

Negotiating an ethic of place in a globalizing society

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Introduction

Globalization offers the possibility of both a danger and a promise. The dangers are often highlighted by critics who point out how sense of place is compromised by international socio-economic, technological and political pressures. What we might identify as the "leveling effect" of chains like "McDonald's" restaurants, who proudly offer identical designs and menus everywhere in the world, result in what German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1959, p. 38) described as nothing more than "a boundless etcetera of indifference and always-the-sameness." Such insensitive, universalizing globalizing pressures also often place local moral traditions at risk. Ramachandra Guha (1989) for instance, has argued persuasively that the ethics of consumerism and modernism may threaten regional identities and ultimately result in moral inequities in the development process.

Nevertheless, as with most things in life, globalization is not uniformly a dangerous phenomenon. Global communication technologies now make it possible to oversee dictators and tyrants as never before and, frankly, the parochial atrocities of insular communities deserve to be challenged by the authority of the international community.

It is true that globalization provides special challenges also when it comes to dealing with my own area of research – the area of ethics. When Europeans arrived on the shores of North America, they encountered a society of First Nations peoples who appeared very different in terms of their own cultures and moral traditions. Unfortunately, the colonization of the Americas resulted in large-scale devastation of local, First Nation identities. To some extent, globalization presents the same colonizing threats to regional communities today, as western scientific and technological paradigms help to advance an anthropocentric, economic ethic worldwide.

Here we discuss how globalization offers such a threat – but we also consider the possibility of a promise. There is the potential to ensure that essential ethical principles, themselves "global" in nature, may help to enhance "the good life" at the local level as well, as long as those principles emerge within an attitude of empathy and caring discernment of a fitting response to bioregional needs.

The paper is organized in three parts:

- the first part discusses some of the special challenges in assessing values, and introduces ethical reflection as a way of thinking that is essentially non-calculative;
- the second part describes some phenomenological and post-modern arguments that criticize "universalizing, essentializing" tendencies of traditional, ethical theories for threatening to compromise local cultural identity; and,
- the last part addresses some of the problems associated with these postmodern critiques and the alternatives that they generate. A compromise between metaphysical universalism and postmodern relativism is proposed that aims to respect both local sense of place, while also ensuring that some essential moral tenets are globally acknowledged.

The place of moral theory

The internationally renowned British philosopher, Bertrand Russell (1961, p. 14), once wrote that "ever since men became capable of free speculation, their actions, in innumerable important respects, have depended upon their theories as to the world and human life, as to what is good and what is evil. This is as true in the present day as at any former time." Certainly, ethics is not simply an academic discipline for the universities but, rather, our values help to define who we are. In that respect,

inasmuch as we are, we are, all of us, moral agents.

But how is it that we typically decide what is the *right* thing that we *ought* to do? According to a study by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), 90 percent of adult Americans believe that moral values are relative to, and even created by society. In other words, ethics emerges not as a bestowal of divinely authored principles but, rather, it is *people*, presumably through some form of deliberative process, who decide what is the meaning of right and wrong.

While this conclusion appears to be very liberal-minded and tolerant on the side of the American population, philosophers believe that the suggestion that the root of ethics emerges from societal norms and agreements, can be a dangerous one. Nazi Germany decided that the extermination of Jews was the right thing to do: in that case, can we really conclude that moral values are relative to each society? If a democratic vote in my Canadian classroom results in a decision to jack up the thermostat and utilize additional energy, rather than encourage each student to put on their sweaters, does that mean that this course of action is the *right* thing to do? If we place *society* and collective bargaining at the root of ethical discourse, morality certainly becomes relative to each such society but, in addition, we begin to sense that some “universal” principles of right and wrong may be compromised in the process. What *is* the case in such a form of collective decision making about ethics, that may be quite different from what *ought* to be the case.

This identification with the origin of ethics in a collective, democratic decision-making process results in some interesting discussions about how values and norms are to be measured and arithmetically quantified. Perhaps it is not at all strange that, in a world where economics reigns supreme, even moral judgments are sometimes seen to be based on calculative models. For instance, a study of peoples’ perceptions and values of a Canadian corner of the Great Lakes Ecosystem – Hamilton Harbour – was undertaken by surveying how much people were willing to pay to improve the health of the habitat. The value of the harbor was directly tied to peoples’ willingness to pay for its restoration.

A number of theorists believe that quantifying values in this way is necessary to substantiate ethical decision making. The problem with tying ethics to peoples’ willingness-to-pay emerges, however, if one considers the following example. I often ask my class to imagine how much they would be willing to pay for an ice cream sundae. I then ask them to consider the possibility that there is a diabetic woman in the room and she is willing to pay \$10 more than anyone else. Even though she clearly *values* the ice cream sundae and confirms that value in terms of her willingness to pay for it, we are left with the question: *ought* she eat it? Presumably, if she is a diabetic, it would be a wrong thing to do.

The example shows that there is a categorical difference between what this woman *is* willing to pay because she values it, and what she *ought* to pay (i.e. nothing at all!) Mark Sagoff is a philosopher who recognizes that there is a difference between wants and preferences, on the one hand, and values on the other: what the diabetic woman *wants* and is willing to pay is distinct from what she *ought* to do. Willingness-to-pay and morality are different in kind: in Sagoff’s words, segregation of blacks and whites in the United States will always remain a “national curse and the fact that we are willing to pay for it does not make it better but only makes us worse” (SAGOFF, 1994, p. 449).

The point is here that ethics – deciding what we *ought* to do – involves more than surveying what it is that people want or how much money they wish to dedicate to satisfying those preferences. Questions of morality involve a different set of parameters than either arithmetical quantification or even of democratic polling of peoples’ beliefs provide. Ethics by collective agreement may well end up as nothing more than what Erazim

Kohak (1984, p. 35) describes to be “knavery and folly, now sanctioned by the consensus of consenting adults.”

Recognizing this risk is only the beginning however. If morality requires a different set of reasoning skills than the calculative, the challenge for philosophers since the time of Plato has been to decide what those skills consist of. For many, the challenge has been to develop sound theories with a universal, rational basis that can serve as tools for analyzing moral issues. Some philosophers have argued for utilitarian principles: to enforce the “greatest good for the greatest number” has been the goal in those systems of thought that define moral decisions in terms of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Deontologists, on the other hand, have attempted to delineate rules and basic rights and, in some cases, corresponding duties that constitute the core of ethical behavior. For centuries, philosophers have attempted to articulate sound, ethical theories with corresponding rules and principles that are to guide moral decision making.

The problem, of course, is that there is today no consensus on the nature of these rules and principles. Rules are either so abstract – “thou shalt not kill,” for example – as to be unhelpful in dealing with genuine ethical dilemmas: in this case, the general principle does not solve the problems associated with complex dilemmas concerning the morality of abortion, mercy killing or even of eating animals. In other cases, specific rules appear to be dogmatic and unresponsive to the nuances of individual cases: I can believe, “in principle,” that mercy killing is wrong until I am actually at the bedside of a pain-ridden, paralyzed senior, enjoying no quality of life or hope of recovery. My principles may well become compromised because of the direct experiential knowledge that develops in one particular circumstance.

And that is precisely the problem faced by ethical deliberation today. On the one hand, we feel that ethics is not economics and, therefore, requires a different kind of analysis and reflection. On the other hand, one hopes that ethics consists of more than merely collective opinions and preferences – but universal ethical theories that hope to apply universal moral principles to decision making turn out to be elusive. It is precisely this difficulty of defining globally-relevant ethical principles and rules that opens up the door to the postmodern critique of traditional, modernist approaches to ethics.

The postmodern critique

In his novel *Immortality*, Milan Kundera (1990, p. 4) describes a central character who was “not in the habit of giving money to beggars. She passed them by and, though they were only a few feet away, she did not see them. She suffered from the defect of spiritual farsightedness.” The discipline of ethics, as it has evolved in the western philosophical tradition, has come to be a dry, abstract affair, very much suffering from a similar “defect of spiritual farsightedness.” Instead of engaging in the complex, often chaotic world of lived experience, philosophers have remained within the confines of theoretical speculation, endlessly arguing amongst themselves and disagreeing as to what is the right set of universal, rational principles to guide moral reflection.

Postmodern philosophers have emerged as some of the most outspoken critics of what some call the universalizing “modernist essentialism and totalization” of the field of western ethics (CHENEY, 1993, p. 87). These critics charge that traditional, Eurocentric and North American approaches to moral theory that have aimed to develop universal truths, applicable across all cultures, have sacrificed genuine awareness of local meaning in favor of a neat, logical system of rules and principles. Utilitarians argue for the need to maximize the overall good – but how one defines the good of a forest will be very different, depending up-

on where one is historically and culturally situated. For the lumber company, the greatest good will mean the greatest profit. For the First Nations people living on the land, the greatest good will mean preserving the ecosystem and disrupting it in minimal ways, since the Earth is Mother and they see themselves as part of the broader community of creation.

In fact, it is precisely these different *stories* that should be the foundation of an environmental ethic, according to some critics of modernism. Holmes Rolson III writes: "An environmental ethic does not want to abstract out universals, if such there be, from all this drama of life, formulating some set of duties, applicable across the whole ... If a holistic ethic is really to incorporate the whole story, it must systematically embed itself in historical eventfulness. Else it will not really be objective. It will not be appropriate, well adapted, for the way humans actually fit into their niches" (cited in CHENEY, 1990, p. 86).

What is fascinating to me about this approach to ethics is that it recognizes that those theories that aim to capture the whole story in some kind of objective, globally-applicable speculative net, often disregard the significance of local traditions and cultures. In that sense, the very meaning of ethics as a guide to appropriate behavior, becomes compromised if *difference* across cultures and historical traditions is placed at risk, in favor of a nicely ordered, logical system that remains aloof from local worldviews.

In this respect, Cheney and others urge us to consider ethics as a dialogical process, rather than a static inventory of globally-valid rules. The challenge, according to Cheney, is to "tell the best stories we can. The tales we tell of our communities' 'storied residence' in place are tales not of universal but of local, bioregional truth." In such a scenario, the task for moral reflection is no longer one of constructing logical systems and rules to follow in any and all situations but, on the contrary, ethics becomes "contextualistic and narrative," aiming to elicit an appropriate, bioregional ethic of place through an "ethical vernacular" that reveals local truths (CHENEY, 1993, p. 89).

There is much to applaud, in my view, in such an understanding of the meaning of ethical reflection. The most important accomplishment of this turn is the recognition that morality demands more than totalizing logical abstraction but, instead, requires an empathy and openness to different cultures, local traditions and unique, human experiences. I am amused and, at the same time, concerned when government agencies increasingly turn to philosophers to provide their "expert opinion" on controversial issues of medical or environmental ethics. My concern emerges simply in those cases where it is assumed that ethics is an objective, mathematical process, no different than cost benefit analysis, and that philosophers have all the answers. After centuries of philosophical debate, ethicists have not developed a universal moral theory applicable across the globe – but then again, neither have medical doctors developed universal consensus on how to treat cancer, nor have scientists been able to agree on the details of global climate change. Life is a messy affair – and the postmodern approach to ethics recognizes this fact, by acknowledging that how we decide on what we *ought* to do has less to do with abstract speculation of universal principles and more to do with acknowledging local identities and cultural meanings.

Having said that, I do see the potential for slipping into a moral pluralism, where ethics becomes no more than a narrative collection of "stories." Certainly, local communities have different moral standards, based upon different cultural traditions. However, the question presents itself: how do we decide which are the *better* stories? I watched as nationalistic pride became publicly revered and respected as a moral tenet of the former Yugoslavia. Serbs, Croats and Bosnians each had "their stories" to tell, based upon apparently different traditions. As a Canadian, proud of my country's multicultural diversity and tolerance as

ethical ideals, my "story" made me unsympathetic to any nationalistic fervor. Whose story is more "right"? – the Croat, who defined to me that all Serbs are morally evil? – my Canadian friends, who are not particularly patriotic but, at the same time, are tolerant of multi-cultural diversity? How do we decide which story is more ethically justified?

Postmodern perspectives on ethics certainly result in a respect for local identity – but they risk succumbing to relativism and skepticism, when moral truth is defined simply as relative to particular "stories." The rapist or murderer have their own stories too, but I doubt that many of us would be tolerant enough to deem those stories to be as ethically relevant as the experiences of their victims.

Toward a phenomenological ethic of place

Certainly, local stories matter. The Serbs, the Croats and the Bosnians each did have their own perspectives on what matters in life. Resolving their conflicts means being receptive to those perspectives, if only to begin to understand them and appreciate how they define a sense of place and values central to each local culture.

That being said, we nevertheless also support, as a global community, the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, for example. The United States Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776) declares that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Such declarations are meant to be universally valid – and certainly, they express strong moral convictions that seem justifiable across local traditions.

But then, despite these noble aims, spend a moment to attend to the language of the Declaration of Independence: all *men* are created equal? The patriarchal basis of American Society in the 18th century becomes evident – which brings me to my point: there seems to be good reason to try to establish *some* universal, globally-acceptable guidelines for behavior, as long as we continue to remain attuned to underlying implicit assumptions, paradigms and values.

My sense is that *not* all stories are created equal. Moreover, I believe that some globally acceptable parameters should be established, in order to help us assess the validity of local traditions. The question becomes: how do we enable such a balancing act between universally-acknowledged, global ethical parameters and legitimate, local stories?

These are big questions but perhaps I can begin to scratch the surface of a solution, by focusing on a case study that explored peoples' values and perceptions of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail, a 600-km long walking and biking trail that runs along the north shore of the lake between Niagara and Brockville. A report on this project, published in *Ekistics* (LEMAN STEFANOVIC, 2002), describes in more detail the strong sense of place and attachment to the water. People show a high degree of identity with the trail, which runs through 177 natural areas, 143 parks and 27 cities. Many of the people interviewed (adults and children) expressed a passion for the water's edge. One person described how "the water seizes my heart...It pulls the stresses away from you somehow. You just sit there and they fall away..." Because of this strong emotional and aesthetic attachment to the waterfront itself, residents expressed disappointment when portions of the trail left the water's edge, leaving them with less direct visual and experiential access to the lake. In some areas in particular, hikers expressed a strong sense of *moral indignation* and a feeling of *injustice* when the trail left the lakefront to accommodate private residential communities. On one section

of the trail, one is forced to leave the water's edge along an old, inhospitable highway, to traverse Wilmot Creek: a private, gated community (rare in Canada) where senior citizens prohibit hikers and bikers from passing through their neighborhood. One hiker who had traveled the trail from one end to the other lamented:

Hiker: What can we do about Wilmot Creek? They won't let you go through!

Interviewer: It looks like a big detour on the map.

Hiker: And it is. You go all the way up to Newcastle and it's a real pain in the neck when all we want to do is just pass through. They've got the guards and ... nobody is going to disturb the Wilmot Creek residents!

Similar complaints arose when the trail was diverted from the lakefront in deference to large tracts of millionaires' mansions. In such cases, the *stories* that we collected during our interviews revealed a strong sense of *ethical injustice*. To be sure, different narratives would have emerged, had we interviewed the residents of Wilmot Creek or the millionaires whose properties hugged the waterfront. I contend, however, that all groups would have argued on what they perceived to be *universal principles of justice*. How each group specifically defined the nature of the just act will have differed, but there must be an understanding of the very notion of justice that is the condition of the interpretive moment and of dialogue.

From the phenomenological viewpoint, my interest is to work towards both

- acknowledging and hearing the different ethical stories and experiences of place; and,
- uncovering taken for granted interpretations of universally acknowledged foundational notions, such as, in this case, the principle of justice.

The aim is not to construct a universally applicable theory of justice. On the contrary, since communication about the notion of justice is possible on some levels, the phenomenological goal would be to attempt to articulate the various meanings of such a notion, in order to ultimately identify converging and diverging interpretations. The eventual hope would be to encourage dialogue and mutual understanding, as well as to better articulate what we mean when we speak of notions of justice, for example, and that we do so, intending that that notion is applicable globally.

What sort of guidelines might be presented in order to facilitate this process of eliciting such an ethic of place? Let me suggest the following:

● **Learn to listen.** In interviewing people on our Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail project, special care was taken to invite uninterrupted reflection on behalf of our participants. Western society has, in many respects, forgotten how to genuinely and empathetically listen to others. Kohak (1984, p. 35) reminds us that "when two or three are gathered together, they seldom have the patience of letting be, of listening and seeing. All too eager to speak, they constitute, in their consensus, a conventional image which they interpose between themselves and the living world around them." Learning to listen to one another, and also learning to be open to other elements of local sense of place, become critical starting points.

In the case of the conflict around Wilmot Creek, it is important that not only the residents and hikers seek to understand one another's stories. It is also important that the universal draw of the water itself be included in these dialogues. Kohak (1984, p. 70) points out that "in our ordinary usage, the word *moral* has been reduced to triviality. For most speakers, it indicates little more than a conformity to a set of social conventions or mores." He urges us to recall that "the order of nature is also an order of value" (KOHAK, 1984, p. 71). When we listen to the stories of

Wilmot Creek residents and visitors, we must also listen carefully to the instruction that emerges from something like the infinite draw of the water's edge.

In addition, it is important to *listen to all stories*. Typically, decision making proceeds on the strength of the voices of power. Minorities, lower income groups, women, children and non-human interests are frequently ignored when decision making occurs. Throw the net wide: be flexible and push the limits of understanding.

● **Attend to your own prejudices.** Universally applicable, "objective" truths are rare, if they occur at all, within the field of ethics. We are all historically embedded and, to that extent, reflect our local worldviews, as well as our spatial and temporal traditions. A common paradigm underlying Western approaches to ethics lies in its anthropocentrism. We often tend to think that the world is there, primarily for our own, human purposes. I am reminded of a thinker who pointed out that, with the death of all fungus on the earth, the planet would die – but with the death of all humans, the planet would survive, perhaps in greater health. This biological priority of fungus over human life for the health of the planet is difficult to genuinely comprehend from an anthropocentric perspective.

● **Identify inconsistencies among conflicting positions and try to resolve them, recognizing that reason means more than mathematical logic.** To think about ethical issues carefully is to do more than moral arithmetic. Certainly, we should seek to avoid obvious contradictions in reasoning but we should also recall that to be rational is also to ensure that intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and ontological concerns are a part of such reasoning. Private property owners have every legal right to prevent trespassers on their property. However, preventing one's privacy in a highly urbanized setting may mean that some accommodation should be made for hikers and bikers to move through Wilmot Creek quickly, perhaps with some form of identification, so that there is minimal disruption to local residents and hikers are not required to take such a difficult detour around the community.

● **Identify areas of convergence, and build on those areas toward a fitting response:** Defining a "fitting response" is rarely easy, particularly in areas of conflict. One thing seems certain to me: articulating such a response means more than the arbitrary accumulation of subjective opinions, and it means more than finding the right answer purely as an objective slate of moral givens. Ethics reverberates in a space between subjective invention and objective fact.

The task for ethical reflection is to ensure that local voices are heard and that a local sense of place, revealed through bioregional ecosystem needs and landscapes, as well as historical traditions – all come together in decision making. At the same time, however, an ethic of place will be responsive as well to international voices and planetary concerns.

● **Recognize that ethics is an evolving process.** My experience has been that westerners often act as if they have a recipe for deciding what is the "right thing to do" when it comes to issues of development around the world. Postmodern theorists remind us that local stories must factor into ethical decision making practices. But plural stories, balanced with international interests, demand that the process of developing an ethic is a temporal one: the "right thing to do" is never available on an objective template but it will require time (and sometimes mistakes along the way) as we build towards a moral order.

In an era of globalization, it is time to recall that values are deeply embedded in local cultures, traditions and landscapes. Any ethic that refuses to recognize this fact risks suffering from the "defect of spiritual farsightedness." At the same time, in evaluating plural cultural and moral perspectives, one must recognize that local traditions which remain insulated from global di-

dialogue risk becoming short-sighted and introverted. Achieving a balance between local identity and the broad diversity of possibilities that arise through global perspectives should help to ensure that ethical dialogue respects difference while aiming, at the same time, to move international dialogue forward on important moral matters that concern us all, inasmuch as we are all humans on planet earth.

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