Moral Portability – Some Insights from Cultural Semiotics

Massimo Leone

University of Turin

Abstract

Portability is the general characteristic of being readily transportable from one location to another. Increasingly sophisticated forms of economic and technological portability are being developed in order to suit the needs of people who move across a more and more globalized world. Yet, despite the current "entanglement of civilizations", the world still lacks any notion of "moral portability". Moral portability is not moral exportability, is not moral relativism, is not moral cosmopolitanism; it is the ability to conceive morality as a normative pattern that mediates our relationship with the world and allows us to both affirm our moral identity and negotiate new moral communities. The perspective of cultural semiotics is suitable to facilitate the elaboration of such moral portability: different moralities are conceived as moral discourses, whose inner structure can be analyzed and compared, as well as re-engineered through processes of moral entextualization, a cultural bricolage in which moral discourses are transplanted from East to West, and vice versa, in order to suit the moral needs of an increasingly interconnected world community.

This paper has three main objectives: (1) introducing and elaborating on the concept of *moral portability*; (2) arguing that a cultural semiotics of moral discourses is indispensable in order to bring about a *moral portability*; (3) proposing two examples of how a semiotic mindset is able to set forth a process of *moral entextualization*, indispensable to give rise to a moral portability: (3.1) neo-Confucianism (from East to West) and (3.2) neo-casuistry (from West to East).

A Definition of Portability

If one googles the word "portability", one obtains the following definition by wikipedia: "'portability' is the general characteristic of being readily transportable from one location to

another". Currently, the concept of portability mainly applies to three domains: (1) social security portability: the portability of social security benefits; (2) software portability: the portability of a piece of software to multiple platforms; (3) telephone number portability: keeping one telephone number while switching one's account to another telephony provider. Every person in the West, as well as many people in other parts of the world, have already experienced what the benefits of technical portability are; for instance, I can change my mobile phone or travel from Europe to China without having to change my mobile phone number. Indeed, my mobile phone number is a portable element in the technology of my personal communication media, and so is the network of social relations enabled by it: I can receive text-messages from all my relatives and friends, independently from where they are, or where I am. This means that a form of social portability is stemming from technical portability: my cell phone number is a piece of my identity, is what enables me to maintain my connection to a certain network of relations, and changing my abode does not endanger this aspect of my identity. This is probably a better definition of portability: what enables me to keep my personal and social identity even if I move from place to place.

From Technical-Economic to Moral Portability

So far the concept of portability has mainly applied to (1) the economic domain and (2) the technological domain. This is not a coincidence: the economic and technological interconnectedness of the world is already a reality and the world is developing increasingly sophisticated procedures in order to secure the portability of economic and technological benefits for people who move across the world. Nevertheless, moral portability is still far from being conceived and implemented. Moral assumptions that are valued by a civilization are, on the contrary, considered as irrelevant, or even harmful, by other civilizations. As a consequence,

people who move across the world are often obliged to conceal their moral identity in order to fruitfully interact with a different civilization. A tourist traveling in a country where different moral assumptions are shared by the majority of the country's inhabitants, for example a different conception of personal freedom, is obliged to conceal this part of her moral identity in order not to incur in social stigmatization or, in some cases, legal sanctions. Whilst in some parts of the world such a conception of personal freedom can be signified and communicated through public signs (talking about it in public with strangers, for instance), in other parts of the world such signification and communication phenomena must be confined in a private or intimate sphere, or either they must be repressed at all. This means that, even in a technologically and economically more and more interconnected world, one's moral conception of personal freedom is often not as a portable element of one's identity as one's cell phone number is, for the way this conception is signified and communicated must radically change when one moves across different moral civilizations.

The problem is not as serious in the case of tourists —whose condition of displacement is chosen and temporary, to the extent that being obliged to momentarily change one's moral identity, for instance concealing one's conception of personal freedom, can be even part of the entertainment— as it is in the case of the increasing amount of people that, also because of the current world economic crisis, move from place to place looking for more suitable living conditions. Entire minorities of migrants in many parts of the world are currently been forced to conceal a great part of their moral identity, to repress it or to displace it in the private sphere, in order to avoid conflict with the predominant moral civilizations where migrants find their new abode. This contributes to create a situation of moral unsustainability, in which the public sphere is not equally shared by all the citizens of a society: some of them can signify and communicate

their moral identity in public, whilst others must repress it, producing a public moral simulacrum of themselves that does not correspond to their private or inner moral identity. Adopting a technological metaphor, it is as if A-class citizens were given mobile phones with which they can communicate both inside an outside their homes, whilst B-class citizens are given home phones only, that cannot be transported from the private space into the public arena. The result of this inequality in the possibilities of communication is evident: A-class citizens are going to know less and less what B-class citizens talk about, and B-class citizens are going to talk more and more knowing that what they say is ignored by A-class citizens. In the long term, such informative asymmetry is likely to create a relation of mistrust and miscomprehension between citizens who can freely display their moral identity in public and citizens whose moral identity must be concealed. It is exactly this informative asymmetry to be one of the roots for the future "clashes of civilizations".

However, if clashes of civilization are an unfortunate reality in some parts of the world, elsewhere they are only a potentiality that can be thwarted by adopting suitable cultural and social policies. According to a reputed neo-Confucian scholar, Robert Cummings Neville (2000), "Samuel Hungtington (1996) is 180 degrees wrong when he says we live in a time of the 'clash of civilizations'. On the contrary, we live in a time of the entanglement of civilizations" (p. xxvii). Indeed, he continues, "we have a world society now, knit together by economic, political, military, and informational causal connections, we do not have a well-knit world culture" (p. xxix).

Moral portability could be an answer to the lack of a "well-knit world culture". But what is moral portability exactly? Through which signs would it manifest itself? And how can semiotic

theory, and the semiotic study of cultures in particular, bring about such a portability and dispel the threat of a civilization clash?

<div align="center">Moral Ex-portability, Moral Relativism, Moral Cosmopolitanism</div>

In order to understand how "moral portability" could be conceived and implemented it is useful to contrast this concept with that of "moral ex-portability". Neo-Conservatism has mostly conceived the absence of a global morality as a problem of clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1996). Roughly speaking, one morality in particular, mainly that of the US "wasp" conservative society, was identified as "the best"; plans and attempts were made to "ex-port" this morality elsewhere. For example, the purported moral justification of the USA war against Iraq was the project to ex-port the "morality of freedom" to an area of the world where it was thought to be absent or deficient.

Indeed, ex-portability implies (1) the individuation of the moral assumptions of a certain civilization X as a standard; (2) the individuation of a civilization Y that does not meet this standard; (3) the conception of Y not meeting the standard of X as potentially dangerous to X; (4) the project to ex-port the moral assumptions of X toward Y, either through persuasion or through force. A corollary of the idea of moral ex-portability is that its counterpart, the importation of moral elements from other civilizations, is considered as harmful and to be avoided at any cost. The concept of freedom that prevails in X, for instance, must not be "polluted" with ideas coming from Y.

Therefore, it is evident that a conception of world morality based on the idea of exportability, of the expansion of a particular moral culture in the rest of the world, eliminates the need of moral portability from the start: in a world imagined as having a single moral culture, what need is there for a morality that might be "transportable" from place to place? The world dreamed by

neo-conservatism is like a giant mobile phone network covering the entire planet, where no portability is needed, because there is no alternative to the only existent network. However, the tragic consequences of the idea of cultural and moral exportability are now visible to everyone: cultures, including moral cultures, cannot be exported because such a project collides with what is at the basis of the concept itself of culture: cultures are adaptive entities, that constantly change in order to enable a better relation between human groups and their environments; thinking that a single set of cultural and moral assumptions can suit the needs of every social group in every environment means transforming a cultural model into a metaphysical entity.

The concept of portability entails different assumptions: (1) different civilizations have different cultural mindsets or moral assumptions; (2) none of them can be considered as a standard; (3) as a consequence of economic and technological interconnectedness, more and more people move across the world, different cultural mindsets and moral assumptions being in contact, sometimes in conflict, with each other; (4) people moving across the world should be equipped with some social skills enabling them to feel culturally and morally at ease wherever they go; their morality should be portable like their e-mail account or mobile phone number. So, if moral ex-portability concerns the transplantation of a civilization across the world, moral portability concerns the transplantation of an individual across civilizations; in other words, moral portability is not a concept centered on civilizations but a concept centered on individuals; it is a humanistic concept.

However, moral portability is not moral relativism; moral relativism shares with moral portability some assumptions [mainly (1) different civilizations have different cultural mindsets or moral assumptions, and (2) none of them can be considered as a standard] but offers no

solution to (3) moral conflicts generated by an economically and technologically interconnected world and (4) the need to develop a peaceful solution to these conflicts.

Moral portability is not moral cosmopolitanism either: the idea that we should, or could, develop a world culture, and a world morality, that are suitable for everyone everywhere and in every condition; on the contrary, moral portability is based on the idea that differentiation is a fundamental principle of cultures and moralities, and that the attempt at eliminating cultural and moral differences could be harmful instead of being fruitful.

The Semiotics of Moral Portability

Moral portability is not moral exportability, is not moral relativism, is not moral cosmopolitism; in order to understand not only what moral portability is not, but also what it is, moral portability must be understood in semiotic terms. Moral portability would be the moral equivalent of a lingua franca. In an essay of mine (Leone 2009a) I have tried to demonstrate that the linguistic dynamics that brings about a lingua franca is different from the linguistic dynamics that comes about with pidgin, or with an artificial language; a lingua franca is a product of social linguistic creativity that stems from (1) the willingness to communicate, (2) the impossibility to communicate through one's own linguistic identity, and (3) the effort to negotiate a linguistic community based on the different linguistic identities involved in communication.

However, whilst lingua francas evolve spontaneously, moral portability is unlikely to do so; indeed, people usually do not conceive moral assumptions linguistically; they do not concede that, in certain circumstances, for the sake of human communication, new, more encompassing moral assumptions might be formulated through social negotiation. Moral assumptions, like religious beliefs, are considered as defining the core identities of both individuals and groups, and therefore reputed as non-negotiable. Most people currently accept to temporarily divest

themselves of their linguistic identity (for example in order to adopt the linguistic identity of another speaker); on the contrary, most people are unlikely to do so with their moral identities.

One of the greatest contributions a semiotics of cultures can give to the elaboration of a moral portability is showing that moralities can be considered as moral discourses, as semiotic patterns through which civilizations mediate the interaction between individuals and an ever changing reality. In other words, semiotics can offer a meta-language in order to structurally compare different moral discourses, so developing a precise understanding of their differences and their similarities.

Of course, the elaboration of such semiotic meta-language of moralities is not unproblematic: semiotics too stems from a certain "ideology", as I have tried to demonstrate in an essay of mine (Leone 2009b). Meetings such as the *International Symposium on Cultural Semiotics*, organized by the China Association for Linguistic and Semiotic Studies at Nanjing Normal University (November, 15-17, 2008) are fundamental exactly insofar as they allow semiotic scholars from different parts of the world to become aware of (and to compare) their semiotic ideologies.

Yet, despite these differences, cultural semiotics could, and should, develop an approach to moralities different from those of more traditional perspectives, such as the approach of moral philosophy, for example. Cultural semiotics, indeed, should not focus on what moralities prescribe (the morality or immorality of certain behaviors), but rather on the semiotic patterns that bring about such prescriptions. From this point of view, Herbert Fingarette's analysis of Confucius's moral discourse is a promising attempt (1972).

Fingarette is not a semiotician, yet the framework of speech acts theory enables him to single out the deep structure of Confucius's moral discourse, and to compare it and contrast it with the deep structure of the "Western" moral discourse. On the one hand, J.L. Austin's philosophy of

language enables Fingarette to re-interpret Confucius's notion of *li* in semio-linguistic terms, and to conclude that:

> There is no power of *li* if there is no learned and accepted convention, or if we utter the words and invoke the power of the convention in an inappropriate setting, or if the ceremony is not fully carried out, or if the persons carrying out the ceremonial roles are not those properly authorized. (p. 12)

On the other hand, such semio-linguistic re-interpretation brings about the possibility of a comparison between the deep structure of Confucian moral discourse and the deep structure of "Western" moral discourse: although the primary imagery of the *Analects* centers around the Way, and although the Western imagery would be inclined to introduce in such path-imagery the derivative image of the crossroads, this is not the case in Confucius's moral discourse (ibidem, p. 18-36).

> According to Fingarette's interpretation, indeed:
>
> although we in the West have an elaborated language in which to express these realities and to trace out their inner shape and dynamics in detail, Confucius (and his contemporaries) did not possess such a language. And they had no significant concern with these moral realities so central to their contemporaries, the people of Greece and the Near Est. (ibidem, p. 19)

I ignore whether Fingarette's interpretation is considered as valid by Confucian scholars; however, what matters here is not the content of this interpretation, but its form: the propensity to compare moralities as semiotic patterns, as ways of imagining morality even beyond the specific content of particular prescriptions.

The same structural approach has been developed even further by other scholars interested in the comparison of "Western" and Confucian moral discourses, for example David L. Hall and

Roger T. Ames (1987). According to these scholars, while the moral discourse of "the West" would be based on the hierarchical, asymmetric relation between a (usually transcendent) moral principle and a (usually immanent) moral rule, determining a certain moral result, the moral discourse of Confucius would consist in the non-hierarchical, symmetric relation between two moral principles; as a consequence, the moral discourse of "the West" would be one of logical determination, whilst the moral discourse of Confucius would be one of aesthetical accordance.

Of course, every interpretation of this kind runs the risk of hypostatizing differences into stereotypes; yet, the constitution of a semiotic meta-language of moral discourses is indispensable to create opportunities for the development of a moral portability.

Indeed, it is only through such meta-language that people can: (1) realize how their moral assumptions are not only a core element in the definition of their identities, but also a semiotic pattern that mediate their interactions with reality; (2) realize that these patterns vary both diachronically and synchronically; (3) realize that, like linguistic and other semiotic patterns, moral patterns too can be used both in order to express one's identity and to communicate with different identities; (4) realize that communicating with different moral identities in an economically and technologically interconnected world means accepting to negotiate a moral portability.

Such negotiation can be conceived in two ways:

1. The logic of common denominator: moral portability would consist in those elements that are shared by all the moral patterns involved in communication; *mutatis mutandis*, such logic has been that inspiring the international moral discourse on human rights; yet, more often than not this logic has proved unsuccessful: the common denominator was so

abstract, and so narrow, that moral discourse resulting from it was closer to an artificial language than to a lingua franca;

2. The logic of exchange: moral portability would consist in a bricolage of moral patterns, a bricolage elaborated according to the idea that traditional moral discourses are, in many cases, inadequate to suit the needs of late-modern societies, and especially the needs of people who move and live across different moral civilizations in late-modern societies.

In other words, in this second case moral portablity would consist in a process that linguistic anthropology would call "entextualization" (Silverstein and Urban, 1996): the dynamics through which a text is "transplanted" from its traditional context into a different one.

An Example of Moral Entextualization (East to West): Boston Neo-Confucianism

An example of how this entextualization of moral discourse could be conceived in the framework of cultural semiotics is the movement called *Boston Confucianism*, according to which some elements of the moral discourse of Confucius could, and actually should, be transplanted in late-modern Western societies. Robert Cummings Neville (2000), for example, proposes to empower Peirce's semiotic pragmatism with Confucius's teachings; he therefore suggests that one of the greatest contributions Confucianism can give to late-modern Western societies is the development of a semiotics of ethics:

The Western ethical traditions generally have focused on actions, decisions, and goals or values, missing the Confucian point that social activities are not possible without the significant ritualized behaviors whose exercise constitutes their existence […]. The Chinese philosophy of culture allows for the critical examination of the social habits and rituals of a society, and for the invention of good ones where they are lacking, a topic

almost entirely obscured by the Western preoccupation with decisions, actions, and goals.

(ibidem, p. 39)

Moral portability —allowing people with different cultural mindsets and moral assumptions who move and live across the world both to keep their old moral identities and to negotiate some new moral communities— should be a morality that borrows from Confucianism the idea of *li*; moral portability would therefore focus on the ritual propriety of those semiotic patterns that mediate the interaction between different moral discourses, even before the issue of moral decisions is taken on.

In most late-modern societies rituals of encounter, patterns of interaction through which moral differences can be acknowledged even before any attempt to settle them, are deficient; entextualizing Confucius in late-modern moral portability would consist in emphasizing the need for the creation of such rituals, for the elaboration of semiotic patterns able to transform the conflict of moral civilizations into the communication of moral civilizations. From this point of view, the Neo-Confucian semiotics of ethics would not be a moral lingua franca, but a ritual pre-condition for the establishment of a moral lingua franca, a sort of gracious greeting between differences.

An Example of Moral Entextualization (West to East): "Asian" Neo-Casuistry

Of course, entextualizations of moral discourses into the moral portability of late-modern societies should not proceed only from East to West, but also from West to East. In this case too, maybe the most interesting suggestions come from those moral philosophers that revisit some neglected moral traditions of the past through the modern sensibility of the linguistic turn. A clear example is the book by Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin *The Abuse of Casuistry* (1988). The authors try to rekindle a trend of the Catholic moral discourse known as casuistry,

that flourished in the 16th- and 17th Century but was subsequently dismissed, especially as a consequence of Pascal's criticism. Jonsen and Toulmin recognize that an abuse of casuistry was made in the 17th Century, partially justifying Pascal's criticism; at the same time, though, they claim that the semiotic patterns of this moral discourse would be very suitable today.

Within the limits of the present paper it is not possible to expound on the most relevant features of the moral discourse of casuistry; what matters here is that moral portability, in the East as well in the West, could, and actually should, borrow from casuistry the idea that principles and rules are not the only elements in relation to which a moral situation must be settled; casuistry, indeed, contributes to moral portability the idea that ethics is not only a logical, but also a rhetorical matter, and that in many cases moral situations can be better dealt with if they are considered narratively, as stories to be analyzed in their individuality, more than syllogistically, as cases to be referred to a typology.

In the words of Jonsen and Toulmin:

"[…] we may recognize that a morality built from general rules and universal principles alone too easily becomes a tyrannical, disproportioned thing, and that only those people who have learned to "make equitable allowances" for the subtle individual differences among otherwise similar circumstances have developed a true feeling for the deepest demands of ethics." (p. 341)

Conclusion

It is probable that for a very long time the portability of technological services and economic benefits will be much more developed than any project of moral portability. Yet, a semiotic understanding of cultures will hopefully help us to recognize what elements in the moral discourses of the past will be knit together to create the moral portabilty of the future.

References

Cummings Neville, R. (2000) *Boston Confucianism – Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fingarette, H. (1972) *Confucius – The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper & Row.

Hall, D.L. and Ames, R.T. (1987) *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Huntington, S.P. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Jonsen, A.R. and Toulmin, S. (1988) *The Abuse of Casuistry – a History of Moral Reasoning*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Berkeley University Press.

Leone, M. (2009a). The paradox of shibboleth – *Communitas* and *immunitas* in language and religion. In Proceedings from EFSS 2007: *The 13th Early Fall School in Semiotics*. Sofia: New Bulgarian University.

Leone, M. (2009b). The semiotic analysis of linguistic ideology. In Proceedings from Metamind 2008. Riga: Latvian Academy of Culture.

Silverstein, M. and Urban, G. (1996) The natural history of discourse. In Silverstein, M. and Urban, G. (Eds.), *Natural Histories of Discourse* (pp. 1-20). Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press.