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## Dissecting the Tao of 'Borat' -- did we learn?

*The Kazakh 'journalist' played off of Americans' self-consciousness of the moment about their international image.*

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In late December, Sacha Baron Cohen announced the demise of Borat and Ali G. What can we say about these heroes, one a pigeon-toed champion of his motherland, the other the duck-toed favorite son of his hood? I submit that these dear fellows were, yes, philosophers in drag, plying the ancient dilemma of relativism for all to hear. Let us pay our final respects by having a look at Borat -- the movie and the lesson.

As you may recall, Borat was the crack Kazakh investigative journalist on a cross-country mission to film his documentary, "Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." A few dozen plaintiffs and Kazakhstan notwithstanding, Borat did benefit many, grossing over \$128 million, landing a Golden Globe, and offering a whole new lexicon. Yet while the naked wrestling scene between Borat and his producer, Azamat, left nothing to the imagination, how exactly he pinned his interview subjects did.

At its core, the suspense of Borat was in watching if and how he wrung agreement from his interview subjects. Borat used a whole toolbox of psychological ploys. They headlined, of course, pandering, Klieg lights, childlike naivete, and playing off of Americans' self-consciousness of the moment about their international imperialist image.

Much more interestingly, though, outside of all the psychological temptations to agree with Borat, there was a philosophical reason to do so. Borat pitted political correctness against cultural moral relativism. On its most fundamental level, relativism argues that some particular domain -- be it knowledge, thought, morality or reality -- is in some way relative to something else -- language, culture, gender or individuals, for example. To have opted for cultural moral relativism was to agree with Borat, who was, as played by Baron Cohen, unintentional- ly but extremely, anything but PC.

In the movie, when the artist Linda Stein of Veteran Feminists of America walked off the set after Borat suggested women have smaller brains, it was the abandoned Borat, ironically, who appeared more sympathetic than Stein. If Borat was misogynist, racist, jingoist, adulterous and homophobic he knew no better. If Stein, however, was xenophobic, well, she ought to have known much better.

So who is right then, Borat or Stein?

As the absolutist who comes clean, perhaps Borat. Borat holds his subjects' feet to the fire on the traditional dilemma of relativism. Either the relativist finds his own view absolutely true, in which case he is an absolutist, or he finds it only relatively true, in which case the view doesn't hold any special weight anyway. To wit, on one hand, Stein as the presumed relativist ought to have sat tight and accepted Borat's absolutism. On the other hand, by keeping put she would have been conceding that feminism itself expresses just one more view -- no better or worse than chauvinism. In throwing in the towel, Stein set aside cultural relativism and admitted that she was an absolutist about feminism if not about other political correctness bylaws too.

Stein was not alone. In spite of knowing that the Kazakhstan mondo film footage was false, movie audiences continued to laugh -- laughter that revealed their own absolutist bias. Kazakhstan or elsewhere, we could pass judgment from our own perch and deem some cultures indeed beyond the pale.

Moreover, Borat preserved the cinematic fourth wall by staying in character in his interviews promoting the film through a MySpace page. In so doing he left delectably ambiguous whether even those who smiled at the live Borat were in on the joke or if they too were just as much the butt of it as his on-screen subjects.

How to unravel the Borat tangle? Not especially easy. Strictly speaking, ethics, possibly a value judgment area like the aesthetic, etiquette or cultural, could avoid the global relativist dilemma. Yet Borat makes use of another ancient relativist dilemma, that of moral psychology and special relationships, to demonstrate how closely even our ethical value judgments identify with his. Courtesy of Ali G, let's call these relationships "peeps."

Peeps are the relationships that we feel morally obliged to give more latitude to -- ourselves, family, friends, colleagues, and fellow citizens -- even if that bias comes at the much greater expense of the others. Peeps are indispensable for our moral development, for our moral sensitivities, and for our motivation and sense of purpose generally. Having peeps depends entirely on sharing a culture or subculture. The dilemma then of absolutist political correctness versus cultural relativism is the dilemma of moral absolutism versus peeps.

If we all are moral bipolars when it comes to peeps, Borat just notches it up to Jekyll and Hyde. For all the Hyde shocks, Borat equally floors us with his Jekyll side -- the fast and conspiratorial friendship with interview subjects, his earnest curiosity and his overwhelming sense of self. While ethicists have attempted to offer some, there are simply no rules as to when a little bipolarity is OK. (Think of it as how you can feel OK about springing for a steakhouse dinner while knowing there are starving children in Africa.)

The happy news is that after only three centuries since the Enlightenment, 60% of the world population now lives under democracy with its moral implications, and the number grows annually.

In addition, recent studies by evolutionary psychology point to the existence of a universal morality. It seems not out of line to hope that a common morality will emerge.

And so, as we bid farewell to our dear friends, Borat and Ali G, I would suggest that we take comfort in the following: Bruno awaits.

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Hillel Felman is a master's candidate in philosophy at New York University.