

Reciprocity and the Search for a Guiding Principle in Cross-Cultural Relations: A Philosophical Essay

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“And on earth peace, good will toward men”

This essay proposes reciprocity, defined as “a mutual exchange of goods or services between two parties rooted in good will,” as a reliable and practical principle that allows differing entities or persons to work productively for a common cause or goal. Reciprocity works because it is rooted in human nature. It relies on an instinctive sense of justice based on equality. Persons or communities provide something of value that another person or community needs in exchange for something of value that they need. It is powerful because it allows humans to communicate and cooperate effectively across national and cultural boundaries. It is not something that is imposed by force but something that is mutually agreeable to parties that deal with each other as equals. This mutually beneficial aspect distinguishes relationships based on reciprocity from those based on leveraging power or the threat of violence. Thus, reciprocity offers an alternative way to engage constructively in cross-cultural relationships. However, although effective and rooted on human nature, relationships based on reciprocity can be difficult in practice. Therefore, I will also point out the difficulties that must be overcome when trying this approach which is so different from the dominant approaches used by most nations which are based on *Realpolitik* and a Machiavellian worldview based on self-interest and the pressure to achieve short term goals. Unfortunately, the ever-present dark side of human nature, based on selfish self-interest, often conspires against the possibilities opened up by reciprocity. These contrary tendencies must be recognized, arrested, and overcome if an approach to mutual relationships based on reciprocity is to work. Moreover, the process of developing mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships must, of necessity, take time in order to test it, vet it, and allow it to flourish.

The Problem is “The Other”

The United States’ government long-term involvement with the non-western cultures of the Middle East and Southwest Asia has brought to the fore the importance of achieving a profound level of cross-cultural understanding in order to attain policy goals. Western culture, whether based on the traditional Judeo-Christian worldview and the legacy of the Classical and Medieval worlds or whether viewed as a Post-Christian secular society based on the principles of personal freedom, liberal democracy, and economic neoliberalism, has been set into conflict with other ancient cultures such as those of the Islamic Middle East, Orthodox Russia, and the complex ancient cultures of India and China. This brings each of these protagonists into conflict with “The Other.” The concept of “The Other” has been used in philosophy, anthropology, and sociology as a way to describe the image we humans sometimes construct of other individuals or groups that are perceived as significantly different from us. To conceptualize “The Other” we emphasize differences and focus specifically on the perceived faults or defects of that “Other.” Thus, “The Other” becomes at best a stranger and at worst an enemy. It follows that the “The Other” cannot be trusted, must be defeated, or somehow subjugated because its “Otherness” represents a challenge and a danger. Violence and deceit, not good will and trust are called for when dealing with this “Other.”

In situations of war and conflict “The Other” is often reduced to a caricature that tends to demonize and depersonalize it so that it becomes easier to kill. We can recall how in previous wars waged by the United States the enemy has been described as “Redskins,” “Krauts,” “Nips,” “Gooks,” or “Ragheads.” These negative stereotypes become problematic when dealing with persons or groups from these cultures that are allied during war or during the post-war reconstruction period. Since these stereotypes tend to persist, they also become extremely detrimental in diplomatic engagements. When confronted with “The Other,” operational leaders within the U.S. government and military have been forced to recognize that persons and groups from “Other” cultures are not only political enemies, but can also be allies and neutral parties to conflict that must be approached appropriately—not necessarily as enemies. This in turn has led to the recognition that soldiers, and other officials who interact with members of “Other” cultures on a daily basis needed to acquire some basic cultural skills in order to bridge cultural differences that would allow them to work together.

Following the Hippocratic dictum of “First do no harm,” soldiers and diplomats have been taught to avoid supposed cultural taboos so as not to offend the mysterious “Other.” Useful though they are at a superficial level, these instructions do not set firm foundations for true cross-cultural communications. The need for a deeper level of understanding led to the formulation of the concept of “human terrain” and an attempt to form teams which included persons with appropriate levels of cultural expertise. Human terrain attempted to use demography and cultural analysis at the local level to better understand the immediate environment. This included local contractors, linguists, and service-members with family roots from a particular culture. Additionally the military attempted to recruit and incorporate persons who had deep knowledge of the operational area or of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and international relations. These efforts certainly enhance the military’s capacity to understand and shape the operational environment. But they often fall short of the desired long-term goals which can only be achieved through long term and persistent cross-cultural engagements rooted in understanding.

At the highest level, U.S. efforts have varied through seventeen years encompassing three presidential administrations, many executive foreign-policy teams and numerous combatant commanders and their constantly changing staffs. U.S. high-level pronouncements have struck both positive cooperative notes as well as provocative dissenting ones throughout the years. This instability and contradictory messages have had a detrimental effect in achieving the desired long term goals. But perhaps the biggest hurdle to effective cross-cultural relations has been the continued persistence of “The Other” who remains inscrutable, alien, and dangerous. We now turn to an alternative—unmasking “The Other.”

Unmasking “The Other”—the Road to Reciprocity

Anyone proposing a solution to serious political and military problems would be extremely naïve to believe that this would be a simple proposition. The problems of conflict and war are deeply rooted in the worst depths of human nature. Moreover, the proposed solution is itself problematic, if not in concept in its implementation. But, it is arguably a practical and proven way to resolve conflict and work toward common goals. So, what is reciprocity? As mentioned in our opening statement, reciprocity in this context is: a mutual exchange of goods and services between two parties rooted in good will.” This begs the question: Can reciprocity work? To answer it we point to the definition. It can work provided both parties work in good will.

Why does reciprocity work? Reciprocity works because it derives from an innate sense of justice based on a mutually beneficial exchange among equals. If this is so we may ask: Why is reciprocity often difficult in practice? The answer lies in the dark side of human nature. Mistrust or fear of “The Other” does not allow for good will and closes the door to reciprocal relationships. Alternatively, the desire to take advantage or dominate “The Other” also destroys the possibility of a reciprocal relationship. It follows that the pre-

condition to engage in relations based on reciprocity is to do away with the external mask that covers “The Other’s” humanity.

Reciprocity takes a broad view of the human condition and places more value on aspects that are considered most basic or essential over those that lie at the surface such as color of skin or aspects conditioned by culture such as food preferences. It focuses on what makes us human rather than on what makes us American or Chinese. This deeper assessment of the human condition is what allows us to relate to “The Other” on a level which surmounts surface differences and acknowledges our mutual humanity. Unmasking “The Other” requires us to accept certain assumptions about the human condition that allow for relations of reciprocity. The first assumption is ontological. We must assume that behind the mask worn by “The Other” we all share a common human essence—a common humanity. From this it follows that we must also unmask ourselves. A common humanity requires equality. All masks are to be removed. From a position of ontological equality we may derive a state of ethical equality. That is, if humans are capable of ethical choices—another assumption we choose to make—and they are ontologically equal, then humans share the capacity to deal with each other ethically. At this point it is important to acknowledge cultural differences rooted in beliefs and custom but these should not obscure the underlying and more basic common human ontology and capacity for ethical choices.

The Intuition at the Root of Reciprocity

When we examine systems of justice throughout many cultures we observe certain similarities that seem to be innate in human beings. One of these is to reward or punish people according to their deeds. “An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth” is the negative expression of this idea. The golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is the positive expression of the same basic idea. As an ethical principle the golden rule exists in many philosophical systems and in the ethical precepts of many world religions. It also forms the basis of restorative justice. Economic exchanges of goods and services are also based on equivalent value. Other such exchanges include trade agreements, military cooperation agreements, mutual assistance agreements in case of humanitarian disasters and others. Thus, reciprocity, rooted as it is in human ontology, capacity for ethical choice, and innate sense of justice in mutual interactions with other humans is a concept that may serve as the basis for cross-cultural cooperation once we ourselves and the perceived “Other” take off our masks.

Some Practical Guidelines to Establishing Reciprocal Relationships

The following guidelines may serve to set the foundations for lasting and productive engagements based on reciprocity:

- Identify actors willing and able to act in good faith. It is important to identify specific persons who are willing and able to cooperate in good faith for a common good. These two requirements are critical. The persons involved must have both the *will* and the *ability* or *power* to act in good faith and commit to a relationship based on reciprocity. The expression of “good faith” means that the parties are approaching their relationship as one of cooperation and in the common interest. Rather than charging into each other in collision course, they are attempting to walk together—side by side. It also means that neither party is attempting to undermine the other by means of hidden agendas and lack of transparency. The expressed intent to act in good faith for the common good is important; although, as we shall see, it must be tested and affirmed throughout the process. The famous Russian proverb “trust, but verify” is very appropriate in this context. A sober assessment of human nature and its pitfalls should allow both parties to devise and emplace a system of mutually agreed upon checks and balances to help keep the participants honest despite tendencies to the contrary.

- Create a Relationship of Practical Equality. Reciprocity works best when both parties are roughly equal in power and capabilities or when one is in a position to provide what the other lacks and vice versa. This power equality facilitates a relationship based on reciprocity because it is more difficult for either party to use force to impose unilateral solutions. Again, in a relationship based on equality and reciprocity there should be no losers—only winners. In practical terms, it is often the case that one party is dominant in relative power vis-à-vis the other. When there are power inequalities traditional political realism would counsel the stronger party to exercise coercion on the weaker in the tradition of “might makes right” or as Thucydides wrote: “The strong do what they will, the weak suffer what they must.” However, if the stronger party wants to reap the benefits of solutions reached through relationships of reciprocity, then it must eschew the unilateral solution based on power and put itself on a theoretical level with the less powerful party. Interestingly, this is the practical fiction embraced by the idea of the United Nations. Each nation, from the world’s superpower to the smallest city state, is, in theory, granted the same dignity and prerogatives. Although practitioners of *Realpolitik* would dismiss this offhand, it provides the foundation for international relations based on a certain level of equality. A general consensus that unilateral action is overwhelmingly counter-productive in a globalized world is also very helpful in nurturing attempts at reciprocity.
- Identify a common ethical framework. In order to develop a proper context for relationships based on reciprocity, it is first necessary to establish some mutually-agreed upon ethical foundations. These ethical foundations are to be accepted by all and are to serve as reference points to relations of reciprocity. This may at first seem an unsurmountable problem given that even within many cultures there are no common ethical frameworks and that many persons do not accept the validity of absolute ethical standards—e.g. ethical relativists—or even the possibility of ethical behavior—e.g. behavioral determinists. Nonetheless, it is always possible to appeal to the moral high ground as defined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The ethical framework provided by the great world religions, despite their immense differences, also offer points of similarity especially in their general ethical principles. In certain situations, these may serve as the foundations of a common ethical framework. In the absence of profound religious or ethical principles, the players may be able to construct mutually acceptable “rules of engagement” which may act as a de facto ethical system—although these would rest in weaker philosophical grounds than those based on accepted systems of ethics.
- Identify common goals. The basis of reciprocity is the willingness of the parties in question to work together for a common good and more specifically, for common goals. When pursuing common goals the parties do not engage in competition where there are winners and losers. They cooperate to obtain an outcome favorable to all parties.
- Work with “The Other” within a framework of mutual trust. Once identified mutual goals must be pursued in an atmosphere of mutual trust. This is important because the existence of hidden agendas, or even the perception that there are hidden agendas will quickly destroy the spirit of cooperation which is at the heart of reciprocal relationships.
- Persevere and Adjust. Relationships based on reciprocity require care and attention. They may need to be readjusted periodically when goals are achieved or when conditions change. At times, it may be necessary to offer “The Other” proof of good will to retain trust and confidence. Trust must be renewed constantly. If lost, it may be difficult or impossible to regain.
- Be Transparent. Trust, based on honesty based on transparency are obviously important for a relationship based on reciprocity to work; however, it is very difficult to achieve these in practice. Furthermore, it may take a long time to develop trust based on honesty and transparency—sometimes years. In practice it takes perseverance and a gradual increase in mutual sharing of increasingly sensitive information or working together toward more significant goals. It is a difficult process indeed, but well worth the effort.

Towards an Ethical Political Philosophy based on Reciprocity

Reciprocity introduces a higher ethical standard than the usual common schools of international relations advocate. It does so because it places the common interests of humanity on a higher plane than the usual focus on narrow national interest. For this very reason, high level engagements based on reciprocity offer the prospect of long-term peace based on justice.

Since reciprocity should work for mutual benefit, partners should keep solutions employing lethal operations and war to a minimum. This is in part a reaffirmation of one of the principles of Just War Theory. War and violence are to be used as a means of last resort. International partners who want to work within the framework of reciprocal relationships could work in concert to isolate those who do not practice reciprocity or are discovered to harbor hidden agendas. As the dominant superpower in the world, the United States has to work particularly hard to gain the trust of lesser powers, particularly those who have been trampled by its power in the past. This is challenging, but it could prove to others the good will of American policy and therefore encourage relations based on trust and reciprocity.

In Conclusion

Reciprocity is a practical principle which cuts across cultural mores and boundaries because it is rooted in our common human nature by virtue of our common ontology and ethical capacity. It is both an attitude of mind and spirit as well as a principle of action. Reciprocity is the basis for mutually beneficial relationships of exchange based on the innate human sense of justice as expressed in the golden rule. It is a simple concept, but one that can be very difficult to implement in practice. However, given that human nature is capable not only of dreadful acts of violence and cruelty but of sublime acts self-sacrifice and great nobility as well, it is a principle that can and should be implemented because it has the potential of creating conditions for profound and lasting solutions to seemingly intractable problems that may otherwise lead to war and conflict. Acting in a spirit of reciprocity requires the opening up of one person or group to the "Other" with an offering of good will in the expectation that it will be accepted and reciprocated by the "Other." It demands the mutual unmasking of the participants as a prerequisite to their engagement at a deep human level. It also requires the acceptance of mutually agreed-upon ethical principles, or as a minimum, standards of behavior. Finally, it demands perseverance and adjustment to reach mutually agreed upon goals. Despite the challenges, the principle of reciprocity has the potential to yield deep and long-lasting positive outcomes in both high level diplomacy and various types of military operations. It is a principle that can and should be put into practice much more often. Our very survival may depend on this.