What Should We Share?
Understanding the Aim of Intercultural Information Ethics

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ABSTRACT
The aim of Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE), as Ess aptly puts, is to “(a) address both local and global issues evoked by ICTs / CMC, etc., (b) in a ways that both sustain local traditions / values / preference, etc. and (c) provide shared, (quasi-) universal responses to central ethical problems” (Ess 2007a, 102). This formulation of the aim of IIE, however, is not unambiguous. In this paper, I will discuss two different understandings of the aim of IIE, one of which advocates “shared norms, different interpretations” and another proposes “shared norms, different justifications”. I shall argue that the first understanding is untenable, and the second understanding is acceptable only with qualification. Finally, I shall briefly suggest an alternative way to understand the aim of IIE.

Keywords
Intercultural Information Ethics, pragmatic arguments, pluralism, relativism, objectivism, value-based ethics

INTRODUCTION
In an increasingly globalizing world, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming an important part of the daily life for not only Western but also non-Western peoples. Ethical issues in relation to ICTs are therefore increasingly becoming global ethical issues. Ideally, one would like to have a set of (quasi-) universal responses to handle ethical problems related to ICTs in global and cross-cultural contexts. But is this possible? As some scholars have rightly pointed out (Brey 2007a; Capurro 2008; Ess 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Ess & Hongladarom 2007), current debates and discussions in information ethics are dominated by the ethical frameworks that are distinct from those in non-Western cultures, whose ethical frameworks may not be immediately compatible. For example, the arguments for the protection of privacy is often based on the individual’s autonomy; these arguments may sound peculiar for Confucian cultures, which generally weigh the collective, common good over and above the benefit of individuals.

Being aware of the importance of cultural diversity and the vices of ethical imperialism, these scholars have called for careful investigations of moral systems in different cultures, when dealing with intercultural or cross-cultural ethical issues related to ICTs. As such, the aim of Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE), as Ess aptly puts, is to “(a) address both local and global issues evoked by ICTs / CMC, etc., (b) in a ways that both sustain local traditions / values / preference, etc. and (c) provide shared, (quasi-) universal responses to central ethical problems” (Ess 2007a, 102). This formulation of the aim of IIE, however, is not unambiguous. Particularly, it is unclear as to what exactly does “sustain local traditions / values / preference, etc.” refers to; as well as, what “shared, (quasi-) universal responses” means. In this paper, I will offer two possible understandings of the aim of IIE as characterized by Ess; namely, one that advocates (i) ‘shared norms, different interpretations’ and one that proposes (ii) ‘shared norms, different justifications’. I shall argue that (i) is untenable, and (ii) is acceptable only with qualifications. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the inadequacy of the prevailing understandings of the aim of IIE. To overcome the inadequacy, I shall briefly suggest an alternative way to understand the aim of IIE in the final section.

INTERCULTURAL INFORMATION ETHICS AS A NORMATIVE PROJECT
Before explaining the two understandings of the aim of IIE, it is worth identifying the basic requirements for an adequate framework for IIE. Already pointed out by Brey (2007a) and Himma (2008), two distinct stages of IIE can, and should, be distinguished. These two stages are respectively, the descriptive analysis of different moral systems in various cultures and the normative analysis of these moral systems and the related task of formulating (quasi-) universal moral principles in response to ICTs-related ethical issues. As it is clear in Ess’s formulation of the aim of IIE, both descriptive analysis and normative analysis are essential components of an adequate framework for IIE.

As IIE aims to provide responses to ICTs-related ethical issues which are (quasi-) acceptable from various cultural perspectives, what is considered to be acceptable in the moral systems of these cultures must first be identified; thus, the first stage of IIE will involve tasks such as explicating the actual moral norms and/or moral values embedded in these cultures, studying the impacts of ICTs to these cultures and their reactions towards ICTs.
However, equally important for an adequate framework for IIE is the possibility to derive normative and evaluative judgments from the framework; as IIE does not only aim to describe the actual responses to the ICT-related ethical issues from a specific cultural perspective, it also attempts to provide “shared, (quasi-) universal responses to central ethical problems”. In other words, IIE is prescriptive insofar as it tells us how one ought to respond to the intercultural or cross-cultural ICT-related ethical problems; and, for such responses to be meaningful, they have to be normative, minimally, in the sense that if party $A$ fails to respond as specified (or, if $A$ fails to comply to the normative, moral standard underlying the responses), the other parties can legitimately condemn $A$’s failure to do so.

Since IIE aims to investigate the ICTs-related ethical problems from various cultural perspectives and attempts to arrive at some agreements on how these ethical problems are to be settled interculturally or cross-culturally; therefore, it must employ both empirical findings of different cultural perspectives as well as normative analysis to determine what can, and should, be agreed upon. Once the agreements are reached, an adequate framework should also enable us to criticize and condemn those who fail to comply with the standard as specified. For any proper framework of IIE, therefore, it must have rooms for both descriptive analysis and normative analysis.

I have explained that any adequate framework for IIE must be normative, in the sense that it should allow us to criticize or condemn others morally when a party fails to follow the shared, (quasi-) universal responses; however, criticisms or condemnations are only possible, if we can reject (or, at least, restrict) metaethical moral relativism – the view that the truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. For, if metaethical moral relativism is true, then it does not make any sense to criticize or condemn people from different cultures because their judgments, actions, etc. are based on different moral systems which is equally legitimate; indeed, if metaethical moral relativism is true, there seems to be no point of making any agreements at all, they are just unnecessary. While it is clear that any adequate framework in IIE has to resist metaethical moral relativism, it is also important to remind ourselves of the importance to avoid ethical imperialism that is – to impose one’s moral system onto another culture, or simply puts, to require peoples from other cultures to judge or act according their own norms and values.

“SHARED NORMS, DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS” AS THE AIM OF IIE

It should be clear by now that Ess’s formulation of the aim of IIE can be understood as both an attempt to avoid cultural-ethical imperialism (e.g. see (b)), and metaethical moral relativism, (e.g. see (c)). On a more concrete level, then, the aim of IIE as formulated is to provide shared norms for different societies with different cultures and distinct moral systems; and, at the same time, maintain the cultural diversity and respect the distinctiveness of various moral systems. The formulation by Ess, however, is not unambiguous. Particularly, it is unclear exactly what counts as maintaining cultural diversity and respecting different moral systems, e.g. (b), and when the norms are considered to be shared. If one looks at the theoretical foundations of recent debates and discussions of IIE (for summary, see Capurro 2008; Ess 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Ess & Hongladarom 2007), one may discern two prevailing understandings of the aim of IIE, namely “shared norms, different justifications” and “shared norms, different interpretations”. As I will elaborate, the first understanding holds that there can be shared norms between different cultures, but different cultures can interpret the meaning of these norms differently with respect to their own moral systems. Here, maintaining cultural diversity and respecting other moral systems amount to pluralism in the interpretation of norms; on the second understanding, cultural diversity is maintained and other moral systems are respected through a plurality of justifications of norms, which means that different cultures should share a set of norms, but justifications of these norms may be different.

In a series of paper, Ess (Ess 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) has developed and defended a theoretical foundation for IIE which he calls pros hen pluralism; while different interpretations of Ess’s theory can place it either as the “shared norms, different interpretations” approach or the “shared norms, different justifications” approach; nevertheless, the first interpretation of Ess’s theory provides the best example of how a “shared norms, different interpretations” approach would look like. In remaining of this section, I shall elaborate such interpretation of Ess’s theory and to show that it does not satisfy the agendas of IIE, and hence is untenable as the aim of IIE.

Ess’s pros hen pluralism is based on Aristotle’s account of pros hen equivocals as well as the idea of phronesis, i.e. Aristotle’s notion of practical judgment. According to the pros hen pluralism, it is possible for the shared norms to take different but related meanings, as he puts (Ess 2007a, 13)
complementariness; indeed, it is unclear the different irreducibility of various cultural perspectives and their hen (Capurro 2008) quickly points out, it is unclear how Ess's defence is lucid and admirable, but as Capurro they can nevertheless understand the norms differently. In this way, various cultures are crucial in determining the meaning of the norms. And, it is up to different cultures to exercise their pragmatic judgment to determine their responses to the ICTs-related ethical problems; as Ess emphasizes the role of phronesis in his theory (Ess 2007a, 14)

[Pros hen] equivocals stand as linguistic middle grounds between a homogenous univocation (which requires that a term have one and only one meaning) and a pure equivocation (as a single term may have multiple but entirely unrelated meanings…). Pros hen or focal equivocals, by contrast, are terms with clearly different meanings that simultaneously relate or cohere with one another as both point towards a shared or focal notion that anchors the meaning of each.

[Phronesis] allows us to take a general principle (as the ethical analogue to the focal term ground two pros hen equivocals) and discern how it may be interpreted or applied in different ways in different contexts (as the ethical analogues to the two pros hen equivocals – i.e., that are irreducibly different and yet inextricably connected).

Taking the pros hen pluralism at its face value, what it appears to suggest is that the shared norms should be construed in the pros hen manner, i.e. the meaning of the shared norms is flexible and it remains so until it is being used to respond to ICTs-related ethical problems; then, the norms takes on a more concrete meaning supplied by the culture(s) involved. In fact, Ess thinks that different cultures are crucial in determining the meaning of the norms, as different culture can be complimentary to the others. In this way, various cultures are irreducibly different, but they can complement the other in determining the meaning of the norms.

In defending the pros hen pluralism, Ess draws support from both researches in information ethics and comparative ethics; and his examples range from Bernd Carsten Stahl's notion of responsibility (and its applications in management of information systems), Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR)'s ethical guidelines for online research, comparative studies of Virtue Ethics/Ethics of Care and Confucian ethics to the notions of privacy in China and Hong Kong and many more. In these example, Ess tries to demonstrate how different parties, while sharing the same set of norms, they can nevertheless understand the norms differently.

Ess's defence is lucid and admirable, but as Capurro (Capurro 2008) quickly points out, it is unclear how pros hen pluralism may resolve the tension created by the irreducibility of various cultural perspectives and their complementariness; indeed, it is unclear the different interpretations itself can help strengthen the shared norms; perhaps, more importantly, allowing different interpretations of norms is too unconstrained to avoid metaethical moral relativism. While Ess's own pros hen pluralism allows “the interpretation of a single idea themselves remain irreducibly different from another, but connected and coherent with one another by way of their shared point of origin and reference” (Ess 2006, 218), it seems to follow that a shared norm can be interpreted, and thus, implemented differently, as long as there is a “shared point of origin and reference”. Yet, without clearly identifying what is a legitimate “shared point of origin of reference”; any contingent facts may be employed to justify vastly contradictory interpretations, as well as conflicting implementations of a norm; and hence, pushing IIE towards metaethical moral relativism.

“SHARED NORMS, DIFFERENT JUSTIFICATIONS” AS THE AIM OF IIE

While being too unconstrained, the “shared norms, different interpretations” approach cannot avoid metaethical moral relativism; one may still insist on the necessity of shared norms, and turn to focus on different justifications of the same set of norms. In other words, one may stress on a more definite meaning of a norms, e.g. protection of privacy has a more or less fixed meaning; but, at the same time, distinct justifications for the norms can be derived from different cultural perspectives. For example, Hongladarom has argued that Buddhism also agrees with the protection of an individual’s privacy; but the justification of it differs from the Western autonomy-based reasoning; in Buddhism, protection of privacy is not considered to be a protection of the individual’s rights per se, rather it is considered to be a measure against human evil, such as greed for power, material gains, etc. (Hongladarom 2007). Such approach, therefore, aims to arrive at shared norms with different justifications (from various cultural perspective). I shall call this understanding of the aim of IIE as “shared norms, different justifications”.

Here, given a standard of reasonableness, understanding plurality in terms of diverse justifications from different cultural perspectives seems to avoid relativism. However, two forms of reasonable justification, that is – ethical justification and pragmatic justification – have to be distinguished. Ethical justifications are based on the moral values within a particular moral system; as such, a moral system can ethically justify a norm if it has the relevant (set of) moral values; on the other hand, there is pragmatic justification, which “are (as far as possible) detached from any socio-political or philosophical presuppositions” (Soraker 2006, 123). Yet, neither forms of justification, as I will show, help the “shared norms, different justifications” approach to satisfy the basic requirements of IIE.
I believe a commonsensical concern for the using ethical justifications by the “shared norms, different justifications” approach is that: a particular culture simply does not have the resources to justify the norms, as it lacks the concepts at stake. For example, Brey has demonstrated that concepts such as privacy, intellectual property rights and freedom of information are missing from the Chinese, Japanese and Thai culture (Brey 2007a); and, Burk goes beyond by arguing that ethical justifications for intellectual property rights and individual privacy rights appear to be missing in Confucian heritage (Burk 2007). The commonsensical concern, however, conflates the moral concepts related to ICTs with the more fundamental values in which these concepts are based upon. In other words, the fact that a particular culture does not, currently, have concepts like privacy, intellectual property rights, and freedom to information does not by itself entails the culture does not have the resources to justify them; moreover, to claim that a particular culture does not have any resource to justify these concepts seems to appeal to a very simplistic picture of different cultural perspectives, and thus misses their complexity.

The true worry for ethical justification, I believe, precisely stemmed from the complexity of various cultural perspectives. Indeed, if we consider the ethical debates in Western tradition, it is rather typical that a norm can be justified by a utilitarian-based ethics, while the negation of the very same norm can be justified by a deontological ethics. The very same thing can also be said of Confucian ethics, as it is often forgotten that Confucianism is not simply fixed rules derived from the canons; but, it is itself a school of thought that contains various sub-traditions, e.g. Neo-Confucianism, New Confucianism, etc.; and, the problem of complexity multiplies once we consider Chinese culture as a whole, which is constituted by Confucian, Daoist and Zen, and each has their own moral systems. Given the complexity of any cultural perspective, we can expect that a norm can be justified by the moral values embedded in the culture, while, at the same time, it can be rejected by the very same culture with different moral values (or, same values, but different interpretations of those moral values). The problem for “shared norms, different (ethical) justifications” therefore is one that: when different ethical justifications are equally legitimate, and these ethical justifications can justify the norms and their falsity; it is logically possible that no norm can ever be shared. In other words, it renders this approach logically inconsistent at its worse.

Hence, without an overarching position, the “shared norms, different (ethical) justifications” is not going to work. Perhaps, then we should look elsewhere to justify the shared norms; as I have pointed out, other than ethical justifications, there also pragmatic justifications (e.g. Soraker 2006), which may help to bring 'overlapping consensus' by highlighting the pragmatic benefits of maintaining the shared norms; indeed, as Ess’s and Soraker’s examples, e.g. emerging notions of privacy in China and Hong Kong (Ess 2008) and China’s regulations and surveillance of the Internet (Soraker 2006), forcefully demonstrate pragmatic arguments (and thus, pragmatic justifications) appear to be most effective way to justify the norms. However, pragmatic justifications are ill-suited for IIE in two senses: firstly, it risks transforming ethical problems into non-ethical problems by substituting ethical justifications with pragmatic justifications; secondly, it seems to downplay the role of the moral systems in different cultural perspectives in IIE, when these moral systems should be at the core of IIE.

First, consider the force of pragmatic justifications in promoting or defending the shared norms; it is their being abstracted away from a particular cultural perspective, by turning the emphasis on favourable and unfavourable, that makes agreements by different cultures more easily. Hence, arguing along Soraker’s line, China’s regulations and surveillance of the Internet is problematic insofar as the consequence of it is unfavourable to the Chinese government; but, if China fail to response to the pragmatic justifications, it is only possible to accuse of her being pragmatically incompetent but not ethically wrong. In other words, the shift towards pragmatic justifications also signifies the shift away from making moral evaluations. An approach like this will thereby fail to satisfy the basic requirement for an adequate framework of IIE, i.e. that the framework should be normative.

Also, the shift towards pragmatic justifications also signifies a move away from any cultural perspectives; thus, rather than promoting cultural diversity and respecting different moral systems, pragmatic justifications throw away the “intercultural” project of IIE, and therefore, it is ill-suited for IIE.

Perhaps, the worse problem for grounding pragmatic justifications a significant role in IIE is its essential link to the economic considerations; there are, in fact, two arguments for rejecting pragmatic justifications in IIE: theoretically, it is, as I have tried to show, contradictory to the basic tenet of IIE, that is – to maintain cultural diversity and to respect different moral systems; one may even go further to argue that the use of pragmatic justifications itself is one form of imperialism; and, practically, it is likely to be an unequal tools of negotiations.

The use of pragmatic justifications can be construed as a form of imperialism, because it presupposes economic progress (or, at least some form of progress) to be the most basic value; however, the concept of economic
**progress** is not neutral for different cultural perspective; by putting it at the core of IIE, then, run afool of the original intention of IIE. Secondly, because of the pretended neutrality of economic progress for diverge cultures, they may be used to mask any attempt to dominate other cultures in the name of supposed economic progress. By pushing pragmatic justifications in such terms, and by allowing our sources for evaluations in economic terms, it essentially transformed the ethical issues into political struggles, in which various agendas can be coined in the spirit of promoting progress.

In sum, the justifications in “the shared norms, different justifications” ought not to be pragmatic, as the use of pragmatic justifications runs against the nature of IIE. Yet, I have also argued that ethical justifications are not a suitable candidate for such approach once we realize the complexity of different cultures; and, with no overarching position to judge which justifications are more legitimate, the prospect of shared norms is dim.

**WHAT SHOULD WE SHARE?**

In the previous sections, I have tried to show both understandings of the aim of IIE are problematic. I believe the problem arise from an overemphasis on producing shared norms. While I agree that having a shared (set of) norms is of practical importance, (a set of) well defined rules can help to resolve disputed ICTs-related ethical issues, particularly, in the (quasi-) legal sense, e.g. international laws, professional code of ethics, etc., but the emphasis on what rules can and should be shared and how to implement these rules lead to an oversight of the philosophical-theoretical foundation of IIE.

Already demonstrated in my discussion of the two understandings of the aim of IIE as producing shared norms, the resulting norms have to be either ‘open’ or ‘thin’, i.e. either it is open to different meanings or it has no substantial normative content at all; in this sense, it is possible to see the aim of IIE, for the shared norms approaches, is to produce a minimal moral denominator, that is – to specify the basic norms in ICTs-related ethical issues that can be accepted by all cultural perspectives. As I have shown, without an overarching position to arbitrate between different interpretations and/or various justifications, such minimal moral denominator is too weak to issue normative or evaluative judgments. As a normative project, the shared norms approaches falsely based its normative foundation on minimal moral denominator. While I agree with Himma that an objective moral foundation is necessary for the normative project of IIE (Himma 2007), the question remains: what, if not shared norms, can provide the objective moral foundation for IIE. The answer, I believe, is (a set of) shared values.

My call for a shift towards values is not entirely new (for examples, Brey 2007b, Bynum 2006; Floridi 2007; Johnstone 2007), and what distinguishes the values-based approaches from the norms-based approaches is their attempts to identify (a set of) basic, common values which is valid across various cultures; it remains an open question as to what the (set of) basic, common values may look like. It may take the form of human (and non-human) flourishing (Bynum 2006), being (Floridi 2007) or capabilities (Johnstone 2007); but, what is important for the values-based approaches is that: such (set of) basic, common values are defined normatively, and that we have the moral responsibility to maintain and promote these values. As such, it provides a normative foundation for arbitrating ethical issues, based on the shared values. But, how will the values-talk translate to ICTs-related ethical issues in IIE? For one thing, ICTs-related ethical issues often claim to arise from cultures possessing different values, e.g. privacy issues in East-West context are often construed as a stand-off between community-based values and individualistic values; the shared values approaches will urge for a close investigation of the scenario and the values involved, and to determine if it is true that no shared value is available; and, it is particularly important for the values-based approaches not to overlook complexity of different cultural perspectives, in its retrieval of moral resource.

More time and efforts have to be given to fully develop a values-based IIE; here, it is important to note that the aim of IIE is not to eliminate every moral disagreements in ICTs-related ethical issues; as moral disagreement appears to be an ineliminable feature of our practical reality; but, at least, IIE should allow us to legitimately formulate normative and evaluate judgements for these issues. To do so, IIE must have a proper moral foundation; I have tried to show that the use of “shared norms” fails to provide such foundation; and hence, “shared values” appears to be a more promising candidate for the task. Moreover, as Johnstone (Johnstone 2007) has pointed out, attending to values opens up the space for issues which are marginal in the norms-based debates, e.g. well-being, digital divide, and gender issues. In other words, an added advantage of values-based IIE would be a more encompassing project than the one in norms-based IIE.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have examined two understandings of the aim of IIE, they are respectively, “shared norms, different interpretations” and “shared norms, different justifications”. Both approaches aim at establishing shared norms that would be accepted by different cultures. I have tried to show that neither of them provide proper basis for IIE as a normative project. While I have not prove, in this paper, “shared values” is the ultimate aim for IIE; my modest objective is to demonstrate the problems and weakness of the approaches which focus primarily on establishing shared norms; and hence, to
open up the space of discussion for values-based approaches for IIE.

REFERENCES


