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Competing Paradigms in the Dialogue Among Civilizations: Core Values vs. Universal Values

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Abstract

The model of universal values and civilizational transformation, on the one hand, and the model of core values and self awareness, on the other, represent two fundamentally opposing paradigms of dialogue among civilizations. In practice, the former represents an attempt to present the core values of Western civilization as universal values and to demand that non-Western civilizations assimilate to these so-called universal values. Thus the promotion of universal values runs the risk of exacerbating intercivilizational conflict and preventing non-Western civilizations from achieving a deep understanding of the core values of their cultures, even concealing the shortcomings of their own value systems. The paradigm of core values and self awareness, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of retaining innate values and ethics, allowing civilizations to evaluate and update their own value systems as needed. We would therefore do well to adopt core values and self-awareness as the dominant model for dialogue among civilizations.

Keywords

core values – dialogue among civilizations – responsibility consciousness – universal values

Intercultural contact refers to the process of interactions initiated as soon as two different cultures come into contact with each other. This interaction comes in many different forms, ranging from violent conflict to mutual influence, unidirectional influence, and even cultural genocide. In a broad sense,

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these different forms of interaction can be termed dialogue among civilizations. This paper does not intend to address these interactions at an individual level. It is important to realize, however, that in recent centuries Western civilization has employed its scientific and technological prowess to effectively decrease the distance between civilizations, lending new significance to the outcomes of their interactions.

After the Cold War, it became popular to analyze dialogue among civilizations using the paradigm of universal values and civilizational transformation. Within the linguistic context of Western dominance, non-Western civilizations began, intentionally or otherwise, to accept certain presuppositions as fact: namely, that the world's civilizations should develop along a common path and that universal values should be the guiding principles of that path. This would necessitate the voluntary transformation of non-Western civilizations according to the specifications of universal values. Failing this, Western civilizations must realize the transformation through forcible intervention. This remains the dominant paradigm of dialogue among civilizations, which raises the question: how does this paradigm affect dialogue among civilizations?

This paper aims to trace the history of the universal values paradigm as well as the more problematic aspects of the paradigm that have come to light in recent years. It proposes a new paradigm for intercultural dialogue: that of core values and self awareness. It argues that the driving force behind the emergence and maturation of a civilization is its specific consciousness of responsibility. Differing conceptions of responsibility consciousness are the root cause of value differences, and so to destroy the core values of a civilization is to destroy its responsibility consciousness and, in doing so, destroy the civilization itself. Therefore, the crucial mandate for dialogue is that civilizations understand their own core values, work to achieve a more objective understanding of their civilization, and continually engage in self-evaluation and self-improvement.

Origin of the Concept of Universal Values

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of an era-long stand-off between communism and capitalism, called the Cold War. After that, the United States filled the vacuum of power to become the world's only superpower, and Western civilization and values then became the dominant, if not uncontested, worldview. This particular view of the history of the past two decades, however, was written by the victors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced an existential crisis. Rather than accepting responsibility

for the collapse, it distanced itself from the recent history of the Soviet Union. Western commentators, however, analyzed the victory of the West ad nauseum. Through their writings, the triumph of Western culture became the triumph of universal values, and the benefits of promoting universal values throughout the world became a consensus.

The term “universal values” began to be used after World War II and gained in prominence after the end of the Cold War. It became, and remains, one of the core tenets of Western-dominated international relations theory. For many non-Western cultures, the process of engaging with universal values proved to be an opportunity for soul searching and identifying erroneous perceptions. But the theory of universal values requires not just reform but political transformation, and therefore it has the potential to destabilize countries and jeopardize peaceful international relations. In this light, it is important to examine the origins, evolution, and shortcomings of the theory of universal values in order to better understand its role in modern international relations as well as the inconsistencies that have arisen from its application.

The evolution of universal values began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948. The atrocities of World War II exposed a lack of regard for basic human rights, and it fell to the newly formed United Nations to establish the existence of and provide safeguards for the most basic human rights. The declaration consisted of thirty articles, each of which relates, either directly or indirectly, to the right to life. The document makes no mention of universal values, but the basic rights it mentions have been interpreted as having universal relevance.

Articles with particular relevance to modern international relations are:

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2: Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

Article 13: Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 17: Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20: Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

The document uses language such as “everyone” and “all people” to make clear that these are universal values that apply to any person living in any nation. It is understandable, then, that some Chinese translations inadvertently refer to the document as the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” rather than its official Chinese translation, the “World Declaration of Human Rights.” In 1966, the United Nations adopted two additional documents relating to human rights: the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In 1976, these three documents were combined into the International Human Rights Law, intended to serve as a foundation for the United Nations’ position on human rights as well as a requirement for all member states.

The Chinese government was not involved in the drafting of these documents, as China became a permanent member of the Security Council only in 1971. In 1980, the Chinese government signed the International Human Rights Law. The law, however, is not binding within China’s borders. In fact, from a legal standpoint, the International Human Rights Law is a political rather than a legal framework. Because there is no authority responsible for its explanation and interpretation, it cannot be implemented as law. Several countries have adopted the International Human Rights Law within their domestic legal framework, but this requires relying on the domestic legal system rather than the United Nations for interpretation. In all other countries, the law serves solely as a directive since the United Nations has no enforcement authority.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union served as ideological reinforcement for the Western world, which soon came to be viewed as the interpreting authority of the International Human Rights Law. In Western political science, democratic elections, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and so on are basic human rights and are considered universal values. Consequently, in countries that are unable to design their political systems according to their recommendations, Western countries use their significant economic, cultural, and military power to force political change. Under the pressure of these ideological influences, dialogue among civilizations has become extremely unidimensional: it now consists largely of the promotion

of universal values and the efforts of Western countries to move toward the ideal of a stateless world. Having considered this, Columbia University historian Samuel Moyn writes: “The phrase [human rights] implies an agenda for improving the world, and bringing about a new one in which the dignity of each individual will enjoy secure international protection. . . . Human rights in this sense have come to define the most elevated aspiration of both social movements and political entities—state and interstate, they evoke hope and provoke actions.”¹

I refer to this model of intercultural dialogue as one of “universal values and civilizational transformation.”

Rights and Responsibilities

Enjoying human rights is a prerequisite for decision-making and, thus, for survival. But survival does not refer simply to an isolated individual at a particular moment but, rather, to that person's continued survival in a community. Therefore, existence naturally also implies responsibility: decision-making entails assuming responsibility for one's own future and the future of other community members. It follows that decisions are made within the context of a specific responsibility consciousness. The rights consciousness that give rise to universal values, then, is only one manifestation of responsibility consciousness. To look at it another way: assume, for example, that some “rights” are irrelevant to a person's existence—that is, a person will not exercise them even if he or she possesses them. For example, freedom of movement is immaterial for someone who does not wish to move. If we believe that such rights that lie outside the day-to-day consciousness of some citizens are universal rights, then we have the responsibility to publicize them to ensure that those who lack rights consciousness are made aware of their rights. It follows that rights are the formal expression of responsibility consciousness. Put another way, the basic prerequisite for survival is the right to make decisions, and such rights exist within the context of a specific responsibility consciousness.²

1 Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

2 More discussion about the relationship between right-consciousness and responsibility consciousness can be found in Xie Wenyu, “Zi you yu ze ren: yi zhong zheng zhi zhe xue de fen xi 自由與責任：一種政治哲學的分析 [Liberty and Duty: An Analysis by Political Philosophy],” *Journal of Zhejiang University* 浙江大學學報, no. 1 (2010).

Western society's predilection for human rights is, likewise, a product of its responsibility consciousness. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Clearly, reason, consciousness, and brotherhood are not rights but, rather, forms of responsibility consciousness. In what sense can we say that a person is rational and conscientious? Consider a person who enjoys committing murder. If that person formulates a plan to commit murder, can we call this a rational act? Is the spirit of brotherhood innate, or must it be taught? How do we determine whether someone has acted in a spirit of brotherhood? Different understandings of responsibility consciousness will invariably lead to different interpretations of these questions.

Historically, the differences between civilizations have originated from differences in their respective conceptions of responsibility consciousness. Understanding the innate responsibility consciousness of a civilization is a complicated task, involving an understanding of the lived environment, oral culture, and numerous other factors. In many cases, a civilization's responsibility consciousness is borne out of a random or insignificant element. For example, a mother who has twins might arbitrarily, regardless of their actual birth order, designate one as the older twin and one as the younger twin. Even this small decision can lead to their different understandings of responsibility consciousness and different life paths. The emergence of an innate responsibility consciousness of a culture occurs in a similarly subtle way. As responsibility consciousness emerges, people begin, consciously or unconsciously, to take it as a guiding principle, using it to understand the world around them, make decisions, engage in social relations, and plan their future lives. For people, having different conceptions of responsibility consciousness lead to different modes of existence, while for civilizations it leads to different cultural personalities and different modes of development. Weighty though it is, responsibility consciousness is also fluid: it can become a basis for decision-making only insofar as it is formalized through a value system. A civilization expresses its responsibility consciousness through multiple facets of community life: its virtues, its rules, its heroes, and its desires. We will call those values through which the responsibility consciousness of a culture is manifested core values. Conflicts between civilizations are typically expressed in terms of these core values. While conflicts involving secondary values can be solved through negotiation, conflicts involving the core interests or values of a country often prove irreconcilable.

Any decisions that we make as human beings in society are inevitably influenced by our civilization's core values, which in turn are the product of

a specific responsibility consciousness. Members of a civilization inevitably conform to its basic responsibility consciousness. We are unable to question the legitimacy of our civilization's responsibility consciousness, since this consciousness itself is the basis of that legitimacy. This leads us to two conclusions. The first is that the development of an isolated civilization is driven entirely by its responsibility consciousness. Such a culture, however, has no basis with which to evaluate this consciousness, because it is the sole means of viewing the world; a closed society is unable to recognize its own perception errors. The second is that it is important to recognize that altering or destroying the responsibility consciousness of a civilization amounts to no less than destroying the civilization.

In sum, we believe that emphasizing the fundamental importance of responsibility consciousness and core values is key to our pursuit of a model of dialogue among civilizations.

In Pursuit of a Model of Dialogue Among Civilizations

In today's world, globalization is rapidly breaking down economic barriers, resulting in more opportunities for direct contact between countries. Now, isolated cultures are few and far between. As contact between countries grows deeper, it is inevitable that conflicts will erupt over core values. Ensuring that countries reap the benefits of interaction while avoiding such conflicts is the basis of international relations.

The Western intellectual world became aware of this issue early on and hoped that models of dialogue among civilizations could offer a solution. But Western thinkers have been unable to cast off the Eurocentric narrative of universal values and civilizational transformation, and their models have fallen short of explaining dialogue among civilizations. Examples include John Hick's (1922–2012) theory of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, the Second Axial Age theory of cross-cultural dialogue, and Samuel Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations—all of which demonstrate the difficulties inherent in reconciling the theory and practice of universal values and civilizational transformation.

In the 1970s, Hicks put forth a theory of religious pluralism, which can be extended to dialogue among civilizations. He argued that all religions appeal to a claim of possessing the ultimate reality (the Real). These competing claims lead to the problem of discerning who actually possesses the ultimate reality. In the end, strong civilizations come to believe that the oppression of weaker civilizations justifies their claim to possessing the ultimate reality, even in the

absence of concrete evidence. But Hicks believed that it was impossible for a single religion to have a monopoly on truth; rather, each possesses an element of truth. If the world's religions fully understood this, they could put aside their arrogance and begin to learn from one another. Only when religions put aside their posturing and recognize that the truth claims of all faiths are equally valid will they be able to successfully engage in dialogue, he believed. Hicks, a theologian, hoped that the banner of religious pluralism could open a channel for interreligious dialogue.³ His hopes, however, proved empty. The theory of dialogue among civilizations tells us that every civilization has core demands to which it will steadfastly hold, lest it abandon its innate responsibility consciousness. The situation is even bleaker from the perspective of weak civilizations, which experience relatively more pressure to conform to the demands of pluralism. This requires that weak civilizations abandon their core demands, which is tantamount to ordering their destruction.

Conscious of the shortcomings of pluralism, Western thinkers including Ewert Cousins, Raimon Panikkar, and Paul F. Knitter put forth a revised version of pluralism known as the Second Axial Age.⁴ In order to affirm the equality of all religions, the requirement that religions alter their core demands is replaced with the requirement that all religions seek the ultimate truth. The Second Axial Age emphasizes a global consciousness and common interests and encourages different religions (or cultures or civilizations) to avoid war and conflict and engage in peaceful dialogue. In order to achieve this goal, some people must adhere to multiple religions. For example, Panikkar is simultaneously a Catholic priest, a Hindu guru, a Buddhist monk, and a secularist. In this way, he is able to gain intimate knowledge of a number of different religions. Of course, this may not be realistic for the majority of the world's believers, who often are limited to the confines of a single religion (or culture or civilization). Therefore, the Second Axial Age is a utopian construction with little bearing on the daily realities of most of the world's population.

In 1993, Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington (1927-2008) published his now-infamous thesis "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs*.⁵

3 Cf. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1973); idem, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

4 Cf. Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibilities* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

5 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993). The theme of the article was later expanded into a book: Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Huntington was aware of the negative aspects of the theory of universal values and civilization transformation. The thesis of chapter 4 in his book was that “the West’s universalist pretensions increasingly bring it into conflict with other civilizations, most seriously with Islam and China.” In chapter 5, he argued that “the survival of the West depends on Americans affirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique, not universal, and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies. Avoidance of a global war of civilizations depends on world leaders accepting and cooperating to maintain the multi-cultural character of global politics.”⁶

As Huntington wrote these words, the theory of self-awareness had already begun to take root: it was a time of crisis for universal values. Huntington, however, believed that the downfall of the West was in its tendency to be overly antagonistic. This, he argued, was what had caused such negative reactions from non-Western civilizations. It was not the theory of universal values that he took issue with but, rather, its execution. In chapter 12, he writes, “Western universalism is dangerous to the world because it could lead to a major inter-civilizational war between core states and it is dangerous to the West because it could lead to defeat of the West.”⁷ Huntington believed that the West had to win the clash of civilizations by asserting its own exceptionalism rather than the universality of its values; this was the only way that it could enjoy continued dominance.

As previously mentioned, every civilization develops in the context of an innate responsibility consciousness in which the chief principle is that of survival. When civilizations engage in dialogue, each civilization has only its own worldview with which to judge others. Value judgments and rational judgments alike have universalist and egocentric tendencies, and it is impossible to discuss dialogue among civilizations without acknowledging these tendencies. Ignoring these tendencies—if it stems from an ulterior motive, as in the case of Huntington’s Western exceptionalism—is tantamount to abandoning one’s innate responsibility consciousness and, indeed, the existence of one’s own civilization.

Again, an innate responsibility consciousness can be born out of even the most subtle elements. In the above-mentioned example of twin siblings, their seniority (despite actual birth order) might be decided by a whim of the mother, yet cause them to follow two completely different paths. Likewise,

6 See Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

7 Ibid.

a civilization's responsibility consciousness can spring from a chance element. Every civilization is built on the foundation of a certain responsibility consciousness, so that different understandings of responsibility consciousness will lead to different values, different worldviews, and, eventually, different means of perceiving reality. Operating under the restrictions of responsibility consciousness means that every civilization will have perception errors. For example, if a given issue is judged to be completely insignificant in the context of one responsibility consciousness but crucially important in another, perception errors will be exposed. If the two civilizations view each other with hostility and a lack of trust, the resulting tensions could lead to violent conflict. If there is mutual trust, however, the revealing of perception errors can be seen in a positive light, resulting in a mutual widening of perspectives.

Basic Principles of Dialogue Among Civilizations

Analyzing dialogue among civilizations, then, has two key elements: innate responsibility consciousness and perception errors. In an ideal world, furthermore, relations between civilizations would be based on a foundation of mutual trust. Any civilization exhibits certain universalist tendencies, but with this foundation of mutual trust, civilizations will be made aware of their own perception errors and will be compelled to further develop their own responsibility consciousnesses, leading to a mutual widening of perspectives and cultural renewal. Weak civilizations will need to reflect on and gain a deep understanding of their own responsibility consciousness in order to correct perception errors. Strong civilizations must do the same: only in an atmosphere of mutual trust can civilizations maintain close relations while staying true to their core values. We call this type of dialogue among civilizations the "core values and self-awareness" model. In this model, civilizational self-awareness is envisioned as a tool for dealing with the clash of civilizations by building a platform for dialogue, emphasizing equality, alerting one another to perception errors, and encouraging civilizations to gain a deep understanding of their core values, leading to peaceful coexistence and harmony without uniformity.

The core values and self-awareness paradigm and the concept of harmony without uniformity are steeped in Chinese intellectual tradition. The *Book of Rites (Li Ji)* says the following: "Ten thousand plants can grow together without harming one another. Following parallel paths is not contradictory. Small acts of virtue are like a forked river, flowing without end. Large acts of virtue are like deep roots and luxurious foliage, with no discernible beginning or end. This is

the reason of heaven and earth.”⁸ Every civilization is a “plant,” growing within its own responsibility consciousness, but plants can “grow together without harming one another.” Every civilization follows its own path, but “following parallel paths is not contradictory.” This philosophy is the only means to peaceful coexistence. To universalists, the core values and self-awareness paradigm may be too conservative, but it is the only truly feasible model for dialogue among civilizations.

The core values and self-awareness paradigm has five main principles. First, we must respect the equality and the voice of all civilizations. Often the perspectives, concerns, cognitive styles, and social and behavioral norms of other civilizations are utterly strange to us, and this strangeness can lead to discomfort and a rejection of the opposing perspective. This discomfort, however, does not have to be negative. The impulse to impose our own ideals upon others is natural and can be a motivation for dialogue. But however well-intentioned this desire, it will only lead to conflict unless it is carried out with the other's consent.

Second, it is imperative that all civilizations gain a deep understanding of their own core values and work to further develop these values. To simply ignore or obliterate the differences between civilizations would be destructive for weak civilizations. It is important to remember that the perspective of every civilization is limited and that dialogue among civilizations presents an opportunity for engaging in self-reflection and moving beyond these limits. This can be a source of tension and even institutional collapse, but it will never destroy the core values of a civilization. Instead, institutional collapse functions as an impetus for reorganization, leading to continued growth and development.

Third, civilizations should follow a policy of noninterventionism by allowing other states to implement the political systems to which they are most suited. Only those individuals belonging to a particular civilization are fully able to grasp its innate responsibility consciousness. Of course, diverse individuals will have diverse and even mutually contradictory interpretations. In the end, whose interpretation is the correct one? Only the civilization itself can answer this question. Outside observers, equipped as they may be to offer an objective perspective, are not in a position to make decisions on behalf of others. Strong civilizations often take advantage of the universal values and civilizational transformation paradigm to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries,

8 Lv Youren, ed., Zheng Xuan, and Kong Yingda, *Liji zheng yi (The Orthodox Interpretation of Book of Rites)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2008), 2043.

but long experience has shown that such interference is at best ineffective in promoting dialogue and, at worst, destructive to weak civilizations. Instead, a country's political structure should emerge organically from its responsibility consciousness. Noninterventionism should be the most fundamental principle of dialogue among civilizations.

The fourth consideration is related to the rise of economic globalization. Countries interact for many reasons: geographic proximity, trade, cultural, or intellectual exchange, and so forth. For most of human history, geographic distance formed a significant barrier to these types of interaction. In the past few decades, however, rapid advances in transportation technology have dramatically decreased the distance between countries. Economic ties have already reached a point of mutual interdependence. Now that we depend on other countries for the most basic necessities of life, cutting off ties would be incompatible with our own interests. This, then, is the essential driving force behind dialogue among civilizations, and it requires a deeper level of mutual understanding than ever previously sought or achieved.

Fifth, dialogue among civilizations can be a platform for interreligious dialogue. The yearning for higher understanding is an intrinsic part of human nature, and religion is an expression of this desire. It is not a practical desire but, rather, a transcendental one. However, different expressions of this desire are the basis for many of the differences in lifestyles among the world's civilizations. Religion, then, is not solely an abstract concern; rather, it has a direct bearing on people's lives. Therefore we must proceed with the utmost caution in order to ensure that we respect religious sentiment in all its forms while building a platform for interreligious dialogue.

These five principles are mere guidelines. Implementing the paradigm of core values and self-awareness requires further discussion, cooperation, and exchange. But what is already clear is that replacing the unrealistic paradigm of universal values with the paradigm of core values will benefit the future development of all the world's civilizations.

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