

'CRASSH Project: Speaking Ethically Across Borders'

Date: 2012-12-07 18:56:01+01:00

I am currently a research fellow at [CRASSH](#), the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, at [Cambridge University](#).

One of the things I'm working on is an interdisciplinary project on 'Speaking Ethically Across Borders'. Right now I'm planning a reading group on the topic for next term. The outline is below, together with some sample readings. If anyone has any suggestions for good readings on this theme, from any discipline, please let me know by email or in the comments below. Thanks!

Incidentally, this is related to my last post: the conversations I am interested in for this project could be seen as self-conscious attempts to overcome potential [conversations at cross-purposes](#).

Speaking ethically across borders

[[Asceline of Cremona]](/Users/jonathanmair/Dropbox/coding/python/2023_static_sites/jm_website_2023/website_files/content/assets/images/AscelinOfCremona.jpg
"AscelinOfCremona"))(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:AscelinOfCremona.jpg>)A conversation between Western Christendom and the Mongol Empire: Pope Innocent IV sends a mission to Central Asia, carrying one of a series of letters that were exchanged between the pontiffs and the Mongol khans in the thirteenth century. (Source: Wikipedia)

Psychologists such as Judith Smetana have argued that the distinction between moral rule and social convention is innate and universal. That may be so, but knowing that there is a difference is not the same as knowing where the line can be drawn that divides the two. When we are in familiar settings, the differences between tradition, habit, and pragmatic efficiency on the one hand, and ethical considerations about value and duty are frequently elided: there are a limited number of given, concrete ways of living life, and most of our choices will be made from among them. Even innovations justified on moral grounds will silently incorporate much that is conventional.

But when people speak ethically across regional boundaries, they must face the problem of finding ways to render the ethics of different regions commensurate, either by translating local, thick ethical practices of one or both sides into the thin common currency of some universalist morality, or by claiming that, in so far as the essentials are concerned, what appear to be quite different values or practices are in fact compatible. In either case, there is a need to agree on a place to draw the line dividing universal or shared essence from contingent cultural convention, to decide whether it is the specific practices that are valued, or only the underlying principle, only their effects, or some combination of these. This makes these conversations an ideal site for scholars interested in understanding moral reasoning and its relation to practice.

Possible examples of conversations across borders

[[|]](/Users/jonathanmair/Dropbox/coding/python/2023_static_sites/jm_website_2023/website_files/content/assets/images/NicolasTrigaultInChineseCostume.jpg
"NicolasTrigaultInChineseCostume"))(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:NicolasTrigaultInChineseCostume.jpg>)A Jesuit in Confucian ceremonial robes during the period of the Confucian Rites Controversy (Source: Wikipedia)

- rival claims to moral authority between rival regional powers with cosmopolitan aspirations
- the universalization of local ethical traditions
- conversely, the vernacularization of cosmopolitan ethics
- civilizing and proselytizing missions
- attempts of diaspora populations to adapt the ethical culture of the contemporary, historical, or imagined home region to life in a variety of different moral environments
- attempts to preserve a regional moral order in the face of modernization by separating *ethos* from *techné* (many fascinating examples to draw here from East Asia, including the May Fourth Movement and Deng Xiaoping's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics')

Sample Bibliography

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