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ETHICS AND INTERCULTURALITY: A DECOLONIAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of intercultural ethics from a decolonial perspective. Through an interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophical and sociocultural anthropology, it examines human indeterminacy and diversity, cultural configurations, and their ethical implications. The study also contrasts colonial-modern and decolonial definitions of interculturality. Ultimately, it proposes a decolonial ethics and bioethics rooted in Latin American intellectual traditions.

Keywords: Interculturality, vulnerability, decolonial theory, decolonial ethics.

Introduction

We live in multicultural contexts characterized by the coexistence of diverse cultures within modern states (Fornet Betancourt & Di Martino, 2009). These contexts frequently invoke the concept of "interculturality," often presented as a solution to diversity challenges in areas such as education and medicine. However, in Latin America and Mexico in particular, interculturality's colonial roots complicate its role. Historically, intercultural relationships have been shaped by inequality, invisibilization, coloniality, hierarchies, racism, and genocides. Thus, interculturality has often exacerbated alterity rather than resolving it.

For instance, medical illustrate problematic intercultural dynamics (Campos Navarro et al., 2017). Western medicine, often presented as universal, tends to marginalize other systems of knowledge. Biases among healthcare professionals—such as perceiving certain ethnic groups as overly expressive or resistant to pain—can significantly impact treatment decisions, revealing the colonial underpinnings of bioethics (Garrafa et al., 2016). Thus, interculturality in medicine extends beyond indigenous practices to include all contexts where individuals with diverse worldviews interact.

Reflecting on interculturality involves critically interrogating diversity and the value assigned to perceived differences. This paper seeks to analyze moral diversity, challenge the idea of universal morality or innate values guiding human behavior, and question the extent to which individuals are free to choose their lives. It scrutinizes the assumed transparency and universality of concepts such as right, wrong, fear, and rationality. Is morality culturally constructed, or is it innate?

The central argument of this paper is that diversity is a realization of human indeterminacy—our lack of biologically or culturally pre-coded answers for living our lives. I argue that diversity has been shaped and hierarchized according to a specific, colonial model of humanity.

This paper addresses the pressing need for a decolonial approach to ethics by exploring its intercultural dimensions and grounding its analysis in Latin American intellectual traditions. The research is driven by three main objectives: to critically examine intercultural ethics through a decolonial lens, to highlight the historical and cultural contingencies shaping ethical frameworks, and to propose an ethics that embraces diversity and fosters equitable relationships. These objectives reflect a commitment to challenging the

limitations of universalist ethical paradigms and advocating for approaches that are sensitive to cultural and historical contexts.

The central research questions guiding this study include: How can intercultural ethics challenge colonial-modern frameworks? To what extent does cultural indeterminacy shape ethical practices? And, what role can Latin American intellectual traditions play in redefining interculturality? These questions frame the investigation into the possibilities of ethics that transcend colonial structures while honoring cultural diversity and epistemic plurality.

Three hypotheses anchor the study's theoretical framework. First, ethical frameworks are inherently shaped by cultural and historical contingencies, rendering universalist approaches inadequate. Second, a decolonial ethics requires the recognition of cultural diversity and the establishment of horizontal relationships between knowledge systems. Third, Latin American intellectual traditions provide valuable insights for reimagining intercultural ethics and addressing global challenges.

To achieve these aims, the paper employs a methodology that integrates philosophical analysis and sociocultural anthropology. It emphasizes case studies from Latin America to illuminate the practical challenges and ethical dilemmas of interculturality. By situating these discussions in real-world contexts, the research seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a comprehensive approach to intercultural ethics through a decolonial lens.

The text is organized into four sections: (1) a philosophical perspective on human diversity, (2) an exploration of Latin American decolonial theory and its intercultural project, (3) an outline of decolonial ethics, and (4) a conclusion advocating for intercultural ethics.

1. On Human Diversity

For over seventy years, philosophers have emphasized humanity's radical indeterminacy—the absence of predetermined content defining what it means to be human. Vulnerability, as Held (2006) emphasizes, is a central aspect of this condition. Humans depend on others to survive, shaping their identities and practices through cultural significations (Castoriadis, 2007). However, this diversity often encounters resistance in societies that obscure their constructed nature and impose normative frameworks.

The essence of humanity lies in its vulnerability, which necessitates care from others for survival. In other words, the ideas and beliefs we inherit from others—the socio-cultural-historical significations—shape and perform what it means to be human. This implies that a historically situated individual can redefine the essence of the human condition.

As presented above, the individual appears to be the focal point of the subjectivation process, as though “the others” merely provide the backdrop for the central action. However, these “others” are, in fact, the ontological foundation of human life; independent, individual human existence is impossible (Salamanca González, 2019). A newborn human, for example, cannot survive independently; she does not instinctively know what or how to eat, how to walk, or how to act. Nothing in her brain provides a guide for these actions. Humans are relational beings, with relationships built upon their sensibilities, as evidenced by findings in neurobiology and developmental psychology (Gilligan in Paperman & Laugier, 2011).

So, when we talk about “human diversity,” what do we mean? Strictly speaking, human diversity is the inevitable consequence of human indeterminacy. Without biological guidance on how to live, we draw orientations from our cultures and societies, which can vary as widely as our imagination and creativity allow. Human diversity is, thus, an intrinsic aspect of the human condition.

This raises another question: To what extent can humans be diverse? Humans can exhibit genetic, phenotypical, neurological, linguistic, nutritional, and behavioral differences. They may vary in how they inhabit space, organize time, engage in labor or leisure, or whether they live nomadically or as settlers. People may differ in their clothing, reasoning,

logic, and values. Human beings have the capacity to be profoundly distinct from one another.

However, this potential for self-determination and self-creation is rarely realized. We are born into worlds that appear stable, true, and immutable—worlds that seem not to have been created by humans at all. This is because societies prioritize obscuring their radical contingency: the reality that institutions, beliefs, traditions, truths, and languages are human creations (Castoriadis, 1999; 2007).

This is the very essence of culture: to produce and reproduce meanings and senses. I will not adopt the modern-colonial argument that analyzes this process as a dichotomy between individuals and societies (or, more narrowly, as a conflict between an archetype of the individual and an archetype of society) divorced from contextualized, historical realities. Culture simultaneously involves the internalization of meanings and their realization through human practices. It embodies the potential for shared understanding, interpretation, and communication (Sewell, 1999). Cultures are simultaneously created and re-created, negotiated, and resisted (Grimson, 2011).

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally –constituted unity— an “identity” in its traditional meaning [...] Actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being : not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, as much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself (Hall in Hall & Du Gay, 1996, p. 4).

Culture is, first and foremost, the subjectivized response to the question of becoming human beings. It is impossible to provide a “precise” definition because the answer to culture lies within ourselves. To be human means not having a definitive answer for how to become ourselves. Thus, the answers to culture and the human condition—the concrete and precise answers—are our historical realizations. Cultures represent who we are: our shared meanings and senses. Naturally, cultures change as we change. They encompass not only what we believe and profess to believe but also what we do and how we represent our beliefs, actions, ourselves, and, importantly, those we construct as “others.”

To clarify this process of subjectivation, Alejandro Grimson (2011) proposes the concept of cultural configurations to move beyond the substantialized modern conception of culture. Cultures fluctuate, are modified, and are recreated through every social practice. Meanings are continually reinterpreted, and senses are reinvested through these practices. Historically situated humans produce and reproduce the meanings that shape their worlds. Cultural configurations, therefore, act as sutures—both stable and fluctuating—between the social creation of meaning and its reproduction (Grimson, 2011).

Senses and meanings are understood as activities through which humans engage interactively with a world that is both elastic and resistant, yet coherent enough to sustain their actions (Carey, 1989, p. 85). The concept of cultural configurations highlights the need for meanings to be shared—or at least shareable. It illustrates how senses are intermittently subjectivized and objectivized.

The primary task of any culture is to establish a stable foundation for processes of subjectivation, with sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. What guarantees the sociohistorical continuity of any culture? Its historical institution (Castoriadis, 1989).

There is no foundation for society other than our trust and adherence to the meanings and senses it provides—a direct result of humanity’s indeterminacy.

Throughout history, humans have attempted to justify socio-cultural significations by invoking extra-historical entities, thereby avoiding responsibility for their creations and institutions. This responsibility has often been attributed to gods, nature, progress, or reason (Castoriadis, 1999). However, no society or culture holds any inherent guarantee for its creations. Neither the Greeks, the Mayas, the Egyptians, the Mongols, nor the West possess an extra-historical basis for their beliefs. All cultures are equally contingent (Castoriadis, 2007).

The human condition is fundamentally indeterminate; thus, humanity evolves through sociocultural meanings and senses. These meanings are historical human creations, grounded solely in their historical institutions. Cultural diversity, therefore, arises as a consequence of humanity’s indeterminacy.

Human diversity—manifested in genetic, phenotypical, linguistic, and cultural differences—is boundless. Yet societies frequently prioritize stability over acknowledging this contingency, masking their institutions as immutable truths (Castoriadis, 1999). As Grimson (2011) observes, cultural configurations are simultaneously stable and fluid, shaping collective identities and practices.

2. Decolonial theory and Interculturality

In decolonial theory (Restrepo & Rojas, 2010), modernity is not merely the emancipation process through reason undertaken by some European countries; at least in America, it is also their civilizational project. Modernity represents a historical process and a deliberate effort to subject diversity, homogenize cultural expressions, and impose a specific vision: a modern, colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal world-system. Moreover, modernity functions as a mechanism of power that shapes subjectivities, with two starkly contrasting dimensions: the colonizer and the colonized. The processes of subjectivation experienced by the “subalterns” cannot be fully understood within the modern categories that systematically exclude them. Édouard Glissant describes the colonized identity formation process as follows:

In this journey, the identity, at least with regard to these western travelers who provided the mass of discoverers and conquerors, is reinforced first in an implicit mode (“my root is the strongest”), then it is explicitly exported as a value (“beings are worth by their root”) obliging the peoples visited or conquered in the long and painful quest for an identity which must first oppose to the denaturalizations caused by the conqueror. Tragic variant of the search for identity. During a historical period of more than two centuries, the asserted identity of peoples will have to be won against the processes of identification or annihilation unleashed by these invaders. If the nation in the West was first of all an “opposite”, the identity for the colonized peoples will be first of all be “opposed to”, that is to say in principle a limitation. The real work of decolonization would have been to go beyond this limit (Glissant, 1990, p. 29) ¹.

¹ Translated from french by the author: « Dans ce parcours, l’identité, du moins en ce qui concerne ces voyageurs occidentaux qui ont fourni la masse des découvreurs et des conquérants, se renforce d’abord sur un mode implicite (“ma racine est la plus forte”), puis s’exporte explicitement comme valeur (“l’être vaut par sa racine”) obligeant les peuples visités ou conquis à la longue et douloureuse quête d’une identité qui devra d’abord s’opposer aux dénaturalisations provoquées par le conquérant. Variante tragique de la recherche d’identité. Pendant une période historique de plus de deux siècles, l’identité affirmée des peuples devra se gagner contre les processus d’identification ou néantisation déclenchés par ces envahisseurs. Si la nation en Occident est d’abord un “contraire”, l’identité pour les peuples colonisés sera un premier lieu un “opposé à”, c’est-à-dire au principe une limitation. Le vrai travail de la décolonisation aurait été d’outrepasser cette limite ».

For those subalternized by modernity, the decolonial option begins as an emancipatory project. It seeks to disconnect identities and subjectivities from the colonial matrix of the West, a system that functions as a machine for producing inferiorized differences (Quijano, 2000). Decoloniality advocates abandoning the modern-colonial project, ceasing to define ourselves through the mirror of the Global North, and rejecting the stereotyped images imposed by the West (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2003). As Audre Lorde (2007) famously suggests, decoloniality calls for leaving behind the master's house entirely.

Coloniality serves as a mechanism of power that enforces subjectivation by establishing an imposed human normality and its inverse: barbaric humanities (Castro Gómez, 2000). This invention of normality originates from a perspective that denies its contingency and particularity, disguising itself as a universal, timeless truth. Western culture portrays itself as non-cultural—a model of humanity supposedly born in a no-place, outside history and culture. Santiago Castro Gómez aptly terms this perspective “the hybris of point zero” (Castro Gómez, 2005).

Decolonial interculturality sheds light on how the world-system not only serves as a matrix for subjectivation but also works to invalidate differences. The West imposes a single model of humanity, disqualifying diversity while invalidating alternative epistemologies and systems of representation. Consequently, this forces marginalized cultures to construct their identities using Western symbols and interpretations (Albán Achinte in Mignolo & Gómez Moreno, 2012).

It is within this sociohistorical context—defined by modernity and its coloniality—that discussions of decolonial interculturality must be situated. Culture reflects our existence in worlds of meanings and senses that are historically created and reproduced. Interculturality, therefore, refers to the relationships between differing meanings and senses (Dietz, 2016). These differences, stemming from human imagination and creation, are theoretically limitless.

As previously stated, interculturality represents modernity's challenge: how to engage with or tolerate alterity. It raises questions about the boundaries of self-determination (or social autonomy) and when efforts to “civilize” begin. For colonial-modern systems, interculturality is inherently problematic. It confronts the West with the issue of how far it will tolerate perceived barbarism in others and how it will interact with subaltern cultural configurations (Dietz, 2016; 2017). In essence, interculturality is a problem only within the current world-system, which imposes a singular, idealized vision of humanity.

What we currently experience, however, is merely multiculturalism—a coexistence of diverse configurations of meanings and senses within power-laden relationships of domination (Fornet Betancourt & Di Martino, 2009). From a decolonial perspective, this is not true interculturality. Non-colonial interculturality does not yet exist. It would only be achievable by accepting the principles of radical human indeterminacy and the contingency of all societies and cultures. Interculturality can only be realized when it is founded upon horizontal relationships rather than vertical, colonial hierarchies. The modern world is incapable of being intercultural because it is inherently colonial. It annihilates differences and has always been a civilizing force.

Interculturality, on the other hand, does not yet exist. It is something to build. It goes far beyond respect, tolerance and recognition of diversity; rather, it points to and encourages a social-political process and project aimed at building new and different societies, relationships, and living conditions. Here I am referring not only to economic conditions but also to those that have to do with the cosmology of life in general,

including knowledge and *knowledges* [saberes], ancestral memory, and the relationship with mother nature and spirituality, among others (Walsh, 2008, p. 140)² [My italics].

Interculturality represents the project of establishing horizontal relationships and redefining how human differences are interconnected, once we move beyond the colonial-domination-civilization model. It transcends the mere acknowledgment of human diversity, advocating instead for a process of co-creating a world outside the framework imposed by the conquerors. The ultimate goal of interculturality is:

[...] not simply to recognize, tolerate, or incorporate what is different within the established matrix and structures. On the contrary, it is to implode from the difference the colonial structures of power as a challenge, proposal, process and project; it is to reconceptualize and re-found structures of scenification and in an equitable relationship the logics, practices and diverse cultural ways of thinking, acting and living. Thus, it suggests an active and permanent process of negotiation and interrelation where the self and particular do not lose their difference, but rather have the opportunity and capacity to contribute from this difference to the creation of new understandings, coexistence, collaborations and solidarity. That is why interculturality is not a given fact but something in a permanent way, insurgency and construction (Walsh, 2008, p. 141)³.

Interculturality seeks to end the pursuit of homogenizing diversity. It highlights the significance of self-creation and self-determination for both individuals and communities. It represents the capacity of each person and community to narrate their own stories, propose interpretations, and mobilize their own systems of representation (Segato in Bidaseca & Vazquez Laba, 2011). Interculturality requires focusing on the kinds of relationships we build and foster. It considers the establishment of voluntary relations, horizontal bonds, and the effective possibility of self-representation as indispensable (Aceri et al., 2021).

Modernity, as understood by decolonial theorists (e.g., Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2003), is not merely a historical epoch but a civilizational project that imposes a Eurocentric model of humanity. This model disqualifies diversity, portraying it as deviance rather than richness. For colonized peoples, identity has often been constructed in opposition to colonial frameworks, as Glissant (1990) notes. Decoloniality aims to move beyond this oppositional dynamic by promoting emancipatory subjectivities and rejecting the colonial matrix.

In Latin America, decolonial interculturality envisions the establishment of horizontal relationships that recognize the equal validity of diverse worldviews and practices. Walsh (2008) stresses that interculturality goes beyond mere tolerance, advocating for the collaborative co-creation of new social and epistemic frameworks.

The need for a decolonial perspective on ethics is not only driven by historical and epistemic necessity but also by numerous real-life cases that compel us to develop an intercultural approach to ethics. For example:

² Translated from Spanish by the author: “La interculturalidad, en cambio, aún no existe. Es algo por construir. Va mucho más allá del respeto, la tolerancia y el reconocimiento de la diversidad; señala y alienta, más bien, un proceso y proyecto social político dirigido a la construcción de sociedades, relaciones y condiciones de vida nuevas y distintas. Aquí me refiero no sólo a las condiciones económicas sino también a ellas que tienen que ver con la cosmología de la vida en general, incluyendo los conocimientos y saberes, la memoria ancestral, y la relación con la madre naturaleza y la espiritualidad, entre otras”.

³ Translated from Spanish by the author: “Su afán no es simplemente reconocer, tolerar ni tampoco incorporar lo diferente dentro de la matriz y estructuras establecidas. Por el contrario, es implosionar desde la diferencia en las estructuras coloniales del poder como reto, propuesta, proceso y proyecto; es hacer reconceptualizar y re-fundar estructuras que ponen en escena y en relación equitativa lógicas, prácticas y modos culturales diversos de pensar, actuar y vivir. Así sugiere un proceso activo y permanente de negociación e interrelación donde lo propio y particular no pierdan su diferencia, sino que tengan la oportunidad y capacidad para aportar desde esta diferencia a la creación de nuevas comprensiones, convivencias, colaboraciones y solidaridades. Por eso la interculturalidad no es un hecho dado sino algo en permanente camino, insurgencia y construcción”.

In the healthcare context in Mexico, indigenous midwifery coexists with biomedical practices, often leading to conflicts over legitimacy. Recognizing midwifery as an equally valid healthcare practice challenges colonial hierarchies within medicine (Sesia, 2013; 2016).

In addressing the ecosocial crises of the Anthropocene, indigenous communities in the Amazon advocate for relational approaches to nature, contrasting sharply with the extractivist policies driven by global capitalism. Acknowledging the value placed on biodiversity by these communities is evident in initiatives like granting legal rights to natural entities, such as rivers or mountains, in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador (Acosta & Martínez, 2009; Alimonda et al., 2017; Machado Aráoz et al., 2023).

These examples highlight the pressing need for a decolonial approach to ethics, one that values diverse epistemologies and practices beyond the colonial frameworks. By embracing intercultural dialogue, recognizing indigenous knowledge systems, and challenging entrenched hierarchies, we can foster a more inclusive and equitable understanding of ethics. This shift not only addresses historical injustices but also provides transformative pathways for tackling contemporary global challenges such as healthcare inequalities and environmental crises.

3. Shaping decolonial ethics

Ethics is the reflection on our decision-making processes; its very existence implies the necessity of making choices, which is rooted in human indeterminacy. We reflect on how we make decisions because we lack inherent guidance on how to approach them. We struggle to describe situations, determine which values to prioritize, and decide in what order to consider them. The objectives of these decisions also need to be defined. Thus, ethics emerged historically as a discipline to address the challenges posed by our indeterminate human condition.

Ethics is inevitably created, transmitted, and reproduced through culture. Our values, descriptions of situations, the words we have (or lack), and the factors we deem important are all cultural constructs (Salamanca González, 2022). Consequently, any reflection on decisions that include or affect more than an isolated individual inherently involves intercultural dimensions, as such decisions are shaped by differing meanings and senses.

Unfortunately, ethics (and bioethics) have been shaped by modernity, which imposes a singular human model premised on a presumed, universally known “nature” and particular “universal” (non-cultural) values. Modern ethics often disregard context, history, and culture in their pursuit of a rationalized framework to be imposed. Many modern ethical approaches are, in essence, attempts to “civilize” those who do not think, value, or decide in the same way as dominant groups. In this text, I will not delve into a critique of colonial ethics (Salamanca González, 2020). Instead, I will focus on the implications of decolonial ethics for interculturality.

Reducing ethics to a person's individual choices, which in their turn are supposed to emanate from deep reflection, whose foundations are philosophical and psychological, and influenced by religious or secular values in a quest for universality, does not simply reflect the social processes of moral life. These processes show how involved the individual is in economic, cultural, family, friendly and professional activities that forcefully define his or her moral horizon in a way that he or she is probably only partially aware. Finally, ethics, if it is conceived as a model of moral reasoning which takes pride in being the champion of abstract reflection and the rational choice of autonomous individuals in search of objective moral criteria, runs the risk of being unsuitable for human experiences that take place in circumstances

that are almost always uncertain and in very specific contexts (Kleinman, 2013, p. 401)⁴.

A decolonial ethics, particularly in the context of health, must be practical and rooted in the realities of actual human beings, not idealized abstractions. Universal and abstract ethics risk neglecting real-world contexts, perpetuating the social structuration of risk and harm, and reinforcing dominant moralities. The problem with modern ethics lies not only in their theoretical imprecision but also in their profound moral consequences on life and death.

Decolonial ethics recognizes itself as a cultural product and must necessarily embed itself within an intercultural framework. It acknowledges the indeterminate and vulnerable nature of the human condition and considers the dynamics of attentiveness and inattentiveness that shape decision-making processes and the contextualization of those decisions (Salamanca González, 2020; 2021). A decolonial ethics, mindful of interculturality, is less normative and more interpretative, less prescriptive and more mediative. In many ways, it is hermeneutic (Salamanca González, 2021).

Arthur Kleinman (2013) proposes using the ethnographic anthropological method as a model for interpretative ethics. This approach challenges the presumed neutrality and detachment of the researcher, requiring the “ethicist” to engage directly with the local realities in which they participate. Through this engagement, the ethicist can produce three types of knowledge (Kleinman, 2013, p. 408):

1. Knowledge of the specific issues that concern the actors in the particular case under study.
2. Knowledge of how local actors employ indigenous or general ethical frameworks to conceptualize moral processes within their world.
3. Knowledge of how the ethnographer herself mobilizes ethical categories when addressing the problem in question.

The central task of interpretative ethics is to acknowledge, understand, and address the cultural shaping of moral judgments. Meanings and moral senses are sociocultural creations. Ethics involves reflecting on how situations are described, which values are considered, how situations are analyzed, and the criteria applied to evaluate them—across all actors, including the ethicist herself. These descriptions, analyses, and contextualizations are always specific: decolonial ethics operates within the particularities of moral life (Brugère, 2011).

If ethics reflects the meanings and senses we have instituted, then these meanings also constitute our morals. Morals are inseparable from our languages and the tools we use to create, represent, and negotiate meanings. They are the embodied sociocultural meanings of the present moment (Pierron, 2010; 2016).

The ethical question shifts when we consider the implications of human indeterminacy and its inevitable cultural realization. The question is no longer “What should we do?” within a normative framework but rather “How do humans inhabit, negotiate, adapt to, resist, or refute the instituted meanings within communicative contexts?” How do those

⁴ Translated from french by the author: “ Réduire l’éthique aux choix individuels d’une personne, qui sont à leur tour censés émaner d’une réflexion profonde, dont les soubassements seraient philosophiques et psychologiques, et influencés par des valeurs religieuses ou laïques dans une quête d’universalité, ne rend tout simplement pas compte des processus sociaux de la vie morale. Ces processus montrent à quel point l’individu est pris dans des activités économiques, culturelles, familiales, amicales et professionnelles qui définissent avec force son horizon moral d’une manière dont il ou elle n’est probablement qu’en partie conscient(e). Finalement, l’éthique, si on la conçoit comme un modèle de raisonnement moral qui se fait fort d’être le champion de la réflexion abstraite et du choix rationnel d’individus autonomes en quête de critères moraux objectifs, court le risque d’être inadaptée au cadre d’expériences humaines qui se déroulent dans des circonstances presque toujours incertaines et dans des contextes tout à fait spécifiques ”.

involved in decisions determine what is best for them? How do they choose the variables to consider in specific circumstances?

If decolonial ethics is interpretative, human communication becomes central to ethical reflection. Since morals and ethics are inseparable from language and interpretation, decisions depend on the representations and narratives constructed to articulate and analyze situations. To decide is—and inherently must be—to interpret (Pierron, 2010).

Conclusion: Towards intercultural ethics

The historical institution of ethics as a philosophical field is deeply connected to the recognition of moral diversity. However, in our colonial-modern world, ethics has retained a normative-prescriptive framework. In response to ethical questions—such as whether abortion should be penalized, euthanasia allowed or punished, patients who cannot breathe independently intubated, or childbirth medicalized—modernity has consistently sought to provide univocal, clear, and distinct answers.

When this modern approach proved inadequate in addressing complex health situations, Western modernity introduced four principles as universal guidelines for ethical decisions (The Belmont Report, 1978). However, this universal-principlist ethics has been criticized in the Global South for its failure to accommodate sociohistorical contexts and specific circumstances. Furthermore, the values and resources of individuals in the Global South often differ significantly from those dictated by institutions in Helsinki or New York, which claim universality but lack relevance in regions such as Latin America (Acevedo, 2014; Garrafa et al., 2016; Kottow, 2019).

This chapter does not aim to develop a critique of universal ethics in its entirety but to illustrate how attempts to protect and institutionalize universal normative ethics rely on imposing a singular definition of human normality. Normative ethics, by its very nature, is incompatible with the emancipation of subaltern groups. Rational-prescriptive ethics becomes a collaborator in the Western civilizational project.

An ethical project that engages with historical realities, particularly those of individuals excluded from the dominant human model, must methodologically step beyond the boundaries of modernity. While diversity and intercultural realities have been explored extensively in social anthropology for more than seventy years, they continue to be overlooked by philosophers, ethicists, and bioethicists. Transdisciplinary dialogues and arguments are indispensable to escape the confines of the master's house. This text is only a first step; much work remains to weave the many unexamined threads.

If we genuinely value diversity and wish for it to flourish, it is essential to dismantle the dynamics of domination that seek to normalize differences using standards created by the planet's most dominant groups (Held, 2006). Ethical frameworks such as principlism, rationalism, utilitarianism, and even virtue ethics are fundamentally incompatible with the goal of resisting Western civilizational intentions. A decolonial ethics must detach itself from the modern project.

Additionally, the notion of an ethicist observing society and morality from a non-cultural, neutral, and universal standpoint is, first and foremost, a domination strategy. It rests on the fallacy of assuming the existence of non-cultural humans or judgments. The ethicist, like all individuals, brings her history, beliefs, and lived experiences into every situation she encounters. She has no guarantee of the validity of her senses or the meanings she holds, believes, or institutionalizes. Decolonial ethics rejects all forms of superiority and hierarchy, even ethical ones.

The first step toward a decolonial ethics is to accept our fallibility, vulnerabilities, and the lack of ultimate truths behind all cultural configurations (Hersch Martínez & Salamanca

González, 2021). From this horizontal premise, we can begin to imagine, create, and institute what we believe is appropriate for ourselves: nothing about us without us.

Finally, the project of intercultural ethics is not merely theoretical but profoundly practical, especially in health contexts (Hersch Martínez & Salamanca González, 2021). Its initial aim is to minimize the dominance of biomedical hegemonic knowledge, which is infused with modern, colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal ideologies. Biomedical culture, like any other, is inherently cultural and holds no inherent guarantee for the validity of its practices or beliefs (Pierron, 2010). Moreover, biomedical practices are shaped and influenced by broader societal meanings—economic, political, and more. No sphere of society operates independently.

In this context, a case-based analysis of intercultural situations becomes indispensable. Such an analysis must regard all meanings and senses as equally valid and avoid reproducing colonial-modern hierarchies and domination. An intercultural project requires a decolonial ethical approach.

A decolonial ethics acknowledges its contingency and fallibility, embracing humanity's indeterminate condition. It is practical, interpretative, and rooted in particularities, prioritizing horizontal relationships and self-determination. This approach is especially relevant in health contexts, where ethical decisions must consider cultural diversity and social inequalities.

Intercultural ethics, grounded in a decolonial perspective, challenges modernity's universalizing tendencies and offers an alternative framework rooted in diversity and mutual respect. By integrating Latin American intellectual traditions and concrete examples, this paper contributes to the broader project of redefining ethics in a multicultural world. Future research should continue to explore these themes, emphasizing practical applications and interdisciplinary approaches.

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