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Cultural diversity and international political theory: from the *Requirement* to 'Mutual Respect'?

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Abstract. From the time of the Conquistadors through to New Labour's ethical foreign policy of 'mutual respect', Modern Europe has found it difficult to identify the appropriate ethical framework for understanding its relationship with the non-European world, a difficulty increasingly apparent in the post-Cold War world. Some argue that late-modern or 'postmodern' thought can provide a better framework than the discourses of classical modernity, but a more fruitful alternative may be found in the revival of premodern ways of posing ethical questions.

Introduction

The politics of cultural diversity has become a key issue for several branches of late twentieth century (international) political theory. Responding to the post-Cold War international environment, and as part of its critique of positivism, constructivist international theory examines 'culture and identity' and strategic cultures; contemporary political philosophers examine the interface between multiculturalism and liberal theories of justice; and rights theorists find themselves obliged to respond to the challenge of cultural relativism.[1] Whatever might have been the case ten years ago, it would be difficult to argue today that 'culture' is still a neglected dimension of

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[1] For a small representative sample see, Josef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in International Relations Theory* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996); Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); John Rawls, 'The Law of Peoples', in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (eds.), *On Human Rights: the Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Peter Jones, 'Political Theory and Cultural Diversity', *Contemporary Research in Social and Political Philosophy*, 1 (1998), pp. 28–62; B. K. Matilal, 'Ethical Relativism and Confrontation of Cultures', in M. Krauss (ed.), *Relativism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Alison D. Renteln, *Universal Human Rights: Universalism vs. Relativism* (London: Sage, 1990). Stephanie Lawson, 'Democracy and the Problem of Cultural Relativism: Normative Issues for International Politics', *Global Society*, 12 (1998), pp. 251–70; Brian Barry, 'The Limits of Cultural Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 307–19.

international relations.[2] Nonetheless, the normative implications of cultural diversity are often puzzling and unclear, and for all the advances that have been made in this area, it is still difficult to find a satisfactory way of addressing these issues.

Consider, for example, those occasions where the plight of individuals becomes tied up with intercultural relations—when, for example, British nurses face a murder charge and possible public execution in Saudi Arabia under a legal code which appears not to conform to international standards, or a British novelist of Indian origins is sentenced to death *in absentia,* on the basis of a religious judgement by an Iranian Imam. Western media, apparently reflecting public opinion, characteristically express outrage at these offences to its/our sensibilities, while a great many people in Saudi Arabia and Iran are, in turn, outraged by the outrage, which appears to be based on the assumption that because something is not done in Western Europe or North America it ought not to be done at all. How are these contrasting reactions to be understood and reconciled—assuming reconciliation is possible, or even desirable? These individual cases highlight a quite widespread tendency in the non-Western world to see the contemporary human rights regime as an example of Western 'cultural imperialism'.[3] Supporters of 'Asian values' (and their African equivalents) attack the individualism of Western notions of human rights in the name of the extended family or kin group, just as some Islamic leaders reject notions of the equality of the sexes and religious freedom. On this account, the human rights regime is seen as an intolerant attempt to impose an essentially Western account of what it means to be human on peoples who have developed their own notions of human dignity. Does this position—which, of course, it must be stressed is by no means universally held in the non-Western world—deserve to be taken seriously? Ought those who support the current rights regime attempt somehow to meet these criticisms or is the appropriate reaction simply contemptuous dismissal?

It is not too difficult to find ways of justifying the latter course. Clearly the leaders of the quasi-authoritarian capitalist regimes of Southeast Asia resent any kind of criticism and are glad to be able to accuse of cultural imperialism those who point to the unsavoury features of their rule; similarly, the application of Islamic law in Saudi Arabia owes more to the peculiar customs of the Royal House in that country than it does to the Koran, and the *Fatwa* against Salman Rushdie may have owed as much to internal Iranian politics than to genuine religious sentiment. It would be unrealistic not to acknowledge that many of those who play the cultural card do so in bad faith—but it would be equally unrealistic to suggest that all expressions of cultural diversity are tarred with this particular brush. Not only unrealistic, but illogical; those in power can only employ cultural arguments as a cynical defence mechanism precisely because they know that so many of their subjects and/or co-religionists are *not* cynical when it comes to these matters. The *Fatwa* may have been employed to strengthen the position of one Iranian faction

[2] 'Culture' is a highly contested term, and it would be easy to spend the rest of this article attempting a definition. For this reason it will be left here undefined, on the principle that readers will have a rough intuitive sense of what is involved in the notion and that is all that is needed in this context.

[3] The use of shorthand terms such as 'Western' is unavoidable but unfortunate. Clearly the West is not a single culture and some of the fiercest opponents of the idea of rights are indisputably 'Western'—see for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's characterization of a belief in rights as akin to a belief in unicorns and witches, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), p. 67.

against others at home and abroad but it could only perform this function because the outrage that many Muslims felt in the face of what they believed to be, or were told was, the insulting nature of *The Satanic Verses* was genuine and unforced.

In any event, the cultural critique of universal rights can be situated within a wider issue, the extent to which the 'settled norms' and practices of our current international order, the Westphalia system—norms such as non-intervention and non-aggression, practices such as diplomacy and international law—can be divorced from their Western origins. It is incontestable that these norms and practices were developed within the European states-system and then imposed on the world at large as a by-product of European imperialism. Some have argued that these practices are eminently suited to a many-cultured world precisely because they presume no common purposes on the part of the members of the practical association that is international society other than the goal of living together in peace and in accordance with the impartial requirement of formal justice.[4] It is, however, doubtful whether the legitimate demands for change in the world socioeconomic structure which come from the poor and dispossessed can be met on this basis. Our current international institutions, practices and norms are the product of only one of the many cultures they attempt to regulate; again, should this be regarded as a problem?

It seems unlikely that these problems will go away of their own accord, more likely that they will become more serious with time. Samuel Huntington's proposition that the next century will be dominated by a 'clash of civilisations' may be a little over-dramatic but is closer to the truth than those who argue that 'globalization' will smooth out all differences or that the triumph of liberal democracy over communism is initiating an era of ideological homogeneity.[5] There are, indeed, global economic forces operating in the world today, but there is no reason to think that they will undermine states or cultures in the foreseeable future. These forces for uniformity and homogeneity will create, indeed already are creating, their own antidotes. In that respect at least, Barber is right to envisage a contest between 'McWorld'—his term for these forces—and 'Jihad', although the use of the Islamic term is unfortunate here, since the fundamentalist reaction to which he refers is more general than this would imply.[6] Coping with the consequences of cultural diversity is going to be a continuing problem in international relations, not as pressing for the time being that of coping with the causes and consequences of world poverty and the inequality of nations, but, perhaps, in the longer run more intractable.

Moreover, we do not yet know *how* to think about these issues.[7] *What* to think about, for example, the death threat to Salman Rushdie may be clear—it is horrifying and outrageous that the author of *The Satanic Verses* should have required the

[4] See in particular Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality and the Relations of States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), developing the thinking of the 'pluralist' wing of the English School, cf. N. J. Wheeler, 'Pluralist and Solidarist Conceptions of International Society', *Millennium*, 21 (1992), pp. 463–87.

[5] Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*; Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3–16.

[6] Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

[7] I mean, of course, '*I* do not know how to think about these issues' but I wish to suggest that this is not (simply) a matter of my personal intellectual inadequacy; those who think otherwise and are completely confident of the rightness of their views—and I have met many such in presenting this article as a paper—will presumably have already stopped reading, if they started in the first place. Perhaps those who remain should place silent quotation marks around future uses of 'we' in acknowledgement that there is a potential problem here.

protection of the security services and it is good that the threat to his life has lessened recently. Similarly, the Saudi and Iranian application of Islamic law is not widely supported even by Muslim scholars, and public beheadings or stonings are repugnant to most people, likewise the authoritarian ways sometimes associated with so-called Asian values. In each of these cases we may feel that we know quite well what we think—but this is hardly the end of the matter. Our preferences and sensibilities remain exactly that—ours, and preferences and sensibilities—unless we can find a way of setting up these issues that is not ethnocentric and partisan.

'Mutual Respect' and the 'Requirement'

The second part of the title of this article refers to two texts which attempt to provide a framework for understanding cultural diversity. 'Mutual Respect' is the title of one of the four main headings of the Mission Statement which was promulgated by the Foreign Office on 12 May 1997, setting out the new Government's understanding of Britain's foreign policy objectives: thus,

> *Mutual Respect*. We shall work through our international forums and bilateral relationships to spread the values of human rights, civil liberties and democracy which we demand for ourselves.[8]

This is the 'ethical dimension' of Britain's foreign policy. Mr. Cook fleshed out what is involved in a speech of 17 July 1997, entitled 'Human Rights into a New Century'. After presenting a list of rights, he added:

> These are rights which we claim for ourselves and which we therefore have a right to demand for those who do not yet enjoy them … The right to enjoy our freedom comes with the obligation to support the human rights of others.[9]

'Mutual respect' in this sense can be taken as short-hand for a common contemporary liberal approach to cultural diversity or intercultural politics; rights, civil liberties, liberal democracy are taken to be unproblematically desirable, and liberals need have no hesitation in promoting them in the wider world. Respect for other peoples is shown by inviting them to conform to these notions and practices—we demand them for ourselves and so we are entitled to demand them for others. Only the ill-intentioned—the 'self-serving' as Mr. Cook puts it in the same speech—could disagree by pointing out the *non sequitur* in that sentence. In effect, 'we' invite them, Others, to become more like 'us'—albeit a stylized, idealized 'us'.

The second text in my title—the *Requirement*—is drawn from the beginnings of the age of European dominance in the world, and requires a little more in the way of background.[10] The conquest of the Americas, which began around 500 years ago, still represents one of the most fecund sources of tales about the encounter between

[8] *Mission Statement for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, 12 May 1997 (http://fco.gov.uk/aboutfco/mission/).

[9] 'Human Rights into the Next Century', Foreign Secretary's Keynote Speech, 17 July 1997.

[10] The best source for the story of the Requirement is still Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949). See also the same author's *Aristotle and the American Indians* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1959).

Europe and alterity. Of course, Christian Europe had always known 'others'. Its self-definition relied upon the existence of pagans, Jews and, later, Muslims, as both enemies and victims and its educated elite was aware of the great civilizations to the East in general, albeit often in highly inaccurate terms. But the peoples of pre-Columbian America were alien to an altogether higher degree. They had no place in the medieval world-picture. The very name assigned to them—'Indians'—was realised early on to be wrong but no alternative was ready to hand. They posed the same kind of challenge to the moral universe of the late Middle-Ages that the discovery of new planets did to the picture of the natural world held by medieval thinkers.

As is well known today, the conquest was accompanied by the destruction of pre-Columbian civilizations and peoples; also known, but still deserving more recognition, is the intellectual resistance to this destruction waged by (some) Spanish theologians and priests in the sixteenth century. This can be symbolized by a sermon preached in Hispaniola by an otherwise unremarkable Dominican friar, Antonio de Montesinos in 1511 on the text 'A Voice Crying in the Wilderness', which amounted not just to a root and branch condemnation of the *conduct* of the conquest, but, more courageously, to an attack on its very *legitimacy*. 'On what authority' he asked 'have you waged a detestable war against these people who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own land?'[11] This was badly received in the New World, but added emotional fuel to a debate on Spain's right to rule which had actually been going on for some years in the homeland. The issue came to a head in 1513 when the next major expedition was due to sail. A committee of theologians was set up to study the problem, and the result was the drafting of a manifesto to be given to the *conquistadors* who would arrange for it to be read to the Indians by interpreters before the conquest could legally begin.

This document began with an account of the history of the world, with particular emphasis on the key role in the salvation of humanity assigned by Christ to Peter and his successors, the purpose of which is to build up to the point at which Pope Alexander VI (better known as Rodorigo Borgia) in 1493 assigned the relevant part of the New World to Spain for conquest and the propagation of the faith. Then two requirements are placed upon the Indians—from this the manifesto took its usual name, the *Requirement*—first to acknowledge the authority of the Church, Pope and King and Queen of Spain, and then to allow the faith to be preached. The *Requirement* goes on to list with chilling accuracy what will happen if the Indians do not acknowledge these requirements. The Spaniards will come with fire and the sword and

> take you and your wives and your children and make slaves of them … and we shall take away your goods and shall do all the harm and damage that we can; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, nor ours, nor these cavaliers who come with us.[12]

The *Requirement* was treated with some hilarity by the *conquistadors* themselves, understandably, for Las Casas himself later commented that when he read it he could not decide whether to laugh or cry.[13] Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, notary to

[11] Hanke, *Spanish Struggle*, p. 17.
[12] Ibid., p. 33.
[13] Ibid., p. 35.

the first post-*Requirement* expedition, was sent off with a bodyguard to carry out his duties but could find no Indian to read the document to. On his return he pointed out to his commander that

> … it appears to me that these Indians will not listen to the Theology of this *Requirement*, and that you have no-one who can make them understand it: would Your Honour be pleased to keep it until we have some one of these Indians in a cage, in order that he may learn it at his leisure, and my Lord Bishop may explain it to him.[14]

Although this suggestion occasioned disrespectful laughter, the notary had, of course, put his finger on the problem. Even if we take the *Requirement* at its face value as a genuine attempt to place the conquest on a legal footing it did so in a way that was incomprehensible to the Indians. Its theology makes sense only if one is already convinced by it, that is, if you believe that the Pope had the right, in certain circumstances, to assign lands for conquest. The Indians had no reason to hold such a belief—and, neither, it should be said, did an increasing number of Europeans, since this reliance on Papal authority came just a few years before the Protestant Reformation, itself partly stimulated by the blatant power-politics of such as the Borgia Pope, Alexander VI.

All told, the *Requirement* is a paradigm of how not to do intercultural politics, how not to handle the problems posed by cultural diversity. The *Requirement* and 'Mutual Respect' are two texts from different ends of the era of (overt) European dominance, each rather crude representations of the thought of its time but each, in its own way, characteristic. Part of the purpose of this article is to trace the movement from the first of these texts to the second; another part is to suggest that this movement may not cover as much ground as may, at first sight, seem to be the case. Although the *Requirement* is cast in theological language which was out of date almost before it was published, while 'mutual respect' draws upon characteristic late twentieth century thinking, the mindsets they represent may not be as far apart as one might have imagined.

Impartial arguments, partial frameworks

How are we to understand the *Requirement*? It invites cynicism, but cynicism would be inappropriate. We must assume that its drafters took it seriously even if those in the field were unconvinced. It is certainly a crude document but it was meant to be taken in good faith and ought not to be dismissed as simply a convenient ideological cover for expansionism. Instead, its underlying structure ought to be examined to see how the argument is supposed to work; when this is done, something quite commonplace emerges, in spite of its exotic setting, namely an attempt to justify action in terms of the application of a general rule.

The fact that the Spanish felt the need for justification at all is, in itself, worthy of note. Most of the great conquering societies of history (including the Aztec and Inca civilizations overthrown by the Spanish) have not shared this need. But a more interesting point is the kind of reason the Spanish offered. Unlike their successors three hundred and more years later (or, for that matter their Roman predecessors)

[14] Hanke, *Spanish Struggle*, p. 33.

they do not in this document speak of their fitness for rule in specific terms, that is as part of their national 'Manifest Destiny', or 'Civilizing Mission' or capacity to bring 'the law' to lesser breeds. Rather, the case is presented in general, almost impartial, terms. God created the world, man fell, Christ redeemed us and gave the Papacy the keys to the Kingdom, and the Spanish King and Queen hold the right to rule in the New World because the Pope gave it to them. The Pope might have given it to someone else—indeed, at other longitudes, actually did give part of it to Portugal. The Indians are invited to bow the knee and allow the propagation of the faith not in tribute to the virtues of the Spanish, but in recognition of the capacity of the Papacy to interpret the good for human beings. They are required to submit for reasons that, taken in their own terms, are impartial. But, of course, something has gone wrong here, as de Oviedo spotted. What we have here is an impartial argument to which the Indians are invited to give reasoned consent, but, before they can see this, they have to enter into the frame of reference upon which it is based. The argument does not privilege the Spaniards as such, but the framework of the argument gives them the advantage. The narrative of salvation to which the document refers and which provides its legitimacy, is unknown to the Indians, and even once it has been explained to them there is no independent reason why they should accept it.

This much is clear because, at the end of the twentieth century, the account of legitimate authority presumed by the *Requirement* is as strange and alien as it was to the Indians. This is why this document is such a convenient metaphor for unsuccessful intercultural relations[15]—everything is laid out in such a way that what is going on is readily apparent; it is not necessary to dig beneath the surface to find the point at which the argument privileges the conquerors. The *Requirement* is very specifically based on a narrative, which makes it easy to see how and why the Spaniards are privileging their own position. For most of the last five hundred years it has not been so easy to recognise when an argument is working in this way.

This is because later functional equivalents of the *Requirement*, such as the idea of 'emancipation', or the notion of 'universal human rights' or the universalizing claims of science and technology—or the ethical ideas involved in 'mutual respect'—resist the notion that they are based on narratives of the kind embedded in the *Requirement*. Instead, they claim to be representations of the truth of the world, hard-won accounts of how things actually are, or should be. To deny these claims is not simply to challenge the relevance of a particular narrative, but to define oneself as irrational, incapable of following the logic of an argument, wedded to premodern fairy-tales, lacking in cognitive adequacy or whatever. But a certain sleight-of-hand is involved here. Because of the success of the West in dominating the rest of the world over the last half-millennium, and because, on the whole, societies which are constructed on the basis of modern Western thought are rather pleasanter to live in than those which preceded them, it is easy to forget that these claims take the same form as, and are, at root, as ungrounded as, the claim of the Spanish that the Pope had the right to grant them someone else's land to conquer and propagate the faith. Of course, it ought not to need to be stressed that this is a *structural* similarity, and it would be absurd to suggest that there is any substantial equivalence between the *Requirement* and the notion of 'mutual respect'; being patronized by even so waspish

[15] It is, I am told, widely used in the school curriculum in Britain in precisely this way.

a British Foreign Secretary as Mr. Cook hardly equates to the programme of mass murder that was the downside to the earlier doctrine.[16]

To recognize this structural similarity it is not necessary to hold that all knowledge is a matter of perspective or that all perspectives are equally valid. It is clear that so-called 'Western' science (which in fact draws on contributions from many other civilizations) has greater explanatory capacity than its non-Western, non-scientific competitors, and technology based on this science gives us a degree of control over our environment that no other belief system can offer. But having greater explanatory power is only a trump card if you want it to be, if, that is, you are already committed to a view of knowledge in which explanatory power is what counts, as opposed to, for example, congruence with a particular way of life or set of sacred texts—and there is no way in which those who hold the latter view of the purpose of knowledge can be compelled by reason alone to adopt the former. As David Campbell argues in an illuminating discussion of a cognate point, reason itself cannot ground the authority of reason.[17]

Similar points can be made about the political and social ideas which are associated with modern versions of the *Requirement*. The idea that individuals have rights and that government ought as far as possible to be based upon the consent of the governed has great power, but it cannot be said to be self-evident, or to encapsulate a general truth about how the world necessarily is or should be. Human beings are clearly individuated but the idea that they are 'individuals' in the modern sense of the term is certainly not self-evident—for example, writers on the classical world have shown us how some of the oppositions that modern Europeans think most basic would not have been familiar to classical, much less pre-classical Greeks.[18] Even the idea that human life is in crucial respects different from other forms of life is qualified by some very well established religious/ethical positions. The notion of a human life as a 'project' with a beginning and an end is shared by the 'religions of the Book'—Christianity, Islam, Judaism—and secular humanists in the West, but not by Buddhist or Hindu believers in reincarnation and 'karma', or Confucians who concentrate on the persistence over time of the family.[19] The political vocabularies of the modern European state build on distinctions which simply do not exist in other vocabularies—most notably the deep political significance of the distinction between 'public' and 'private'.[20]

[16] *Monty Python's* gangsters, the Piranha Brothers, come to mind. Dinsdale specialized in conventional violence, nailing heads to the floor and the like, but Doug was much more frightening. 'He used sarcasm. He knew all the tricks, dramatic irony, metaphor, bathos, puns, parody, litotes and satire.' Graham Chapman et al., *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words* (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1990), p. 190.

[17] D. Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 28.

[18] See, e.g. A. W. H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972).

[19] This is one of the reasons why the contemporary Western obsession with Islam as the 'Other' is misplaced. Clearly there are family resemblances between Islam, Christianity and secularist humanism that do not exist between any of these positions and the religions of the East or, for that matter, some contemporary 'New Age' religious movements.

[20] This latter point has been picked up by feminists who signpost the ways in which Western political ideas have not simply provided a framework within which patriarchy could flourish, but have actually been based on patriarchal assumptions. The greatest achievement of Western political thought—the notion of the self-determining republican citizen—is unambiguously patriarchal. The soldier/citizen

Between monism and relativism

Leaving the *Requirement* and 'mutual respect' behind for the time being, the argument can be recast as follows: one the one hand, all claims to social knowledge that are politically significant are grounded in particular ways of life and reflect the values and interests of that way of life. There appears to be no independent reference point which can be brought into play in order to allow us to make judgments which do not reflect and privilege the values and interests of a particular way of life. This is, of course, a commonplace; such a position has conditioned a great deal of the social and political thought of the twentieth century. If it is taken seriously, cross-cultural judgments which imply that one particular way of life, or the stories upon which it is built, can unproblematically provide criteria by which to assess practices associated with another must be rejected. It cannot be assumed that our stories about religion, or science, or politics are compelling to others.

On the other hand, if taken too seriously, there is a danger that this position will lead to a version of moral relativism which disables any kind of cross-cultural criticism, with equally unsatisfactory consequences. It may be right to be critical of the project of imposing a Western notion of universal human rights on peoples who have developed their own distinctive ways of asserting their humanity, but to argue that any longstanding cultural practice is to be accepted simply because it is longstanding is every bit as unacceptable. Apart from anything else, such a position would tell against any notion of moral development *within* cultures, as well as making it difficult for any particular culture to learn from another. How, then, can the fact that all knowledge is shaped by particular frames of reference which it ought not to be assumed are shared with others, be preserved from turning into an essentially conservative and incoherent version of moral relativism? How, in Bikhu Parekh's terms, can the choice between an unviable moral monism and an undesirable moral relativism be avoided?[21]

One answer proffered by a number of political philosophers over the last thirty years or so has been to attempt to create an artificial foundation for moral debate by building upon the idea of a consensus constructed under ideal conditions. There is no actual foundation for morals, but if we can agree amongst ourselves to create such a foundation all will be well. Of course, ideal conditions must be stipulated for this process because it is clear that a consensus under other than ideal conditions will reflect differentials of power and interest but if we can successfully imagine what agreement on normative issues would look like in the absence of these differentials we will have created a basis for the critique of our own and all other societies. This is the claim of theorists of justice stimulated by the work of Rawls, and of 'critical theorists' who take a lead from Habermas.[22] Consensus either on normative issues, or, more plausibly, on a framework for deciding normative issues, is possible once

who since the time of classical Athens has provided us with the picture of what it means to be free, performed his public role in a context where women were restricted to the private sphere. See, e.g. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[21] B. Parekh, 'Non-Ethnocentric Universalism', Timothy Dunne and N. J. Wheeler (eds.), *Human Rights in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[22] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), Jürgen Habermas, *A Theory of Communicative Action*, Parts I and II (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

extraneous factors are removed from the situation and all voices are allowed to be heard.

This kind of theorizing can give added force to a quite common rhetorical tactic in arguments on normative issues. To argue that 'you wouldn't like that if it was done to you' or 'do unto others as you would be done by' is a common tactic, and what the Rawlsian 'veil of ignorance' or the Habermasian 'ideal speech situation' does is to try to turn such pieces of folk wisdom into grounded operating principles. The problem is that these moves presuppose a prior willingness to engage in moral debate, that parties desire 'reasonable agreement' as Scanlon puts it, and are willing already to see others as human beings with interests that deserve to be taken seriously.[23] Such a willingness simply does not exist in many of the circumstances under consideration here. This is not to deny the potential contribution of 'critical theory' as exemplified, for example, by Andrew Linklater's most recent book, which defends the ideal of unconstrained consensus emerging from unfettered dialogue as the basis for community with great skill and passion.[24] The problem is that to engage in this kind of dialogue is to undertake a re-evaluation of one's values that inevitably will be painful and with no guarantee that the eventual outcome will be agreeable. Why would those who are comfortable with their values, indeed, as will often be the case, benefit substantially from them, enter into this process in the absence of some compelling reason to think that their situation is untenable?

From the postmodern to the premodern

The route from the *Requirement* to 'mutual respect' seems to take us from one world to another, and yet the underlying structure of the argument is, in each case, much the same. In both cases the attempt to engage across cultures is made, each attempts to portrays itself as standing on impartial ground, but neither is able to sustain this claim. Putting the matter in different terms, each position rests upon a 'meta-narrative' which the recipients of the message are tacitly invited to regard as compelling. From one influential recent perspective, reliance on metanarratives is a characteristically modernist strategy, and 'incredulity towards metanarratives' is a defining feature of the postmodern—here, perhaps, may be found a satisfactory route into problems of cultural diversity?[25]

The writer who has engaged these problems most deeply from a postmodern perspective is Richard Rorty; his contribution is, however, profoundly ambiguous.[26]

[23] Thomas Scanlon 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism', in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[24] Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[25] See J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. xxiv for 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.

[26] Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (eds.), *On Human Rights* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) is his major explicit statement on these matters; it draws on the thoughts expressed in essays collected in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)—this latter containing his 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality' essay. The implications of Rorty's position for international political theory are discussed in Molly Cochran,

He uses the modernist language of rights, but with a particular spin. Rights act to 'summarize our culturally influenced intuitions about the right thing to do in various situations'; such summarizing generalizations increase 'the predictability, and thus the power and efficiency, of our institutions, thereby heightening the sense of shared moral identity which brings us together in a moral community.'[27] Since the Enlightenment, Americans and Europeans have created a 'human rights culture' in opposition to prejudices of one kind or another—racial, religious, most recently, misogynist and homophobic—and thereby extended the scope of this shared moral identity. What relevance has this for societies where this seem not to have taken place? What response can be made, for example, to Muslim extremists who think that the death penalty is appropriate for writing a book that, allegedly, defames the Prophet? Not that they are wrong or irrational, or that they have not understood that the nature of human beings is such that this is an inappropriate response. There is no such nature, there are no general moral standards that apply here. Human beings create themselves and if they have not created themselves in ways that are amenable to a human rights perspective nothing can get through to them. The best way to see such people is not as 'wrong' or 'irrational' but as 'deprived', deprived of the security and sympathy that has allowed us to create a culture in which rights make sense. To get through to them, or, more plausibly, their children, we need to engage in a 'sentimental education', arguing for and promoting the human rights culture explicitly as a culture, rather than assuming that the way of life it summarizes can be defended by universalist arguments.

How plausible this position is even in its own terms is contestable; Norman Geras argues quite convincingly that, *in extremis*, it is precisely universalist arguments that motivate people to care for others[28]—but in any event the ways in which Rorty advocates the human rights culture suggest an attachment to this particular social formation every bit as strong as that held by those still possessed by what he would regard as a naïve essentialism about human rights. He holds the same kind of assumptions about the superiority of the Western way apparently on the principle that such assumptions are acceptable as long as they are held 'ironically', that is, with the conscious knowledge that they might be wrong—one can then laud the virtues of a sentimental education through which the rest of the world gradually comes to share the advantages of being like us.

Rorty's postmodernism remains, in crucial respects, modernist in its willingness to privilege some categories of thought. To break out of this mindset it may be appropriate instead to look in another direction—to the *pre*modern rather than the postmodern. The reference here is to one of the features of recent thought on ethics in general, namely a revival of interest in classical ethics, neo-Aristotelianism, and the 'virtues'.[29] There are two particular features of this thought which, taken

'The Liberal Ironist: Ethics and International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 25 (1996), pp. 29–52. Anthony J. Langlois 'Redescribing Human Rights', *Millennium* 27 (1998), pp. 1–22 appeared too late to be considered here, but addresses a number of cognate themes.

[27] Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', p. 117.

[28] Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* (London: Verso, 1995).

[29] For overviews, see Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Daniel Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); Special Issue 'Virtue and Vice', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 15:1 (1998).

together or separately, may be helpful—the revival of a kind of essentialism, and a move away from formalism and abstraction towards the concrete and particular.

In both cases what we are talking about is a different account of the task of 'ethics', or 'moral philosophy' more generally. The most common modern account assumes that ethics is about the nature of moral judgements, and that the practical task of applied ethics is to tell us what to do when we face a decision we recognise as posing moral difficulties.[30] It is usual to identify two characteristic ways of approaching such decisions. One is in terms of the application of a set of rules which it is our moral duty to obey. This is 'deontology' and the most important modern deontologist is Kant. The other approach is 'consequentialist' and rests on the idea that we should make judgements essentially on the basis of an estimate of the effects of our actions—the most important modern consequentialist doctrine being utilitarianism. It is conventional to take utilitarianism and Kantianism as opposing positions, with some reason because they do quite frequently point in opposite directions. Yet they have in common a central concern to generalize, to establish criteria for moral judgment, to answer questions about what we should do, to establish general rules of conduct—a concern also present in both the *Requirement* and the notion of 'mutual respect'.

Modern proponents of virtue ethics have pointed out that this focus would have seemed surprising to the ethicists of the classical world. Their characteristic question was not 'what should we do'? but 'what kind of person ought we to be'?, or, in the classical formation 'how should one live'? From this perspective, the virtuous human being would know what to do when faced with a moral dilemma, not by reference to the consequences of his or her actions, or to a set of formal maxims, but by being the sort of person who would behave appropriately in such circumstances. Indeed, on some accounts, the only way of telling what the right thing to do would be is to see what a virtuous person would do, there being no other frame of reference by which what was right and wrong could be determined. Moral philosophy on this count is not a matter of teaching us directly how to take difficult moral decisions, but of teaching us how to develop the capacities (virtues) which will enable us to know how to take such decisions when we are required to do so.

How does this help? In two ways. In the first place, it may be possible to use the idea of the virtues to construct the kind of account of what it is to be human that would not be vulnerable to the charge of cultural imperialism. The 'virtues' are frames of mind which orient one towards characteristic human experiences. As Martha Nussbaum puts it (paraphrasing Aristotle):

> *Everyone* (emphasis added) has *some* attitude (emphasis in the original), and corresponding behaviour, towards her own death; her bodily appetites and their management; her property and its use; the distribution of social goods; telling the truth; being kind to others; cultivating a sense of play and delight, and so on. No matter where one lives one cannot escape these questions, so long as one is living a human life.[31]

Nussbaum is a classicist who became involved in these issues while working for the

[30] The following account draws on G. E. M Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 33 (1958), pp. 1–9.

[31] Martha Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', in M. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 245.

UN University on one of its development programmes.[32] Coming into this context from the outside she was horrified by the prevalence of arguments resting on a crude cultural and moral relativism. Her goal in trying to describe the shape of a human life is to provide a minimalist account of the circumstances under which human flourishing can occur. There may be—will be—many different ways in which human beings can live a human life, but there are limits to the acceptable range of differences. There are some kinds of lives that preclude human flourishing and which ought not to be accepted as fully human. The claim is that this position relies on an anthropology that is not simply the self-descriptions of one culture writ large—in short, that by approaching matters from this angle a meaningful account of 'human nature' may be reinstated in the face of the almost universal rejection of 'essentialism' by the social sciences in the twentieth century.[33]

An equally significant feature of the classical revival may be a shift back to a mode of thinking about ethical problems which follows Aristotle's dictum that 'sound moral judgment always respects the detailed circumstances of specific kinds of cases'. Stephen Toulmin suggests that 'modernity' involved forgetting this injunction.[34] He describes the ways in which, in the seventeenth century, the insights of renaissance humanism (drawn, of course, from the wisdom of the classical world) were put aside: formal logic displaced rhetoric, general principles and abstract axioms were privileged over particular cases and concrete diversity, and permanence was valued more highly than the transitory. It can well be argued that it has been the search for formal logic, general principles, abstract axioms and the permanent that has bedevilled so much of Western thinking about cultural diversity. In this respect, the *Requirement*, far from being a product of medievalist obscurantism, had proto-modernist features; the theologians who prepared it approached the moral dilemmas of conquest by attempting to lock both Indians and *conquistadors* into a set of logically related axioms. Such a strategy allowed all concerned to avoid looking too closely at the actual circumstances of the case—had they done so, the critique of de Montesinos could hardly have been disposed of with such ease. Similarly, making 'mutual respect' equate to demanding for others the way of life we value for ourselves is a good illustration of the kind of thinking to which Toulmin refers. For all the Foreign Secretary's contempt for philosophers who spend 'happy hours' muddying the waters over human rights, the categories he employs are clearly the product of 'theory-centered' rather than 'practical minded' thinking.[35] The real requirement in this, as in other areas of moral life, is that philosophers and politicians alike return to a focus on the particular, concrete, local details of everyday

[32] For a more extensive examination of her potential contribution to international political theory, see Chris Brown, 'Towards a NeoAristotelian Resolution of the Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Debate', in Jan-Stefan Fritz and Maria Lensu (eds.), *Value Pluralism, Normative Theory and International Relations: Essays from the 25th Anniversary Conference of 'Millennium'* (London: Macmillan, 2000) .

[33] Evolutionary psychology is also clearly (and controversially) moving in this direction; in the medium to long run it may turn out that at least some of the issues treated in this article as conceptual are actually empirical. Justine Burley (ed.), *The Genetic Revolution and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) is a pioneering collection here, while Steven Pinker *How the Mind Works* (London: Penguin Books, 1998) is a good popular introduction.

[34] Stephen Toulmin, C*osmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[35] Foreign Secretary's speech, 17 July 1997; Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, p. 34.

human affairs rather than spending too much time in the higher realms of abstract principle and general laws.

Conclusion

What this means in practice can only be answered by returning to cases. Consider first Samuel Huntington's account of the 'clash of civilizations'. The prevailing metaphor in that book is that there are physical 'fault-lines' between civilizations—that, for example, the clash of civilizations is already taking place in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnaya and Armenia, where Muslims and Christians are in conflict and thus the need is to establish general principles for coping with these fault-line conflicts, principles such as tolerance and coexistence. This tectonic notion of civilizations is simply not practically-minded. The clash of civilizations takes place everywhere because civilizations are not monolithic entities occupying ground, but systems of ideas which have always coexisted in time and space; indeed, the 'clash of civilizations' quite frequently takes place within particular individuals—the Cantonese patriot who wishes to see China whole again but who wants to preserve the benefits of civil society in Hong Kong, the militantly Islamic Afghan or Saudi woman who, nonetheless, has no wish to be excluded from public life, or for that matter the ordinary Westerner whose intellectual formation will draw on, often contradictory, Greek, Roman, and Germanic heritages.

The clash of civilizations is as likely to be found in the real, messy, world of contemporary urban politics, where intercultural politics are conducted by social workers, community leaders, trade union officials and policemen, as it is in the world of high politics or the seminar room, where the participants are diplomats, soldiers, intellectuals and theologians. In this real world, in Frankfurt or Bradford or Bombay, the will to reduce politics and morals to general rules will often be positively harmful. Returning to the examples which began this article, in each case the attempt to solve these particular problems by reference to the authority of general rules has been singularly unhelpful. The supporters of Salman Rushdie sometimes appeared to believe that his precarious position would be altered for the better if only Western governments could make a stirring enough defence of the principles of freedom of speech and be prepared to back up such rhetoric with effective sanctions against his persecutors—including the self-appointed Islamic leaders in Britain who called for the judgment against Rushdie to be carried out. On the contrary, it seems that what actually has caused the threat to Rushdie's life to diminish is the kind of unheroic diplomacy of detail and compromise neglected, or condemned in advance, by many of his supporters. Similarly, reading lessons to the Saudis or the Malaysian government about universal human rights is unlikely to create changes in the direction desired by the preachers. What is required in these cases is a shift towards a concern for rhetoric and context, and away from formal logic and abstract propositions. The need is for critics to find ways of expressing their views on these matters which do not belittle and demean the people to whom these views are addressed, and which play into the hands of those who seek accommodation rather than those who seek to heighten the tension. The *Vienna Declaration on Human Rights* of 1993 refers to the need to bear in mind 'the

significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds' when considering human rights. This formulation is often, and rightly, seen as undermining somewhat the universalism of the notion of human rights and opposed accordingly; perhaps, on the contrary, this is a positive move—in any event the sentiments expressed make sense and should be developed.

This may sound rather like advocacy of a policy of 'constructive engagement', which, all too often, has been—and even in an era of supposed 'mutual respect' still is—code for business as usual with oppressive regimes, a policy in which ministers and diplomats ensure that on their visits to countries such as Indonesia and the People's Republic of China they have at least one well-publicized exchange about human rights in between the real business of promoting trade. Rather, the need is for a genuine attempt to engage with other peoples and cultures via the development of modes of argument which do not pre-suppose the validity of a particular way of life but which explore the different ways there are to be human. This kind of constructive engagement cannot claim to be wholly neutral; the assignment of favourable connotations to notions such as 'accommodation', 'engagement' and 'dialogue' is clearly culturally loaded, and, partly for this reason, there will certainly be times when no engagement or dialogue is possible. Engagement must involve the exercise of judgment; if the obvious problems of moral relativism are to be avoided then some practices must be thought of as wrong and treated accordingly, irrespective of their grounding in a culture. Nonetheless, these apparently disruptive features of engagement need not pose problems as long the assumption of superiority evident in so much Western thinking, from the *Requirement* through to more recent mission statements, can be put aside.