposes that distinct interpretations to values are assigned across cultures. A more nuanced view acknowledges a great degree of intra-cultural variation and sees culture as developing in fits and starts, effectively challenging the idea of cultural essentialism. Understanding this crucial point, and putting educational programs in place that instill an appreciation for cultural awareness, will set the stage for a more productive dialogue at the global level. A universal axiology will become possible only if there is sufficient willingness by individuals of diverse cultural traditions to accept that their respective traditions do not confine them to a narrow set of beliefs associated with their practices.

Beyond the appreciation of the shared content within differing cultures' normative systems, tolerance and open dialogue can be fostered by the increased recognition of the profound influence cultures have had upon one another throughout history, including their mutual contributions to each other. Regarding both these elements of intercultural relations, education again has a clear and significant role to play. An educational agenda that reinforces both shared content and demonstrates the history of cultural cross-pollination is key to framing today's era of continued globalisation in positive, and collaborative terms.

The Challenge and Promise of Cultural Diversity

The idea of transcultural synergy—that the overall effect of cultural sharing often becomes greater than the effect of the individual cultures—demonstrates the benefits of globalisation and should be a crucial facet of cultural education. Classic studies like the one carried out by E.R. Dodds, demonstrate that this mutual borrowing of culture was present in the early days of Western Civilisation. Many writings prior to Dodds obscured the fact that ancient Greek philosophy and mythology was profoundly influenced—and enhanced—by exposure to Eastern thought. While it can be argued that an assertion explaining the extent of “irrational” influence from the East on the supposedly “rational” thought of the West is a bit of essentialism in itself, the overarching value in the study of cultural sharing is increasingly pertinent in today's interconnected world.

Towards a Universal Axiology

One characterisation of the general subject of human rights is to codify values so fundamental that consensus regarding their content is regarded as readily attainable. In practice, of course, this consensus has proven more difficult to attain than expected at the time of the early human rights charters. A main challenge has been providing an account of human rights that is sufficiently objective, and not irretrievably trapped within a Western worldview. Recently, scholars have revisited Marx's contention that emphasis on rights tends to promote hyper-individualism at the cost of communal value and respect for social integrity. One of their primary concerns is that more collectivist cultures will have a challenging time reaching consensus with strongly individualist cultures. While these considerations do present real difficulties that should not be underestimated, in practice even a minor degree of consensus is sufficient for dialogue to take place. Pre-eminently, radical disparities of wealth and power in the international theatre are impediments to transparent, meaningful dialogue. In order to establish a climate of respect for human dignity, conditions must be fostered wherein diverse groups can dialogue meaningfully.

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Breaking down essentialist understandings of cultures and raising awareness of their respective contributions to one another both diminishes cultural arrogance and provides the basis for trust and respect. Such dialogue, must be sustained over the long term in order to be effective. There are eight elements that enable transcultural synergy and carve help to forge a universal value system:

1. Dialogue
2. Agreed upon Rules and Ethics of Dialogue
3. Mutual Understanding
4. Tolerance and Respect
5. Mutual Learning
6. Identification of a Moral Minimum
7. Reduction of the Technological Gap
8. Fair Representation

Throughout intercultural discourse it will be crucial to have mechanisms in place for people from all strata of society to play an active role in defining the cultures in question, so that the dialogue aimed at transcultural understanding is genuinely driven by the people and not by a small group of politicians or well-placed bureaucrats. These considerations emphasise both the need for both a moral minimum and agreed upon rules for dialogue. The responsibility rests upon the world powers to allow dialogue to proceed according to formats and protocols agreed to by all participants, not merely within the existing frameworks established by the usual suspects. More generally, in order for dialogue to be authentic and productive, there must be limits to the kinds and degrees of disparity between cultures that can be countenanced, especially with regard to economic and technological development.

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