Western and Eastern Principles and Globalised Bioethics

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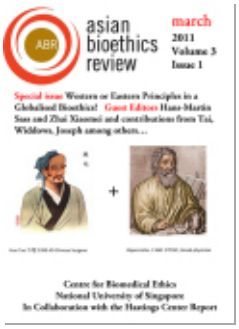

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ARTICLES

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The title of the original symposium from which this paper is derived, "Western or Eastern Principles in a Globalised Bioethics?", makes a number of assumptions. First, it suggests that there are recognisable "Western" and "Eastern" principles of bioethics which can be easily identified; second, it suggests that these principles are different and separate from each other; third, it suggests that whether or not a global bioethics exists depends on the way such principles can or cannot be connected.

This article will reject these assumptions as false. It argues that in fact there are not easily identifiable "Eastern" and "Western" principles of ethics which are mutually exclusive, nor are there ways of living based on these principles — which are fundamentally different from each other — which characterise lives in the "West" and the "East", respectively. It argues that to present "Western" and "Eastern" principles as fundamentally different not only misrepresents the various traditions of ethics which can be drawn upon, but it is also dangerous, in that it divides the world into what are effectively two types of persons, as if we were not all human beings. In addition, it wrongly places the emphasis of the debate in the abstract realm of whether principles are compatible rather than in the realm of practice, where global bioethics is actually developing and becoming a reality. The article argues that to focus on the theoretical debate is also dangerous as it allows the practice of global bioethics to develop without robust critique and analysis. To permit this makes it more likely that the global bioethics which emerges is not representative of either East or West. Therefore, what we should do is to shift the debate away from questions about whether bioethics is possible in terms of combining principles and instead focus directly on practically shaping the emerging global bioethics.

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Eastern and/or Western Principles

The first issue which will be explored is the nature of Eastern and Western principles of bioethics and the assumption that there are easily identifiable and distinguishable sets of "Western" and "Eastern" principles.[1]

I first addressed this issue in a 2007 article in *Bioethics* where I discussed moral neo-colonialism and the possibility of a global bioethics.[2] In it, I engaged with the Asian values movement and its rejection of any forms of global ethics, such as "human rights", as Western impositions and essentially forms of colonialism. The Asian values movement — associated originally with Malaysia and Singapore — has spread across Asia and Africa: in other words, this critique has been taken up and is identified with by scholars from all over the non-Western world.[3]

Asian Values

The roots of the Asian values movement are generally traced to Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister of Singapore, who, along with Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, are regarded as the founders of the Asian values movement. The Asian values movement argues that Western values (most particularly those implied in human rights and by rights and autonomy-based language) are alien to the values of Asian countries. These communities are said not to endorse Western individual values, but communitarian values, which support the political and religious order, are linked to business and government, and promote loyalty to the family and the wider community.[4] Lee attributed Singapore's speedy economic achievements to such Asian values which he presented in contrast to western individual rights. For instance, he stated that, "we were an Asian-Oriental-type society, hardworking, thrifty and disciplined, a people with Asian Values, strong family ties and responsibility for the extended family which is a common feature of Asian cultures, whether Chinese, Malay or Indian".[5] The Asian values movement denies the primary "Western rights" of liberty and instead claims to value communal values, such as hard work, thriftiness and individual discipline for family benefit. They reject "Western" individual rights, not only because they embody different values, but also on the grounds that Asian values are superior values. For instance, Mahathir has denounced individual Western values as being responsible for many aspects of community breakdown and the disintegration of society and solidarity. Accordingly, he stated that in the West, "the community has given way to the individual and his desires. The inevitable consequence has been the breakdown of established institutions and diminished respect for marriage, family values, elders, and important customs, conventions,

and traditions. These have been replaced by a new set of values based on the rejection of all that relates to spiritual faith and communal life".[6] Essentially, the Asian values movement claims that there are different "Eastern" and "Western" principles and values and they represent different and competing ways of life.[7]

The Asian values movement is contentious for many reasons and has been criticised by both internal and external critiques. Perhaps most ink is split over the political motivations and agendas of the proponents of Asian values. For instance, the proponents of Asian values have been criticised as simply wishing to ensure a placid, cooperative and hardworking population. And by some, the movement is presented as little more than a means to deflect accusations of human rights abuses and to support unjust authoritarian political systems. A little less critically, the promotion of Asian values has been critiqued as merely being a convenient way to promote economic and political social progress. Economist and political theorist Amartya Sen, in his 1997 lecture, "Human Rights and Asian Values", denied that authoritarian anti-human rights governments do in fact further such political and economic projects.[8] He also questioned the notion that there is a distinct set of Asian values that is in tension with human rights thinking. By contrast, he argued that respect for human rights is not a historically an exclusively Western concept: a view which fits well with the claim of this article.

However, whether or not the claims — that the Asian values movement provides the grounds for individual political agendas — are flawed, is irrelevant. Even if the motivations are flawed, ethicists still need to address the claim that "global" ethics and bioethics are not "global" but are really "Western" ethics and the attempts to impose them are forms of colonialism. In particular, the claim that human rights and Western concepts of ethics do not express universal values, but promote a particular Western view — an over-individualistic, liberal view — is worthy of consideration; not least because it echoes other criticisms which are made within the Western tradition, such as from Marxist and feminist perspectives. For example, the prioritising of civil and political rights over economic rights — and the focus first on liberties rather than the provision of basic goods — can be regarded as a perspective which fits the needs of more affluent Western nations best; those who benefit most from the maintenance of capitalism. By contrast, poorer and developing nations might believe that economic rights to basic subsistence should come before civil and political rights. Therefore, at the very least, we should not dismiss out-of-hand claims about the "Western" nature of global ethical systems. In this article then, the sole purpose of introducing the Asian values movement is to use it as a starting point for discussion on the supposed separation of "Eastern" and "Western" principles. As a statement of this position, the

Asian values movement is fairly representative of those who claim that global ethics is "Western" and not compatible with "Eastern" ethics.

Eastern and Western Moral Agents

Those who argue that Eastern and Western values and principles are fundamentally different, as the Asian values movement does and this discussion assumes, claim that the West endorses broadly individual moral values — autonomy, freedom and choice — and that the East endorses broadly communal values — respect for community, relationships, family and the "good life" rooted in community. Underlying these claims about different values and principles are hidden claims about the moral agents who exhibit these values: that not only are values different, but that this results in vastly different, indeed almost diametrically opposed, types of persons or moral agents. The "western" moral agent is an autonomous, isolated, free, choosing individual and the Asian moral agent is a connected, community-defined, relational being. Understood in this way, "western" and "eastern" individuals appear to be completely separate — as if they had nothing in common — not even humanity. Indeed, so different are these persons that they could almost be different species.

	Western — individual	**Eastern — communal**
Values	Autonomy, freedom, choice	Community, relationships, family
Persons	An autonomous, isolated, free, choosing individual	A connected, community-defined, relational being

This division is false, of course. Western individuals are not isolated beings making choices in a vacuum. To present human beings as making judgements outside their culture and background is to ignore the historically and socially constructed nature of human beings. The eastern picture is no better — that of an amalgamated creature, conjoined to relations and the family with no distinguishable personhood or identity. Such a person would be entirely passive and lack any sense of self, preference, decision-making and the ability to form relationships — again, not a realistic picture of a human being.

The outcome then of holding a view of separate and distinct "Eastern" and "Western" principles is that those who live in these communities are presented as being so different that it is hard to imagine they could all be human beings. Clearly, this is a ludicrous outcome and one which is not desirable for anyone in the global community. Nor, as our exploration of the pictures of moral agent

which this separation assumes, is it realistic. People are just not the way the polarisation suggests. Presenting the argument in this way shows the absurdity of the conclusion of arguing that "western" and "eastern" value systems are different and incompatible. Clearly, the diagram above which separates "eastern" and "western" agents should be absurd — even a straw man — however, the frequency of claims which insist on such differences means that this still needs to be brought out and argued against.

Instead of such polarisation, there is, at most, a spectrum of values with a tendency for some ethical systems to prioritise some values, and others to prioritise other values; and in terms of the diagram above, qualities should overlap. What is essential, is to recognise the dichotomy which arises from claims of difference and the necessity for all ethical systems, irrespective of whether "eastern" or "western" — if they wish to represent real human beings and their decisions — to take into account both the communal and individual aspects of human agency. Therefore, the answer to the questions posed by the discussion on whether or not Eastern and Western principles would be appropriate for a global bioethics is neither and both. What we need are human principles which represent the full moral experience and concerns of real human beings. All the values discussed above — autonomy, relationship, freedom and duty to family — are human values and essential if we are to understand properly moral persons: something which feminists have long emphasised in their focus on relational autonomy. "Relational autonomy" asserts that context and relationships are essential to any adequate understanding of autonomy. On the relational view, for a choice to be autonomous, it must take into account the pressures and commitments of real individuals, rather than present individuals as free and unencumbered.[9]

Misrepresenting Ethics

The suggestion that Eastern and Western principles can be effectively separated not only results in limited and unrealistic pictures of human beings and moral agents, but it also misrepresents traditions of ethics, values and principles. For instance, as already alluded to, (Western) feminist ethics is far from individualistic and feminists have criticised the individualism of Western ethics.[10] For instance, Carole Gould is a champion of human rights, but, like other feminist theorists, rejects the extreme individualism which characterises much liberal theory, especially rights theory. Gould, following many critics of liberal individualism, asserts the relationality and connectedness of human beings which militates against a conception of human beings as isolated, separate individuals. Thus, she supports a view of human beings as social and relational

beings, or in her words, "individuals-in-relations". In this view of "individuals-in-relation", the individualism of liberal theory is tempered as all activity includes recognition of others, their needs and the individual's relationship with them. Accordingly, while the focal agents of her model are "individuals", these individuals are not the autonomous, separate, moral loci of liberal individualism but are contextually-embedded beings who are relational and connected.[11] Moreover, feminists have also emphasised the importance of difference and promoted the values of social justice over individual choice; again showing solidarity with "non-Western" critics.[12] Suffice to say that almost all feminists (including liberal feminists) suggest that, at the very least, the over-individualist liberal (and feminists would argue male) model needs supplementing and reforming.

The mention of feminist ethics alone shows that "Western" systems are not always at the individualist end of the spectrum; indeed, to suggest this is to neglect much of the richness of Western ethics. However, feminist ethics is not the only example, and in the 2007 paper I wrote on this topic and used the work of virtue ethicists. Virtue ethicists are concerned with character rather than individual actions and they are particularly critical of ethical frameworks which focus on "individual choice". They focus on human flourishing understood in relational, historical and communal contexts and they critique over-individualist frameworks in a similar vein to Eastern critics.

The Dominant and Dominating Ethical Framework

The discussion above shows that it is false to think that there are separate and distinct principles of Eastern and Western ethics. Moreover, it shows that not to argue for a full spectrum of moral values is to fail to respect actual human beings and to account for their actual moral experience. However, sadly, to point out these fallacies and inaccuracies does not end the debate as the real crux of the debate is not here. Rather, the underlying concern of the debate is not really about principles and values and whether they are separate or whether they converge: instead, it is about which values will be dominant.

Often, the reason scholars and groups, such as the Asian values movement, oppose global frameworks is not because they actually believe that the values do not converge, or that there really are these wholly separate ethics, which completely different types of people live under. But rather, they fear that values which differ from the dominant individual framework of ethics will be eroded and even annihilated. Here, we return to the debate about moral neo-colonialism; and the term is appropriate. As discussed in more detail in the earlier paper, unlike traditional moral colonialism, moral neo-colonialism presents values not as superior, but as universal, not requiring conversion, but

recognition. However, this worry is not addressed by denying the possibility of global frameworks — as the claim that there are different and separate "Eastern" and "Western" principles of ethics does. To do this is merely to avoid the argument and to fail to argue for certain values to be represented in any global ethics. Only by engaging in the debate, and recognising that there are indeed shared values and that a global bioethics is emerging, is it possible to ensure that the bioethics which is dominant is not too far at one end of the spectrum. Only by shaping the resulting global ethical framework can concerns about neo-colonialism be addressed and met.

Global Bioethics Already Exists

To focus on whether or not there are shared principles is to miss the point and focus on the wrong area of debate. I argued in 2007 "that practical necessity is driving the creation of global ethics and thus the pertinent question is no longer 'Whether or not we should advocate global ethics?', but rather, 'What type of global ethics should we promote?'".[13] This seems to be far truer now than it was then.

We do not need to look very far to see that in fact global bioethics is already in existence. To give only a few examples: first, bioethical laws, norms and guidelines are already global — for instance, the Declaration of Helsinki and standards of best practice and the right to health. Second, medical research is international — in terms of its funding (pharma companies are multinationals), practically — research often happens across sites and approval has to be sought from a number of research committees, and the final products of research, goods and services are marketed globally. Third, intellectual property regimes are global. The controversy over the manufacture and sale of generic drugs in middle-income countries shows clearly that under TRIPS, the framework is undoubtedly global.

It is true that there are some areas where a global bioethics does not yet exist. However, in these areas, we might wish to argue that there are strong practical reasons for wishing to establish it. For example, to regulate the circumvention of local and regional laws by those rich enough to travel to jurisdictions where their chosen ends are not prohibited: think for instance of the black and grey market in organs or the practices of reproductive tourism.[14] Likewise, the interconnectedness of persons and the realities of modern travel means that health threats — such as SARS or swine flu — are global threats. Again, global protocols for responses to such threats are clearly valuable and essential and in the best interests of all those in the global community. As with so many contemporary global ethics issues — from climate change to terrorism — the only effective responses are global ones.

Given that global bioethics already exists and is continuing to expand and develop, and given that there are good reasons why we might wish to support it, to continue to focus on whether global values are possible and desirable runs the risk of neglecting the more important debate about what type of ethics global bioethics should be. If we fail to address this practical issue, we may end up with a global bioethics which is overly individualistic and does not take into account the rights, needs and interests of all global actors and stakeholders; with a global bioethics which is not as concerned as it should be for the relatively marginalised and powerless who constitute the majority of persons in the global community. The dominant individualist model will proliferate if it is not challenged in practice — not because of any great conspiracy — but simply because solutions will be found in an ad hoc manner, driven by practice. New models of ethics ***are*** emerging (for instance, group models are now prominent in genetic and population research), but more work is needed.[15]

Therefore, those such as the Asian values movement, who care about ensuring that cultural and minority values are preserved and perpetuated, should not argue that there are no shared values or principles. There clearly are, otherwise we could not practically develop shared norms and practices as the development of global bioethical codes and practices shows we are able to. Rather, they should focus on attempting to influence and shape global bioethics.

Conclusion

This article has argued that it is patently not the case that there are separable, distinct and recognisable Eastern and Western principles of ethics. It has done this by showing that to suggest this would lead to a false picture of moral agents — neither the Eastern nor the Western picture represents actual human begins. It also showed that there are ethical traditions within the Western tradition which have similarities with supposedly Eastern ethics, such as feminist and virtue approaches. It then argued that despite revealing the fallacies in these claims, this was not the end of the debate, as the underlying fear that some ways of life and the values these embodied would be eroded by an over-individualist ethic. It was suggested that this fear can only be addressed by engaging with the practical issue of what practices should form global bioethics. The article shows that there are rich and numerous resources, both Eastern and Western, which can be drawn on in order to create this ethic. Consequently, our focus should be on shaping and making global bioethics, not on arguing about whether or not it should exist. It does exist — and we are responsible for making it just.

Notes

1. It should go without saying that terms such as "Western", "non-Western", "Eastern", "Northern", "Southern", "Developed", "Developing" and so on are deeply problematic and to be regarded with caution. However, given the premise of this discussion polarises the debate in such a way (using "Eastern" and "Western"), they are perhaps necessary to use in this debate.
2. Widdows, H. (2007) Is Global Ethics Moral Neo-colonialism? An Investigation of the Issue in the Context of Bioethics, *Bioethics*, **21 (6)**, 305–15.
3. For instance, to China, where Confucianism has been seen as the source of such values and invoked "as the native cultural ground on which to reject human rights concepts as alien, culture-bound, Western impositions".
4. See Barr, M.D. (2002) *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War*, Routledge, London and New York; Bauer, J.R. and D.A. Bell (1999) *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
5. Yew cited in Barr, M.D. (2002) *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War*, 3. Lee Kuan Yew has continued to promote such a concept, and in his speeches as recently as 1998, he acclaimed the Asian values of hard work, sacrifice for the future, and the entrepreneurial spirit.
6. Mahathir cited in Barr, M.D. (2002) *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War*, 3.
7. For further details on how the Asian values movement has been received in the countries of its creation, see Muzaffar, C. (2002) *Rights, Religion and Reform: Enhancing Human Dignity through Spiritual and Moral Transformation*, Routledge, London; Teik, K.B. (2003) *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents*, Zed Books, London.
8. Sen, A. (1997) Human Rights and Asian Values (Sixteenth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture on Ethics & Foreign Policy). Available at http://www.cceia.org/resources/publications/morgenthau/254.html/_res/id=sa_File1/254_sen.pdf [accessed 15 September 2010].
9. Mackenzie, C. and N. Stoljar (2000) *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Automony, Agency, and the Social Self*, Oxford University Press Oxford.
10. Hampton, J. (1997) *Political Philosophy*, Westview Press, Boulder.
11. Gould, C. (1988) *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Gould, C. (2004) *Globalising Democracy and Human Rights,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
12. Young, I.M. (2009) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
13. Widdows, H. (2007) Is Global Ethics Moral Neo-colonialism? An Investigation of the Issue in the Context of Bioethics, *Bioethics*, **21 (6)**, 305–15.
14. Campbell, A.V. (2009) *The Body in Bioethics*, Routledge, Abingdon; Dickenson, D. (2008) *Body Shopping: The Economy Fuelled by Flesh and Blood*, One World, Oxford.
15. Widdows, H. and C. Mullen (2009), eds., *The Governance of Genetic Information: Who Decides?* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.