

## CULTURAL CONFIGURATIONS OF VALUES

*All cultures are infused by or even rooted in certain values. Although those values are generally recognised in all societies, they are diversely ranked or prioritised in different human groups and different perceptions partly account for cultural diversity as not all values can be equally upheld in any community or by any individual. Though value universalism in a strict sense is unachievable, we can all agree on a pluralistic mutual understanding of and tolerance for diversity.*

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This article develops a pluralist understanding of cultural diversity, which may be called “culture as a configuration of values”. It has the following components:

1. Primary human values that are similar across cultures.
2. Some of these primary values conflict or compete with one another.
3. Conflicting values are configured in ways appropriate to circumstances in society. An important aspect of cultural difference is that even though cultures have primary values in common, they may not give the same weight to these values.
4. In the world and sometimes within the same society, more than one value configuration can be justified and different value configurations are likely to persist. Cultures and societies change over time, but they may never come to uniformity on a universal configuration of values.

According to this view, a moderate moral universalism can be justified with respect to its claim that various societies share similar moral values and a moderate moral relativism can be justified with respect to its claim that more than one pattern of moral practices can be justified. This phenomenon can be explained in terms of different configurations of similar values. As far as values are concerned, human

beings across cultures are both similar and diverse, in different ways. While we share enough commonality to work with one another, we also have legitimate grounds in value configurations for cultural diversity. Understanding this important dimension of culture is crucial for handling cultural differences and for the peaceful coexistence of cultures in today's world.

#### HUMAN VALUES

The nature and ontological status of values is a subject of philosophical debate. Some people hold that values are subjective, while others think they are objective. Some values are considered intrinsic, while others are considered instrumental. Some values are moral, while others are amoral, such as economic and aesthetic values. This article establishes an understanding of values at a general level without getting into these disputes. Although it mainly focuses on moral values, the general theory developed, applies to non-moral values as well (Grice, 1991 and Wiggins, 1987).

Values are represented in concepts that stand for ideals and what are considered worthwhile in life. They guide and motivate people's pursuits. Values are not specific goods that people acquire—they are the reasons underlying people's pursuits of those goods. For example, someone gives to charity because he holds that generosity is a good value and that poverty and misery are not. When we praise a person's action as courageous, we use the value of "courage" to evaluate the action and to encourage similar actions. Values are connected in various ways and may be called the knots in the web of practical reasoning. For instance, kindness, compassion and generosity are related concepts. We often call the embodiment of a value in a person "virtue", that is, a trait which instantiates a value or values. What is considered virtuous reflects the values in a culture.

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The first claim of this article is that, in general terms, primary human values are similar across cultures. One difficulty in cross-cultural studies of values is that value terms used in different cultures are not precise. Values as formulated in particular cultures are not “natural kinds” and do not conform to a universal mould. To avoid unnecessary disputes, one may say that values across cultures are “similar” rather than the “same” even though some may accept a stronger claim that primary human values across cultures are the same. This first claim also holds true with subcultures, though this article does not draw a line between cultures and subcultures. Understandably, some may find this claim sweeping and in need of empirical evidence, which can be found in studies such as the World Values Survey by Ronald F. Inglehart, University of Michigan (available at, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>). This

**Values are not specific goods that people acquire—they are the reasons underlying people’s pursuits of those goods.** article is not an empirical study but for the sake of argument, the first claim may be treated as a hypothesis and its validity understood in the context of the entire thesis. Nevertheless, some reasons in

support of its plausibility include the fact that primary human values are similar across cultures because human values answer to human needs and basic human needs, in general terms, are similar across cultures. The particular forms of these needs may be culture-specific. Most Chinese desire tea whereas many Americans drink coffee; the poor in a mountain village somewhere may rely on sweet potatoes as their main source of food whereas people in Europe routinely eat wheat or beef; while some people see priests for their psychological needs, others see psychiatrists. However, basic needs remain the same in general terms and basic human values respond to those needs.

We may call the basic values “primary values”. This essay does not set a specific scope for primary human values. Suffice it to say that these are a cluster of high-order common values one would associate with the good life, such as “knowledge”, “kindness”, “health”, “wealth”, “bravery”, “friendship”, “respect”, “temperance”, “strength”, “liberty”, etc. Primary values are expressed in terms of general concepts and are not culture-specific, even though they can be translated into culturally specific terms. In a way, primary values are comparable to Michael Walzer’s “thin”

moral ideals, which he argues are universal (Michael, Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Alternatively, this view resembles that of David Hume, who argues in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Part II, Section II, 1751) that social virtues are recognised because of their beneficial tendencies to promote the interests of the human species and to bestow happiness on human society.

The first claim can be supported by the theory of evolution, which maintains that human beings are biological beings that have evolved to this day, that as a biological species we have no higher purpose than survival and that our basic activities can be explained, directly or indirectly, in terms of this sole ultimate purpose. According to this view, human beings' basic biological and psychological needs are formed through the same evolution process and therefore these needs are the same or similar across societies. Without these needs being satisfied, the human species will not be able to survive and they are the ultimate sources of human values. We value bravery because bravery enables us to protect our kin or ourselves. An evolutionary biologist once stated that humans value the beauty in flowers because flowers were sources of food for our ancestors. Blossoming wild flowers are themselves edible or are usually found along with other plants that can be used as food.

This, however, does not mean that every individual or group across cultures embraces all these values. Some individuals have blind spots in their value framework for various reasons. They are "abnormal" in society. A serial killer may not value respect for human life. An extreme loner may not value friendship. People of a particular school of thought may not value wealth. However, a society as a whole cannot have blind spots about primary values, though it may rank a value considerably lower than another society. Nor can one deny that social practices vary from culture to culture. Some of these differences can be explained by divergent applications of values. The same values may be manifest in different ways. In one

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society, being a good community member (a primary value) implies attending church regularly, while in another it does not. In one culture, parents take their sick children to medical doctors whereas in another parents take them to *shamans* for religious rituals. Nevertheless, parents in both societies share the value of their children's health, even though they pursue it in different ways. Other differences in the realisation of values are mostly explained in terms of different assessments of the worthiness of a practice in pursuit of values. To many people, bullfighting in

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Spain is cruel. One may ask how can people value animal cruelty? A reasonable explanation is that people in Spain do not value animal cruelty—they value sportsmanship, bravery, national spirit, entertainment and their cultural tradition. In bullfighting, they see these values that they share with the rest of the world, more than the suffering of the animal. They may not deny that bullfighting causes pain to the animal, but they see it as minimal and worthwhile, given the positive values

realised in practising this ritual sport. Therefore, different moral practices across cultures do not prove that cultures do not share primary values.

#### COMPETING AND CONFLICTING VALUES

The second claim is that some primary values conflict or at least compete with each other. Isaiah Berlin in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Henry Hardy (Ed), New York: Alfred A Knopf, p 12, 1991) argues, "values can clash". This is because values are vectorial. If we imagine a moral space with values in it, each of these values carries both a force and a direction with respect to one another. This vectorial character of values prompts a person to act in a certain way. Because some values compete on the same dimension, they may conflict with one another. Each value points in a direction for a person to act.

When a person acts in one direction, he or she cannot act in another direction with equal force. For example, a person's own freedom and loyalty to someone else may conflict. "Freedom" and "loyalty" are valued in all societies, even though the ways and degrees in which they are practiced vary considerably. Some people may not feel the tension or conflict between individual liberty and loyalty and can freely choose to be loyal to someone. However, as long as loyalty holds one from breaking away, there will be a tension between these values. Suppose Peter has served a political leader Larry for a long time and after a successful career, Larry is slowing down and Peter is thinking about starting his own operation. As Larry has treated Peter well and clearly still needs his assistance, Peter is torn in opposite directions— "loyalty" to Larry and "freedom" for himself. Another example is that one cannot live a life full of exciting adventures as well as a life of safety and tranquillity. This kind of conflict exists in a person as well as in society. According to Berlin (*ibid*), "total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted. ... Equality may demand the restraint of the liberty of those who wish to dominate".

Some values conflict because they compete for time and resources in their realisation. Just as one may find it impossible to develop fully both one's scholarship and athletic potentials, one may find it difficult to be a responsible caring mother to one's children and at the same time, a "Mother Teresa" to help the poor all over the world. In *Four Essays on Liberty*, (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p 168, 1969) Berlin writes, "The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others".

Conflicts of values generate moral dilemmas, which are situations where one is caught in an action that intersects with two or more seemingly equally important

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values and pursuing one value undermines the pursuit of another. In “From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value” (*Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol 30, No 1 pp 3–26, 2001) Bernard Williams discusses the notion of “a cost in liberty”—in the interests of equality or justice, sometimes we have to put restrictions on liberty. It can be argued that there is a cost in any value within a value system. When we allow a large degree of free speech, there is a cost in other values such as public decency. Recent debates in the United States on allowing unlimited internet access at public libraries (including access to pornography) illustrate one such example. Lifestyle, thrift and elegance may pull us in opposite directions—one may incur a cost on the other. These costs occur because values are related in such a way that they compete for space within a value framework.

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While many authors agree with Berlin that values conflict (Charles Taylor, “Plurality of Goods”, Bernard Williams, “Liberalism and Loss” and Thomas Nagel, “Pluralism and Coherence” in Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin and Robert Silvers, *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, New York: New York Review of Books, 2001) others deny

such conflict. Ronald Dworkin (“Do Liberal Values Conflict?” in Lilla, Dworkin, and Silvers, *ibid*) argues that liberal values do not conflict if articulated in the right way and instead of writing a blank cheque on liberty, liberals should define liberty as a specific kind of right with its own limits. Thus, Dworkin sees the need to define liberty with “limits” precisely because liberty conflicts with other values. We need to assign these values their proper places, otherwise these values will step on each other. Dworkin sometimes seems to imply that values may conflict as one value may be “overridden by other values” (*Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, p 2, 2000). The very idea of a possibility for one value overriding another implies that these values compete on the same dimension and can conflict with one another.

## VALUE CONFIGURATION

As individuals we deal with value conflicts one decision at a time. We appeal to our moral philosophy as formulated in our culture for guidance, but how does culture handle conflicting values. Obviously, if society is to retain all good values they have to be brought together in a meaningful way. This is achieved through the formation of a value pattern within a culture. Value patterns reflect the established relationships between various values, including competing and conflicting values. This third claim is the process of knotting various values together into a value pattern “value configuration”. This is a complex, long and on-going process, through which values are prioritised and organised in a systematic way to reach what is deemed an ideal balance of values in a particular culture. Value configuration consists of two modules. First, values are ranked with respect to one another through prioritisation. Differing cultures do not prioritise values the same way. For example, one culture may hold loyalty to be a higher value than individual freedom whereas another culture may hold otherwise, even though they both endorse these values. While Confucianism places the observance of the general rules of *li* (propriety) above spontaneity, Daoism arguably does the opposite. Second, value configuration also indicates how much priority or importance one value is assigned *vis-à-vis* other values. It is possible that two cultures both hold value *x* to be more important than value *y*, yet they may disagree on how much importance separates these two values. This separation of values admits degrees. For example, in the US, freedom of speech is arguably given more importance *vis-à-vis* public decency than in many other countries.

Placing one value above another does not necessarily mean that one value always “trumps” another. For example, Confucians hold that one’s duty to parents is more important than one’s duty to a job. This, however, does not mean a person cannot do anything else whenever there is a conflict between his duty to his parents and his duties on the job. It depends on circumstances, on how much stake each side has in an action, etc. If the parents want to watch a movie together while the person needs to attend an important meeting at work, a reasonable Confucian would say the person should attend the meeting. However, if the parents need to be taken to hospital because they are not well, then perhaps the meeting can be skipped. This is



similar to saying that although gold is more precious than silver, the value of one hundred ounces of silver still outweighs that of one ounce of gold. The point is that when there is an ultimate conflict, between the sacrifice of one's parents and the sacrifice of one's job, the Confucian value configuration tends towards fulfilling one's duty to one's parents.

A configuration of values represents a conception, vision and ideal of a good life. It is a systematised, conceptual response to society's needs to survive and flourish. Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (Second Edition, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p 222, 1984) speaks of tradition as an argument "about the goods which constitute that tradition". While articulating a particular value configuration, a cultural tradition provides rationales as to why certain values are important or more important than others. As a conception, value configuration cannot be precisely quantified. Relationships between values in a value configuration

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are usually loosely established. Different cultures may share a similar value configuration while manifesting it in different customary forms. Anthropological studies reveal different customary cultural forms as embodiments of values and comparative moral philosophy sheds light on

different value configurations. Attempts to articulate, justify, or reform a value configuration can be found in moral philosophy as well as in the social sciences. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is a good example of value configuration, so is John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). Researches in the social sciences such as the World Values Survey give a good idea of different value configurations across cultures and reflect existing or emerging value configurations in societies. Often in the same society, there exists more than one value system and hence more than one configuration of values. This is the case when a general culture encompasses subcultures. In ancient China there were value configurations represented by Confucianism and Daoism. In the US today, to some extent the debate between liberalism and communitarianism represents different configurations of values.

Value configuration is not a conscious decision by the people of a society. It is a spontaneous process, usually influenced by factors such as geographical circumstances and historical contingencies. People in harsh environments may value endurance as an important virtue, as it is crucial for them to survive and flourish, while people of a hunting society may place a high value on physical strength. A powerful and charismatic leader may seize a historic moment to articulate a new value configuration and change the direction of a nation. The September 11 terrorist attacks in the US provided an occasion for Americans to shift their value focus towards security and social control at the cost of individual liberty. If terrorism against the US persists, this shift in value configuration may become long-term. This is an example of the reconfiguration of values.

Different cultures are usually embedded with different value configurations. Ancient Greek philosophers gave prominence to wisdom, courage, moderation and justice among their primary values. Confucians put *ren* (benevolence), righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness at the centre of their culture. It would be a mistake for us to think that the Greeks simply did not value benevolence, or the

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Confucians did not value justice. They did but they ranked these values differently from their counterparts. Similarly, it is not that the communitarians today do not value individual liberty—they do but not to the same degree as the liberals, or the libertarians. In addition, it is not that the libertarians do not value equality, they do but not to the same degree as the communitarians. One may wonder if it would have been better if the Greeks had valued love and care more or if the Confucians had valued justice more? Would it be better if the communitarians valued individual liberty more and the libertarians valued equality more? After all, all agree that these values are good values. The answer is, yes—they could value these respective values more, but not without affecting their prioritisation of values and the weight they give other values. As varieties of values in a culture are configured together, the assigned weight of each value is not independent of others. Therefore, increasing

the allocation of importance for one value inevitably affects the share given to other values.

The inevitable cost of pursuing one value incurring in other values makes it impossible to have absolute values. While people may think some values like human life are absolute, they are not. Millions of people die of AIDS or cancer each year. If society invests more to enhance medical research, many lives may be saved. However, there will be a cost in doing so, in economic as well moral terms. It would interfere with other important things that we also value. Many people think that the value of human rights is absolute. It is not. It is a severe violation of human rights when we send innocent people to prison for crimes they have not

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committed. Yet it happens. If we as a society invest more in training our police force and legal personnel better, we could significantly reduce this type of human rights violations, but we do not do so. This is not because we do not value innocent people's human rights. It is mostly because there would be a cost to other things we also value.

We also want national security, assistance to the poor, better healthcare and so forth. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, rhetoric among American politicians is that "no cost is too high for national security". They are wrong—the cost for national security can be too high. This is because the value in security has a cost that can interfere with other important things that are valued, which we are not willing to go beyond the limit for. In value configurations, some values are taken as significantly more important than others, but there is no single value that "trumps" all other values in absolute terms.

The characteristics and vitality of a value system lie in its specific value configuration that answers to the particular needs of a society. This is why synthesising value systems, is not always the best way for cultural improvement. Berlin in *Four Essays on Liberty* (*ibid*) maintains, "the very concept of an ideal life, a life in which nothing of value need ever be lost or sacrificed, in which all rational (or virtuous, or

otherwise legitimate) wishes must be capable of being truly satisfied—this classical vision is not merely utopian, but incoherent”.

It is incoherent because some primary values necessarily conflict and we cannot satisfy one without negatively affecting others. For example, one may think that the Daoist emphasis on spontaneity is a good thing as is the Confucian emphasis on observance of the general rules of *li* (propriety) and one may want to have both. However, as a value system configured in a certain way, it can be either weightier on spontaneity or on observance of general rules, or weigh both equally. There cannot be a value configuration that makes both a priority to each other. In this sense, a Confucian–Daoist value configuration is a contradiction. It is not impossible to produce a value configuration that stands between Confucianism and Daoism. However, such a system would be neither Confucian nor Daoist and would lack the strengths and characteristics of either system.

Reforming a culture involves changes in its value configuration. This is usually accomplished through intra-cultural dialogues and controversies.

One important aspect of Martin Luther’s Reformation Movement was that by challenging Papal authority, Luther shifted the source of authority away from the papacy to individual believers. In other words, one consequence of Luther’s movement was to value centralised power less—which in Christianity was the papacy—and to value local and individual self-determination more. When Confucius first articulated his humanistic vision, he made *ren* (benevolence) a central value against such values as (military) strength. Besides changes in value configuration, another important aspect of cultural change is changing symbolisms, namely the change of customary forms through which pursuits of values are manifested. That is a subject study mainly for anthropologists.

The mutual cost between values is often overlooked. In their attempt to “improve” a cultural tradition, people sometimes elevate a value to a higher status to meet new challenges. This is done through the introduction of a new or “foreign” value, even though the “new” value is usually a re-articulation of a native value that

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so far had been placed low in its value configuration. In doing so, while they see the positive side of the change, they are usually oblivious of the “cost” in other values involved in the change. For example, when the Song-Ming Neo-Confucians made Confucianism more universalistic, there was a cost to the family-centredness of Classic Confucianism. Another example is the current attempt to democratise Confucianism. Some authors have tried to elevate “democratic values” within Confucianism, like William Theodore de Bary (*The Liberal Tradition in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). This move carries an inherent cost to other traditional values and if overdone, may undermine the vitality of the traditional Confucian value system.

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vendor’s fallacy”. Growing up in a mountain village in northeast China, I used to attend farmers’ market with my grandfather. One day, we were looking for a bed mat made of crop stalk skins, diagonally woven together into a rectangle shape. Because of this their length and width was not strictly fixed. At the market, we found one vendor with mats of good quality but his mats were not long enough for us. In an attempt to sell us his mats, the vendor held one side of the mat and shook it—

the mat became longer. When my grandfather pointed out that now it did not have adequate width, the vendor simply turned the mat by ninety degrees and shook it again—the mat became wider. I laughed at the vendor. Perhaps he was so eager to sell his mats that he did not realise that he could not have it both ways. Some authors today often remind me of that mat vendor. The fact is that democratising Confucianism has a cost and the cost to the Confucian traditional values may be too exacting. If we cannot have it both ways within a value system, we need to decide which way to take.

In today's world, moral disagreements across cultures are more on the priority of values than on values *per se* and divergent configurations of values across cultures, rather than values *per se*, are the primary source of today's resistance to moral universalism. The issue of human rights is a good example. While first-generation human rights emphasise social and political rights, second-generation human rights give equal weight to economic and cultural rights. Some advocates of first-generation rights reject or downplay the legitimacy of second-generation rights and *vice versa*. Most people accept the value of both rights even though they disagree on their prioritisations or importance. Article 10 of the 1993 Bangkok Declaration of Human Rights reaffirms, "the interdependence and indivisibility of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and the need to give equal emphasis to all categories of human rights".

Balanced as it is, this configuration of values (rights) does not give as much priority to social and political rights as advocates of first-generation human rights do. Even though sometimes people misjudge or overlook the values

of certain practices and may change their evaluations, it is undeniable that cross-cultural moral disagreements are often caused by differences in the priorities of values in different value systems. This can also be said about tensions and conflicts between the justice and care perspective in ethics. These two ethics share similar values, but different configurations—while justice ethics prioritise justice, care ethics prioritise care (Li, 2008).

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#### THE PERSISTENCE OF DIFFERING VALUE CONFIGURATIONS

The fourth claim is that more than one value configuration can be justified and different value configurations are likely to persist. The persistence of diverse value configurations can be explained and justified by two accounts. First, there are different configurations of values in part because configuring a value system is not

a purely logical process. Value configuration is never determined by reason alone but by various other factors including sentiment and tradition. Rationalists argue that reason is the foundation of moral values. According to Immanuel Kant, one should be able to form morals on the sole basis of reason. That rationalism contains at least a grain of truth can be seen from the fact that we often reason with ourselves and with one another to establish a moral path. An American philosopher once stated that after reading Peter Singer's powerful argument on animal liberation (*Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New

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York Review/Random House, 1975) she quit eating meat. The power of reason in moral value formation is evident and the rational approach to moral values may be found in many cultures. The Golden Rule is an example. Even though emotions may also be involved in practicing the Golden Rule, it primarily relies on reason to figure out the appropriate course of action (Jeffrey Wattles, 1996). One may be inclined to do one thing, but deliberation on the Golden Rule may lead one to do another.

Sentimentalists, on the other hand, believe that our sentiments or feelings determine our moral values. For example, David Hume in "Moral Distinctions not Deriv'd from Reason", *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Part I, Section I, 1739–40) argues that ultimately it is how we feel that determines moral rights and wrongs. Hume holds that rules of morality "are not conclusions of our reason" and that "'tis in vain to pretend, that morality is discover'd only by a deduction of reason". Furthermore, reason cannot motivate moral and virtuous behaviours either, because reason is "inactive in itself" and "reason has no influence on our passions and action". Sentimentalism can find support as one reflects on one's own morals. We often follow our instinctive feelings in making moral decisions, even though our feelings are shaped and influenced by our social environment. One example is the issue of abortion. The rational approach rarely works in changing a person's position on abortion. In the end, it is how one feels about it that determines one's position and

our feelings toward the matter are largely formed by our upbringing and shaped by our environment.

Traditionalists believe that our morals are formed within traditions. MacIntyre maintains that without tradition, one would not be able to determine the moral and the virtuous. He argues that the histories of individual agents can be understood only within a setting in which they are situated. Otherwise, a history of the human agent becomes “unintelligible” (*After Virtue, ibid*, p 206–7). For him, an individual’s life is a part of a tradition. Only within the context of a tradition can the goods be defined and pursued (*ibid*, p 222).

MacIntyre writes: “we need to discover a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of the same tradition” (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p 7, 1988). Accordingly, tradition is the source and the home of rationality. Different traditions have different rationalities or “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue, ibid*, p 222). For traditionalists, therefore, rationality is constituted within tradition.

The truth is that human values are shaped and reshaped by all three elements—reason, sentiment and tradition. We reason with people to make them realise that certain things are more important than others. We react to a situation of moral significance according to how we feel about it and living within a tradition, we inherit values from earlier generations and transform and pass them on to future generations. Our value formation, though changing over time, is a result of all three processes. Besides reason, sentiments and tradition, we can also add such factors as geographical conditions and particular historical events. All these factors involved in value configuration make the existence of diverse value patterns natural, Globalisation has significantly increased cross-cultural influences on value

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configuration, but it does not eliminate local factors. People of various cultural traditions may reason in different ways. They may feel differently about certain things and follow different trajectories in perpetuating their traditions. Diverse value configurations are most likely to continue. The persistence of different value systems can also be explained by another important element of the moral life, namely the indeterminacy of value efficacy in human affairs with respect to our moral decisions. This means that because of the complexity and uncertainty in human affairs, configured values do not always determine the outcomes of human actions even though we act in pursuit of these values. Due to this indeterminacy, it is virtually impossible to prove a value configuration to be superior to others, except in extreme cases.

Philosophers like Plato searched for certainty in human life. In his realm of Reality, Forms “blended” (or “configured”) together in a logical way like mathematical symbols. In the *Sophist*, through the mouth of the Stranger, Plato tells us that Forms blend together like the letters of the alphabet for which grammar governs

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which letters can and cannot be conjoined (253a). For Forms, logic governs which are consonant and which are incompatible with one another (*Sophist*, 253c). The correct blending of Forms constitutes the hierarchical structure of the reality of Forms. A philosopher’s job is to determine the

science or logic of the blending of Forms, the most important being that of Dialectic. Two things should be noted with Plato’s realm of Forms. First, according to him there is only one correct way of Form-blending and the hierarchical structure of the Forms is ultimately ruled by the Good. Second, Plato does not make a distinction between fact and value in his realm of Forms. What is said of facts can also be said of values. Consequently, for Plato there is one correct way of systemising values in the realm of Forms or a single correct way of value-configuration. This uniquely correct value-configuration is the basis for his idea of grasping the *technè* for the moral life. In the *Protagoras* Plato shows us that to rule out *tuchè* or luck in life, human learning should aim at grasping the *technè*. This is the knowledge and

skill that enables an individual to systematically manage one's life. In other words, because there is one objectively correct value-configuration, the moral person must know such a reality and manage one's life accordingly.

Plato is wrong not only because there is no realm of Forms but also because there is no one objectively correct value-configuration. We humans cannot escape uncertainty in our moral lives. Often we choose to do certain things, particularly something moral, because we want to produce desirable outcomes. However, often we do not know if our actions will produce the desired outcomes, particularly in the long run. If a student fails to get into law school and feels bad about it, should he keep trying? If he stops trying, he may miss the train and ruin his future as a good lawyer. However, if he gives it up, it may turn out to be a good thing as he may find a better niche in the world for himself and lead a happy life. Thomas Nagel in "Moral Luck" (Daniel Statman (Ed), *Moral Luck*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p 61, 1993) identifies decisions under uncertainty as one sort of moral luck. "Moral luck" here refers to the unpredictability and uncertainty of the outcomes of our moral actions (for discussions of moral luck in a broad sense, see Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, New York: Cambridge University Press 1981 and Statman, *ibid*). This is not the sense in which Aristotle uses the term, for whom moral luck includes one's birth, physical appearance and even the kind of children one has. Nagel's concern is mainly with moral responsibility and worthiness but moral luck has further implications. Because uncontrollable factors contribute to the outcomes of our actions, whether a moral choice is good or bad for the expected outcome depends at least in part on luck.

**Because we are human and because there is moral luck in our lives, we have to struggle and waver between various values and sometimes between value systems.**

Because of moral luck, we cannot possibly find one particular value system that best answers all our moral questions. For example if a wife finds her husband becoming an abusive alcoholic, one option for her is to stay in the marriage and try to save it by helping her husband change for the better—another option is divorce. She is likely to hear different voices in her head. One voice comes from moral values such as commitment, relationship, family responsibility to the children,

love and so forth. Another voice comes from values such as independence, autonomy, liberty and freedom. These voices pull her in opposite directions, even though they are all good values. What should she do? Which voice should she listen to? If she listens to the first voice, she will stay in the marriage, at least for a while. The husband may reform himself and the couple may live happily ever after, or it may be just a waste of the woman's time. By choosing to stay in the marriage, she may end up suffering more and missing major opportunities for a better life. If she listens to the second voice, she may get away from her incurably abusive husband

**All major cultural traditions that have endured the test of time are well balanced to answer human needs, even though they do so in different ways.**

and start a new and better life, or she may lose the chance to save an otherwise salvageable marriage and cause tremendous hardship and pain to herself and her children. Utilitarian calculus based on statistics does not help here because each situation is different. Most

of us would agree that it is unadvisable for her to divorce her husband the first time he got drunk and called her names. Most of us would also think it unwise to stay in the marriage trying to change him after a prolonged period of abuse. If she wants a divorce right away under the name of individual freedom when her husband starts to be abusive, we may want her to listen more to the voice of commitment, relationship and family responsibility. If she does not get out of the marriage under the name of commitment even after a long period of abuse, we may want her to listen more to the voice of individual freedom and autonomy. If this happens in a society, where there are two predominant configurations of values—one a kind of liberalism and the other a kind of communitarianism—the system of the liberal-oriented configuration would encourage her to get out of the marriage earlier than the one that is communitarian-oriented.

In reality, most people would need to make a decision somewhere between too early and too late. Which voice should the woman listen to more? Because of moral luck, there is no perfect formula for one to follow. Suppose the woman is at the mid-point of being too early and being too late, which of the competing voices should she listen to? While a "liberal" would say that she should listen to the second voice and get out of the marriage, a "conservative" would say that she should listen

to the first voice and try to salvage the marriage. Who is right? This is often determined more by luck than by the legitimacy of moral values. The matter here is not only one of a desirable outcome but also of getting things right. In other words, one does not have to depend on a utilitarian presupposition of the moral good to deliberate on whether the woman should or should not seek a divorce from her abusive husband.

Because of value indeterminacy, we cannot know for sure which value or value system will lead us to the desired outcome in a particular case. In one case, listening to the liberal voice may produce a good outcome, while in another the communitarian voice may produce a good result. Following one value in a moral dilemma may not always lead to the

desired outcome. If that were the case, one single moral value system would have won the day long ago. Because we are human and because there is moral luck in our lives, we have to struggle and waver between various

**An instrumentalist view of value configurations may be best, in which the good or bad is more a matter of efficacy rather than truth or falsity.**

values and sometimes between value systems. The Chinese have long been known for practicing Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism simultaneously. They subscribe to different value systems alternately. Understanding the role of moral luck in people's moral decision-making process may help us make better sense of such a practice.

Because of value indeterminacy, we cannot possibly find one single value system that answers all our moral questions. However, this is not to say that all value configurations are equally valid. Extreme value configurations, like the one Friedrich Nietzsche outlined, would neither facilitate human survival nor get a hold of society nor last. Consequently, all major cultural traditions that have endured the test of time are well balanced to answer human needs, even though they do so in different ways. In this regard, Charles Taylor writes, "it is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time—that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable—are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even if it is

accomplished by much that we have to abhor and reject” (Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp 72–3, 1994).

An instrumentalist view of value configurations may be best, in which the good or bad is more a matter of efficacy rather than truth or falsity. Because value configuration is heavily influenced by local factors such as tradition and historical events, differing value configurations can be justified under different circumstances and are likely to persist.

#### CONCLUSION

Finally, if this account of cultural value plurality is correct, the world may never come to accept one single value configuration. The tremendous success of the West in the last century has made people wonder whether humankind has finally come to “the end of history”. In other words, humankind has finally realised that the Western liberal democratic value configuration is the only viable value system

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for the entire humankind and this values system will be embraced throughout the world (Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *National Interest*, Vol 16, pp 3–18, 1989). If this means the entire world will come to accept the same value configuration—this will not happen. Circumstances that influence value configurations can never be uniform across the world. Diverse geographical,

social and historical circumstances provide conditions for value diversity and make it impossible for there to be one single value configuration to suit the needs of all peoples under diverse social and cultural circumstances. Cultures change over time, but they do not change in the same direction and in the same way. Therefore, they may never come to a consensus on a universal configuration of values.

The world is large enough for a variety of value configurations. If cultures with divergent value configurations do not converge into one single configuration, what

do they do as they encounter one another? According to John Gray “Conflicts between incommensurate ways of life are settled by achieving a *modus vivendi* between them” (“Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company” in Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (Eds), *Pluralism: The Philosophical and Politics of Diversity*, London and New York: Routledge, pp 85–102, 2000). The status of *modus vivendi* is one that different ways of life or value configurations put up with one another even though they do not agree on important issues. One such example is Confucianism and the value system of liberal democracy. As long as Confucianism does not provide a better alternative to the democratic way of producing public officials through popular election, it has to accept it as a reality, even though it sees liberal democracy as seriously flawed.

According to Berlin, we should have learned this lesson long ago from romanticism. “(A)s a result of making clear the existence of a plurality of values, as a result of driving wedges into the notion of the classical ideal, of the single answer to all questions, of the *rationalisability* of everything, of the answerability of all questions, of the whole jigsaw-puzzle conception of life, (romantics) have given prominence to and laid emphasis upon the incompatibility of human ideals”.

He concludes, “But if these ideals are incompatible, then human beings sooner or later realize that they must make do, they must make compromises, because if they seek to destroy others, others will seek to destroy them and so, as a result of this passionate, fanatical, half-mad doctrine, we arrive at an appreciation of the necessity of tolerating others, the necessity of preserving an imperfect equilibrium in human affairs, the impossibility of driving human beings so far into the pen which we have created for them, or into the single solution which possesses us, that they will ultimately revolt against us, or at any rate be crushed by it” (*The Roots of Romanticism*, Henry Hardy (Ed), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p 147, 1999).

We should now finally understand that the vitality of cultures should not be underestimated. If cultural value configurations are largely legitimate, the only way to reach and maintain world peace is to find ways for cultures to co-exist with one another. ❧