

# TRANSNATIONAL MORAL DIALOGUES

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**M**oral Dialogues, social processes through which people form new shared moral understandings, occur not only within small communities, or even nation states, but also across national borders on a transnational level. A case in point is the widely spread opposition to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which, according to hundreds of millions of people across the world, has failed to meet the criteria of that which constitutes a just war. Transnational moral dialogues have resulted in widely shared understandings about moral obligations to the environment (hence the transnational support for the Kyoto Protocol), condemnation of terrorism, support for human rights, and much else.

This discussion proceeds by first explaining what moral dialogues are, then exploring their role in community building, and finally applying these roles to transnational relations. Before I proceed, a terminological clarification is called for. The term "transnational" is used to stress that the focus of discussion is not about intergovernmental relations or even relations among nations per se, but rather it refers to the relations among the people who constitute nations. Thus, when protest groups of various countries use the Internet to carry out coordinated anti-globalization demonstrations in various cities across the world, it is best to consider such an action to be transnational in order to distinguish it from actions by one or more nations or by their representatives.

## **Moral Dialogues**

Dialogues is a term often used to refer to a give and take among people who labor to understand one another, that is, to open up and truly listen to each other. They may therefore learn about themselves as they learn about the other, and they would thus be ready to re-examine their own positions and hence be more inclined to seek to reach a shared understanding than they would be otherwise.

Moral dialogues have the added feature of being mainly about values and not merely or even primarily about facts. Thus, for example, public dialogues (as dis-

tinct from dialogues among experts, say economists) about the size of the national debt were not first and foremost about the ill effects of large debts on interest rates—but about the claim that deficits will cause "our children to pay for our having lived beyond our means."

The thesis that moral dialogues can and do occur ought to be contrasted with the view of some rationalists who hold that one can argue about facts, but values, like tastes, cannot be disputed. The image evoked is of true believers, say, a radical Islamic and a secular human rights advocate, screaming at each other, each accusing the other of betraying basic values. Hence, such dialogues are considered by such rationalists to be worthless at best, dangerous at worst. These concerns have deep roots that need be merely mentioned here rather than studied. In the wake of the Enlightenment, it was widely accepted that reason would replace beliefs and hence dialogues about facts and logical conclusions would replace arguments about normative issues. Also, religious and cultural wars left a residue of fear of engaging value differences. And twentieth-century totalitarian movements particularly fueled a fear of true believers. All these developments supported the notion that value differences—if they could not be avoided all together—ought to be delegated to the private realm, while public dialogues ought to be limited to procedures and policies, which people of different values can support.

Viewed in this historical perspective, moral dialogues are "neo-romantic." That is, they seek to augment if not reject the preceding Enlightenment (rationalist) positions. Moral dialogues presume that there are many important public policy and social issues that cannot be settled by facts or reason, including questions that concern our moral obligations to one another, our children, our elders and other members of our communities, and our obligations to the most vulnerable members of our society and those of other societies as well as to what constitutes justifiable interventions in the internal affairs of other nations. Moreover, moral dialogues take it for granted that the distinction between a private and a public sphere is too simplistic because matters that

occur in private require public moral judgments and action (e.g., definition as to what constitutes child abuse and what constitutes legitimate interventions). Moreover, when public policies are not founded on shared moral understandings they often lack legitimacy and hence they will be poorly supported, which will result in low levels of compliance, high levels of government enforcement costs, and even coercion. The failure of Prohibition is a relevant example.

Above all, a normative vacuum invites fundamentalist responses. This is most evident in all the societies in which totalitarian regimes, whether secular (as in the former Soviet republics) or religious (e.g., the Taliban in Afghanistan) collapsed. Upon collapse, each of these societies suffered from an explosive growth in anti-social behavior of many kinds including crime, drug abuse, spread of AIDS, and abandonment of children. This high level of social disorder in turn is inviting undemocratic responses. Hence, replacing the police state with moderate, informal social controls, of the kind that play such a crucial role in free civil societies, is obviously needed. To form these informal social controls, new, shared moral understandings are essential. These in turn are formed through moral dialogues. The same holds true—although in a less pronounced way—for free societies whose moral order has weakened for one reason or another.

One may ask here whether shared moral understandings are not acquired via shared socialization, in which all the members of a group acquire similar values or via religious instruction or some other mode of transferring the shared values of previous generations to a new one. This surely occurs, but reference here is to the formation of *new* shared moral understandings where the old ones have frayed or have been rejected or none existed with reference to new policy areas such as the nature and scope of our moral obligation to “mother earth.”

A liberal (as this term is used in political theory) will tend to focus on good citizenship, understood as that of people who pay mind to public affairs, react rationally to new information, and deliberate over its implications as they cast their vote. In contrast, at least this communitarian focuses on good membership. Here special attention is paid to the ways people are deeply affected by their values, on which they draw in making up their minds above and beyond new information. (I mention this in response to those rationalists who hold people change their minds because of new data. This is true, but so are changes in people’s values.) And individuals make up their minds while interacting with other members of the community. In the process, they are influenced and persuaded and subject to leadership, all

terms that call to our attention that more is involved than reasoning in the rational sense of the term. Often, as part of this communal give and take, people engage in what I refer to as moral dialogues.

Moral dialogues do have many of the features flagged by those who fear them. These dialogues do tend to be passionate, emotionally engaging, disorderly, and without a clear starting point or conclusion (in contrast to, say, elections and Parliamentary votes). However, moral dialogues often do lead to new, shared moral understandings.

Whole societies, even if their population is in the hundreds of millions, do engage in moral dialogues that lead to changes in widely shared values. These are formed by linking millions of local conversations (between couples, in neighborhood bars or pubs, in coffee or tea houses, next to water coolers at work) into society-wide networks and shared public focal points. The networking takes place during regional and national meetings of many thousands of voluntary associations in which local representatives dialogue. They also happen in state, regional, and national party caucuses; in state assemblies and in Congress; and increasingly via electronic links (such as groups that meet on the Internet). Public focal points occur around call-in shows, debates on network television, and nationally circulated newspapers and magazines. Several associations, including the Council on Foreign Relations, Common Cause, and the League of Women Voters, are explicitly dedicated to nourishing both local values/talk and dialogues. They often believe that they are mainly dedicated to the sharing of information and clarification of thinking; but a closer look suggests that they play a considerably normative role. Thus, the Council on Foreign Relations has a strong anti-isolationist slant. Common Cause has a firmly progressive, civic slant, and so on.

National dialogues are often nourished, accelerated, and affected by public events such as public hearings (the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill episode focused discussion on what constitutes sexual harassment and the morally proper response to it); trials (the 1925 Scopes trial challenging the teaching of evolution); demonstrations (undermining the normative case for the war in Vietnam); and marches (civil rights marchers in the 1960s changed the country’s view on racial discrimination).

A few brief illustrations might serve to illustrate the effects of moral dialogues. Until 1968, a person was considered dead when the heart and lungs stopped functioning. Movies perpetuate this notion depicting people holding their ear to a dying person’s chest or a mirror to his mouth to see if it fogs over. As technology made extension of life by these criteria rather common, to well beyond the point where a person’s chances of regaining a meaningful life were nil, a group of scientists

and ethicists came up with a new definition of death: Brain death. But the community continued to demand that doctors do all that could be done for loved ones until long after the heart had stopped. At this point, various scholars primed an informal dialogue about the definition of death. The issue was dramatized by the Karen Ann Quinlan case in the 1970s. The ensuing dialogues gradually led to a change in the public perception (and the movies' image) of death. Although the change is still not complete, it was wide enough to establish new social norms. In recent decades, similar dialogues about the deficit, sexual harassment, and before that about women's reproductive rights, have occurred, all leading to changes in normative direction.

Until 1970, the environment was not considered a shared core value in Western societies (nor in many others). This does not mean that there were not some studies, articles, and individuals who saw great value in it; but the society as a whole paid little systematic heed to its needs and the environment was not listed among America's core values. As is often the case, a book, *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, which was widely read and discussed, triggered nationwide dialogues. A massive oil spill and the ensuing protests in Santa Barbara, California, and the Three-Mile Island incident further impressed the subject on the national normative agenda. Thousands of people gathered in New York City to listen to pro-environment speeches and to pick up garbage along Fifth Avenue. Two hundred thousand people gathered on the Capitol Mall in 1970 to demonstrate concern for the environment on "Earth Day." As a result, concern for the environment became a core shared value. There continues to be disagreements about the level of commitment to this cause, and the best ways to proceed, but not about the fact that it is a basic value.

One may argue that changes in the commitment to the environment are the results of new information about the deterioration of the environment and people becoming more aware of these facts—and not the result of moral dialogues. These facts surely played a role. However, one should note that most people are hardly in a position to evaluate who is right in the debate over the warming of the earth, the relative merit of alternative fuels, and so on. They are much more influenced, studies show by what they consider to be their civic duty toward the environment and their fellow community members.

The same can be shown for the values issues that were raised during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the early 1960s, which led to the broad-based consensus that legal segregation in the South had to be eliminated. Additionally, values issues were raised

in the 1980s during the debate about excessive government intervention in the economy, which resulted in a broad-based agreement that regulations needed to be curtailed. Two more examples of dialogues include the rise of a clear consensus regarding public smoking and the emerging agreement about driving while under the influence of alcohol.

Similar dialogues occur in other societies. For instance, there are moral dialogues about how deeply various nations are willing to be integrated into the European community, for various reasons including which value changes such integration entails. Other dialogues concern how to deal with immigrants who seem to threaten national core values, the future of the welfare state, which measures to take to suppress prostitution (if it is to be suppressed at all) and how to deal with Muslim extremists.

When moral dialogues successfully mature, when they do lead to new or reformulated shared moral understandings, they serve multiple functions. One concerns community building and nurturing. Communities are not merely places where people bond and have affection for one another, but they are also places that have a shared moral culture from which a set of values and norms are derived. However, due to circumstances and membership, these values and norms are continually challenged and dialogues serve both to recast them and persuade new members of their validity. Constantly renewed shared moral understandings, via dialogues, serve to keep members of the community from seceding when differences arise and provide the moral justifications for joint actions.

By some narrow interpretations of democratic theory, such shared understandings are not needed because votes can be taken and then those who have a minority moral position will heed the result. First of all, this presumes that people believe in the supremacy of democratic procedures even if the results of such procedures offend their profoundest moral convictions (which may themselves come from shared moral understandings). Second, procedural beliefs at best make people acquiesce with a policy; policy implications are much less costly and effective when most if not all people are truly persuaded of their legitimacy. Moral dialogues are a major way of achieving such acceptance. In other cases, moral dialogues pave the way for new policies in matters as different as gay marriage and the abolition of the death penalty, which are two issues currently on the United States' moral dialogue docket.

### Transnational Dialogues

The suggestion that the "people of the world" can have moral dialogues sounds like one of those dewy-

eyed notions that naive idealists dream about. This indeed is not my claim. Not all the citizens of any one nation participate in these dialogues, thus, the resulting understandings are not shared by everyone. Indeed, many people are so preoccupied with basic needs, or locked out from the needed communications involved by lack of education, oppressive regimes, and access to the media, that they cannot participate. The same holds true even for members of small communities within many a nation.

However, the attentive public, those who are publicly aware and involved, is growing as education, access to the media, and a measure of political openness are spreading in many parts of the world. This growth is also due to the decline in religious and secular totalitarianism, which took place starting in 1990. Thus, the citizens of the former USSR, China, Afghanistan, and Iraq currently have more access to transnational communications than they had in 1990. Hence, the import of transnational moral understanding is rising.

Of all the transnational dialogues, particularly significant are those that concern the development of a new global architecture. And among those the most important dialogue of the past years has been on the question: Under what conditions is it legitimate—that is, in line with shared values, mores, and laws—for one nation (or a group of nations) to employ force in order to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations? Few observers still accept the Westphalian principles that whatever happens within a nation's borders is of no matter to others; that nation-states are sovereign on their own turf; and that no other nation has a right to apply force or intervene in the internal affairs of another nation. The growing recognition of basic human rights has led many to believe that other nations, the United Nations, and in a sense the world community have not merely a right but also a duty to encourage, if need be pressure, and, if all else fails, use force to protect human rights.

There is growing worldwide moral support for intervention for humanitarian purposes. Transnational moral dialogues led to a widely shared understanding that it was wrong for the powers that be not to stop the genocide in Rwanda in which some 800,000 people were killed and many others maimed. Humanitarian interventions have taken place in Haiti, Liberia, East Timor, and Kosovo, among other places. However, this does not mean that the conditions under which they would take place and who will intervene have been fully worked out. This fact has been highlighted by the 2004 debates about whether the ethnic cleansing in Sudan amounted to genocide and what should be done about it. The same holds for other shared moral understandings: They of-

ten are fuzzy at the edges and constantly revised. This, however, does not render them insignificant. They did lend legitimacy to those interventions that took place and cast a pall over those who did not act in the face of large-scale atrocities.

There is also a growing transnational normative brief for courts that try individuals who commit the most serious violations of international humanitarian law such as genocide; specifically, for the International Criminal Court (ICC). The United States is in the minority of nations that did not sign the treaty on which this supranational court is based. The fact that there nevertheless is considerable moral support for it can be gleaned from the considerable criticism the United States faced from many abroad and quite a few citizens at home for not supporting the court.

In addition, there is a surprisingly strong shared opposition to unilateral action. Many in both the East and the West prefer action by groups of nations (“coalitions”) in which all the members are consulted and each has veto power, as occurs in NATO. (Veto power in NATO may be traditionally rather than legally required, but it still has a strong normative status.) Further, many support action that has been endorsed by the United Nations and is in line with international law. The reasons why many heads of states and citizens favor such positions may have little to do with moral considerations. Their motivation may reflect the desire of weak powers to curb the more powerful ones, or the desire of nations that were once major players on the world stage, such as France and Russia, to regain influence on the global scene or to win an election at home (as German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder did in 2002 after taking a stand against the American-led effort to invade Iraq). Nevertheless, the fact that those opposed to unilateral activity can find huge audiences that are receptive to claims that the United Nations should be respected (despite its numerous and serious limitations); that multilateralism is preferable to unilateralism; and that compliance with international laws is important (despite their vagueness and fungibility) shows the direction in which shared moral understandings are evolving.

To argue that there are evolving transnational shared moral understandings, which in turn affect what the public is willing to accept as legitimate, is not to suggest that global public opinion is all-powerful. Military force is still powerful and it can and often is employed in defiance of worldviews. Economic factors also play a key role. Still, public opinion is a significant factor and it is affected by what is considered to be legitimate. Flying in the face of this opinion has both short-term and long-term costs. And although these

cannot be documented here, it should be noted that as education and access to communication technologies spread, global public opinion is becoming more of a force than it used to be.

The effects of lack of legitimacy were highlighted early in the twenty-first century when the United States invaded Iraq in ways many people across the world considered illegitimate. As a result, the United States lost favor in the eyes of many. For instance, in Indonesia, where 60 percent of its citizens held a favorable opinion of the United States in 2002, a mere 15 percent felt this way in May 2003. In Turkey, 30 percent had a favorable view of the United States in 2002, but that number fell to 15 percent in May 2003. On the eve of the 2004 U.S. presidential election, nine newspapers from around the world conducted polls to see how the United States' reputation has fared since the occupation of Iraq. An average of 57 percent of the respondents in Japan, France, South Korea, Canada, Australia, Mexico, Britain, and Spain said that their view of the United States was worse than it was two or three years ago, compared to the average of 20 percent who said that their opinion of the United States had gotten better.

Global opposition to U.S. policy had some very real consequences. Anger with U.S. plans to go to war with Iraq led to the election of Roh Moo-Hyun, a previously unknown politician in South Korea, as well as the reelection of Chancellor Schroeder in Germany. Both leaders rushed to oppose U.S. policies, the first with regard to Iraq and the second with regard to North Korea. Public opposition to the war also prevented the United States from opening a second front through Turkey. During the 1991 Gulf War, a number of other nations sent their troops and picked up about 80 percent of the war's cost. This time around, the United States is stuck with most of the bill. In short, those who

consider legitimacy in general and especially in transnational matters of little consequence should re-examine their position. Its effects are far from trivial and growing.

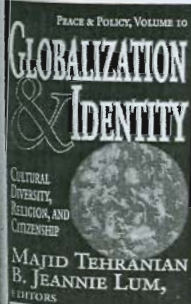
### Transnational Community Building

There are some highly limited but important signs that a measure of a global community is developing. Since 1990, there has been a substantial increase in transnational voluntary associations, interpersonal networks, and social movements. There has also been a considerable increase in transnational communications, travel, and citizenship, and some thickening of international law and its various institutions both governmental and non-governmental.

All these developments benefit from transnational moral dialogues. By agreeing on shared moral positions, public interest groups, protestors, and the media in a variety of nations are promoting the same national and international changes. These include changes in institutions (e.g., the creation of the Global Fund), policies (e.g., debt relief for poor nations), and allocation of funds (e.g., for a worldwide campaign against the spread of AIDS). Moreover, shared moral understandings tend to be embodied in new international treaties and laws, of which the ban against land mines is a case in point. That is, ways similar to what occurs in local and national communities, albeit on a much smaller scale, moral dialogues and the resulting shared moral understandings are contributing to community-building on the international level.

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*Amitai Etzioni is author of The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society (New York: Basic Books, 1996); and From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations (New York: Palgrave, 2004). This essay draws in part on these works.*



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