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Intercultural Information Ethics

'Culture' have become a catchword in many circles today. Many years ago Huntington argued for a "clash of civilizations" where cultural and religious domains of the world are replacing ideological camps as the main factor in global conflicts (Huntington, 1996). Instead of the ideological camps of the free capitalist states and the Soviet blocks, Huntington sees the world to be effected by deep seated differences stemming not from ideologies which both stem from the same cultural source (namely the European West), but from age-old cultural and religious sources dating back millennia, The clash between the Islamic states and the West presents a clear illustration of Huntington's point. Religion has become the key element driving violent conflicts and struggles.

There are many criticisms of Huntington's view. One of them concerns the nature of the conflict itself. Instead of the purely religious conflicts that took place many centuries ago in the Crusades, conflicts (especially those between the Islamic world and the secular, liberal West) in our contemporary world take on the nature of globalization, and there are many more factors involved in the conflicts beyond only religious matters. This does not mean that religious faith is not a factor, but in order to understand the complexities of the conflicts many more factors are involved. Another criticism is that Huntington divides the cultures or civilizations into a number of neat geographical areas. This might be fine at first when we start out trying to understand the global and cultural regions of the world and how they interact, but as we shall see, when we really look deeper into the matter, we find that there can be as much difference within these geographical regions themselves as there is among the separate regions.

In any case, however, Huntington shows us that cultural differences can be crucially important in fully understanding the world today. Perhaps the clearest mark distinguishing the Crusades of old and the religious conflicts today is the effect of globalization and modernity which is saturated with technology. It is this factor that makes the conflicts today much more complicated and multifaceted than those in the past. Information technology saturates our lives today; it is used not only in battlefields but everywhere else in our lives—in our homes, our workplaces, our entertainment venues. Mobile phones are being merged with computers and both of them with the Internet. News and information travels around the world in huge quantity that boggles the imagination and all of this at the speed of light (even though some users naturally complain of the slowness of their individual connections). And when news and information travels around the world, it encounters differences among cultures and traditions.

Here, then, is perhaps another dimension of Huntington's clash of civilizations. Instead of the armed conflicts, the clashes also take on the form of incongruencies that arise when news and information from one cultural domain travels to another. These can take place in several dimensions. One important dimension is an ethical one. The news and information that travels around the globe carries with it sets of values and justificatory systems behind those values originating in one area of the world but may not be the same in others. When the Internet first came to Thailand, many were shocked by the level of openness and freedom that existed in the online world. However, Thai people in general saw the great potential that the Internet brought to the country in terms of instant connectivity and fast flowing information and so on. So they gradually adopted the Internet and at the same time became rather cautious when it came to the kind of information that appeared to threaten the existing value systems. Even today, after the Internet has been introduced to Thailand for almost twenty years, the conflict between traditional value systems and the openness and freedom still remains and in fact has become more serious as the traditionalists who want to hold on to old values are fighting with tooth and nail to keep the traditional picture of what they think Thailand should be.

This issue represents on the key areas within intercultural information ethics: How can one justifiably maintain the value system belonging to one culture when it is juxtaposed with another system coming from another culture? The Thai people who want to keep their traditional values (such as the belief in a hierarchical society based on ranks) are arguing that they are maintaining their cultural identity. Not doing so would mean that the identity of being Thai will be obliterated by the influx of foreign ideas and values. The hierarchical society is not as bad as the Western liberals might think, so they argue, because in this society those who are ranked higher have the duty to take care of or to provide for the less fortunate, while the less fortunate have the reciprocal duty to recognize the higher rank and thus perpetuating

the system. This is better than the Western liberal society where everybody is fully equal since nobody there is obligated to take care of anybody else, which results ultimately in nobody being obligated to take care of others at all. We may of course agree or disagree with this argument, but this is the gist of intercultural information ethics.

Theoretically, the main area of discussion and debate within intercultural information ethics centers around the age-old philosophical problem of universalism and particularism. The sets of ideas promoting Western style of individualism are predicated upon the more foundational belief that these ideas are universal in nature. It does not make much sense to promote autonomy and liberty of individuals if these individuals are restricted only to a few groups (such as the European whites), because that would totally defeat what these ideas stand for. On the other hand, those arguing for the traditional hierarchical society ideas presumably also believe that their ideas are universal. That is, they believe that there is something wrong with the Western view of atomic individualism, and what makes it wrong is valid not only in Thailand, Japan or China, but it is valid everywhere for every culture. But if this is the case, then the point of debate is not the metatheoretical one of universalism versus particularism, but a first-order one of which value system is better than the other. It is this more down to earth, first-order kind of debate that apparently takes place not only among academic circles, but among practitioners and lay people who encounter these intercultural problems in their daily lives.

This does not necessarily mean that arguments for the particularist or relativist positions have no place. But it means, I believe, that debates aiming to justify positions of the more particularist persuasions are too theoretical to be of much use for practitioners in information ethics who need guidelines on how to proceed in these matters. It does not make much sense to set up a guideline saying that value systems are relative to contexts, because those needing the guideline would want to know how to act, which requires that the guideline provide *content* of how to act in certain situations rather than arguments purporting to show whether any content in the abstract is universalist or particularist (or relativist).

To take a rather concrete example in information ethics, privacy is a perennially interesting issue. Arguments justifying privacy usually proceeds through relying on the view that the individual person deserves respect and autonomy. And privacy figures in as a necessary ingredient of the respect and the autonomy in question. Privacy of individual citizens need to be protected because they *are* individual, autonomous persons. But that is not the only way to justify privacy. There is another way, which is more consequentialist, and this kind of argument looks at privacy as a necessary factor in bringing about or in maintaining a certain way of living together that is desirable. This kind of argument does not rely on metaphysical assumptions about the individual (that the individual possesses autonomy, and so on), but is more practical in the sense that if privacy is efficacious in bringing about desired goals, then it is justified.

Furthermore, when the set of ideas surrounding Western conception of privacy in information ethics enters a foreign cultural domain, such as one in Asia, there arise several problems and tensions as reported in many research works in the literature (See, e.g., Ess, 2005 and Capurro, Frühbauer, and Hausmanninger, 2007). However, what exactly is at issue, what exactly is the root cause of the tension, is not so much on the content of privacy guidelines in themselves (that much is actually agreed on by both parties), but on the view that privacy is to be justified through reliance upon the atomic and autonomous individual. Practitioners in information ethics in the East would not object to the first-order guidelines regarding privacy (such as the privacy of the individual needs to be protected against unwarranted intrusion by the state or the third party, for example), but they object to the view that privacy is part and parcel of the Western view of the individual. They see the value of privacy protection, because after all they are living in the same globalized world as do people in the West, but they object to the view that, in order to accept privacy guidelines one has to adopt the Western view of the individual. There are other ways of justifying privacy without relying on the atomic, autonomous individual, ways which accord more to the traditional ways of life and belief of cultures in the East.

However, this does not mean that debates focusing on universalism and particularism does not have a place in the discussion on intercultural information ethics. Karsten Weber, whose paper appears in this issue, argues that one should focus on the philosophical and normative aspect of information ethics rather than just showing how other cultures think and believe (Weber, this

issue). This is perfectly all right. Nonetheless, discussion on ethical matters also need some substance, some background information on which the discussion and the deliberation proceed. For example, we learn a lot when scholars such as Pirongrong Ramasoota (2007) and Lü Yao-Huai (2005) show us how people in Thai and Chinese cultures, respectively, react to privacy issues coming from the West and how the go back toward their own cultural roots in order to formulate a kind response which is both true to the roots themselves and at the same time able to meet the challenges arising from information technology and globalization. It is true that ethics is a normative discipline, but how to come up with answers to normative questions differs. By insisting that ethics be a normative discipline, one does not have to subscribe to a system proposed by one philosopher or one philosophical tradition. For instance, to insist that discussions on intercultural information ethics be normative does not mean that one has to subscribe to Kantian ethics. One can certainly proceed with normative enterprise in ethics, finding out what one *should* do in certain situations, without believing any of the foundational premises of Kantian ethics. One can find out what one should do through look over one's shoulder, so to speak, and see what others in different regions of the world are doing. Then one can compare those practices with what one has been doing in order to find out whether one's own current practice is worth carrying on or not. It is true that simply doing this without any further elaboration or deliberation would not, strictly speaking, be a philosophical enterprise, since all that this involves is nothing more than comparing practices. But one can come up with a system of thought that justifies one's own decision, and it is this system that constitutes philosophical result and activity. For example, one can use the example one obtained from observing other cultures as a starting point, an input, toward a construction of criticisms of the system of thought underlying one's own current practice in order to reform that practice in case one finds it to be unsatisfactory.

If that can be the case, then observing what other cultures are doing through empirical research and investigation is important and hence should remain a part of intercultural information ethics. Papers by Kenya Murayama, Thomas Taro Lennerfors, and Kiyoshi Murata (Murayama, Lennersfors, and Murata, this issue), as well as one by Ryoko Asai (Asai, this issue), clearly illustrate this point. Though the main thurst of both papers are descriptive and social scientific, they provide needed background information for deliberation in information ethics. For example, the difference in attitudes toward file sharing in Sweden and Japan, as shown in Murayama et al., does provide for a rich resource for ethical reflection as to which attitudes are more appropriate, and whether contexts do play a role in finding out the answer. Another paper that deals with applying theoretical matters to empirical contexts in information ethics is one by Pak-Hang Wong (Wong, this issue), who argues a conception of the "good life" should be regarded as a guiding light in deliberation in the field rather than the purely procedural matter of the right and the just (Wong, this issue). Wong says that there is a lacuna in the current literature in information ethics as there is a shortage of works dealing with non-Western theories of the good life which would provide for substance for deliberation for his kind of ameliorative conception of information and communication technologies. Here Wong is dealing not so much arguing for a metaethical stance on universalism versus particularism as premising his view on a tacit assumption of the universal character of his argument. He is arguing, in short, that everybody should pay more attention to the ameliorative aspect of the technology rather than the procedural one alone.

The last paper in the issue is a purely theoretical one dealing with "informational existentialism" – a kind of existentialism that happens when everything is saturated with informational stuff (Costa and Silva, this issue). The authors argue that informational existentialism will facilitate discussion in intercultural information ethics because it allows for an opening where individuals can be more accepting and truthful (Costa and Silva, this issue). Heidegger's own existentialism provides a basis on which the authors' informational kind of existentialism is constructed. More importantly for this issue, the authors argue that this kind of existentialism provides for a better way in which dialogs between the East and the West, indeed between any types of intercultural communication, can be conducted.

So these are the papers in this volume. Intercultural information ethics is a rich field and there are many topics and areas which remain to be further explored. The papers here represent some of the pioneering attempts at breaking new grounds. We hope that the new ground here be rich and fertile.

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