

Building Bridges: Eurocentric to Intercultural Information Ethics

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Misguided use, manipulation, misappropriation, disruption and mismanagement of Information deeply affects the infosphere as well as the social and moral fabric of a society. Information ethics is an attempt to bring the creation, organization, dissemination, and use of information within the ambit of ethical standards and moral codes. The diverse and inherently pluralistic nature of societies however puts forth an additional demand on us - to come up with an intercultural information ethics. An intercultural ethics which is other-centric, context sensitive and workable without being homogenizing, patronizing and colonizing. An endeavor in that direction has already been made by proponents of intercultural information ethics like: Charles M. Ess, Fay Sudweeks, Rafael Capurro, Pak-Hang Wong, Soraj Hongladarom et al. In our paper, we propose that the kind of ethical pluralism being sought in the domain of information ethics can be attained by having a reappraisal of the current methodological strategies, by casting a critical relook at the Eurocentric ethical model. This paper analyses the current framework of Intercultural Information Ethics. And in an endeavour to move towards an all-encompassing, other-centric, workable, intercultural, harmonious and compassionate model of 'Pluralistic Information Ethics', it proposes the Indian / Asian philosophical method of 'Samvāda' to the current inventory which includes methods like: 'parrhesia/free speech' and 'interpretive phronēsis.

Keywords: Information Ethics (IE), Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE), Samvād, Infosphere, Dialogue, Parrhesía, Eurocentrism, phronēsis

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1. Introduction

We live in the information age where societies are evolving through the mediation of information technology. And, with that is evolving the way in which we interact, relate with, and understand each other. In its ambit this paper discusses how misappropriation, manipulation, disruption and mismanagement of information deeply affects the infosphere as well as the social and moral fabric of society. Information Ethics (IE) is an attempt to bring the creation, organization, dissemination, and use of information within the purview of ethical standards and moral codes. In contrast to the traditional ethical frameworks which were designed to evaluate the agent and their actions, IE was devised to evaluate the various aspects of information. The diverse and inherently pluralistic nature of societies however, puts forth an additional demand on us - to come up with an Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE). An IE which is other-centric, context sensitive and workable without being homogenizing, patronizing and colonizing.

In the following sections we look at the Eurocentric bias in IE, move to IIE and forward the Dialogical method of *Samvād* as a bridge between Eurocentric and other Inter-cultural approaches to IE. In *section 2*, we discuss the nature of information, infosphere, information entities and how the challenges arising from these gave rise to IE. In *section 3*, we dig deeper into the methodology of IE and uncover an inextricable Eurocentric influence which we show as an ethically fraught and neo-colonial approach. In *section 4*, we proceed from the problematization of IE to discussing how IIE offers significant improvement over IE. We find *Dialogue* to be a string which runs through the different IIE frameworks, such as *Charles Ess's Phronēsis* and *Rafael Cappuro's Parrhesía*. This leads us to *section 5*, where this paper elaborates upon the different Dialogical Methods in the IIE framework. In *section 6*, we forward our own *Dialogical Method* rooted in the Indian *Nyāya* Philosophy — *Samvād*; and how it offers a holistic and methodical ethical approach towards *intercultural dialogue* through its unwavering focus on *other-centrism*. In *section 7*, we bring forward in detail how the method of *Samvād* could offer us a pluralistic framework to build bridges between different intercultural positions thus, joining us all in a continuum. Conclusively, in *section 8*, we sum up the key features of the method of *Samvād* and try to summarily argue why it deserves more serious attention as a way forward.

2. Emergence of IE

It is often maintained that information is objective and value-neutral. Therefore, an objective and universalisable approach of IE will be an apt framework for evaluation. However, information arises in contexts and bears indelible impressions of its origins and circumstances throughout its life cycle. Any framework which proceeds with the misconstrual that information is value neutral, and independent of its context, will prove to be inherently problematic, unethical and insufficient. The scientific - *view from nowhere* (Nagel, 1986) - approach with its aloofness from context and lack of consideration for granular — day to day — moral challenges, fails to stand the test for a holistic ethical theory. Therefore, this paper proposes a global move of the

‘information societies’ from the current dominant, mono-cultural, Eurocentric discourse of IE frameworks, towards more nuanced, non-homogenizing, context sensitive IIE frameworks. To that end, this paper forwards ‘*Samvād*’ as a tool for building intercultural bridges. *Samvād*, as forwarded in this paper is both an ethical framework as well as *praxis*.

Any discourse on IE will be incomplete without a deliberation on the imports and nuances of the term ‘*information*’. The common sense understanding of the word *information* would be any piece of knowledge which answers our queries and resolves our dilemmas. *Luciano Floridi* uses the term ‘*information*’ in a strongly semantic sense. He refers to information as “*syntactically well-formed, semantically meaningful and veridical data.*” (Floridi, 2010, p. 265) *Deborah Johnson* highlights the pragmatic function of information by detailing its role as a facilitator of our inter-relationships (Bowie, 1985). *Robert Herritt and Floridi* surmise that we as individuals cannot be segregated from our information – “from our data, to particles in our body, to our medical history, to the story of our life” (Bielby, 2016, p. 239), we are intertwined with our information. *Paul Sturges* underscores that there has been a shift in information discourse; technicalities have made way for richer and more ethics-oriented discussions (Sturges, 2009).

In thinking about information as networked data and as facilitator of inter-relationships, it is inevitable to think about it locationally as existing in ‘space’. It is here that the concept “*infosphere*” (Floridi, 1999, 2001, 2010) is of note. Akin to hydro, atmo, litho and bio, *infosphere* is any environment which is populated by information entities or ‘*inforgs*’ (Floridi, 2008). One of the ramifications of the information age has been our absolute dependence on our access to information through the internet. The complexities and challenges of understanding the interactions and inter-relationships between different digital selves makes the digital ontological understanding especially relevant. In his unpacking of digital ontology, *Capurro* reformulates *Berkeley’s* ‘*to be is to be perceived*’ as — “*to be is to be digital*” (Capurro, 2006, p. 178). *Floridi* comes up with an alternate framework in the form of ‘*Informational Structural Realism (ISR)*’. According to ISR, ‘*being*’ of the entire existing physical universe can be understood in terms of informational structure. But scholars like *Bruce Long* contend that ISR is essentially not very different from digital ontology (Long, 2020).

Traditional ethical theories emanating from normative and applied ethics have proven inadequate in dealing with the challenges of the information age. “The question of how ethics can maintain universal claims without turning into moral imperialism (Beck, 1998) is a central one for all modern ethicists” (Stahl, 2008, p. 98). IE emerged as a specialised branch which could be applied to not just packets of information or aggregates, but to the entire information cycle (Floridi, 2010). In normative ethics, the focal point is the rationally thinking human agent. IE took a step forward and shifted the focus of ethics from an atomistic anthropocentrism to information-centric paradigm, where agency was conferred upon information entities and the infosphere. For example: In the *RPT Model*, Information gets treated as Resource [R], Product [P] as well as Target [T]. (Floridi, 2010). This model considers information to be intrinsically valuable and believes that entropy of information is to be prevented at any cost. As an alternative

to the RPT model, the *Information Flow Model / IFM* (al-Fedaghi, 2010), tries to explain the life of information by enumerating the different stages through which the information moves throughout its lifecycle. Yet another alternative to the RPT and IFM models is the *Flourishing Ethics (FE)* model of *Terrell Ward Bynum* (Bynum, 2006). *FE* has deep *Aristotelian* roots and includes ideas similar to those in Eastern philosophies of *Taoism* and *Buddhism*. Bynum's *FE* sees an intricate relationship between human *telos* and our information processing nature. Our overall purpose according to *FE* is to *flourish*, and in order to do that we need to engage with a plethora of information (assessing, retrieving, organizing, evaluating, acting upon etc).

Scholars of information claim that IE leads to a paradigm shift of the discourse from *epistemology to ontology*. This claim however needs to be carefully analysed. We assert this because, if one were to evaluate the infosphere, one would still end up assessing and analysing actions of the epistemic agent only. It is so because the toolkit of this inquiry lends itself to asking typically agent-centric questions. For example: a). Was the agent informed enough to make rational choices? b). If the question of consent was involved, was it informed consent? c). Were choices made by the agent in the infosphere in accordance with ethical principles such as The Principle of Non-Injury, General Good etc.? d). Was the action by the agent in an information environment a product of their free will? e). Whether an action by a rational agent used another agent as a means to an end because of information asymmetry? If such are the quintessential enquiries of this toolkit, can it still be asserted that the paradigm has shifted? This paper questions the stance of IE scholars who claim that IE veritably led to a paradigm shift by mere inclusion of the information environment.

3. Eurocentrism and The Redundancy of The IE Framework

3.1 IE methodology

Norbert Wiener's methodology of *computer ethics* is considered to be the precursor of the IE methodology (Bynum, 2004). It is similar to that of other empirical sciences; we start with a hypothesis pertaining to the ethical question at hand. The ethical question necessarily has to be about the integration of information technology in society. Since the aim is to resolve the ethical problem at hand, any ambiguous idea needs to be first clarified. The given hypothesis is to be then verified by testing its applicability in light of acceptable principles, laws and practices. Inspired by *Weiner's* methodology, logical positivism and developments in natural sciences, different models of IE also opted for empirical verification in order to attain universality, objectivity and certitude. *Techno-solutionism* (Morozov, 2013) as an upshot of empirical verification has come to be seen as a solution to any and every problem in our world.

3.2 Eurocentric influence on IE methodology

The *Eurocentric* influence on the models, theories and methods of IE discourse is anything but apparent. *Eurocentrism* can be defined as a cultural phenomenon which views the histories, life-worlds, cultures of non-western societies from the lens of the *Western perspective*. *Eurocentrism* projects Western Europe, Americas and Australasia or 'the West' as a universal

signifier, and advocates for the application of a 'Western model' based on 'Western values' rooted in *Enlightenment* like: rationality, certitude, objectivity, verifiability, individuality, human rights, equality, democracy, free markets etc. (Pokhrel, 2011). In the *Eurocentric* framework of ethics, the *othering* of different cultures has been a recurring theme. *Hegel*, for instance, has been criticized for finding within Chinese thought “only poor morals”. He gives a low rank to the teachings of *Confucius*, as they contain a lot of “commonsense and a mainly popular morality”, but no “speculative philosophy” (Kimmerle, 2016, p. 103). Most frameworks of IE have been designed from the western perspective and have been superimposed on the non-western societies, leading to *Information Injustice*; which can range from being subtle to being deeply entrenched. Information Injustice in today's infosphere is rampant, and can be seen in the form of marginalized access and representation, information asymmetry / unfair distribution of information, violation of human rights [like right to equality, right to freedom (of speech, expression, thought), cultural and educational rights, right against exploitation], infringement of rights to information (which helps to make informed choices and give informed consent), infringement of privacy, illegal access and manipulation of information (e.g. hacking), information excess and deficit, cultural imperialism (via imposition of monocultures, bias in datasets and flawed algorithmic models) etc. In this context, Nikita Aggarwal aptly remarks, “the ethical norms and values designed into these technologies collide with those of the communities in which they are delivered and deployed” (Ess, 2020, p. 553).

Though it is extremely disconcerting to look back at human history and find it looked at through Eurocentric lenses, it remains an inescapable fact. The western Eurocentric frameworks of ethics have been unable to capture the values, ideals and aspirations of non-western societies. They are formalistic and have been devised keeping in mind ideal, utopian scenarios wherein humans are presumed to possess extraordinary abilities, but the fact is that it is our contingencies and limitations which make us human. If the moral standards are too high, then they become far-fetched, impractical and inaccessible (Prasad, 1989). Thus, the pieces — of how Eurocentrism came to be a powerful approach which influenced the entire world — fall into place. The predominant European power centres spread Eurocentric frameworks and unilaterally imposed them on other cultures as being superior, rational, objective and universalizable. It was a hallmark of imperialism impressed indiscriminately upon all societies which were subjugated and colonized. Continuing the same thread, some scholars believe that a ‘computer mediated colonization’ (Ess, 2002) is well underway. It is happening via “Big Data, Algorithmic processes, Surveillance and the emerging IoT” (Ess, 2020, p. 554). Often subtle and subliminal, Eurocentrism came to be superimposed due to colossal power asymmetries that lay in the very foundations of the building of our modern world. In light of these facts, to still continue the use of the traditional *Eurocentric* frameworks as the only models available — when there clearly are several other pluralistic, contextual, local frameworks — is ethically wrong. Therefore, the promulgation of an intercultural model based on an empathetic, cross-cultural, other-centric understanding seems to be the logical next step.

4. From IE to IIE

IE is several decades old, but there is no consensus on a universal understanding of it due to lack of contextual sensitivity. Paving the way forward therefore, several localized approaches to IE emerged thus giving rise to the discourse on *Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE)*. IIE according to *Jared Bielby*, is pertinent to and rooted in all cultures (Bielby, 2008). Capurro is of the view that without the intercultural bend, the richness of tradition and human morality will be lost. (Capurro, 2008) It is only through intercultural dialogue that the IIE discourse can become all encompassing, other-centric, harmonious and compassionate, asserts Capurro. He is critical of Floridi's approach and has argued that IE should not merely engage with the biocentric questions about moral status of the infosphere and its entities, but should also address questions pertaining to the intersection of the infosphere with ecological, political, economic, and socio-cultural horizons. *Pak-hang Wong* has opined that the current discussions in IE are dominated by ethical contexts unique to *Western* culture. In the name of making space for context, there is little admissibility of *Non-western* cultures. As per Johannes Britz, there are uncritical assumptions under which we have been operating in IE (Britz, 2013). Capurro points out how the three interpretations of freedom (freedom of speech, access to information, and freedom of press) have their roots in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. *UDHR* presents itself as a universal and globally enforceable framework, but at its core it is an Eurocentric framework (Capurro, 2006).

Hongladarom and Britz have also drawn attention towards the debate on Western monopoly branded as *universalism*, by raising the *universalism vs. particularism* debate (Hongladarom, & Britz, 2009). They question the promotion of western values and ideals as universally acceptable, by questioning the nature and basis of such a promotion. If we consider the Western conception of privacy, it is all about the individual; their choices, and autonomy. By contrast, in Asian cultures (viz. India), privacy is a diffused concept, more collective, relative, and group oriented. For instance, in their paper *Ponnurangam Kumaraguru, Lorrie Faith Cranor and Elaine Newton* have provided us a preliminary glance into differences in perceptions of the notion of privacy between Indians and Americans. They state that, "The subjects in India mostly related privacy to personal space and subjects in the US mostly related privacy to information privacy. Most of the US subjects related privacy to some form of control of information or data protection. On the other hand, Indian subjects related privacy to physical, home and living space" (Kumaraguru et al., 2005, p.11). It may however be noted, that even in the same larger, undivided social set-up like India, where there is vast diversity in terms of culture, class, caste, geography, education etc., privacy may be interpreted differently depending upon one's situatedness.

Concepts like privacy, security, consent and identity have deep ramifications on the formulation of ethical frameworks. To drive our point we briefly consider the conceptual notion and definition of *privacy* in the *Draft Data Protection Bill (India), 2018*. The document establishes *privacy* as a right of a *natural person* by guarding the *data principal* against any conceivable or real harm, and by taking due cognisance of the interest of the *data principal* at different stages of the *data life-cycle*. A parallel can be drawn between Chapter 3 (Articles 12-23) of GDPR (which elaborates upon the rights of the *data subject*) and Draft Data Protection Bill (India). At this point an important question would be — Is blanket adoption of principles like consent, privacy, security etc. as in their western understanding (as in the GDPR framework)

judicious, considering the vastly different socio-cultural and economic tapestry of India? Notably, there existed a precedent to GDPR in Europe in the form of the Data Protection Directive, 1995. India can claim no such precedent which could have helped ease the transition of the society towards the said direction (Burman, 2019).

Concepts do not arise in vacuum. They develop as a layer upon an intricate mesh of social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual contexts. We can see this particularly by noticing how *privacy* is connected with concepts like *freedom*. We believe that *freedom* cannot be reduced to merely the three formulations from the UDHR framework. Clinton Rositer states, "Privacy (....) can be understood as an attempt to secure autonomy (....)." (Westin, 1967, p. 34). Freedom can also be understood in terms of liberty from any and every form of coercion or control (Hayek, 1960). In the Indian moral and religious philosophy, *freedom* has spiritual meaning; it also means liberation from the cycle of birth and death. In the realm of the infosphere, freedom would entail having control over what gets concealed or revealed about oneself. Thus, it can be concluded that the Eurocentric paradigm does not fully capture these (and possibly many other) multitudinal dimensions in its notion of freedom. The same inference can be drawn for other ethical principles as well.

Charles Ess's 'Global Information Ethics' seeks to avoid imperialistic homogenization while simultaneously preserving the irreducible differences between cultures and peoples (Ess, 2006). Ess propounds Interpretive *pros hen* ('towards one') ethical pluralism as a common denominator in Eastern as well as Western conceptions of privacy. This kind of pluralism goes beyond purely *modus vivendi* pluralism which leaves tensions and conflicts unresolved and gives rise to a cycle of violence by claiming that different cultures with varying values and life-styles can coexist in a practical world by reaching a rational consensus regarding the best way of life. Interpretive *pros hen* ('towards one') ethical pluralism promotes "positive engagements across our cultural differences that do not require identity that risks suppressing our defining differences" (Ess, 2020, p. 552).

Dialogue is an important tool in the IIE framework. It enables the discourse to answer the challenges of cultural differences and diversity. Such a dialogue is not limited to individuals or collectives interculturally, but can be upscaled interculturally (Elberfeld, 2000). According to *Capurro*, any meaningful, presupposition-less intercultural dialogue on governance and administration of the infosphere can only take place with "*frankness instead of persuasion*" (Capurro, 2006, p. 175). Any attempt of reaching universality sans outreach and engagement with local moral sensibilities is to be done away with.

5. Dialogical Methods In The Current IIE Framework

Dialogue can be engaged in through different ways. In the IIE framework, we come across two foundational approaches. One of them is *Charles Melvin Ess's phronēsis*. According to him, the method of interpretive pluralism and *phronēsis* can be used to engage in positive dialogue with cultures very different from us, without suppressing the differences which define us. The method

of *phronēsis* or practical wisdom as a prerequisite demands cultivation of values that have the potential to bridge deepest cultural divides through open engagements. *Phronēsis* enables the interlocutors to comprehend their commitment to fundamental norms, values, and guidelines irrespective of differences in context and interpretation or application of norms (Ess, 2020). The other method is that of *parrhesía* or free speech, as advanced by Capurro. We think Capurro's notion of free speech (*parrhesía*) can be compared with Buddhist notion of *Right Speech* (*samyak vaçan*) as it appears in Buddha's *Doctrine of Eight Fold Path or Ashtāngamārga*. From a Buddhist perspective, right speech would mean abstention from falsehood, harsh speech, boastfulness and vain verbal indulgences etc. It is one of the right paths through which an individual can attain *nirvāna* (liberation) from the cycle of birth and death. It can also be considered as another tool under the dialogical method.

“According to Foucault, dialogue is a major *parrhesiastic* technique in opposition to a rhetorical or sophistical speech. It is a form of criticism in which the speaker is in a position of inferiority with regard to his interlocutor. The aim of such verbal truth-telling activity is to help other people (or himself) by choosing frankness instead of persuasion.” (Capurro, 2006, p. 175). *Parrhesía* owes its origins to the Greek city-states which were direct democracies and allowed open debates. The methodology presumed the speaker's inferiority and bequeathed citizenship rights only upon adult males. Women, foreigners and slaves were excluded from citizenship rights, and could not partake in the open discourses held in the agora. In this respect, we would like to question the context behind the method of *Parrhesía*. Any method which precludes more than half of a society's population as invalid cannot be universalised. Such an exclusionary framework is unethical by design. Dialogue is an engagement between equals, a *parrhesiastic method* on the other hand, “emerges in the context of asymmetrical power relations” (Weiskopf & Tobias-Miersch, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, how *Parrhesía* transcends the pitfalls of its origin to become a universalisable and other-centric framework remains an unanswered question.

The advent of information technology led to a systemic *digital divide*. It thus became an imperative to develop a praxis which could bridge the digital divide between the digitally empowered and the digitally marginalized ('Other'). Such a method has to be inclusive, other-centric, empathetic, and interculturally informed. This leads us to *Samvād*; as a concept and *praxis*.

6. *Samvād* and the 'Other'; Concept as Praxis

In the Indian tradition, building *Samvāda* ('sam' = equal + 'vāda' = dialogue) between one's own position and that of the others before reaching any conclusion, has been the most fundamental style of philosophising. According to *Vātsyāyana*, the commentator of *Nyāya Sūtra*, any inquiry is initiated because of the existence of *samsaya* or doubt. The reason behind the origin of doubt is the presence of two adversarial positions; thesis or '*pakṣa*' and antithesis or '*pūrvapakṣa*'. The doubt leads to ascertaining the strengths and limitations of both positions, to arrive at a solution for the problem at hand. In a well conducted philosophical inquiry, initial uncertainty paves way for ascertainment of the properties of the things or concepts under consideration. The investigation sanctions the use of data which are irrefutable or are accepted

by all the parties (Ganeri, 2001). *Nyāya* school developed a very systematic approach for elucidating *Pūrvapakṣa*. As per *Vātsyāyana's Nyāyabhāṣya*, the *Nyāya* system follows a three-fold procedure of – *enumeration (uddēsa)*, *definition (lakṣaṇa)* and *examination (parīkṣā)*. Herein, ‘enumeration’ means the act of referring to an object by its name, ‘definition’ denotes any characteristics of the said object which distinguish it from all other objects and ‘examination’ involves verifying the distinguishing feature with the help of *pramānās* (source of knowledge). “The play of the *pakṣa* of self and the other’s *pakṣa (pūrvapakṣa)* is inescapable amidst the *diversity of Indian societies*” (Ali, 2018, p. 451). It is imperative upon those engaging in *Samvād* to remain honest throughout the process. Honest representation of one’s own *Pakṣa* as well as of all possible formulations of *Pūrvapakṣa*, — concealed and revealed — ensures equality during *Samvād*. *Samvād* offers the holders’ of contrary views; an opponent or the ‘*Other*’ — the dignity of acknowledgement, and through it, ascription of validation. In doing so, *Samvād* paves way for mutual assurance of validity and respect. It is only after such an understanding, on the foundation of trust and commutuality, that the differences can be addressed and bridged upon through dialogue or *Samvād*.

It is important to stress that cosmetic uniformity or erasure of differences is not the goal of *Samvād*. Instead, it is about acknowledging differences, positionalities and situatedness of both the ‘*Self*’ and the ‘*Other*’, the ‘*pakṣa*’ and the ‘*pūrvapakṣa*’, with the understanding that co-existence in face of differences is the way forward. And in order to do that, *Samvād* needs to be built. “If we dare to extend the steps in the method to the multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, multi-religious, multi-gender, or multi-ethnic frameworks of Indian societies, we find that every individual has a *pūrvapakṣa* to consider. The *pūrvapakṣa* in actually existing societies is what we call the ‘*Other*’” (Ali, 2018, p. 451).

6.1 *Samvād*; the other-centric ethical method

“The presence of the ‘*Other*’ whether as a person or in the form of contradictory thought is normal to the living and thinking of any society” (Thapar, 2020, p.14). *Samvād* bridges the gap between ‘*Self*’ and the ‘*Other*’ through understanding and openness at its core. It is here that we would like to bring in *Emanuel Levinas's* Other-centric approach to ethics. According to him, moral responsibility can be understood in terms of one’s endeavor to reach out and understand the ‘*Other*.’ For *Levinas* the ‘*Other*’ is irreducible. Dialogue for him becomes an ethical tool through which we can reach out and understand the ‘*Other*’.

It may be noted that the concept of *Samvāda* and the dialogical method of *Levinas* are very different from each other. The difference which is being spoken about is not only that of foundational questions — which they try to resolve — but also of the method. According to *Levinas*, the relevance of the dialogical method can be understood in terms of its ethical ramifications. It is our moral responsibility to participate in dialogue. ‘*Genuine freedom*’ as per *Levinas* lies in our moral responsibility and obligation towards ‘*Other*’ and can be achieved by engaging in dialogue with one’s interlocutors. *Samvāda* on the other hand, is essentially an intellectual device and framework which is rule-governed and makes use of the various tools

from (*Nyāya*) logic to resolve not only complex philosophical problems but also our day to day predicaments. *Muzaffar Ali* states that it is in the dialogical method that a real encounter with the 'Other' takes place and even if one uses the method for the sake of method, it will still have a moral import. Though the dialogical method of *Samvād* emerged as an intellectual logical tool to resolve epistemological issues, it also went on to offer an ethical framework grounded in care and concern for the 'Other'. According to Debīprasād Chattopādhyāya, other-centric ethical perspective of *Samvād* comes out very clearly in the following two preconditions of *Samvād*: “b) An imperative necessity to know, elaborate, and remain honest while conveying (or understanding) the contents of a rival position or one’s ‘Other.’ c) Need to add more arguments in favor of the ‘Other’ by the ‘Self’ sometimes more than its (‘Other’s’) actual representatives. However, it has to be done while adhering to (b)” (Ali, 2018, p. 451).

7. Of Big Picture and Bridges Through *Samvād*

In the prominent discourses of Ethics, promotion of hegemonic values as universal and fit-for-all, displacement and marginalisation of local frameworks and value systems has been a recurring theme. Consequently, leading to a feeling of alienation and voicelessness among the non hegemonic voices. The '*building of bridges*' commences with the simple acknowledgement that the global value system is not a *monolith*. This simple fact could prove effective in fostering intercultural wilfulness to come together and lend an ear to each other, initiating a spark and paving a way forward towards *Samvād*. We would like to emphasise here that *Samvād* is not to be taken as a praxis meant for diluting the irreducible differences between the different cultures, or as a framework which unilaterally imposes one system as a universal standard.

The question that arises next is — do we need to completely do away with universalistic frameworks in favour of more context-specific and workable models? Given the pluralistic nature of our society, there cannot be a blanket generalisation about the ultimate nature of reality. But in our endeavour to keep the irreducible difference between the different cultures intact, is it justifiable to side with a cultural relativist framework? The issue with cultural relativism is that it forecloses any further possibilities including that of *Samvād*. *Modus vivendi pluralism, liberal pluralism and pros hen interpretive pluralism*, on the other hand, enable us to secure irreducible differences between different cultures, but at the cost of assuming a priori presumptions about shared *norms, standards, identities, principles, beliefs, points of reference, points of origin, relations of complementarity*, etc. We assert that every apriori presumption is necessarily grounded in a plethora of metaphysical assumptions. And an open-minded *Samvād* can never truly be undertaken with so much metaphysical baggage at hand.

In our version of ethical pluralism, irreducible differences can be bridged not by taking recourse of shared common grounds but by engaging in honest, empathetic, other-centric *Samvād* which flows and decides its own course. Why do we need to incorporate assumptions about what is shared between two systems in the first place, even before starting the dialogue? Why can't two value systems — hypothetically speaking — coexist side by side with continuous flow of dialogue (*Samvād*) between them? Our ideas embodied in the framework of *Samvād* take a unique approach in that *Samvād* circumvents the need for finding common denominators as

mutually assured shared grounds to foster pluralism. *Samvād* instead proposes an open minded acknowledgement and acceptance of the differences and moving forward nevertheless.

In order to make sure that all the relevant features of varying contexts are taken into consideration, it becomes incumbent upon all parties to undertake *Samvād* at multiple levels before reaching any conclusive decision. Instead of a top down approach to *Samvād*, a bottom up approach can yield better results. Undertaking a local rather than global or a more generalised approach is ideal as it is more rooted in the context and closer to small, local communities. In this very context, Jonathan Dancy's work on *moral particularism* offers useful insights. According to *Dancy*, the moral status of a conceptual schema or an action cannot be determined by absolute or relative moral principles; it can be determined only by evaluating the relevant features of the context which is being deliberated upon. *Dancy* aptly points out that "every consideration is capable of having its practical polarity reversed by changes in context" (*Dancy*, 2015, p. 325). One cannot thereby construe the ultimate nature of reality as either being digital, informational, structural, material etc. by merely casting a prima facie glance. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that such an analysis can be applicable all over any society because there always are local contexts, and fragmented cultural tapestries which oppose wide-scale generalisations.

A fair *pūrvapaksa* to *Samvād* would be about its scale. After all, it is perplexing to think about how to bring different contextual understandings, regional affiliations and diverse interest groups together in a richly diverse democracy like India, for instance? We believe, in India, the ease with which comparative — social, cultural, political — dialogues happen between diverse ethnicities, religious and interest groups, owes its origin to the ancient Indian (*Nyāya*) philosophical tradition of *Samvād*. It has been an intrinsic and abiding force, powering the Indian socio-cultural ethos for centuries. *Muzaffar Ali* asserts that *Samvād* in its true form is clearly palpable in the realm of inter-religious dialogues in India (*Ali*, 2018).

However, we would like to note that the framework of *Samvād* as it exists today — at the national level — is strained because of the abandonment of values like: honesty, mutual respect, good faith and an open-minded, empathetic understanding of each other. These values serve as the ground on which the superstructure of *Samvād* takes root and sustains itself. To further understand the vulnerabilities which could lead *Samvād* to breakage, we bring in two pertinent case studies from India. Through these examples, we analyse the digital *Samvād*; its unfolding, factors causing *fractures*, and what could possibly be done to *repair* the process.

Since antiquity, India has been known as a tolerant society, where citizens have been free to voice their concerns and have conducted *Samvād* with both the State (or equivalent overarching power structures) and their fellow citizens, especially in matters of public interest. However, very recently we witnessed a scenario wherein every possible attempt was made to fracture *Samvād* between its netizens by disrupting and stalling the internet services for five hundred and fifty days in Kashmir ('Statement on long overdue 4G mobile internet restoration in Jammu & Kashmir after 550 days #KeepItOn', 2021). A similar shutdown was imposed near the

borders of Delhi and in Haryana to suppress farmers' protests (Sinha, 2021) It can be argued that communication breakdown in any form leads to *distributive epistemic injustice* and is a gross violation of the *right to freedom* (freedom of expression), *access to information and democratic participation*. These instances of communication shutdown are clearly not in conformity with values and practices of *Samvād*. When faced with any *samsaya* or doubt, *Samvād* has to be carried out by ascertaining the strengths and limitations of *paksa* as well as *pūrvapaksa*. One of the greatest advantages of *Samvād* is that none of the parties engaged in the dialogue feel victimised and aggrieved as the very method has transparency, accountability, empathy and equity embedded in it.

In another recent case, *Whatsapp* decided to change its *Terms of Service (ToS)* in India, in February, 2021. This change would have allowed data sharing of users' metadata between *Whatsapp* and *Facebook*. It is worth noting that *Facebook* acquired *Whatsapp* in 2014. This decision and the unilateral manner in which it was imposing the new *ToS*, did not go down well with its Indian users. *Whatsapp* gave users only two choices; a) to agree, or, b) to discontinue services of the highly popular messaging app. This one sided, unethical and aggressive move led to a mass exodus of users to other messaging apps such as *Signal* and *Telegram*. *Whatsapp* has since delayed the move by three months in order to better communicate its terms with the users. It also posted a blogpost answering FAQs to address the backlash against its privacy policy. At present, it can be said that our data constitutes who we are, at least in the eyes of the power structures which facilitate collection, storage, maintenance and retrieval of data on us and about us. So, when systems/people/entities have so much power that they have unfettered access to our personal data, we inadvertently end up jeopardizing our freedom to act and think freely. Power and information asymmetries in democratic processes lead to one upmanship by governments.

In both the above cases, there are some common denominators such as: lack of transparency, secrecy, mistrust, unilateral decision making without the involvement of all stakeholders, miscommunication, unilateral impositions of decisions, and the digital nature of these issues. If we hypothetically apply *Samvād* to these cases in retrospect, the parties presenting the *paksa* should have started out by considering an entire range of arguments against theirs (*pūrvapaksa*) which would involve the very difficult task of assuming all possible positions and standpoints of stakeholders. In addition, *they* would need to scrutinize the validity and rigour of the arguments of the *paksa* against their counter arguments (*pūrvapaksa*), to arrive at the final thesis or *siddhānt*. More so, we identify two levels at which *Samvād* should have happened in these two cases, beginning with (a). *Concealed* - at the level of policy framing wherein, the counter arguers are absent both physically and digitally. The *Paksa* would also need to adhere to strict self-discipline so as to not undermine the process of *Samvād* and follow the process with integrity, empathy, compassion and humility. And then (b). *Revealed* - at the level of policy implementation and in the presence (physical and / or digital) of the *pūrvapaksa* proponents. *Samvād* at the revealed level can be carried out in both real as well as virtual space.

8. Concluding Remarks

One of the constraints of *Samvāda* is that it expects the enquirer to represent their own position or *paksa* as well as that of all *pūrvapaksa* with utmost integrity, but the expectation of ideal moral conduct in its adherence is a weak point of Samvada. Akin to any conceptual framework, *Samvād* has its limitations too. Nevertheless, *Samvād* can enable us “to cope with dynamism in the world knowledge,...to facilitate better reasoning and inferences over the represented knowledge,...to adapt to addition of necessary information with change in the specification or conceptualization” (Mahalakshmi & Geetha, 2010, p. 14).

Samvād is an uncomplicated framework which can be practiced at any scale. An individual could choose it to form more inclusive, enabling, compassionate, other-centric worldviews. A society could choose it as a framework to conduct an inter-regional or intercultural dialogue to promote amity, understanding and inclusion. A nation could choose the framework in policy formulation, implementation as well as, post implementation feedback mechanism. An intercultural *Samvād* — inter or intra nationally — would foster better cultural and contextual awareness. An interdisciplinary *Samvād* could greatly alter our processes of knowledge-making, make us more informed of our differences, and perhaps more considerate towards the '*Other(s)*' as well as more accommodating in our inferences and conclusions.

Diversity as a default of our world - is a fact. Diverse groups have peacefully co-existed in India for millenia. It is a question worth asking - if this commutuality exists in the Indian ethos because of shared norms or our mutual understanding despite irreducible differences? Moral relativism fails to capture the essence of what mutual understanding as part of the social fabric is capable of accomplishing. Relativism's singular focus on differences and their irreducibility prevents it from giving a holistic view. In *Samvād*, we let our irreducible differences stand. The process of *Samvād* is a living one, it never ceases to be. It at no point tries to dwell on the differences — irreducible or otherwise — from the perspective of reducing or levelling them up to create common grounds. *Samvād* allows us to see our differences and yet come together. In light of our differences, we continue our *Samvād* to figure out ways of coming together and contributing towards our common future. Instead of getting fixated upon a set of apriori principles, we let the context organically decide the mechanics of our inter-relationships as *Samvād* progresses in the due course.

Samvād ultimately aims to bridge the divide between '*Self*' and the '*Other*' rather than blurring or erasing our differences. Differences are intrinsic to *Samvād*. *Samvād* is neither an ultimate nor the only framework of its kind, nor does it downplay, oppose or consider itself superior to others. In fact, any such assumptions would be against its very spirit. This paper analyses and proposes *Samvād* because our analysis finds that in addition to the already discussed positives, it is inclusive by design. It advocates for those on the margins, fights erasure, challenges established/dominant narratives and shakes us out of our comfort zones into acceptance, humility and co-existence. It not just acknowledges but also syncretizes and mainstreams the '*Other*' before the '*Self*'. And in doing so it heralds a new approach to conducting both *Philosophy* and *Dialogue*. *Samvād* with its abiding commitment to mutual co-existence in face of all differences, perseveres to build bridges through open-minded, honest,

flexible, fluidic, and other-centric dialogue. Cutting across geographies and intellectual traditions, it makes no claims of superiority at any juncture and remains resolutely devoted to looking beyond troublesome dichotomous thinking with either/or choices. And in doing this, *Samvād* departs from colonising, mono-cultural, patronizing, generalising, non-pluralistic and dogmatic approaches and frameworks.

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