ALTERITY: HOW DIFFERENT ARE WE REALLY?

In *Human Universals* (1991), Donald Brown challenges the consensus of cultural relativism and chides the guild of anthropologists:

> "Although they were sent into the field with the charge of getting the whole picture, so that they could come back relieved of parochial views and thus tell the world what people are really like, anthropologists have failed to give a true report of their findings. They have dwelt on the differences between peoples while saying too little about the similarities (similarities that they rely upon at every turn in order to do their work). At the same time, anthropologists have exaggerated the importance of social and cultural conditioning, and have, in effect, projected an image of humanity marked by little more than empty but programmable minds. These are distortions that not only affect the way we look at and treat the rest of the world's peoples but also profoundly affect our thoughts about ourselves and the conduct of our own affairs. These distortions pervade the 'whole secular social ideology'… of our era."[1]

Brown goes on to catalog several hundred "surface" universals in language or behavior shared by societies across the world, ranging from "classification of body parts" to "hairstyles" to "tickling." The list could have been elongated further by including less visible concepts or traits that most but not all societies exhibit and other anthropologists have compiled similar lists.[2]

Brown identified this problem in respect to a single domain—culture and anthropology. But as others have gone on to point out, the question is broader and potentially underlies several distortions of late modernity. How different are we really from each other? How formative are culture, individual embodiment, or interpretive communities on the human experience? Is humanity a blank slate, shaped entirely by these external influences and thus, potentially very different from one another? Or is

---

[1] Brown, Donald E. 1991 Human Universals. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 163.

[2] Brown's universals are (helpfully listed in Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, pg. 435-439. Possibly even more discussed is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory proposing six cultural dimensions.See also G. P. Murdock, "The Common Denominator of Cultures," in *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. R. Linton (New York, 1945), p. 141 and *The Church* and Culture by Louis Luzbetak, 1963: 317. So also Walter Goldsmith, Comparative Functionalism: An Essay in Anthropological Theory, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, arguing that while cultures may vary more widely, "people are more alike than cultures" (134).

there something more fundamental and abiding to our humanity that all of us share in common?[3] This question can be illustrated in three different domains.

Ethics and Culture

How does culture shape our human experience, or more specifically, how does it dictate our ethics? Missionaries venture into a new setting only to discover that a fully functioning ethical system was already in place long before they arrived. What authorizes them to blithely correct this with a Christian ethic? Is Christian preaching only ethnocentric aggression? And ethical dictates never exist in a vacuum; they are interlinked in an entire cultural system. Who can predict what unintended consequences will arise if we try to correct time-tested, internally complex ethical systems? Do new arrivals and cultural outsiders really know what they are doing?[4]

Robert Priest gives the example of missionaries encountering polygamy. Viewing the problem in sexual terms, the missionary attacks the practice, potentially splitting families and leaving the women vulnerable. Meanwhile, the culture he faces views the practice as levirate. The husband may have reluctantly but mercifully taken on a costly liability by marrying a woman who would otherwise be destitute. What appeared as licentious to the American is a noble act for the locals. Furthermore, they note, the foreigner has deeper issues of his own—the rank sin of stinginess with all of his fancy possessions he has yet to share with the community.[5]

And yet in starkly ethical terms, Jesus commanded us to teach *all* nations to obey *whatever* He had commanded. One set of ethical dictates extends to all peoples in all times and all places including entire nations and cultural systems that did not yet exist when He spoke these words.

The missionary seeks only to apply Jesus' ethic based on Jesus' universal authority over all of planet earth. But no one should be surprised when the locals retort that the

---

[3] The question at hand is related to Locke's notion of humanity as a blank slate or Kant's embedded categories. If our starting nature is fluid and moldable, we cannot understand ourselves or one another apart from culture, experience, or the results of individual choices. But if human nature is in some way fixed or carries embedded categories, we might share something in common.

[4] Cultural Relativism is nearly taken as axiomatic with cultural anthropology, though recent discussion has recognized the inescapable complexities. Judging cultures based on the values of your own culture is the classic definition of ethnocentrism. And yet all anthropologists have their limits, condemning, for instance, female genital mutilation or child brides, even if these practices are considered acceptable in some cultural settings. See 4.1, Cultural Relativism in the article "Relativism" within *The Stanford* Encyclopedia of Philosophy, plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/#CulRel.

[5] Bob Priest, "Missionary Elenctics: Conscience and culture" in Vol XXII, No. 3, July 1994, Missiology: An International Review, 291-315.

outsider understands neither their culture nor their ethics. And in so asking, they raise the **ethical problem of alterity**. Is it possible or proper to speak to another person's actions? Are there universal dictates for human behavior? Can one ethical framework be enough for all?[6]

Gender and Empathy

Nor are passports necessary to find divergent experience; it can be located in every family unit. The closest of human relationships is formed by two persons with very different experiences.

The male-female difference has been conceptualized in various ways. Though now largely rejected, some feminists have emphasized embodiment. Men have not and cannot experience menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, or even vulnerability to rape and resulting pregnancy in the way that women do.[7] Rooting the distinction in psychology, Sir Simon Baron-Cohen distinguishes empathizing (type E brains) from systematizing or analytical (type S brains). Females will generally tilt toward the former; males toward the latter.

But even if, as is more typical, the difference roots in learned gender rather than biological sex, it is fundamental to feminism that the female identity is (1) recognizably distinct from maleness, and (2) a meaningful, significant aspect of personal identity. On this No man can say what it is like to be a woman, nor the converse. Whether

---

[6] Charles Kraft is helpful here, arguing that "we must recognize a substantial basic substratum of characteristics common to all humans" (117). *Anthropology for Christian Witness,* Orbis Books, New York, 1996. Note also his chart categorizing basic human needs on pg. 118. A large number of evangelical missiologists have likewise argued for a more universal notion of human nature, even while acknowledging the wide surface differences between cultures. See Priest, Robert J. 1994 "Missionary Elenctics: Conscience and Culture." Missiology 22:291-315. Dye, T. Wayne 1976 "Toward a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin." Missiology 4:27-41. Benny Van Den Toren 2002, "God's Purpose for Creation as the Key to Understanding the Universality and Cultural Variety of Christian Ethics," *Missiology* 30: 215-33. Thomas Austin, "Elentics" pg 307-308 in Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions. D. J. Hesselgrave, October 1983, Missiology 11:4: 461–83.

[7] This is the primary grid behind trans-exclusionary feminist's arguments. Of course, the discussion is significantly more nuanced, and nearly no one wants to be known as an essentialist. But expressions of these ideas can be found in Janice Raymond's *Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Raymond writes "In some very real senses, female biology shapes female history—a history that men don't have because of their sex—including the history of menstruation, the history of pregnancy or the capacity to become pregnant, the history of childbirth and abortion, the history of certain bodily cycles and life changes, and the history of female subordination in a male-dominant society. Note that I keep saying history. To deny that female history is, in part, based on female biology is like denying that important aspects of Black history are based on skin color. As with biological skin color, female biology doesn't confer an essential femininity; rather it confers a historical reality about what it means to be born with XX chromosomes" (pg. xx). In *The Whole Woman*, Germaine Greer points out that transsexualism is only the removal of distinct male organs rather than acquiring the distinct capacities and challenges of womanhood" (70-72). See also the explanation in Carl Trueman's The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self. Crossway, 2020, 352ff.

construed as sex, gender, or both, there is at least agreement that our sexual identity is profoundly important to our human experience.[8] This is the basis of "sisterhood" and even the basis of intersectionality's critique that identity is broader than gender alone.[9]

Even writing from a conservative evangelical standpoint, Sherlock Charles notes that "it maybe be difficult for a man to understand what it means to be a woman" (194), in part because of embodied experiences that are distinctly female.[10]

If the first example questions the possibility of ethics, this raises the problem of empathy—is it possible to understand another person's feelings and experiences? Extending the problem further, can I have legitimate, meaningful relational understanding of someone's emotional experience? Do I understand them? Do they understand me? Is meaningful **relationship** or **empathy** possible?[11]

This is because relationship requires projected models of another person's mental and emotional states. It is inherent to relationship that we desire to understand and be understood. But to the extent that our personal subjectivity and experiences shape us, we cannot access the thoughts and feelings of others. Like the problem of other minds, this question is not finally resolvable.

But Scripture does not leave the question so simple. Men are told to live with their wives "in an understanding way" (1 Pet. 3:7, κατὰ γνῶσιν). The Christian vision of marriage is that male and female differences create partnership, not alienation. The underlying question returns—how different from each other are we really?

---

[8] It is also ironic that even as transgenderism clashes with feminism, the very same dynamics play out, for even here, a core contention of non-traditional sexuality is that cis-gendered heterosexuals cannot understand the experience of non-traditional sexual attraction. In both cases, the contention is that one's unique psychology or sexual experience creates a gulf that is nearly a complete barrier to communication.

[9] The early history of feminism included interesting anticipatory moments in which African feminists were sidelined. In the 1985 international conference on women's issues in Nairobi, the African women offered the reminder that "women are also members of classes and countries that dominate others… Contrary to the best intentions of 'sisterhood', not all women share identical interests." Quoted in Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Reprint edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 97.

[10] Sherlock, Charles. *The Doctrine Of Humanity*. 1st edition. Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2006, 194.

[11] "Empathy" is used here in its philosophical sense of understanding another person's experience or being able to bridge the gulf of consciousness to other minds. See plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy.

Communication and Understanding—Interpreting Texts

If our differences isolate us in ethics and empathy, communication only increases the problem exponentially, for now multiple minds come into play, each bringing their own opportunity for subjective lensing.

Derrida explores this with his concept of *alterity*—the fundamental gap between individuals because of their unique perspective, experiences, or to use Stanley Fish's phrase, their interpretive community. These differences make it impossible to convey information without distortion. He recommends, rather, that we permanently defer meaning, accepting the honest reality that we can never fully comprehend another person's context, viewpoint, or meaning.

As Nida comments, "one must also reckon with the fact that no two receptors are ever likely to comprehend and respond to a message in identically the same way. This means that absolute communication is never possible, for no two individuals ever share completely the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds."[12]

But the issue only grows thicker when we turn from interpersonal communication to texts for two reasons. First, texts allow for only one-way communication—the self-correcting feedback loop from receivers is broken. Reader-response hermeneutics have simply affirmed the hazard that more foundationalist hermeneutics sought to avoid—readers can refract messages according to their subjective preferences and the author has no recourse.

One solution is for the author to know his audience well enough to include "anticipatory feedback—that is, sensing in advance how an audience is likely to react to what is said."[13] But a second problem is that texts are read by many individuals or cultures across time, including perspectives that did not yet exist and that therefore, the author could not possibly anticipate when he wrote them.

The intertwined questions are actually twofold: (1) To what extent does background or subjectivity control our textual understanding, and (2) how different are the backgrounds or subjective factors between two hearers? The product of these two factors will have a direct, inverse relationship to the possibility of understanding.[14]

---

[12] Nida, Eugene A., and William D. Reyburn. *Meaning Across Cultures: A Study on Bible Translating*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1981, pg. 7.

[13] Nida, 24

[14] Nida writes, "though one cannot face fairly the problems of the translator without reckoning with the many and often striking differences between the culture of the Bible and that of other societies, it would be quite wrong to exaggerate the diversities, as some persons have done. As anthropologists

And so the third problem of alterity is the impossibility of **understanding**. Can I read a text or hear communication from another person and comprehend what they are saying? Are the thought frameworks given to us by our interpretive communities so determinative for our communication that we cannot communicate our differences? If so, we are forever sealed within our discreet views of the world in a kind of communication solipsism.

Ethics, Empathy and Understanding Integrated

These discussions only illustrate several expressions of the problem of alterity—others could include the shaping influence of age, socioeconomic status, trauma, religion or philosophical beliefs, language, education or many others. What these examples better illustrate is the whole-person and whole-life influence of alterity, from ethics to relationships to understanding. Furthermore, they illustrate that the problem exists in a wide diversity of social combinations including individuals and groups. The problem also exists in both one-way and bidirectional communication: between two individuals (male ←→ female), an individual engaging with an entire culture (individual ←→ culture), or a speaker addressing a diverse audience that cannot interact in return (writer → diversity of disconnected readers).[15]

---

have frequently pointed out, there is far more that unites different peoples in a common humanity than that which separates them into distinct groups. Such cultural universals as the recognition of reciprocity and equity in interpersonal relations, response to human kindness and love, the desire for meaning in life, the acknowledgment of human nature's inordinate capacity for evil and self-deception (or rationalization of sin), and its need for something greater and more important than itself—all these universals are constantly recurring themes in the Bible. These are the elements in the Scripture that have appealed to numberless persons through the centuries and across cultural frontiers.

What is important about recent interest in the Bible in the western world is the very fact that the Scriptures come from another age and from a distant culture. For a long while modern persons have been told that their problems are the direct result of their technologically based life characterized by urbanization and industrialization, but now many are discovering that persons portrayed in the Bible had precisely the same problems and needs as persons today—the proclivity to sin even when they want to do right, the feeling of guilt, a need for forgiveness, power to resist temptation, and the desire to love and to be loved. The fact that these universal needs are exemplified within the context of concrete historical events involving real life is what makes the Bible so much alive and appealing to persons in so many societies." (28-29)

[15] Other comparisons between the examples are interesting. Ethics is complex because it is part of an entire social and cultural system that must hold together to remain stable. Gender is distinctly attached to the embodied human experience, because those elements are shared by most members of a given gender, because these experiences are not a single passing event in life but extend to all of life, and because all humans are divided between one gender or the other. Texts and interpretation are distinct because our uniqueness as individuals is then instantiated in a physical artifact external to us but that still represents something significant about us.

Question	Do ethical mandates transcend cultural differences? Are there universal dictates for human behavior?	Can meaningful relationship transcend the genders? Is it possible to understand another person's feelings and experiences?	Can information transcend the communication gap? Can I read a text or hear communication from another person and comprehend their thoughts?
Barrier	Culture	Gender	The gap between sender and receiver
Concern	Volitional—Ethics	Affective—Empathy	Intellectual—Understanding
Parties	Interpretive Community ←→ Interpretive Community	Male individual ←→ Female Individual	Single Individual → Open-ended diversity of Individuals and Interpretive Communities

In other words, the problem of alterity extends as far and as wide as there are persons. If we intend to engage with one another in any way, we must also engage with alterity.

It is also interesting that there is a cultural penalty for not acknowledging alterity—the charge of aggression. In culture this is understood as ethnocentrism or appropriation; in gender studies, patriarchy or heterocentrism. And even in interpretation, Derrida posits that the claim to understand another person's perspective is an act of aggression against their irreducible complexity, suppressing their voice and agency. In other words, alterity is not only a philosophical problem but a protected cultural totem.

What would it mean to be the same?

But before moving to a proposed solution, there is a further question—what exactly do we mean by "the human experience" and what would it mean for it to be either the same or different to begin with?

At base, the question is inherently unanswerable. If the intractable problem of other minds leaves us unable to prove that other minds exist, how would we ever demonstrate that their conscious experience is like or unlike our own? Thomas Nagel's seminal article, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" distinguishes the direct, subjective experience of being a living creature from external attempts to describe it.[16] No matter how well we understand the physical processes behind echolocation and draw analogies to our own sensory experience, we can never say what it is like to directly experience it.

[16] "What is it like to be a bat?" *Philosophical Review*. LXXXIII (4): 435–450. Oct 1974.

How does a bat experience what it is like to be a bat?	How would a human describe what it is like to be a bat?
First person and direct	Third Person extrapolation
Subjective experience	Objective projection
Personal, experiential consciousness	Reductionism—failed attempts at describing conscious experience in terms of physical processes

Similarly, if the question we intend is what it feels like to be another person rather than myself, there is no further discussion to be had. Human knowers can only make assumptions about the experience of other conscious beings by extrapolating from their reactions.

But in fact, something more is being assumed in the problem of alterity. The cross-cultural situation questions whether ethics is universal. The egalitarian rejoinder to gender roles disqualifies someone's capacity to empathy on the grounds that they cannot view the situation from the same vantage point, ultimately nullifying the possibility of meaningful relationship. The problem of interpreting texts questions whether information move intact across the divide of our divergent experiences and whether there is such a thing as public knowledge. These assertions stretch well beyond what it feels like to be another person. Rather, they are recognizable as the full-orbed arena of human flourishing. If the gap that separates us in these areas is insurmountable, can there be any agreement about what it means to live well? Without shared ethics, relationships or knowledge, what remains to hold onto?

This gives hope to the discussion, for though the subjective experiences of two actors or groups are forever inaccessible to comparison, full congruence may also be unnecessary. Furthermore, we should only expect that Scripture will guide us on topics so fundamental for all of life. And we would expect to also find biblical parameters—fixed horizons that allow for measured but not limitless variation in the human experience.

Do those biblical guidelines exist?

Essential human nature in the Biblical Story

In fact, we can begin as widely as widely as the biblical story, where we find significant support for a shared, collective human reality.

Created in God's Image: The *imago dei* is one of the most fundamental ways that Scripture describes our natures (Gen. 1:27; 5:1; 9:6). But God is one. To whatever extent our natures reflect the one Creator, we should expect to be similar also to one another. Nor is the image of God a mere adjunct property—it is fundamental to our

humanity, serving even as the ethical grounds against murder and spite (Gen. 9:6; Jam. 3:9). If this is one of the essential ways to describe ourselves, we can expect that our commonality extends to the deepest aspects of who we are.

The First and Second Adam: This only continues with our redemption. Romans 5 roots the possibility of imputation in humanities shared identity—first in Adam; then in Christ. Both rest on the fundamental solidarity of the human race, whether we stand condemned by our first representative's sin or whether we can be viewed in light of the second. First Corinthians 15:48-49 further describes this union—"As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven." The closest that Scripture comes to partitioning humanity is into these two affiliate groups—not along lines of race, gender or culture, but in terms of their affiliation with Jesus Christ.

Christ, the Paradigmatic Human: This further highlights the significance of the incarnation. In saying that Christ was made "like His brothers in every respect" (Heb. 2:17), there is no need to clarify the specific affiliate group or cultural context of these "brothers." Salvation is available to every person, race and gender because Christ is willing to affiliate with all (Gal. 3:28). Nor is Hebrews concerned to bracket our solidarity to mere adjuncts or abstracts—it is "in every respect." Whatever this comparison entails, it consolidates every race, gender, or cultural category of humanity in relationship to Christ.

The solidarity extends further to our experience. Christ has experienced both our weaknesses and temptation—"in every respect [He] has been tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15).[17] That Christ never experienced womanhood or inhabited particular culture systems in no way vitiates his solidarity with them. It is therefore possible to be made like someone "in every respect" or to be "tempted in every respect" even if their gender, culture, or experience are not the same.[18]

---

[17] Though not specifically Christological, 1 Cor. 10:13 seems to trace the same logic with the assurance that "no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man" (ἀνθρώπινος). Clearly, the specific form of temptations and struggles can vary from person to person. Gender, culture, experiences or embodied situation may even exacerbate their struggles. And yet Paul assumes that these expressions of temptation are somehow adjunct to an underlying essential commonality shared by all humanity.

[18] Strikingly parallel language binds the two passages together. Taken together, the two passages argue that Christ can serve as our high priest because of shared nature (v. 17) and shared experience (v. 15).

Hebrews 2:17	Hebrews 4:15
ἀρχιερεὺς	ἀρχιερέα
κατὰ πάντα	κατὰ πάντα
ὁμοιωθῆναι ("make like")	καθ ὁμοιότητα ("as we are")

Restoration: Finally, shared humanity is the basis for our restoration. All believers are restored according to a single, specific standard—Christ (Rom 8:29; Col. 1:15; 3:10). Distinction does continues in the new heavens and the new earth—recognizable tribes, tongues and nations. And yet glorification is described as being conformed to the single standard of Christ's person and nature.

We can recognize these categories as the basic framework for the biblical story—creation, fall, redemption and restoration. For the purposes of our question, each of these give a horizon for human commonality. How essential to our humanity, how determinative or significant for our experience, how descriptive of our natures are the image of God, our corruption in Adam, Christ as the paradigmatic standard for human flourishing, or our ongoing and future restoration into God's image? To this extent, we ought also to affirm humanity's shared commonality across culture, time, and gender distinctions.

This biblical pattern bears additional weight because (1) it starts with essence—what makes a human a human and how we are distinct from other beings. (2) It extends across the Fall. Even with the distortions and aberrations that follow Adam's sin, we are still defined in terms of our essential solidarity. (3) As we await our final restoration, this pattern includes a norming mandate—direction us to to how we ought to live—and an embodied paradigm. The ideal for human flourishing is not an invisible or unrealizable paradigm existing only in the realm of the "forms." He has actually existed in time and space.

Conscience

Priest, Dye, and many others have demonstrated how widely ethical expression can differ across cultures. And yet even so, the similarities are even more striking. How are ethics in societies across the world so similar in their concern for work, property ownership, sexuality, or truth? Societies might practice polygamy or same-sex relationships, but the greater question is how something like marriage can exist worldwide or why such widely diverse societies consistently codify their ethics in ways that approach the 10 commandments?[19]

---

[19] In the appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, CS Lewis complies a series of ethical guidelines from traditions as diverse as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to Confucius' *Analects*, grounding ethical universals such as "duties to parents, elders, ancestors" or "sexual justice" or "honesty." This supports his contention that there is a "Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes… [which] is the sole source of all value judgements."

There are a number of possible explanations. *Creational constraints* built into the world lead naturally to these ethical protections and serve as guardrails that limit how far people can realistically distort ethics. There is, after all, only one universe in which to live. *Common grace* links ethical constraint more directly to God as the source and Giver. And recognizing that our nations and societies are more historically linked than we usually acknowledge, there are likely aspects of retentive revelation preserved in societies and traditions.[20]

But a fourth explanation has the most extensive biblical support—*conscience*. Paul can speak of "the work of the law [that] is written on their hearts" (Rom 2:15)—a knowledge of the law to those who "do not have the law" and yet "by nature… do what the law requires." The earlier context strongly supports this reading with Paul's argument that even for the Gentiles, God's attributes are "plain to them" and "they knew God" (1:19, 21). There is an even closer fit between "by nature" in 2:14 and "contrary to nature" or "natural relations" in 1:26-28 or the assertion that "they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die" (1:32).

Of course, conscience is quite mutable. It is entirely possible for conscience to be weak (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12), wounded (1 Cor. 8:12), defiled (1 Cor. 8:7; Titus 1:15) emboldened to sin (1 Cor. 8:10), evil or guilty (Heb. 10:22)or seared (1 Tim. 4:2).[^1] Moral guardrails that should be natural can be refracted or distorted until, like ruts worn into a road by frequent use, the trailing average of our past ethical decisions will commend decisions that are blatantly unethical.

But none of this erases Paul's confidence that while people chose sin, there is still an underlying ethical framework rooted in essential human nature. This notion is also found in the substructure of Romans 1-2 with the assertion that people "suppress" what they simultaneously know to be true (1:18, 21), they perpetrate evil even though *they know* it is wrong (1:32), and they must contend with "conflicting thoughts" that "accuse or excuse them" (2:15).

The implications on the human experience might escape us simply because conscience can be so easily overlooked. But what is ethics but a set of guidelines for human flourishing under the label of "ought" and "ought not" behavioral norms? These norms are embedded inescapably in our natures so that people groups around the world hold them as nearly self-evident—dictates for life and conduct that need no justifying

---

[20] The concept of retentive revelation was first suggested by JH Bavinck in and later more fully explained by Daniel Strange in *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*. In place of the more typical assumption that religions start off in animism and slowly progress upwards to monotheism, this theory understands religious diversity as a divergence from the original truth they received from Adam, Noah, or later shared sources of special revelation.

because they are axiomatic. Even further, according to Paul's understanding, this awareness is not only subconscious. "They know God's righteous decree" (Rom. 1:32).

Of course, the central focus of Paul's argument is that they subvert this knowledge. As with Strange's concept of retentive revelation, the phenomenon is not that cultures have evolved their ethics, mysteriously converging on similar solutions to social problems. A better model is that all humans enter life with the same ethical standards and variance between cultures is the record of how each has turned away.[21]

Scripture and Intertextuality

While the problem of textual communication remains an intractable and abiding problem for philosophy since Gadamer, Scripture seems utterly blind to these concerns. Daniel's message is intended not only for him but for a future generation including people still unborn (Dan 12:4, 9). Scripture speaks authoritatively to the entire world with the expectation that all peoples and nations will hear and obey. The striking pattern is not that Scripture promulgates its right to speak this way; rather it evidences no concern to make the case.

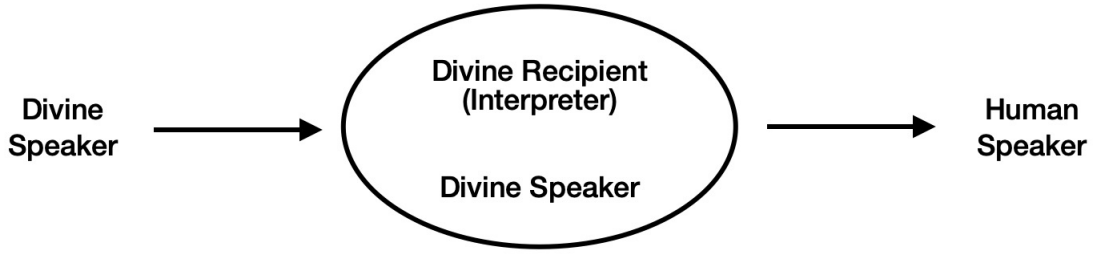
As with ethics, an argument can be made for the possibility of communication on *a priori* bases. After all, why make the case that understanding is impossible across our differences if no one can listen? The same is true for cross-cultural communication. Anthropologists such as Hofstede have made an effective case for distinguishable sets of cultural values, categorizing some of the parameters in which cultures might fall and even recognizing "cultural clusters"—values and systems that tend to be shared in common. The very existence of categories tells us that there are identifiable limits of variation. If humans can observe and categorize the permutations of alterity, they can also learn to communicate across it.

But there are better arguments than these because human-to-human communication is not all that exists, nor is every sender and receiver epistemically limited. Scripture is *sui generis* because the speaker understands all minds, both in the original audience and all future hearers across time and space.

---

[21] This is not to say that the specific forms of ethical expression should be identical any more than there is only one system for sharing food or only one way to hold marriage in high regard. The differences I have in mind are cases of actual aberration from biblical ethics or practices that a Christian missionary would have to address. Bob Priest's "Missionary Elentics" suggests that missionaries can and ought to specifically appeal to conscience in these areas as part of their apologetic.

This becomes more interesting still when Scripture interprets itself, for by interpreting his original words and placing them in a new context, God functions as both hearer (interpreter) and speaker.[22]



Built on this model, the implications for alterity and communication extend widely. (1) Communication is rooted in God, not us. He was speaking before we were. (2) The alterity between God's nature and ours could not be any more different. And yet God expects that we can understand His word, else he would not speak to us, nor hold us accountable for our responses. (3) He expects that His word can be meaningfully interpreted _and applied_ across all time and space. And then he sets the precedent for that interpretation by doing it before us (intertextuality). Scripture itself sets the foundational bases for hermeneutics. (4) Scripture then calls us to communicate that word, authoritatively applying it across differences in gender, background and culture. It is possible to speak all the commands that Jesus made and to do so cross-culturally and in a way that constrains ethical behavior. God expects that we can meaningfully communicate with one another across the gap of culture and background and He even entrusts us not only with our own messages but with the responsibility to accurately represent *Hiṡ* words.

The three considerations above can also be stacked on one another. Because of what we are like (essential human nature), there are universal patterns and mandates for human flourishing (ethics) which Scripture can communicate to all people everywhere (communication). This is because there is also progression in these categories from humanity in relationship to God (essence) to relationship to the world (ethics) to fellow humans (communication).

Alterity and Solidarity in Tension

This paper has focused entirely on coherence across the human experience, suggesting that the similarities are greater than the differences. This is fitting given our particular

[22] Nida makes a similar observation that translators function in this intermediary role, serving as both receptors and secondary speakers (20).

moment in philosophical history and also the dominating power of individualism in the West.

And yet it is also entirely possible to distort the biblical data in the opposite direction. Distinction exists together with unity. While the underlying principles of ethics are universal, various cultural settings raise different questions leading to distinct answers. While the image of God in man is more basic than gender distinctions, gender differences are also critical to human flourishing. And our readings of historical documents will be severely impoverished if we assume a one-to-one correspondence between our culture and the original settings.

In fact, unity and distinction are not ultimately opposites or at cross-purposes with each other. This is evident in several ways. First, both similarity and difference are necessary for human relationships and flourishing. We are communal creatures, implying both differences and commonality. Distinction forces us to work cooperatively; commonality makes it possible for us to do so.

Second, neither distinction nor commonality are rooted in the fall; both will extend into eternity. Said differently, both similarity and distinction existed before sin entered the race; neither is ameliorated by sanctification; both will extend beyond our future glorification. This means that our differences are not necessarily problems to be resolved in the name of achieving unity—distinctions are a gift. Similarly, our essential commonality is life and hope-giving because our created purpose in relationship to God from creation to restoration unites us as one.

And yet both human solidarity and disparity will be leveraged in defiance against God. Babel expresses a defiant solidarity; the diversity of idolatrous gods that follow it represents defiant disparity. This will echo again at the end of time with mankind rebelliously holding to their idols (Rev 9:20), even as the world prepares for unified worship of the beast (Rev. 13:4). Specific forms of sin often spread as social contagions through our sense of shared community, even as, in the individualistic West, people cherish the freedom to construct their own morality and personhood apart from concerns about the collective. Predictably, they then celebrate and defend *together* this radical individualism. So also, sinful defiance will in turn claim unified consensus (eg, evolutionary consensus against the biblical record), then open diversity (biblical ethical codes are oppressive). Either can form the basis of radical rebellion or flourishing.

In fact, Christopher Watkin points out solidarity and distinction depend on one another. Returning to Derrida's notions, when we can be so desperate to avoid totalizing the other by placing them within in our categories that they are left "without theme, context, contour, identity" (Emmanuel Levinas) and "the good becomes

identified with an abstract indeterminacy that can never embrace the richness of intimacy."[23]

If this calls to mind the rich Christian foundations for discussion unity and diversity, our minds should follow it further to the Trinity, the church with Christ as the head connected to the diversity of the body, and marriage as its living picture.

Conclusion

We began with Donald Brown's concern that anthropology emphasized differences to the neglect of similarity. In one sense this outcome is entirely unsurprising. What interest is there in an anthropologist, missiologist or cross-cultural worker finding that humans are profoundly more alike than different?

But what our bias towards seeing only the differences proves the opposite point? When we do discover significance divergences, we tend to describe them in measures relative to ourselves. "My husband is more agitated about the future than I," we might observe, or "Filipinos enjoy relaxing in large social groups more than Americans do." Our very ability to see differences depends on fundamental similarities.

We might imagine a group of natives on a Pacific island that share, by default, the same cultural practices and way of life. Asked how different they are from one another, any of them can detail an extensive social map. Kahu is the inventive one—he once tried tying his nets differently. Aitu is ambitious—his boat is a foot longer than the others', and so on. No matter how uniform the group relative to world cultures, they will tend to focus on the differences because it is all they know.

This is all of us. We are a parochial species. Our only awareness of other sentient beings is by divine revelation… if only we will listen. Ignoring that context, we define ourselves by ourselves and see wide differences. But are we not astonishingly the same? We are a people with recognizable patterns of moral sensibilities. We can speak of guilt or fear, love, or anger with any other human and all of the concepts are immediately recognizable. We anxiously pursue many of the same fundamental desires. And the most important information about us is our story—how we were created, how we fell, how our Redeemer took human flesh, how we are redeemed, and our future glorified state.

---

[23] Christopher Watkin. *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022, pg 47-49.