

# The John M. Rezendes Ethics Essay Competition

VOICES: MORALLY ADDRESSING THE CONFLICT IN THE DRC  
THROUGH KANTIAN ETHICS

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“So many people have failed to help the Congo,” Daniella Runyambo told me during our first conversation. “You don’t know how to start. Even as a Congolese person, I ask myself: ‘How do I help my country?’”

Daniella is a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She fled with her family when rebel violence between warring tribes grew too dangerous in their hometown of Bukavu in the DRC’s South Kivu region. They relocated to Cyangugu, Rwanda, and then later to Rwanda’s capital of Kigali, where Daniella lived with her mother and her seven siblings for three years. Her father came to the United States in 2005 to seek asylum. When he was granted it two years later, Daniella and the rest of her family moved 6,202 miles to Portland, Maine. She was sixteen.

Achingly, there are other stories. The relief group known as Refugees International estimates that upwards of 460,000 Congolese have fled to other countries due to the violence characterizing the nation since the late twentieth century (*DR Congo*, 2013). The question that Daniella asks is echoed by many; the conflict in the DRC is staggeringly extensive and multifaceted, with no single catalyst. The people of this nation have been grappling with tribal warfare, corruption, internal dissension, disenfranchisement, rape, disease, and poverty since the early twentieth century. Hostility between the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups during the early 1990’s triggered the massive Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, a conflict which spilled over into the DRC (Berry and Berry, 23). Hutu extremists fled to the areas of East and South Kivu, and countering Tutsi rebel groups grappled for strongholds in those areas, as well (“DR Congo Conflict,” 2014). Hostility towards both the Tutsi and Hutu people — from without and within — still pulses in the South Kivu region, which lies on Rwanda’s western border. Chafing against

a unified, single leader by various tribes has led to more tension. Invasions of the *interahamwe* — Hutu paramilitary groups — are characterized by the use of children as soldiers and women as sex slaves, along with waves of directed violence and systematic rape. *UNICEF* estimates that forty women are raped daily in South Kivu, while hundreds of thousands have been raped since the conflict began (“Rape: Weapon of War,” 2012).

As journalist Jason Stearns describes in his book, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*: “The long history of state decay in the Congo — or, more accurately, the failure to ever build strong institutions — has meant that actors have proliferated, competing for power and resources in the absence of a strong government. At the height of the war, there were upwards of forty Congolese armed groups in the eastern Congo alone, while nine different African states deployed troops” (Stearns, 21-22). Accordingly, the conflict evades simple explanation.

In the Western forum, its intricacies have engendered a silence and darkness surrounding the struggles people in the DRC face; no sound bytes or individual articles can accurately encompass the conflict, and the media pieces that do address the DRC tend to view it through general and sweeping lenses (Stearns, 23).

This silence is a primary ethical issue at stake in regards to the DRC; there is a distinct *lack* of discovery surrounding the peoples in crisis in this nation, and this silence and lack of engagement (anti-discovery) is shown even in the very manner of relief methods and approaches that are being employed by the international community. I argue that the darkness surrounding this global conflict can be countered with a method of active discovery that aligns with a Participatory Action Research approach grounded in

Kantian ethics; particularly, the argument that valuing the voice of the *individual* in the process of learning more about the DRC's condition can catalyze powerful ethical engagement and reciprocity of empowerment. Ultimately, active and intent discovery focused on the personal stories of those marginalized by the turmoil in the DRC is an accessible, authorizing method of moral engagement in the midst of a conflict that eludes generalizations or simplification — and can seem, as Daniella expresses, overwhelming and unfathomable.

Engaging in the debate surrounding the ethics of discovery can help to solidify the dignity of the human life, and — moreover — the morality of respecting, honoring, and *recognizing* this dignity. In particular, I will outline the moral obligations we face as citizens of a global community in learning about and sharing the different cultures and the different trials characterizing individuals. As pieces of a greater whole, we face a distinct task: to recognize and honor the dignity of those in conflict by lifting up their stories and their voices.

Daniella has taught me the incredible importance of this engagement. I began meeting with her weekly throughout the past fall semester at the suggestion of a university friend; I was working on an essay about a charity race I had participated in to raise money for women in the DRC, and I came to Daniella in hopes of learning directly about the conflict and the people involved. What unfolded from our many conversations changed why I had initially pulled out my pen. She gave me a different story and message, a voice to capture and share. In unpacking the ethical issue of silence surrounding the DRC and how to address it, I will cite Daniella's ideas to corroborate the importance of an approach grounded in Kantian ethics.

First, to delineate the ethical issue surrounding the DRC: the violence and power structures characterizing its turmoil are weighty issues of morality, but the crucial problem that I would like to focus on is the fact that this turmoil has been largely shrouded in silence. Moreover, some of the aid efforts that attempt to bring relief in the midst of the conflict do not elicit the individual voices of those involved and affected — and so again, silence is engendered.

As Thomas Turner describes in his book, *Congo*, the internal tensions of the DRC have been largely unnoticed by the international community — in part due to their complexities, but also because of the international relationships and ruling structures that have characterized the nation's history. When the DRC was locked under imperial rule for the first half of the twentieth century as a Belgium colony, news of anti-colonial dissent remained within the country (Turner, 36). When this dissent boiled over and ultimately led to the nation's annexation from the Kingdom of Belgium in 1960, the tense relations were on display (Turner, 28). However, from 1965 to 1997, when extremist Joseph Mobutu took over the nation, "internal violence attracted little attention" especially in the North American forum — likely due to the Mobutu's close, positive relationship with the United States as an ally in the Cold War (Turner, 38). At the close of the war, as Mobutu's usefulness wore away, the United States shifted alliance and support towards the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan army as it prepared to oust the Hutu leadership of Mobutu's Congo (Turner, 39). The resulting offensive triggered increased violence, ethnic tension, and poverty within a nation already struggling with tribal warfare and rebel aggression. Because of their varied national interests, the western

nations with the power to report and share the stories of those in conflict largely declined to do so (Turner, 39).

These conflicts still plague the DRC. But so does the silence surrounding these issues. Media portrayals align under the simplifying categories of “Hutu vs. Tutsi,” “Poverty,” “Rape,” and “Violence.” Reports focus on specific aspects of the conflict in order to represent it at all; “To some, the war can be reduced to Rwandan meddling, to others to Western greed for raw minerals ... More recently there has been a push by advocates to see the conflict through the sole prism of sexual violence and conflict minerals” (Stearns, 23). More destructively, however, the intricacy of the conditions in the DRC generates silence from the international community: “The greatest sins of western governments have been ones of omission and ignorance, not of direct exploitation,” (Stearns, 23).

The problem with this silence is that the distinct and marginalized voices of the conflict are not recognized, not discovered, and not listened to — even within certain relief efforts, which can sometimes place people within the sweeping categories that characterize the media’s portrayal of the conflict. The silence of these voices prevents empowerment and perpetuates inequality, as Chidi Anselm Odinkalu describes in his essay, “Why More Africans Don’t Use Language.” Odinkalu cites the flawed nature of many western-based outreach efforts, which operate using the language of human rights but in a way that can be exclusive to the literal opinions and voices of the communities that they engage with: a “specialized language of a select professional cadre with its own rites of passage and methods of certification. Far from being a badge of honor, human rights activism is, in some of the places I have observed it, increasingly a certificate of

privilege” (Odinkalu, 2). To that end, Odinkalu calls for a turn inwards, for the groups addressing the issues in Africa to “think locally,” and to speak directly to the aspirations and survival of the individuals who have been marginalized by conflict (Odinkalu, 3).

Daniella confirms the lack of listening in the DRC — even amidst relief efforts, even amidst those attempting to discover more about the conflict: “The government is very corrupted, so that even the donations that are brought over are really providing for the people already on top, the money doesn’t even reach the people who need it,” she said. “You can mail as much money as you can ... but there’s a part of humanity lost when you are not heard and no one is listening; that’s not really living.” She confirms the importance of endeavoring to discover and understand a conflict through the voices of the individuals affected. This process of gaining knowledge and shedding apathy is essential to ethically address the conflict in the DRC. But Daniella also accentuates the secondary steps one must take to become morally engaged. Like Odinkalu, she cites the necessity of an effort to move beyond simply mailing a check, or ruminating behind the barrier of privilege and elevated language that can characterize contemporary relief efforts. She asks that we know and learn about a peoples’ experience through listening, recognizing, and sharing the stories of the individuals involved. This supports my argument for a specific kind of discovery in regards to the ethical issue of silence surrounding the DRC: attentive discovery that values and lifts up the voice of the individual.

We can look to Kantian ethics to confirm the importance of this method of discovery. Kant’s moral philosophy clarifies the impossibility of placing a price on human life. There are no substitutes or equivalents for the soul. Instead, humanity is quantified and qualified by that weightier unit — deeper and more consequential than any

price tag or dollar sign — of dignity. As Kant writes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, “that which is elevated above all price, and admits of no equivalent, has a dignity” (Kant, 52). There is a deep significance to one’s personhood. This is a meaning endowed to every individual — to the wise and wrinkled ones, and even to those at the other end of life, too young to speak, perhaps equally toothless. As Kant further clarifies, “Morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, because only through morality is it possible to be a legislative member in the realm of ends. Thus morality and humanity, insofar as it is capable of morality, is that alone which has dignity” (Kant, 53).

Scholar Jens Timmermann elucidates Kant’s definition of this human dignity as “the inalienable capacity to act on our own laws” in her essay, “Autonomy and Moral Regard for Ends.” (Sensen, 212). Despite the outcomes of these actions, whether these internally-engendered laws are actualized or not, our ability to generate them regarding our own behavior is the dignity that characterizes mankind (Sensen, 213). Kant applies this worth on the basis of an individual’s *ability* to exercise will, to affect the course of one’s life (Sensen, 24).

The ability to recognize and to honor this dignity in each individual aligns with the moral framework — also known as the “categorical imperative” — with which Kant urges us to view the world. Elizabeth Anscombe, philosophy professor at California State University, describes the formula behind this imperative: Kantians ask themselves “Can I rationally will that *everyone* act as I propose to act? If the answer is no, then we must not perform the action.” (Anscombe, 2007). This questioning describes the first tenant of Kant’s categorical imperative: universalizability, or the idea that our actions ought to be justifiable not only internally, but by others if they were to perform them, as well.



Anscombe points to a second question tied to Kantian ethics: “Does my action respect the goals of human beings rather than merely using them for my own purposes?” (Anscombe, 2007). This is the crux of the second formulation of Kant’s imperative, also known as “The Formula of Humanity.” As Timmermann describes it: “The idea that human beings possess a certain dignity, a moral standing that grounds the claim that they should never be ‘instrumentalized’ but always duly respected” (Sensen, 212). In other words, Kant urges us to recognize the will (the dignity and choice-making ability) present in all human beings, and to honor that this will is not to be swayed or utilized by our own intentions.

To that end, Kantian ethics can act as a framework for our mode of discovery surrounding the conflict in the DRC. The concept of universalizability illustrates the “shared moral perspective” that can guide our approach to counter the silence. Before acting, Kant asks that we justify our behavior in relationship to others, thus demanding that we orient ourselves as pieces of a greater community composed of individuals. This aligns with my call for discovery regarding the ethical issue of the DRC: we must shed the apathy and generalization that characterizes the western portrayal — or absence of portrayal — of the tensions in the DRC, as described by Stearns and Turner. In doing so, we honor our place as part of a greater community.

Kant’s humanity formula clarifies this further: when we place ourselves as citizens within a global community of other will-endowed individuals, the importance of discovering the individual experiences of those marginalized by the conflict in the DRC becomes even more crucial. Daniella confirms this importance: when so many stories go undiscovered and so many people go unheard in the DRC, a piece of their very humanity

is lost. Indeed, in the midst of this silence the dignity that Kant lifts up goes unrecognized, as well as his categorical imperative that we honor the worth inherent in the human condition.

In outlining my method to counter the ethical issue at stake, I call for active discovery surrounding the struggles of the DRC that aligns with a Participatory Action Research approach grounded in Kantian ethics. An exploration of what it is encompassed by Participatory Action Research further corroborates the need for *active* discovery and engagement with individual voices. The principles of Participatory Action Research can also help to provide direction and focus in our engagement approach where Kantian ethics may leave us with gaps or questions.

Those critics who question the application of Kantian ethics in the context of a global crisis like the DRC point to Kant's possible racism. Kant's anthropological work, including his early essay "Of the Different Human Races," attempted to outline the distinctions between the races that make up the human species. According to critics, Kant's particular interest in this topic and the diction he employs in "Of the Different Humans Races" can be linked to racist undertones, ultimately jarring the moral philosophy he touts in works like *The Metaphysics of Morality*. As Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze describes in his essay, "The Color of Reason," Kant can be interpreted as claiming the "subhuman, primitive, and characterological inferiority of the American Indian, the African, or the Asian" in his anthropological work (Eze, 129). In their essay, "Kant and Race," Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Bernard Boxill also point to Eze's contention with Kant's "adulation of reason," which Eze claims excludes those individuals *not* engaged in a white, European, Enlightened context (Hill and Boxill, 450). Hill and Boxill eventually

undermine Eze's claims in their essay, "Kant and Race," claiming soundly that Kant's moral theory is appropriate for addressing contemporary issues of race when considered with a "realistic awareness of the facts about racism" and the context within which the Kant operated as an anthropologist (Boxill, 449). But Boxill and Hill make a very real point about the power of this racial tinge in shaping how Kant's moral theories are viewed today: "It may instead be that the faults of attitude and judgment that show up in one aspect of a thinker's work is likely to infect his work as a whole" (Boxill, 449). Indubitably, discussion is still being generated regarding Kant's position on race and how this validates or invalidates his concepts of the humanity formula or universalizability.

In considering the possibility of this "racial infection" — as Boxill describes it — throughout Kant's work, as well as Eze's claim that Kantian ethics directly address a white, privileged male audience, I turn to the theories instilled in Participatory Action Research (PAR). Though PAR is not a theory outlined by a single thinker, it is a developed philosophy regarding a specific approach towards ethical engagement. And PAR can help to provide answers and actions where perhaps Kant is silent. PAR also allows us to explore a philosophy that echoes Kant's moral teachings but avoids the racism dispute surrounding Kant's work that was delineated earlier.

PAR is defined as an alternative philosophy of social research, one characterized by "shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action" (Kemmis, 273). When applied to social transformation in the Third World, PAR endeavors to eliminate the distance between the researchers and the researched by drawing those individuals who are being studied into the research process itself (*Participatory Action Research*, 2006). The approach values

the oral histories, culture, distinct experiences, and local context of the individuals being studied (*Participatory Action Research*, 2006).

The success of a PAR approach within a specific community can further outline the validity of this philosophy of social research — and can confirm how a PAR approach is necessary in ethically grappling with the silence surrounding the conflict in the DRC. In her article, “Telling us your Hopes: Ethnographic Lessons from a ‘Communications for Development’ Project in Madagascar,” anthropologist and social activist Antonie L. Kraemer describes an NGO-led oral testimony project focused on marginalized people in rural Madagascar who were facing dwindling resources due to private sector development. Kraemer found that interviewing the local individuals for the project was empowering and mobilizing: the oral testimony approach facilitated “opportunities for knowledge-creation by marginalized subsistence farmers and fishers” and “opened up debates around the impacts of development” (Kraemer, 2010). As she described, the PAR method she employed “gives people a chance to represent their own versions of reality and thereby challenge representations by powerful groups which may have profound effects on people’s wellbeing. The representations of local people by ‘experts,’ including anthropologists, sometimes hired by multinational corporations, can thereby be more directly and equitably engaged with by these people themselves” (Kraemer, 2010). Thus, in discovering more about the people in this affected community by speaking directly to the individuals, researchers and volunteers are able to elicit stories, personal histories, and questions from their interviewees. In turn, the distance between the “expert” and the “local” begins to dwindle, and the individuals affected by an issue are able to undergo their own process of empowering discovery.

As Kraemer describes it, when these individuals are given a space to speak about their experiences, they are also given a chance to define them, to question them, and to interpret them (Kraemer, 2010). And the result is an increased engagement with the issue by both parties — and movement towards better and more powerful solutions and support methods. This idea is embodied by the phrase Kraemer used to describe the oral testimonies: she calls them “opportunities for knowledge-creation” (Kraemer, 2010). A thoughtful method of discovery that aligns with the values of PAR seems to trigger new cycles of discovery within a marginalized community: discovery of the self, of individual voices, and of new ideas surrounding healing and solutions.

To that end, a PAR approach aligns with the principles of Kant’s categorical imperative, especially The Formula of Humanity, in that it recognizes the dignity and worth of each individual. A PAR method of discovery also orients us as pieces of an interconnected community, which is also confirmed by Kant. PAR, however, allows us to fill in the gaps regarding the issues of gender and race where Kantian ethics remain silent by outlining *specific* methods with which to engage with these issues. PAR also allows us to draw upon the moral philosophy espoused by Kant — and avoid the critique and debate sometimes triggered by his anthropological work.

Throughout our semester-long discourse, Daniella emphasized the same principles inherent in PAR when she discussed how best to engage with the conflict in the DRC. As we outlined earlier, the sexual violence, warfare, power structures and poverty that characterize the situation in the DRC can internally stifle the voices of those affected: “Everywhere we heard that women were raped, hurt, and beaten ... So many girls are not educated, if you’re not educated, how do you talk? They don’t even know

they don't have a voice. There's no foundation." Daniella said. "I don't think there's anyone to listen. There's no one to tell. The whole system is so corrupted; the Congolese don't even have a place to voice out to say what they think and say how they feel." We talked about the power of oral testimony and story collection in breaking this silence, and in catalyzing the kind of self-discovery and "knowledge-creation" that PAR also emphasizes.

In regards to the role that the outsider can play, like those of us in western nations who are looking in on — or are simply oblivious to — the struggles in the DRC, Daniella also calls for a PAR approach: "Maybe if the people of the Congo had someone to listen to them they would want to speak, no one really tries. They need a voice to actually live and feel like they are citizens in their own country," she said. "They need to be heard, because they carry so much, and there's a limit to how much a person can carry."

To that end, an ethical approach drawing upon the principles of PAR specifically acknowledges the grievances tied to the conflict in the DRC. As Stearns, Turner, and Daniella describe, the crucial issue characterizing the struggles of those afflicted by the DRC's turmoil is a multilayered silence. As Daniella defines it, there are two components to having a voice: speaking and being heard. "Having a voice means being able to be heard and being allowed to disagree. What you say might be true to you and not to other people, but having a voice means you can still speak it; and you are heard," she said. "It means that others are listening." The international patterns outlined by Stearns and Turner confirm the absence of both of these elements for people in the DRC: due to political ties among the players in the conflict, as well as its sheer complexity, the media resorts to simplifying categorization or utter avoidance in regards to the events in the

DRC. And so the individual voices of the conflict are not properly heard. Additionally, as Daniella and Odinkalu elucidate, individuals themselves are often unable to properly speak in the way that Daniella so values and emphasizes. This lack of voice is due to the internal corruption and the pressures of survival that characterize life in the DRC; there are few safe spaces for speech, and few motivations to try and be heard. Furthermore, the distanced and elevated positions that some relief groups inhabit can prevent the development of these voices: Odinkalu points to the exclusionary language used by outreach leaders that does *not* often include the distinct voices of the marginalized.

Engaging with the individuals of the DRC's turmoil through an approach grounded in Kantian ethics that draws upon the values and methods of PAR, instead, can generate noise where there has been silence. This kind of approach, as Kraemer outlines, catalyzes questioning, action, and reflection, blurring the lines and distance between the helper and the helped.

Daniella has taught me the power in this sort of discovery. After our semester of conversations, we decided to plan an event focused on the importance of ethically engaging with a conflict by sharing stories, eliciting voices, and listening. We will lead a campus event in October, 2014, that will feature Congolese author Georges Budagu. Budagu will read from his memoir, *Ladder to the Moon: A Journey from the Congo to America*. We plan to share excerpts from a film on African immigrants in Maine, and Daniella will perform a vocal piece. Ultimately, we'll be demonstrating the lessons that we learned together, and confirming the reciprocity of empowerment catalyzed when we engage with the individual voices of this community in crisis.

It is imperative that we break the barrier of silence that currently surrounds the DRC. And in discovering more about the turmoil, we must listen and learn from its voices. This particular process of discovery evokes further discovery and reciprocity of empowerment for both parties. “When you are aware of what’s going on, you tell your neighbor and they tell someone, and that in the future can have a huge impact on a whole nation.” Daniella said. “When someone is willing to listen to you, that changes a lot – that’s more than just mailing something, it’s the best gift you can ever give.”

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