



The Serious Problems, for Science and Education, of Moral ‘Universals’

Helen Haste

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 7th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 3th – Saturday 5th January 2019.

These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author’s prior permission.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



The Serious Problems, for Science and Education, of Moral ‘Universals’

Helen Haste

University of Bath, UK

Helhaste@aol.com

I will argue that the pursuit of a culturally transferable model of ‘character education’ is probably scientifically unsound and certainly in grave danger of being politically inept. On both grounds, it is likely to be unsuccessful. How might we remedy the problems?

There is a fundamental tension in dialogues between philosophy and the social sciences that underpin education – psychology, sociology, anthropology. This is about *prescription* and, or versus, *description*. It is a version of the age-old problem of ‘ought’ and ‘is’. We try to devise a set of universal ethical principles which serve what we perceive to be universal human wellbeing, whether individual, or societal – social order, social capital, the macro conditions that promote flourishing. Inevitably these are ‘oughts’ and imply prescription. There are acceptable criteria in philosophy and in social science for drawing up, and drawing upon, such universal principles. There are historical traditions in all cultures and religions for doing just this kind of ‘ought-building’; it can be very enjoyable....

However in any attempt to translate this we trip immediately over an ‘is’. This is the actual reality of how different cultures – indeed subcultures – fashion the norms and sanctions, the hierarchy of values or even what values are recognised as ‘valid’. This is the reality of human ethical functioning; we cannot ignore it if we wish to be effective as educators – let alone the ancillary question of the extent to which we may be guilty of ethical imperialism.

Some questions emerge:

1. Can we establish a truly common set of virtue terms across cultures?
2. Can we assume, or establish, the ways in which these terms are prioritised within different cultures?
3. Can we assume/how can we establish that the virtue or value term has the same meaning, or implication for action, or the same assumptions about the purpose and function of the value?
4. Can we assume/how can we establish assumptions (even within a culture) about developmental processes (which are crucial to formulating educational programmes); how virtues and values

are acquired, how such models influence educational programmes – privileging an emphasis on self-regulation or creative discovery, hierarchical authority or collaborative exploration and dialogue, justice, care, community, sanctity?

5. Do such models focus on promoting moral reasoning skills (post-Kantian), the developmental of habits (Aristotelian), or the nurturing of emotions (post-Hume etc)? Each of these psycho-social models have vastly different implications – sometimes conflicting – for education practice.

The evidence for various forms of ‘is’ indicates diversity and the dangers of a superficial apparently overarching approach that both distorts and would be ineffective – or dissolve into conflict. International bodies who try to develop a ‘universal’ model find themselves mired in misunderstanding and confusion, primarily because different cultural groups feel that others do not begin to recognise different perspectives. This is about *pluralism not relativism*; if we do not start by asking where people are coming from, what perspectives underpin their ethical system, we cannot begin to move to a position where there might be commonality. In fact most cultures are quite pluralistic, manifesting several parallel ‘ethics’ or value patterns. Recognising such pluralism is vital for understanding cultural diversity and avoiding the dangers of seeking either universal values or a simple cross-cultural consensus.

Some examples: I will develop these in my presentation:

1. The same value term has the different meaning or implications in different cultural contexts. ‘Respect for elders’ which is widely valued, has very different implications for actions, relationships and mutual obligations in Asian societies from many Western cultures. ‘Freedom’ is widely valued, but is applied to different issues by the political Left and Right
2. Shweder’s work, identified three coexisting different ethics; *autonomy, community and divinity (sanctity)*. The ethic of autonomy prioritizes individual choice and self-determination. The ethic of community emphasises one’s relationship with the community and the need to place community needs above individual needs. The ethic of divinity or sanctity defines actions and objects in terms of pollution, taboo or observance of religious codes. Shweder’s respondents were highly skilled in knowing to which terrains of life each ethic was applicable.
3. One example of potential pitfalls is Kohlberg’s theory of moral development which rested, in the Kantian tradition, on both the universalisability of principles and a core ethic of justice. It increasingly emerged from international studies that in other, non-Western, countries justice was not the dominant ethic but, for example, filial piety or honour. Later research also showed that an ethic of care and responsibility coexists in American culture with an ethic of justice.
4. Another example comes from China where values are in transition. Since 1989 there has been an explicit policy to create a more individualistic, entrepreneurial values culture, in order to stimulate economic development. China’s cultural values have traditionally emphasized the maintenance of community and the obligations of individuals towards this. Chinese young people express strong morally-charged motivation to maintain the social harmony of their

classroom and the community in general. The value of autonomy is interesting; in Western culture autonomy is associated with individual striving for self-determination and achievement. In current Chinese society autonomy is valued, but explicitly the individual should be *autonomously* motivated to best use his or her talents for the benefit of China's growth.

5. A study by Seana Moran demonstrates the importance of considering cultural differences in how an apparently 'universal' concept is understood, and what are its implications. 'Purpose' as defined by William Damon incorporates four dimensions of personal meaning, intention, engagement, and having an effect on the wider social good. It is an important aspect of values and goals for well-being. In a six nation study with over 3000 participants, with additional material from four other nations, Moran found ten distinct versions of 'purpose':

In the US, purpose means 'life purpose'. In Spain, it means 'objective'. In China, it means 'ideal life'. In Brazil, it means 'life project'. In Finland, it means 'hopeful future'. In Korea, it means 'ultimate achievement'. In South Africa, it includes 'life calling' and also collective responsibility. In Iran, it means moving towards God. In Thailand it means good prospects and opportunities. In Japan it means future life perspective and the moral virtue of sustaining social harmony.