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DID THE PEDESTRIAN DIE? ETHICS ACROSS CULTURES.

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Abstract

This article shows how different cultures might define integrity and ethical behavior differently. These definitions might work in a single culture but what to do when cultures meet in multi-cultural environments? Billions of people in all cultures, all organizations, all institutions agree the greatness of leaders having in common being respected across cultures and institutions. Indeed they have integrity, the art of creating wholeness through bridging opposites. In this article it is suggested is that integrity is creating wholeness through the integration of opposites. Something not taught at educational institutions.

Key words: culture, ethics, integrity

Many readers who have seen and heard me at one of my conference presentations will immediately understand the title of this article: Did the Pedestrian Die?¹

The story that follows, created by Americans Stouffer and Toby², is an exercise used in our workshops. It takes the form of a dilemma that measures universal and particularist responses.

You are riding in a car driven by a close friend. He hits a pedestrian. You know he was going at least 35 miles per hour in an area of the city where the maximum allowed speed is 20 miles per hour. There are no witnesses. His lawyer says that if you testify under oath that he was driving only 20 miles per hour, it may save him from serious consequences. What right has your friend to expect you to protect him?

- A. My friend has a definite right as a friend to expect me to testify to the lower figure.
- B. He has some right as a friend to expect me to testify to the lower figure.
- C. He has no right as a friend to expect me to testify to the lower figure.

What do you think you would do in view of the obligations of a sworn witness and the obligation to your friend?

- D. Testify that he was going 20 miles an hour.
- E. Not testify that he was going 20 miles an hour.

Figure 1. shows the result of putting these questions to a variety of nationalities. The percentage represents those who answered that the friend had no right or some right and would then not testify (C or B + E). North Americans and most north Europeans emerge as almost totally universalist in their approach to the problem. The proportion falls to less than 75 percent for the French and Japanese, while in Venezuela two-thirds of respondents would lie to the police to protect their friend. Time and again in our workshops, the universalists' response is that as the seriousness of the accident increases, the obligation to help their friend decreases. They seem to be saying to themselves, "The law was broken, and the serious condition of the pedestrian underlines the importance of upholding the law." This attitude suggests that universalism is rarely used to the exclusion of particularism, rather that it forms

¹ Trompenaars Fons, Did the Pedestrian Die? Capstone; 1 edition (March 14, 2003)

² Stouffer, S.A. and J. Toby. 1951. "Role conflict and personality." *American Journal of Sociology*. 56: 395:406.

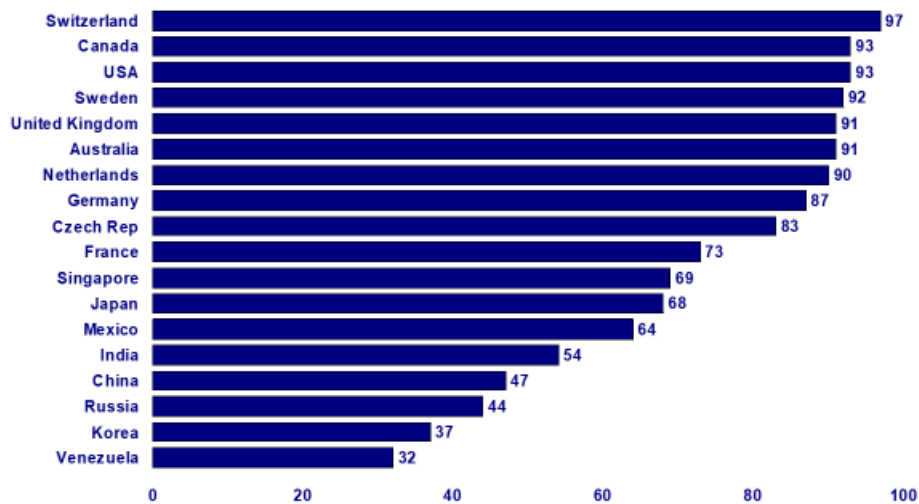
the first principle in the process of moral reasoning. Particular consequences remind us of the need for universal laws.

Particularist cultures, however, are rather more likely to support their friend as the pedestrian’s injuries increase. They seem to reason, “My friend needs my help more than ever now that he is in serious trouble with the law.” Universalists would regard such an attitude as corrupt and unethical. What if we all started to lie on behalf of those close to us? Society would fall apart. There is merit to this argument, but particularism, which is based on a logic of the heart and human friendship, may also be the chief reason that citizens would not break laws in the first place. Do you love your children or present them with a copy of the civil code? And what if the law becomes a weapon in the hands of a corrupt elite? You can choose what you call corruption. The more universalist cultures would say that the particularists are corrupt because you can’t trust them since they would help their friends. The particularistic cultures, on the contrary, would call the universalists corrupt because you can’t trust them since they would not even help their friends. The question becomes by what you want to be corrupted: a friend or an abstract system?

Percentage of respondents opting for a universalist system rather than a particular social group (answers C or B+E)

01/ Rules/standards

Friend has no/some right and would not help



Trompenaars Hampden-Turner

Figure 1. The Car and the Pedestrian

In a workshop we were giving some time ago, we presented this dilemma. There was one British woman, Fiona, among the group of French participants. Fiona started the discussion of the dilemma by asking about the condition of the pedestrian. Without that information, she said, it would be impossible to answer the question. When the group asked her why this information was so indispensable, Dominique, an employee of a French airline, interjected: “Naturally, it is because if the pedestrian is very seriously injured or even dead, then my friend has the absolute right to expect my support. Otherwise, I would not be so sure.” Fiona, slightly irritated but laughing, said, “That’s amazing. For me it is absolutely the other way around.” What does this show is that when the British don’t help friends when they really need it. Brexit is a wonderful example. And if you know Paris you know that friends are more important than pedestrians.

This illustration shows that we “anchor” our response in one of the two principles. All nations might agree that universals and particulars should ideally be resolved—that is, that all exceptional cases be judged by more humane rules. What differs is their starting points. We have since posed this dilemma in international workshops and conferences across many different cultures, and also to some 150,000 managers captured in his cross-cultural database, also made available in our free App Culture for Business³. Not only was the initial reaction different in different cultures, but the course of action the passenger would finally take, such as lying to protect their friend, was also dependent on the answer to the question “Did the pedestrian die?”

Whilst all could readily identify with the dilemma, this response was clearly culturally determined. A British person might feel more concerned to respect the law if the pedestrian died. A French person might feel more obligated to help their friend, arguing that friends are more important than unknown pedestrians.

Going Global

Internationally operating organizations have known this dilemma in its manifestation of developing strict rules against corruption. Their integrity offensive often ended in universalist rules dictated from HQ of people who don't think in dilemmas. It is black or it is white. In predominantly Protestant countries the value of integrity became very popular. It is by far the most quoted value. Obviously because it is hardly practiced in most organizations. (if it was why mention it?). Let's check if the value of integrity helps truly.

I was giving a workshop at one of the largest financial institutions in the US. I started to ask their international top 80 who in the audience would like to be in this situation. And as I have experienced before no individual in the crowd raised their hand. So I asked why not? And the prevailing answer was that this is a dilemma.

Obviously this organization had *integrity* as their first value. So I followed by asking the following question: “If you live the value of integrity seriously in your organization what would you do in the car accident dilemma”. A North American stood up and said he didn't understand the question: “How can you have integrity if you don't tell the truth in court. And a good friend would never ask me to lie.” Fortunately we were interrupted by a South Korean who said: “I disagree John, how can you have integrity if you don't help your friend? “ It was fun to see that all 80 international participants, representing 40 countries, understood both. As a human being we share the dilemma. There is no one who wouldn't say: we like to help friends in difficult situations that is what friends are for. And at the same time: we have to respect the laws that are made to protect our children to be overrun and therefore we have to tell the truth. That is why it is a dilemma. And by the dialogue I realized that we as human beings share the same dilemmas. But I also realized that in case we have to make a decision our cultural context numbs half of our logics.

What I liked of the discussion is that obviously amongst Americans you would have a preference not to lie while in South Korea there is a tendency to help your friend in this case. But what to do in a multi-cultural environment consisting of a Swedish, Chinese, American and South Korean participant? This is the challenge an ever internationalizing world is facing. And why I raised this particular organization out of many is that they had a second value: *We respect the culture of others*. So I was ready for a nice afternoon because I asked the crowd to sit in groups of five and discuss what the two main values would do for you in deciding to help a friend or not in a multi-cultural group.

³ Culture for Business, in App Store <https://itunes.apple.com/app/culture-for-business/id1025724721?mt=8> and for Android users: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=nl.syca.THT&hl=En>

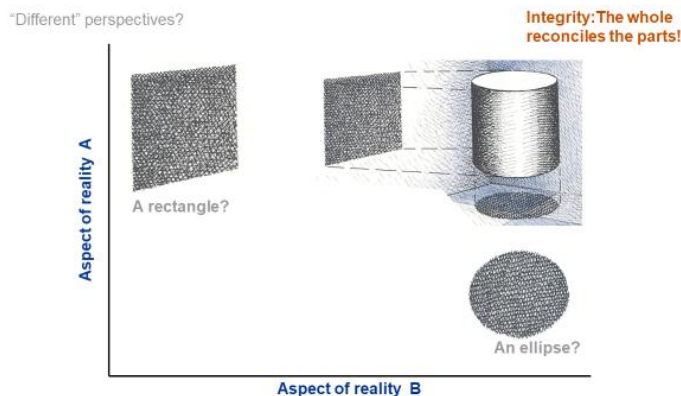
01/ Dilemma

INTEGRITY	
The top 2 of your corporate values are:	
1	Integrity
2	We respect the cultures of others

Please discuss in the context of these values what your answer would be...

It is astonishing how few participants ever come up with an answer that pleases all cultures ranging from particularist to universalist. Is it a lack of intelligence or experience? No obviously not. It is the unconscious bias we have in the way we have asked the question. There is an assumption that by choosing between a friend and the truth you'll find more or less integrity. You don't! So in view of the dichotomous question the answer that works in all cultures is nonexistent. We need to go back to the etymological root of the word *integrity*. Most versions refer to *wholeness*. The one I prefer is that integrity is *creating wholeness through the integration of opposites*. Think about yin and yang. It is whole that consists of two opposites. It is synthesis built out of thesis and antithesis. It is understanding that the cylinder includes the shadows representing the rectangle and the ellipse.

How do we perceive reality?



Japanese approach

Nice words, but how does this works in practice? How can we create a whole out of opposing particularist and universalist viewpoints. Frequently, I found that Japanese participants come more frequently with the answer that works in diverse cultures than in the Western world. They often start by saying that there answer is not one of the possibilities. A good start. "What we would do in Japan is to convince our friend as a friend to tell the truth in court. And we will have to talk to the judge to lower the sentence for his courage". So you see that both the truth and the friendship is respected. Some Westerners come with the answer that "we should not lie but help our friend in many other ways like socially, financially and legally". In both cases the friendship is deepened by the truth and that is the real meaning of integrity.

Cultural relativism

The arguments made above are very often seen as a culturally relativist position. Not at all! Not anything goes. Corruption is bad anywhere and we should fight it everywhere. I once had a discussion with a Nigerian who called an American the most corrupt person in the world. Why? “After doing business he takes you out to dinner and pays for it. Very corrupt! I will never do that in the part of Nigeria where I live”. And after asking him what the biggest problem is in Nigeria he unequivocally answered Corruption! So ethical behavior in a multicultural environment can only be achieved when we integrate value orientations on a higher level.

Way forward

This article presented just one particular dilemma that we identified and used to help both organizations and individual managers and leaders. Each element has been conceived, written, and then used all over the world; many were created after requests from clients, or developed from “moments of enlightenment” as we teased our research team or joked with fellow gurus. The individual dilemmas we face in our writings are on the one hand self-contained, but on the other hand form a whole that embraces the important issues facing the international leader and manager in today’s ever-globalizing world⁴. Together they provide a comprehensive digest of best practice and learning for modern business management.

University education and too much training are still failing today’s generation of potential leaders and managers. These are still based on Cartesian logic and scientific method where problems are defined as closed systems and where the variables selected are those that can be measured and controlled. Apparently all we have to do is to evaluate alternate courses of action and select the one offering the lowest cost or highest margin. MBA students are still being taught to give sophisticated answers to the wrong type of question. Even in school laboratories pupils are told think in terms of keeping the temperature and pressure constant so they can study changes in volume. However, those who have to work in the real world know that a change in volume is not isothermal, but adiabatic: everything is connected to everything else. A problem is like surplus flab – tuck it in here, and it pops out somewhere else.

Billions of people in all cultures, all organizations, all institutions agree the greatness of Mandela, Ghandi, Mohammed Ali and our religious icons. And what do these leaders have in common that their respect crosses cultures and institutions? Indeed they have integrity, the art of creating wholeness through bridging opposites. The crucial question for following up this article is if ethical leadership is a reflection or a cause of this competence to integrate opposites. It is indeed true that most worldly respected leaders are having something that can be described as Ethical. And it doesn’t matter if the pedestrian died or not.

⁴ Trompenaars Fons and Ed Voerman, *Servant Leadership Across Cultures: Harnessing the Strength of the World's Most Powerful Leadership Philosophy Hardcover – Infinite Ideas*, London, January 31, 2009

