Chapter 5

Ethical Universals, Justice, and International Business

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I. The Particularist Sense of Universality as a Moral Prerequisite
II. Some Norms Required for Business Transactions
III. Ethical Consistency in International Business
IV. Some Moral Norms Are Relative to Existing Conditions
V. International Justice
VI. Practical Morality and Open Ethical Questions

Are there ethical universals in international business? Normative theories in general tend to claim some sort of universality. Hence, the short answer that a Mill or a Kant would probably give is yes.¹ For on the most common interpretations the principle of utility applies universally both in that it applies to all actions and in that it applies to all persons. The same is true of the categorical imperative. An affirmative answer to the question will also be given by a number of others. On the other hand, a relativist would probably have an equally short answer to the question: no. For the relativist would deny that any principles apply either to all actions or to all persons. But having said this much is not to have shed any light on the issue that people did not know before. And the point of the question surely is not to ask for one more defense of some normative ethical theory, or one more argument for or against relativism.

The question of whether there are ethical universals in business ethics might be taken as a special instance of the question whether there are ethical universals in general ethics. There is no reason to think that the answer to the first question will be any different from the answer to the second question. Business ethics is not separable from general ethics any more than business is separable from the rest of human life. Hence no special answer is possible with respect to ethics in international business.

¹ F. N. Brady (ed.), Ethical Universals in International Business © Springer-Verlag Berlin · Heidelberg 1996
The question of whether there are ethical universals can be considered a special case of the question of whether there are universals. The problem of universals goes back at least as far as Plato, with many different and subtle positions and variations developed from antiquity through the middle ages to the present time. For a nominalist, there are no universals, and hence no ethical universals. Some non-nominalists might hold there are universals—for instance in the realm of mathematics—yet deny there are ethical universals. But that discussion is not the point of asking about ethical universals in international business.

There are other ways to construe the original question as well. It might be taken to be raising the issue of the difference between subjectivists and objectivists in ethics, although one can be an objectivist without holding ethical universals; or between moral absolutists and moral relativists, although moral universals need not be absolutes; or between moral realists and non-realists, although moral universals do not necessarily demand moral realism.

Finally, raising the question of ethical universals in international business may not seek an answer based on a normative theory, or an answer based on metaethical or metaphysical considerations, but an answer based on empirical findings. Judeo-Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist morality overlap to some extent. But they also differ, and none of them or any other view is in fact held everywhere by everyone. Factual cultural relativity is widely acknowledged. Yet neither it nor factual moral similarities solve the problem of ethical universals any more than did our earlier answers.

All these are familiar debates in the literature of philosophy and of ethics. The many varied responses to these complex and debated issues are well known. There is no last word on any of these issues, and I do not propose either to rehearse the many positions or to attempt to give a final answer to any of them. Rather, I shall argue that we no more need to settle all these questions in advance in order to make moral judgments in the area of international business than we do to make moral judgments in other realms of moral life. I accept the fact that peoples and cultures often differ both on their moral principles and on their particular moral judgments. And I am not sanguine about developing any arguments strong enough to show that certain principles are the only right one or ones, or that particular judgments are infallibly right or wrong.

Nonetheless, for purposes of international business, there are certain basic claims and norms that are necessary for business, and these throw some light on claims to universality in ethics, whether or not they yield what are considered moral universals.