Conversing Across Communities: Relativism and Difference

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Does the recognition of incompatible logical and linguistic practices in different communities mean that there can be no communication across communities? Strong linguistic, cultural or logical relativism suggests not only that a culture is impenetrable unless one has complete command of the language, but also that any particular community is inaccessible to non participants. Weaker and more plausible forms of linguistic/cultural relativism make possible discussion about difference. This paper argues that while there are cultural differences in discourse styles, communities can be defined in which difference can be discussed across cultural divides. Such communities are defined in terms of the practices of listening and arguing according to broadly conceived criteria of rationality, in the fashion of so called 'discourse ethics'.

When we first lived in Beirut, at the beginning of the troubles in 1974,1 had just graduated as an Honours student in logic. It was a tense time, and our apartment, high on the tenth floor above the headquarters of Squad 16, the crack troops, gave us a good view. The area, Mousseitbeh, was the scene of some early violent encounters, but had been taken over by the Syrian Orthodox Christians, whose leader was the local greengrocer.

I had an exchange with our landlord, Abou Moustafa - Muslim, but Syrian - in which, I now realise, I very rashly attacked his reasoning. The affair was about hot water. Abou Moustafa, a prudent man, was determined to save money - and his apartment block was almost empty. So he extinguished the hot water every night. We woke to freezing water. We had complained and he assured us it would not happen again. It did.

I descended to his apartment on the 7th floor to remonstrate. He assured me the boiler was on. I insisted that he descend with me to the basement, to inspect the boiler. Each in our dressing gowns, we set off. The boiler was, as I supposed, off. Abou Moustafa flicked the switch and said, in French, << Voyez madame, le chauffage est allum >>. I argued that it's being the case that it was now on did not mean it had been in the past and so on. M_y arguments were haughtily swept beneath the carpet. I pondered. Was this a case of genuine Quinean indeterminacy of meaning - there was no fact to the matter of what he - or I - meant by the boiler being on, whether in French, English or - presumably - in Arabic?

Was it that I had simply failed properly to translate his language, and hence could make no sense of his behaviour? Was his logic radically incommensurable with mine? Or was it that the complexities of face in the (Syrian) Islamic community meant that Abou Moustafa could not admit being wrong, at least to an infidel female in a dressing gown? The issue is one which, I fear, cannot now be resolved, although I am inclined to think that the final explanation is the most likely. I was young and very self righteous. However, the questions raised by the dispute have interested me ever since. In this paper I wish to raise the familiar question of whether we can communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries, with a particular twist. My concern is whether there are universal logical or dialogical principles to which we can turn if different communities disagree seriously on questions of substance - not just matters of taste. Are there any procedural principles which would allow debate across difference? We have become accustomed to ethical, scientific and cultural relativisms, and the assumption that we cannot debate across incommensurable theories. I wish to suggest that the model of the community of inquiry, governed by a set of procedural principles allied to those of so called `discourse ethics' can provide an alternative to such sorts of relativism.

I begin the paper by distinguishing strong and weak versions of relativism with respect to particular areas of discourse, respectively linguistic, cultural/ethical and logical (section 1).1 then turn to the debates relating to logic in particular, and to the fashion in which we aim to justify our deductive practice (section 2). 1 suggest that a model of `ideal practice' can ground communication across difference, and examine the suitability of Habermas' notion of the ideal public sphere and the notion of a `community of inquiry' as used by Lipman, to this end (section 3). In the final section (section 4) I define `ideal practice' which tolerates difference yet which is not relativistic.

Section 1: LINGUISTIC, CULTURAL AND LOGICAL RELATIVISMS: STRONG, WEAK AND VERY WEAK FORMS

Relativism is a strategy of argument used very frequently by those who wish to deny, of some area of discourse, that there is any external position from which one can evaluate statements. Some forms of relativism are both anodyne and obvious - it is clearly the case that statements of the form `Size 12 jeans fit well' or `Tofu tastes good' are not true or false, appropriate or inappropriate absolutely. It depends on what size the wearer of the jeans is, and on who is eating. So truth in this case is relative to another set of variables, namely the size or person involved. At a less trivial level, the same holds of table manners.

There is no clear external way of judging whether a statement: `Eating with your fingers is bad manners' is appropriate or not, unless one specifies the group or cultural circumstances one is in. It is good manners in Arabic cultures to eat with fingers of the right hand only; bad manners for our culture, except when on picnics. Good and bad manners are relative - to culture and to occasion.

This is a relativist claim of a far more substantial type than the first case. In the first case, it is possible to state non relativist truths: `Size 12 jeans fit people of such and such dimensions'. In the case of manners and taste, there are no independently specifiable dimensions - manners and taste are not generally specifiable, without circularity, in terms of some feature other than the manners or tastes of those who possess them. Yet we should be no more worried by such relativism than we are by that of size, since different sets of manners, and differences in taste are as pervasive and inoffensive as differences in size. There is no room for disagreement, precisely* because - at least for most of us - nothing crucial hangs on manners or on difference of taste. It is a raw fact that societies differ in manners and people in taste. Relativist claims which assert that for instance, what is good is relative to a group or culture or individual, have more impact. It is essential to our notion of good that we think of it as applying to actions in general. If, as a subjectivist, we are content to allow each person their own view of what is good, good simply becomes a matter of taste. The consequences of adopting such relativist claims are often not recognised, although claims of this type have become commonplace. I wish here to discuss some of those consequences, by drawing parallels between types of relativisms.

I shall take relativism to be a statement about truths of a certain class. A relativist about truths of a class assumes that those truths cannot be determined without reference to further factors. For instance, fit of jeans is relative to the size of the wearer, manners to social groups, taste to persons, and for the moral relativist, what is good is relative to the agent or their social groups. I here consider three interwoven and highly controviersial types of relativisms. The first is a contentious and much debated view, called linguistic relativism: the claim that to understand the concepts used in a language, it is necessary to be a competent speaker of that language.

This claim has often been associated with Whorf (1956), and is frequently expressed as the view that the understanding of the world implied by possession of a particular language is only accessible to speakers of that language. It is 2 possible to distinguish two versions of this Whorfian linguistic relativism: which I shall call strong and weak relativism. Weak linguistic relativism is the claim that: A competent speaker of a language L, is able to understand the concepts used in L. The converse, much stronger claim has often also been associated with Whorf - namely the view that the understanding implied by possession of a particular language is only accessible to fully competent - in the extreme form, mother tongue - speakers of that language, i.e., only speakers of L can understand the concepts used in L or equivalently.

If x is able to understand the concepts used in L, x is a competent speaker of L which I call strong linguistic relativism. This version of the Whorfian claim is strongly relativist, insofar as it suggests that understanding is only possible with the possession of a language. The view that possession of a language is necessary for the

possession of concepts has been very widely accepted. Take, for example, relativist views applied to languages of the Australian aboriginal peoples. Certain Aboriginal groups of Central Australia use a language of spatial reference very differently from the fashion common to Indo-European language families (Levinson, 1992). Instead of referring to directions in the familiar way translated as `right of here', `left of here'; they always use cardinal directions - translated as `to the north', `to the west south west' and so on. In describing an object in a store, they will not say `It's to the left of the counter', but instead, refer to its being, say, in the north-east corner of the store. For a learner of these languages, a complex calculation must be done each time they receive a direction - where is north, they wonder.

For speakers of these tongues, on the other hand, there are different problems. They must first orient a map to their true north before they can understand it, for instance. For the linguistic relativist, this linguistic difference implies that the very idea of how the world is - how space is defined - is different for speakers of the Central Australian languages than it is for the Indo-European groups.

Such linguistic phenomena are widely cited as justifying linguistic relativism. Yet, there are difficulties with relativism. The strong relativist view is that only a (possibly mother tongue) speaker of the language in question could ever properly understand their use of cardinal directions. This yields a contradictio in adjecto. The explanation given above describes the very difference in understanding directions which the strong relativist suggests can only be grasped by a speaker of the language. Strong linguistic relativism implies that unless one speaks a language one cannot understand the concepts it uses - hence outlawing any communication across difference. This is a consequence we should be very reluctant to accept. Notice that strong relativism means there can be no position from which we can recognise difference in meanings. Either you are a member of the group, and understand the language, or you are not and cannot understand. The very common event of misunderstanding, even within one language, is inexplicable for the strong relativist.

The weaker form of linguistic relativism suggests that with adequate training we can escape the confines of our linguistic conceptualisation, by becoming a competent speaker of a language. Indeed, were this not possible, the linguists' and anthropologists' endeavours to understand other cultures would be self defeating. However, certain versions of the weak linguistic relativist claim - and in particular those allied with linguistic holism[1] imply that in order to understand a concept of L one must understand the entire language. This too prevents communication across difference and rules out the possibility that one could learn, or translate into another language, a portion of a language. Again, the project essayed above with the case of the Aboriginal languages, of translating in a fashion sensitive to underlying difference, is ruled out. A more reasonable claim, which captures the intuitive force of linguistic relativism, is that some concepts are language specific. This we might call very weak linguistic relativism. In this conception, the possibility is allowed that there may be groups whose concepts and perceptions differ from our own. But this does not mean that it is impossible to acquire or come to understand such concepts; nor indeed does it mean that it is impossible to comprehend ideas in other languages translated into our own.

The weak linguistic relativist, then, is happy to allow that others' concepts can be made accessible in the home language, through sufficiently fine grained translation, for instance. What the very weak relativist does suggest is that we must be wary of too simplistic a view of the concepts expressed in other languages, and too ready a belief that we understand. Such a principle may be expressed as a principle of charity - don't underestimate the differences when interpreting - rather than a statement about the status of truths of a class, as the relativist would put it.

Cultural/ethical relativism, the view that meaning (and what is right) is relative to a culture, is often associated with linguistic relativism. Again, one can distinguish a strong and a weak form. Weak cultural/ethical relativism is the claim that a competent participant in a culture is able to understand the concepts and agree with the ethical judgements made in that culture. Awareness of cultural relativism has made us reluctant to question the social mores of another culture unless we understand it fully. This has often led to adoption of a strong form of relativism.

Only a competent participant in a culture is able to understand the concepts and agree with the ethical judgements made in that culture or equivalently. If x is able to able to understand the concepts and agree with the ethical judgements made in a culture C, x is a competent participant of C which I call strong cultural/ethical relativism.

Cultural relativism in its stronger forms has distasteful consequences. There are actions, such as infanticide or female circumcision, or the sentencing to death of British writer Salman Rushdie by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, which we wish to insist are wrong whatever the internal practices of a culture might be. The extreme cultural relativist would be committed to allowing each culture its own assessment of such actions.

Even in its weaker form, cultural/ethical relativism has the consequence that any substantive disagreement about ethics is not possible unless there is a failure of understanding. If we believe, as many do, that the possibility of substantive disagreement is at the heart of what makes a matter ethical, then even this weaker form of relativism will not do. It would be better to interpret ethical/cultural relativism as even weaker principles - very weak ethical/cultural relativism - which direct us to be wary of too rapid a judgment of others' beliefs and actions.[2]

The strategy here resembles that suggested in the case of language. The insight of linguistic relativism which we should accept is that linguistic resources may alter, quite fundamentally, conceptualisation. This is common ground. It is the further step to the inaccessibility of conceptualisations without command of the entire battery of a language which is questioned by the very weak linguistic relativist. Similarly, in the case of moral relativism, very weak relativist accepts that particular types of moral imperative are specific to certain social organisations.

However, moral judgments of others are not see as inaccessible to those of other social backgrounds, for that has the consequence that they cannot, in principle, be criticised. This is no argument for moral absolutism but rather an argument for attention to difference. The aim is to accommodate the insights of relativism without taking on the unpalatable features.

Linguistic and cultural relativism are widely subscribed to. Indeed, they have become the dogma of the daily paper. Less popular are the analogously strong and weak forms of logical relativism. Weak logical relativism is the claim that: A rational member of a community C (speaker of L) can be persuaded to agree with the logical judgements made in C/L.[3] Awareness of cultural relativism has made us reluctant to question the apparent logical inconsistencies of others. This has often led to adoption of a strong form of relativism.

Only a rational member of a culture C (speaker of L) can be persuaded to agree with the rational judgements made in C/L or equivalently: If x is able to be persuaded to agree with the rational judgements made in C/L, x is a rational member of C (speaker of L) which I call strong logical relativism.

Strong logical relativism consists in the view that logical practices are relative to a culture - or possibly to a linguistic community. It is a view which has had a number of adherents, including those who argue that none who are not members of certain groups can understand the `logic' of their group.[4] The weaker forms of logical relativism are still strong, insofar as they claim that we cannot disagree about the principles of logic without being ruled out of court, as irrational. Again this weak relativism about logic leaves no room for disagreement about logical principles - and given the view that there is no clear division between matters of logic and matters of meaning - no room for disagreement tout court. Better then to take a weaker form - very weak logical relativism - which directs us to be wary of too rapid a judgment that others are irrational.

The common element in these types of very weak relativism is the belief that there is no one external unique privileged position from which to judge truth, what is right or is what the best method of proceeding logically. It is a rejection of that truth can be defined from outside one's perspective - a sort of "God's eye view", or escape from Plato's cave into the direct light of the truth. Indeed, the idea that one can escape one's own perspective and somehow have direct access to verities is both tempting and itself fraught with contradiction.

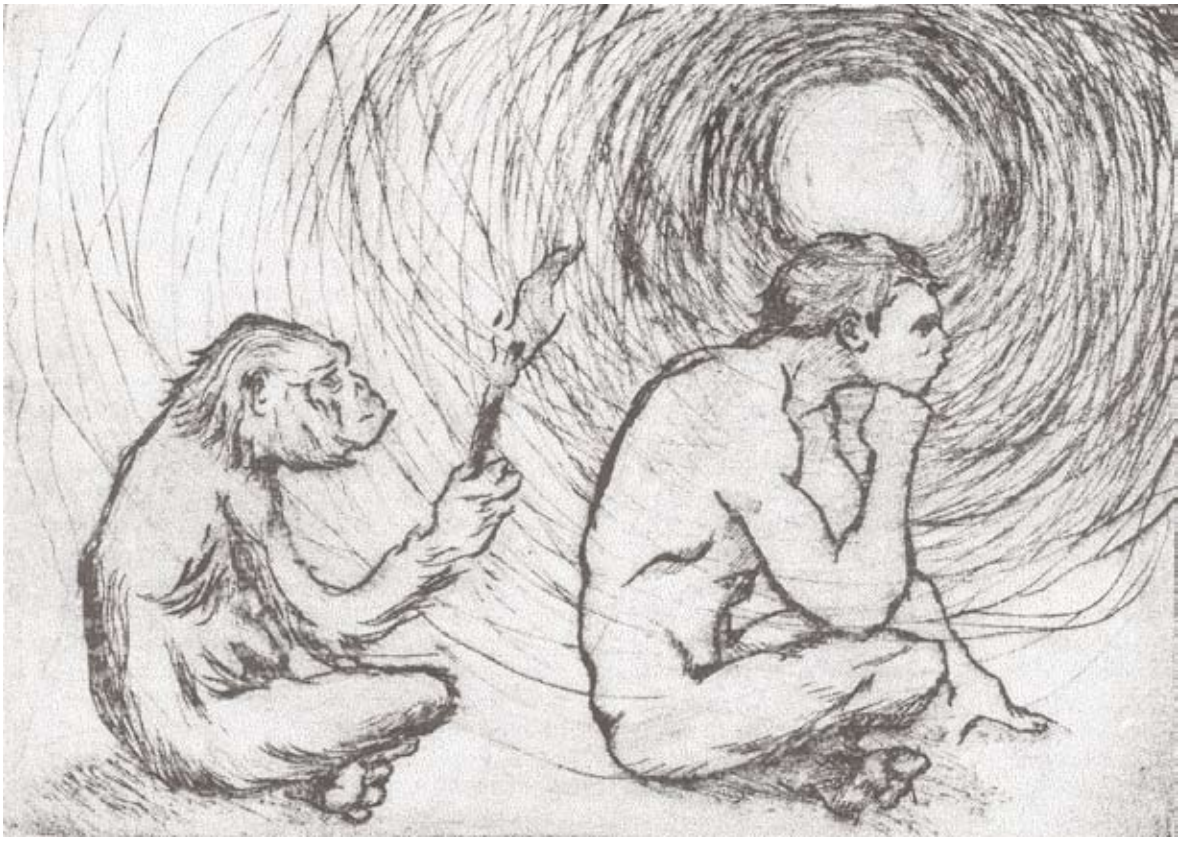
What I have here called very weak relativism is scarcely a form of relativism at all. Very weak relativism could equally be seen as a principle of charity - to beware of one's own assumptions. The point is that we do not need a stronger form of relativism about linguistic, cultural/ethical principles and logic to accommodate difference.

Indeed, I suggest that relativism is incompatible with recognising a justified difference, whether in judgments on ethical issues or in logic. There is a further common thread in the three types of relativism discussed here. Language, moral judgment and logical judgment are manifested in practices of speaking, and judging, whether morally or logically.

These are interrelated practices, and the forms of relativism mentioned here may be logically related, insofar as logical relativism may imply, for instance, ethical relativism, or vice versa. My argument here is not directed to these interrelationships, but to the shared practices which manifest competence in language, and moral or logical judgement. I have argued that the stronger forms of relativism, by defining competence in language and moral or ethical judgment as consisting in agreement of practice, do not allow for disagreement distinct from misunderstanding.

The model I seek to develop here is one which takes the practices of language and reasoning as fundamental, and is weakly relativist in this sense. However, it is not relativist in the sense that each set of practices as self contained and inaccessible to other sets. I have argued for accessibility between different practices as a condition of communication across difference.[5]

Section 2: THE JUSTIFICATION OF DEDUCTION



Chad Kennedy, Sophomore, "Untitled", Drypoint Print

It is no surprise that logical relativism has been less fashionable than the analogous forms of linguistic and ethical relativism. Logic is fundamental to the very practice of argument, so that the dangers of self contradiction in arguing for logical relativism are particularly obvious. I argue that logic should be seen as grounded in discourse in just the way language and ethical practice are. This should not drive us to logical relativism, but to an understanding of the possibility that there may be logical disagreement. I suggest that if we adopt weak logical relativism, argument can survive across different logical systems. The difficulties with such a view have been much rehearsed. If we accept that there may be a genuine difference between judgments of logic, how can those differences be debated? Can we justify deductive practice?

There is a paradox in justifying deductive practice or at least a problem which looks liable to a regress: for in virtue of what is any justification justified? Recall Lewis Carroll's "What the Tortoise said to Achilles". How can rules of inference be justified, and if they can, what justifies the justification?

Platonists hold that logical rules are sacrosanct, belonging to an eternal outer realm; conventionalists that they are merely a matter of convention. Most theorists fall between the two extremes. Quine's (1970 et passim) position, that logical rules are themselves a matter of convention, is far from simple when unpacked.

His holistic image is of a network of interlocking beliefs, of which logical beliefs are themselves members.

Revision of logic would then theoretically be a possibility, but, according to Quine, our current logical practice is enshrined insofar as it is the simplest and best logic. In a sense, Quine (e.g. 1970) is non realist about logic, since the truths of logic are embedded in the web, while he denies that revision of logic is possible in practice. Others, such as Dummett (1975, 1977) insist that there can be genuine debate about logic. Dummett's argument strategy is controversial, and opposed to holistic views, but it brings out the way in which our understanding of logic is dependent on our understanding of language. While logic serves to articulate the web of belief in the Quinean model, in Dummett's approach, the logical operators are themselves part of the practice of language. The practice of language so conceived is essentially public and interpersonal, for familiar Wittgensteinian reasons, and understanding must be manifestable. If logical truths - and more generally, reasoning - is part of linguistic practice, and if logical truths derive their force from practice, it would be natural to incorporate that practice into our teaching of logic. This is not to say that our logical practice is infallible - it is not, although I think it far less flawed than pedantry might suggest. But linguistic practice is the benchmark, the basis of reasoning. Logical practice can itself be criticised. But can we define logical practice? Prior (1960) pointed out a difficulty in the assumption that any introduction (I) and elimination laws (E) for a logical constant could determine its meaning. Prior argued that if it were possible to define the meaning of a logical constant this way, a constant TONK could be defined with the I rule for disjunction and E rule for conjunction. Such a constant would trivialize logic. For the following argument would be valid: p TONK q (TONK I) q (TONK E). This would be absurd. In order to avoid this conclusion, Belnap (1961) proposed that I and E rules can be taken to specify the meaning of a logical constant in the context of an antecedent characterisation of deducibility, such as that provided by the rules of natural deduction systems. The introduction of a logical constant extends the definition of well formed formulae to include A TONK B, and introduces TONK I and TONK E rules. New statements are then deducible. Belnap imposes Post's "conservative extension" requirement on the new connective: The new deducibility statements licensed by the I and E rules for the constant must not lead to the deduction of a new statement A..... A ! - B, not containing the connective, unless that statement is already provable in the absence of rules for the new constant. Thus, TONK is an illegitimate new constant in any consistent logic, since it does not obey the conservative extension principle.

But can we expect to specify the meaning of a logical constant by laying down appropriate introduction and elimination laws for it? It appears that we can do so, but it is not clear that we have thereby avoided the use of semantic notions in specifying meaning. For the rules of a natural deduction system are designed to take one from sequents with a certain semantic property, to others with that property. The conservative extension principle is also designed to ensure that rules for a new constant preserve deducibility, as defined in the original systems. Deducibility is that relation between premises and conclusions which preserves the semantic property the system was designed to capture.

This detour into logic leaves us with little guidance on the vexed questions of logical relativism. If we wish to allow debate about logical principles and their justification, we need to assume a particular logical framework in which to conduct the debate. But this does not yet mean we have to impose a global and objective logical model, based on, say, the Predicate Calculus or classical deducibility. The debate may itself need to be framed in particular logical frameworks, but so long as there is debate, there is room for discussion.

The difficulty of justifying deduction is in part the difficulty of searching for a transcendent level from which to assess logical practice. As Carroll pointed out, that way leads to paradox or regress. But if we turn back to the very practice of discussion between participants, then what counts as justified deductive practice will be tantamount to what moves are acceptable within the discussion. There may be no universal set of norms for logical constants which apply regardless of the participants, but insofar as a discussion is possible it will be in terms of shared logical norms - and there are surely general principles which are conducive to `reasonable discussion'.

I thus suggest that the issue of logical relativism resembles in very important respects the more familiar issues of linguistic and ethical relativism. In all these cases, we should aim to allow difference without retreating to stronger relativist positions. In order to do so, we need to explain how difference - and in particular logical difference - can coherently be debated.

Section 3 THE IDEAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

There are a number of accounts which aim to ground the practices of a group which is conversing according to principles of rationality. Each has a particular focus and a particular justification. The two accounts I wish to examine are those of Habermas and of Lipman. Habermas' (e.g. 1989) ideal public sphere is designed to provide a description of a type of interaction which allows space for the resolution of difference according to rules of rational debate. Very crudely, the ideal public sphere is the domain in which participants in the social process can engage in debate about the public good. The notion of a public sphere is of a space in which public debate governed by rules of rationality is protected.

Critics, such as Fraser (1993), Benhabib (1993), Iris Marion Young (1990) and others have argued that Habermas' public sphere is unacceptably narrow in conception. The model of rational debate is one of informed and competent debaters coming together to put their views - presumably articulately and rationally. It excludes those who are voiceless and marginalised, and is insensitive to the need for empathy, for an ability to change and see the world as oppressed groups do. In effect, critics have focussed on the fact that the procedures of rational debate are gendered, and ethnically specific: archetypally the province of white Anglo Saxon males.

The concern of those critical of the ideal public sphere can be operationalised by considering international debates relating to communication regulation. It is no surprise that the representatives of emerging economies felt it necessary to set up the New Wor] d information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the mid-`70's. They argued that the very model of public debate and reporting was being set by the newsrooms of the developed economies, and that the voices of the developing world were hence not being registered. A similar sense was registered by women protesting that the traditional news values excluded women. In each of these cases, we find the concern that the procedures of debate as laid down in the public sphere are exclusive. The theoretical underpinnings of such attacks on the ideal public sphere have very often been explicitly relativist. NWICO, for instance, was based on an assumption that the perceptions of those who consumed the news would be directly affected and that only someone who shared the presuppositions of the culture should therefore provide the news. This is already a strong relativist view - one which would make illegitimate most reportage. Nevertheless, there is good reason to be suspicious of too narrowly defined models of what counts as legitimate public debate - particularly if it is exclusive.

The second example I wish to raise is that of Lipman's (e.g. 1985,1989; also Splitter & Sharp, 1995) model of a community of inquiry, based on Deweyan ideals of education. Lipman talks of an ideal speech community in which students discuss their own and others' ideas in a fashion governed by criteria of rationality. His account yields quite specific directions for behaviour likely to elicit and encourage rationality - certain types of questions, for instance: "What reason do you have for saying that?" or "Is what you are saying now consistent with what you said earlier?"

Just as Habermas' ideal public sphere has been questioned on the grounds that it makes assumptions that participants are white Anglo Saxon and male, so the model of the community of inquiry has been questioned. For instance, MacColl (1992) and Reed(1992) have each raised questions about the structure of the community of inquiry and I (1993) discuss the issue of whether the community of inquiry is gender biased. Over the past eighteen months, the internet user group of teachers and academics working in the field has been torn by the connecting sets of issues about the conventions governing the style of conversing in the community of inquiry on the net.

Is it implicitly imperialistic that English is used on the net? Will the use of English as the language of debate close off the sources of ideas, make impossible certain types of intellectual or ethical argument?

Again much of the debate has made implicit appeal to relativist doctrines. There is the assumption that arguments expressed in one language are not (readily) expressible in another. There have been several debates about the nature and extent of cultural hegemony, which have drawn on cultural relativism. At no stage have I observed logical relativism at play, perhaps because of the all too obvious danger of regress in using logical relativism in argument.

This said, the objections are well taken. It is far too easy to overgeneralise from one's own practice to notions of what counts as `appropriate public debate' or `good logical practice'. However, the community of inquiry, like the Habermasian public sphere, does have a resource for dealing with the suggestion that difference is excluded.

For each of these approaches takes the process of discussion as fundamental, rather than the product. In the community of inquiry, for instance, there exist the procedures of reasoned debate through which the conception of rationality itself can be debated. In the ideal public sphere, there is space to debate very assumptions of the ideal public sphere - the fact, for instance, that the participants are normally conceived of as male.

Each of these models then brings a set of procedures to the issue of how to discuss across difference. In the ideal public sphere, the procedures are those of reasoned debate, in particular on matters of ethical and public importance. In the community of inquiry, the procedures are those of reasoned discussion, generally on issues of philosophical interest. In each case, while the procedures themselves can be targeted as marginalising difference, by implicitly requiring participants to have a `voice' of the right type, there is room for debate about the procedures themselves.

Section 4: DISCOURSE ETHICS

It is possible to accommodate difference in models such as the ideal public sphere or the community of inquiry, in a fashion which avoids outright relativism. Furthermore, it seems to me, models which focus on the procedures of debate should be the preferred route, precisely because such models begin with human interaction, from which difference arises. I shall consider in turn ethical disagreements and logical disagreements. My arguments relating to ethical disagreement are based on Janna Thomson's unpublished paper, `Discourse Ethics'. `Discourse ethics' is a label for those who emphasise the importance of justification and argument in ethical judgment. For one who espouses discourse ethics, the practices of justification characterise a position as ethical, rather than particular principles.

This is a view famously associated with Habermas, as a consequence of his theoretical model of the ideal public sphere. Thomson discusses a range of positions which might be defended by those who suggest that ethics should best be defined in terms of practices of ethical debate. One version of this position is that in which the procedures of justification are universal - one aspires to the sort of justification which would sway any interlocutor of any ethnic, cultural or linguistic background. Such a view of discourse ethics differs at most in detail from traditional consequentialist accounts. The justification of an action would, in this version, have to be such that it would sway no matter whom to agree and act likewise in relevantly similar circumstances. This principle, labelled `universalisability' by Hare (1952 et passim) is the hallmark of consequentialism. Notice that this version does not allow of genuine ethical disagreement.

If one is in a position to hear the arguments, one should be in a position to arrive at the same conclusion. Paradoxically, this view of the process of justifying ethical decisions yields the same result as ethical relativism - there can be no substantial disagreement about ethical issues. However, Thomson points out that there is an alternative version of discourse ethics, which allows that the process of justifying ethical views cannot be guaranteed to yield a unique outcome. Precisely because participants in the debate may come from varied backgrounds, it might be that - even after the most extensive and rigorous examination of views - no single course of action would fulfil the ethical imperatives. The existence of different backgrounds may prevent agents from abstracting away from difference to the relevant universal principle.[6]

Universalisability simply does not apply once one admits that certain aspects of difference may be relevant to ethical decisions. Particular social relations may be relevant to a judgement of what is right for me that could not be relevant to those who are not women, for instance. Thomson suggests that we should not see the failure of universalisability as a flaw, but rather as the virtue of this second version of discourse ethics. The model of ethics as based on a process of judgment and argument is one which gives difference a role. If, in the long run, everyone should come to agreement on what is right, then the model of discourse ethics is merely a heuristic device. If on the other hand we take ethical difference seriously, then difference might survive the process of ethical debate.

We should not take ethical disagreement lightly, for it is a serious matter, worthy of attention and reasoned argument. But we cannot assume it is eliminable. Indeed, by allowing for difference we build into the procedures of discourse ethics the respect for persons and for difference that underpins many of our relativistic leanings. I wish to consider a similar view of logical difference. A `discourse reasoning' account of good logical practice could take two forms. In one, what counts as good reasoning in debate would be essentially monological.

In order to assess the reasoning of a segment of discourse, one would, in effect, translate each move into a

set of logically related statements, as if they were spoken by one person. Each move of discourse would count as justifiable if - and only if - the corresponding move would be valid in a formalised system obeying your favourite logical principles - PC, classical deducibility or intuitionist natural deduction. The alternative interpretation of `discourse reasoning' would be genuinely dialogical. What counts as reasonable would be essentially those moves which are coherent and acceptable for each participant. Of course, if a serious disagreement arises, then the discourse will break down.

Difference is a serious matter, worthy of attention and reasoned argument itself. In accepting that there may be difference, the model of discourse reasoning requires a respect for the arguments of others. Unlike stronger forms of relativism, however, it does not require that we accept apparently unreasonable arguments. In the model of discourse reasoning we are required to debate and point out inconsistencies. Yet, by allowing that the procedure of debate can continue, even while disagreeing on logic, there is a requirement of respect for different argument styles. There is nothing inconsistent about arguing with paraconsistent logicians - those logicians who admit inconsistencies into their logics.[7]

The strategy of this paper can be applied equally to the issue of linguistic relativism. How can we converse across communities if - as we have come to accept - meanings inhere within communities, and are isolated within and relative to communities? The response I advocate might be caricatured as `discourse meaning'. We should not think of meanings monologically, as if there were a set of meanings each community accepts.

Instead, we must think dialogically, of the practices of intervention and negotiation of meanings. We must accept that participants in conversations come laden with difference, that it will be sheer serendipity if they succeed in agreeing, given differences in background, beliefs and desires. A proper respect for difference in the creation of meanings.

Such a view of language is of course a familiar one, elaborated by theorists of may different persuasions in many different forms (cf, e.g. Kress; Halliday; Teun van Dijk; Wittgenstein) As a theory of ethics, discourse ethics is less familiar; and as a theory of reasoning, dialogical models, while having a venerable heritage from Socrates through Lorenzen, have been underplayed. Their virtue is that, in combination, they leave a space for discussion across difference, conversing across communities.

NOTES

1. Dummett (1973, passim) raises this criticism of not only the Quinean `web', but also the views of Davidsonians.
2. These remarks telescope the wide-ranging debates in the area - I here emphasise the overlapping patterns of argumentation.
3. The formulation of `persuaded to' reflects the fact that not even logical relativists should wish to privilege untutored logical intuition.
4. I here refer not just to those who argue for `ethnic'or `cultural' logics (cf eg Solomon & Higgins, 1993), but also those who suggest there are methods other than those of reason for discovering the truth.
5. It should thus be evident that I am arguing against incommensurability.
6. Pettit argues that the consequentialist can accommodate certain of the apparently special ethical imperatives, such as the imperative to save the life of one's own child, but not - at least with equal force - that of another's child. The point being made here is that such personal ethical obligations are just a subset of a larger set of perspectival ethical principles.
7. Paraconsistent logics seal off the consequences of accepting contradictions, so that it is possible to accept both p and not p, without trivialising the logic (i.e., the rule (p & not p -> q does not apply).

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