

# Communication of ethics – across cultural boundaries

**Göran Collste**

Linköping University, Sweden

Diogenes

2022, Vol. 64(1–2) 11–14

Copyright © ICPHS 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/03921921221080805

[journals.sagepub.com/home/dio](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/dio)



## Abstract

Is it possible to communicate ethics across cultural borders? Not according to representatives of “the incommensurability thesis”, who claim that values and norms are culturally bounded. This article argues against this thesis. A first problem is that cultures and traditions are seen as comprehensive, delimited, and exclusive. Normally, however, a culture develops from and is in dialogue with other cultures. Further, the inner diversity of cultures and traditions opens the possibility of communication and shared understandings across cultural borders. Finally, the teaching and discussion of cross-cultural ethics provide practical evidence of the possibility of dialogue and mutual understanding.

\*

## Keywords

ethics, communication, culture, freedom, human rights, contextual values, Amartya Sen

There is an obvious need to communicate ethics across cultural boundaries in today’s globalised world. In the wake of globalisation, social practices such as politics, research, health care, information, communication and media, education, and business increasingly include actors from different parts of the globe. Ethics is of crucial importance for these practices and hence the question of how to communicate ethics becomes critical. Communication of ethics requires that ethical notions (i.e., norms, principles, values, ideals, virtues, etc.) used by a sender are understood by a receiver, but is such a shared understanding of ethics feasible?<sup>1</sup>

First, I will discuss an influential objection to the possibilities of cross-cultural communication of ethics that I will call the “incommensurability thesis”. According to this view, ethical notions are embedded in a culture, and to be able to fully understand their meanings, one has to know the culture from the inside. Cultures – or in the vocabulary of some authors: traditions, civilisations, paradigms, etc. – differ according to this view not only with respect to ethics but also with respect to rationality. Thus, to really understand the ethics of a culture, one has to be brought up within the culture and internalise its values and ways of reasoning, and in order for someone from the outside

---

## Corresponding author:

Göran Collste, Emeritus Professor of Applied Ethics, Linköping University, Sweden, SE-581 83, Sweden.

Email: [goran.collste@liu.se](mailto:goran.collste@liu.se)

to understand the culture, he or she has to go through the toilsome process of mastering the culture “as a second first language”, to quote philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1988: 394).

The incommensurability thesis is problematic. The first problem is that cultures and traditions are seen as comprehensive, delimited, and exclusive. Normally, however, a culture develops from and is in dialogue with other cultures. For example, early Christianity was influenced by both the Hebrew religion and Greek philosophy, early Islam by Judaism and Christianity. Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism have mutually influenced each other throughout their histories. Thus, a culture entails views from previous and contemporary traditions, and, therefore, within each tradition there is room for different and even conflicting moral views and values.

Seeing cultures as comprehensive entities also invites the use of stereotypes such as “Western values” and “Eastern values”. But obviously both the West and the East are sites for diverse ideologies and worldviews. For example, Catholicism, Protestantism, the Humanism of the Enlightenment, Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism all originate from the West, and Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism from the East. Within these ideologies and worldviews, one finds a variety of moral views. Consequently, cultures should be seen as open, changing, and porous. Indeed, within a culture there are conflicting views on moral issues, for example on justice and gender equality, and there are similar views on justice and gender equality between adherents of different traditions. The inner diversity of cultures and traditions opens up the possibility of communication and shared understandings across cultural borders.

I will illustrate this concept with an example borrowed from the Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen. Is freedom a typical Western value without relevance and foundation in other cultures, such as the Chinese and Japanese? In his book *Development as Freedom* (1999), Amartya Sen examines the relation between development and freedom. He argues that “substantive individual freedom” is the building bloc of social and economic development, and further that freedom is a universal value relevant in all parts of the world and internal to all major moral and cultural traditions. One may ask, however, is not individual freedom a Western, liberal notion? Does it really have any relevance in Asia? According to Sen, one can find authoritarian as well as liberal ideas in both the Eastern and the Western traditions. The respective founding fathers, Confucius and Plato, are examples of authoritarian heritages, but one can also find “components” of the comprehensive notion of political liberty in the different traditions. Individual freedom is indeed a value that is important in present day Western political and philosophical discourse. But it is not therefore a *unique* Western value. To illustrate his argument, Sen points to empirical examples from the history of Asian traditions (Sen, 1999: 231–248). Buddhism pays great attention to freedom and human choice. Islam is often seen as an anti-liberal and authoritarian religion, but there are historical examples of when Islamic rulers were guardians of freedom and tolerance. Hence, during certain historical periods totalitarian values are dominant, while during other periods freedom prevails in both East and West.

Categorizations of values according to geographical, cultural, or religious boundaries are based on the view that values are contextual in contrast to universal. What does it then mean that a value in this sense is contextual? There are several possible interpretations. It can mean that a value has its *origin* in a specific culture. Then the focus is on history. A value is seen as contextual in the sense that its origin can be traced to a specific cultural, religious, or philosophical tradition. For example, one could claim that the notion of human rights originates from the Enlightenment, with an historical background in the Hebrew-Christian view of man as the “image of God,” yet also hold that due to globalization, this is a historical fact with little relevance to the characterization of cultural value differences today. As a matter of fact, human rights is a global moral framework.

That values are contextual can also mean that different societies provide more or less *favourable cultural or political conditions* for the implementation of a value. For example, a value like

freedom may be easier to implement in a democratic society than in a totalitarian one. Lastly, it can mean that a value is *accepted* by a greater part of the population in one society than in another. Due to such factors as illiteracy and ignorance, a value that is widely supported in one society – say, informed consent as an important principle in health care and research – may not even be known by people in another society. Neither interpretation excludes the possibility of cross-cultural understanding of, and support for, similar values.

What, then, are the differences between the East and the West when it comes to ethics, values and morality? This question invites generalizations and clichés. A common answer is that the West puts an emphasis on individuality and autonomy. According to this view, the individual is taken as a point of departure for moral reasoning, and as a basic object of concern, normatively speaking, individual autonomy is highly esteemed. In contrast, the East emphasizes community and social values. There might be some empirical backing for these dichotomies. According to a value survey, Chinese respondents adhered to a larger extent to community values than respondents in the West (Matthews, 2000). However, these simplistic dichotomies must be modified. In the West there is a long tradition of communal thinking, for example, in Marxism and Social Democracy, and in the East – at present, for example, in Hong Kong – activists are struggling for human rights, which by nature apply to individuals.

Furthermore, from a normative point of view, the contrast between autonomy and community seems to be artificial. Why should the value of autonomy conflict with the value of community? Don't we have reason to value both – in the West as well as in the East? Autonomy is valuable because it gives the individual possibilities to realize his or her wishes, and community is valuable because it gives the individual security and social relations (Griffin, 2008).

A second common answer is that the ethical discourse in the West focuses on *criteria for a right action*, while the focus in the East is on how to be a *good person*, that is on virtue ethics. In the West, ethics is action-oriented and in the East virtue-oriented. However, virtue ethics has since Aristotle been one of the main ethical streams in the West, today represented by influential scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and theologian Stanley Hauerwas (1974). On the other hand, individual actions also play an important role in Eastern ethics. In Buddhism there is an emphasis on *both* individual acts – “individuals create themselves with their moral choices” (Keown, 2005), which leads to *karma* – and virtues.

When societies exist in isolation, they will develop their own moral standards. However, when there is interaction between individuals belonging to different societies and cultures, one can expect an interchange of moral norms and values. Since globalisation implies increased interaction between different societies and moral traditions, one could expect a convergence of moral standards towards universal values (Kukathas, 1994: 20). This view is also empirically validated by the global reach of human rights. As Xiarong Li argues: “...the globalization of the ideal of human rights remains an unpleasant fact for cultural relativists and moral sceptics who doubt the possibility of establishing the universal (cross-cultural) validity of human rights” (Li, 2006: 124).

In conclusion, I will add a personal remark. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating”! For many years I was Director of an international programme in Applied Ethics and for three years I taught ethics at the Harbin Institute of Technology in Northern China. I constantly communicated ethics to my students through lectures, seminars, and supervision, which would have been impossible if the incommensurability thesis were correct.

## Note

1. This essay is based on my introduction to Collste (2016).

## References

- Collste G ed. (2016) *Ethics and Communication: Global Perspectives*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Griffin J (2008) *On Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hauerwas S (1974) *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, Inc.
- Keown D (2005) *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kukathas C (1994) Explaining Moral Variety. In: Paul EF (ed) *Cultural Pluralism and Moral Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Li Xiaorong (2006) *Ethics, Human Rights and Culture: Beyond Relativism and Universalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- MacIntyre A (1981) *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.
- MacIntyre A (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London, Duckworth.
- Matthews BM (2000) The Chinese Value Survey: an interpretation of value scales and consideration of some preliminary results. *International Education Journal* 1(2): 117–126.
- Sen A (1999) *Development as Freedom*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.