Cultural Continuity as an Ethical Imperative

Clifford G. Christians
University of Illinois

Mainstream Western ethics defines humans as rational beings. Ethics is a system of rules external to society and culture. Qualitative inquiry defines humans in holistic terms—as cultural beings, and cultures are value centered. The master norm for qualitative research, therefore, ought to be cultural continuity. Decisions for change are controlled by cultural groups themselves. Research ought to empower them toward the locally sustainable. Research is not neutral but a catalyst for critical consciousness.

Keywords: *culture; critical consciousness; values; ethics*

Ethical rationalism has been the dominant paradigm in Western moral philosophy. Reason makes the human species distinctive, and only through rationality are moral canons legitimate. The truth of ethical prescriptions is settled by formal examination of their logical structure. In Descartes's version, reason was considered "the same for all thinking subjects, all nations, all epochs and all cultures" (Cassirer, 1951, p. 6).

Just as Western science has held there are universal truths about the world, discoverable through reason and accessible in principle to people of all times and places, so Western philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Kant believed that there are timeless moral truths, arising out of human nature and independent of the conventions of particular societies (Paul, Miller, & Paul, 1994, p. vii).

Philosophical ethics in this tradition since Athenian Greece is "based on the common principle" that we ought to "do the good which withstands the test of reason" (Landmann, 1974, p. 110). Reason enables us to "disobey divine or traditional regulations" (p. 110) and instead follow what logic dictates. For the Enlightenment mind, the scientific successes of the 17th century in astronomy and physics became the structural model for philosophy. The cosmos was seen to mirror in its mathematical and quantitative character the explicitly rational structure of human thought. Rational calculation was the axis of Kant's universalizability criterion and became the

437

foundation of utilitarian ethics. Ethics is grounded in prescriptions, norms, and ideals external to society and culture. This is an essentialist paradigm rooted in linear rationality. Humankind is rational being.

The idea of a common morality known to all rational beings had its detractors, of course, from within the Western tradition itself. David Hume (1739, 1748 and 1751/1963) took seriously the multiplying discoveries of other cultures in the 18th century, recognizing within the framework of empirical epistemology that these diverse conceptions of the good might turn out to have nothing in common. But such oppositional voices were of limited influence, until now in the 21st century the paradigm of immutable and universal morality has been generally discredited. The modernist project to establish reason and truth as everywhere and always the same has failed. Though presumably based on shared features of human beings as a whole, universal principles founded on rational consent have been exposed as the "morality of a dominant gender and class" (Outka & Reeder, 1993, p. 4). Postulating an abstract good is no longer seen as beneficent but rather as imperialistic control over the moral judgment of particular communities.

The future of research ethics, in Seyla Benhabib's (1992, 2002) terms, depends on whether a post-Enlightenment definition of universalism is still viable without the philosophical prop of rational being. Obviously as one period of history is left behind and another begins, our mandate is not a research ethics of any sort under any conditions. The only legitimate option is an ethics that is culturally inclusive rather than biased toward Western hegemony. For those of us in cross-cultural research—indigenous cultures, marginalized peoples, native Americans—rationalist universals are totally inappropriate. We need a comparative ethics that places Western and non-Western societies and those North and South and the first people and indigenous cultures on a level playing floor.

Qualitative Inquiry

The qualitative project opposes the standard rationalist framework for morality, that is, formal criteria that adjudicate cases and competing claims. It theorizes morality from an experiential, relational basis instead. It works from narrative and culture and social experience to reconceptualize the field away from the canonical, monocultural ethics of abstraction and rationalism. Together, it represents a larger movement toward intercultural ethics. Ethics is located in the sociocultural first of all, instead of in rational prescriptions and impartial reflection.

Contrary to the 18th-century dualism between thinker and agent, reason and will, we know ourselves primarily as whole beings in relation. This is an ethics closer to the ground where the moral life takes place. Morality is presumed to develop through community formation and not in the obscure sanctums of isolated individuals. Moral values are situated in the cultural context rather than anchored by theoretical abstractions.

It gives ethics its proper orientation. It contradicts the Western tradition of extrinsic morality and situates the moral domain in culture instead. Morality is grounded in community understanding. Reciprocal care and understanding, rooted in emotion and experience and not in formal consensus, are the basis on which moral discourse is possible.

Humans as Cultural Beings

Interpretive social science that is serious about ethics has abandoned the ontology of human rationality and understands the human in radically different terms. Regarding the latter, I propose humans as cultural beings as the best alternative.

Cultures are those patterns of belief and behavior that orient life and provide it significance. They constitute the human kingdom by organizing reality and indicating what we ought to do and avoid. Cultures are humankind's distinctive and immediate environment built from the material order by men and women's creative effort. Cultures are those webs we stitch together to direct societal practice, the embodiments of our living as persons in community. Max Weber calls them the "webs of significance" within which the human species uniquely lives. Echoing the same theme, anthropologists since E. B. Taylor have contended that we are dependent on the inheritance and transmission of cultural forms or we cannot exist as a species. I speak of a universal practice—all humans are cultural beings.

We are language-using and culture-incorporating entities whose forms of experience, conduct, and interaction take shape in linguistically structured environments and are conditioned by the meanings they bear. Creative beings of culture is a definition carved out against a reductionism to humans as essentially *intellectus* on one hand and a naturalistic physiology on the other. This is a dramatic shift, in other words, from rational being to cultural being and, in so doing, away from humans as biological beings.

Realities called "cultures" are inherited and built from symbols that shape our action, identity, thoughts, and sentiment. The symbolic realm is constituted in the human species. Humans alone of living creatures possess

the creative mind, the irrevocable ability to reconstruct, to interpret. Thus, the cultural paradigm is decisively value centered. Values, signification, and meaning are the culturalists' stock in trade. If cultures are sets of symbols that orient life and provide it significance, then cultural patterns are inherently normative; they constitute the human kingdom by organizing reality and by indicating what to do and avoid. Assuming that culture is the container of our symbolic capacity, the constituent parts of such containers are a society's values. As ordering relations, values direct the ends of societal practice and provide implicit standards for selecting courses of action. Communities are knit together linguistically; because the lingual is not neutral, but value laden, our social bonds are moral claims.

Therefore, the intellectual task of post-Enlightenment ethics is embedding normative principles in history rather than presuming modernist metaphysics. Emmanuel Levinas is one example of how to proceed. In his classics, *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 1969) and *Ethics and Infinity* (Levinas, 1985), ethics breaks free from tyranny and violence by inscribing itself in the inexhaustible Other. Infinity cannot be grasped by human reach or understood through human reason. We are transfigured through the Other as unfathomable difference; a third party arrives in our face-to-face encounters—the presence of the whole of humanity. Ethics is no longer a vassal of philosophical speculation but is rooted in human existence. We seize our moral obligation and existential condition simultaneously.

Rather than privileging an individualistic, transcendental rationalism, Levinas's ontological model is closer to the way the moral imagination operates in everyday life. It refuses to separate moral agents from everything that makes them unique. Instead of constructing a purely rational foundation for morality, our mutual human existence across cultural, racial, and historical boundaries is the touchstone of ethics. The moral order is positioned fundamentally in the creaturely and corporeal rather than the conceptual. "In this way, ethics . . . is as old as creation. Being ethical is a primordial movement in the beckoning force of life itself" (Olthuis, 1997, p. 141).

Cultural Continuity

In terms of our humanness as cultural beings, the research ethics I propose is controlled by the norm of cultural continuity. A commitment to cultural continuity makes sense when the lingual community is understood to be ontologically and axiologically prior to persons. To place this controlling

norm in more technical language, note the formal criterion: Research is legitimate if and only if it maintains cultural continuity. This value-laden enterprise we call research, to be set in a normative direction, must comport well with cultural continuity. We ought to consider the viability of historically and geographically constituted peoples to be nonnegotiable. Given culture's centrality in our humanness, its continuity warrants the primary focus.

I am suggesting that our research must "comport well" with the controlling norm of cultural continuity. "Comport well" carries with it a creative ambiguity. On one hand, it asks for a strong relationship, one rooted in cultural continuity. On the other hand, it does not specify this relationship precisely. This norm does not suggest that all research activities are detailed in the first principle nor that they can be deduced from it.

I thereby insist on humility about human knowledge. No one should expect to find a complete system of normative standards for research activities that results by simple deduction. All human effort—including theorizing—is done by beings whose knowledge is incomplete, whose insights are imperfect, and whose understanding is often blinded by tentativeness.

And, of course, I speak of historical continuity. I am not proposing a static view of continuity without discontinuity; that, at best, represents an ancient Greek cyclical view of history. But I choose to emphasize continuity so as to contradict notions of blind evolutionary progress that undervalue continuity altogether. Also continuity undercuts the modernization schemes devised by transnational companies or colonial powers to strengthen their hegemony. Perhaps oscillation conveys the appropriate image of a dialectic between continuity and discontinuity—with the overall pattern one of cultural formation rather than rejection.

Clearly, opposites are at work here—differentiation and integration, centralization and decentralization, large scale and small scale, uniformity and pluriformity. And difficult choices must often be made between these opposites. But the prevailing direction is always toward differentials, decentralization, small scale, and pluriformity. Sometimes that results in a break with past practices (discontinuity), but such disruptions are made more gradually and by smaller steps when controlled by continuity as the first principle. The point is to place a final decision about the mix in the hands of natives who speak in their own interests for those innovations that most appropriately serve their local cultures. As Arnold Pacey (1983) concludes,

> one thing common to most countries where equity has increased alongside economic development is that, in one way or another, the interests of low-income groups have been effectively represented in the political process. . . .

> Demands have had to be expressed from below before there is a more equitable allocation of resources. (pp. 16-17)

Pacey gives an example of historical continuity (pp. 70-77). The state of Kerala in south India follows a basic-needs approach rather than rapid growth. In medical care, for instance, rather than a sophisticated centralized hospital, one of Kerala's notable features has been a well-staffed network of primary health clinics established throughout the state. Largely accessible by walking, the clinics concentrate on child birth, public hygiene, and basic medical care. In the process, operating costs are locally affordable, surgeons and specialized equipment need not be imported from technologically advanced countries. It represents grassroots interests: The people of Kerala negotiated this alternative among themselves rather than acquiescing in the expertise of Delhi. It exemplifies a commitment to continuity, with an element of progress or discontinuity (a drop in infant mortality rates, for instance, to the point of favorable comparison at present with England).

Certainly, the master norm of cultural continuity cannot be understood in passive terms but as human flourishing. Research is not content with recording the status quo but aims to empower cultural formation. In Paulo Freire's (1970) terms, lingual beings must gain their own voice and speak the true word about the reality they know from the inside. Therefore, research is not neutral information but a catalyst for critical consciousness (Freire, 1973). For Charles Taylor, the issue is cultural recognition—not merely treating ethnic diversity with fairness but recognizing cultural groups politically. The basic issue is whether the specific cultural and social features of African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Buddhists, Jews, the physically disabled, or children publicly matter. Beyond equal rights and due process,

> recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need. . . . Nonrecognition or miscrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor et al., 1994, p. 26)

Cultural identity needs to be established for pluralism to come into its own. It is not an "integrationist initiative" aimed at informing the majority of racial injustice but instead "offers new forms of representation that create the space for new forms of critical race consciousness" (Denzin, 2002, p. 182). The rich version of cultural continuity enhances moral agency, that is, research serving as a catalyst for moral discernment and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Research normed by cultural continuity does not enable us to construct an apparatus of professional research ethics. It works instead within the general morality.

Rather than developing rules for experts, its preoccupation is the moral dimension of everyday life. It does not establish standards for institutional review boards or codes of ethics for social scientists but reflects the same social and cultural space as our research itself. How the moral order works itself out in community formation is the issue, not first of all what practitioners consider virtuous. For them, the moral domain is intrinsic, not a system of prescriptions external to human beings. Yvonna Lincoln (1995) clarifies the issues in these terms:

> In effect, many of the proposed and emerging standards for quality in interpretive social science are also standards for ethics. . . . This dissolution of the hard boundaries between rigor and ethics in turn signals that the new research is a relational research—a research grounded in the recognition and valuing of connectedness between researcher and researched, and between knowledge elites and the societies and communities in which they live and labor. Relationality is the major characteristic of research that is neighborly, that is, it is rooted in the emerging conceptions of community, shared governance and decision making, and equity. (p. 287)

Researchers are not constituted as ethical selves antecedently, but phronesis and our conceptions of the good unfold dialogically. The Enlightenment dualism of means and ends is rejected; the ends of ethnography are reconciled with the means for achieving them.

Because we are all cultural beings—the researched Others, researchers, and the public to whom we communicate—research is not the transmission of specialized data, but in style and content, it reflects moral discernment. Ethnographic research should enable us "to discover moral truths about ourselves"; our research narratives ought to "bring a moral compass into readers' lives" by accounting for things that matter to them (Denzin, 1997, p. 284). Communities are woven together by their common understanding of good and evil, happiness and reward, the meaning of life and death. A critical moral consciousness directs the ongoing flow of praxis and reflection in everyday life. Those who gain their own voice about their moral bearings are empowered to move their culture in whatever direction they choose.

References

Benhabib, S. (1992). *Situating the self: Gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Benhabib, S. (2002). *The claims of culture: Equality and diversity in the global era*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cassirer, E. (1951). *The philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Denzin, N. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. (2002). *Reading race: Hollywood and the cinema of racial violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury.

Hume, D. (1739). *Treatise of human nature*. London: J. Noon.

Hume, D. (1963). *Enquiries concerning the human understanding and concerning the principles of morals*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. (Original work published 1748 and 1751)

Landmann, M. (1974). *Philosophical anthropology* (D. J. Parent, Trans.). Philadelphia: Westminster.

Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (R. A. Cohen, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Lincoln, Y. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *1*, 275-289.

Olthuis, J. (1997). *Knowing other-wise*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Outka, G., & Reeder, J. P., Jr. (1993). *Prospects for a common morality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pacey, A. (1983). *The culture of technology*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Paul, E. F., Miller, F. D., & Paul, J. (Eds.). (1994). *Cultural pluralism and moral knowledge*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, C., Appiah, K. A., Habermas, J., Rockefeller, S. C., Walzer, M., & Wolf, S. (1994). *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Clifford G. Christians is the Charles H. Sandage Professor of Advertising and Ethics, and a research professor of communications at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He has been a visiting scholar in philosophical ethics at Princeton University and in social ethics at the University of Chicago. He was a Pew scholar in ethics at Oxford University. He is co-author of such books in ethics as *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning* (seven editions), *Good News: Social Ethics and the Press, Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, and *Moral Engagement in Public Life: Theorists for Contemporary Ethics*.