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The Problems of Universal Ethics¹

The universal ethical system is a concept widely accepted though narrowly understood. It is as a misty region that many claim to know and visit, though for which no map is generally available. The purpose of this paper is not to provide that map, but to show why such a place does exist, separate from our home region—a culturally dependent ethical system—from whence it came, and why a map is essential not only for philosopher explorers but and *especially* for the ordinary day tripper.²

Ethical Relativism Versus Universalism

¹Despite a concerted effort to limit this paper to the specified maximum number of pages, the result bears no relation to the intent. I can only apologise for the excess and offer the consolatory promise that though the “cuteness” quota is much reduced—as compared to the previous offering—there is nevertheless enough of it sweeten at least partially the olive like flavour of obligatory reading.

²I acknowledge the unusualness and perhaps inappropriateness of using a conceit in the opening paragraph of an academic paper. It was chosen in an effort to avoid the heavy-handedness inherent in most formal thesis statements.

Universal ethics' *raison d'être*, in simple terms, is to provide an ethical measure by which all other ethical measures might be measured. It remains to be seen, however, whether a reason to exist can actualise existence. What is clear is that the belief in universal ethics is derived from the inclination that culturally defined systems are in some manner inadequate: the source of this inadequacy being essentially the lack of differentiation between *thinking* something is right or wrong and something actually *being* right or wrong. For the ethical relativist, as W.T. Stace in "Ethical Relativism" rightly points out, two apposite beliefs in two opposite cultures means two versions of what *is* right. Rightness and wrongness, from this viewpoint, are assessments that come into being only after the facts of any given ethical dilemma have been filtered through a mind formed largely by culture.

There can be no doubt that different cultures do indeed demonstrate different ethical systems and that this variety does in itself seem to suggest that mores are contingent upon cultural determinates. Stace counters this conclusion by calling notice to the many different views societies and times have espoused regarding a multitude of issues—in particular, the subject matter of the physical sciences—and concluding:

. . . if the various different opinions which men have held about the shape of the earth do not prove that it has no real shape, neither do the various opinions which they have held about morality prove that there is no one true morality.(209)

This analogy at first seems successful, though upon closer examination it proves lacking. The logic it employs also would suggest that though many cultures embrace many different gods, this does not mean that there is no *true* god. The important point is that in both cases there is no demonstration of a positive conclusion either. There is no proof of one true god just as there is no proof of one true morality.

Setting aside Stace's weak comparison, he does clarify the source of the conflicting interpretations of anthropological evidence of culturally based ethical systems by suggesting that:

The relativist says that the facts [the diversity of mores] are to be explained by the non-existence of any absolute moral standard. The absolutist says that they are to be explained by human ignorance of what the absolute moral standard is. (209)

In the final analysis, despite the clarity and pointedness of Stace's essay, it is essentially an exercise in avoiding that which it claims to seek. The proof is in the title itself. Rather than tackling the difficult problem of at least justifying if not actually proving the existence of a universal ethical system, Stace chooses rather to undermine ethical relativism. This smacks of the ineffective general mocking his enemy before examining his own troops. Indeed, when Stace does briefly examine universal ethicism, there seems virtually a declaration of defeat. In Stace's own words: "It is idle to talk about a universal morality unless we can point to the source of its authority." (211) This is followed shortly by the admission

that there is no evidence for such a source, but that:

It is always possible that some theory, not yet examined, may provide a basis for a universal moral obligation. (211)

Logic such as this could justify the belief in almost anything:

Many people believe there are invisible flying fairies flying about our heads whose job it is to keep us from harm. Realists argue that we keep ourselves from harm. Those who prefer the flying fairy hypothesis simply argue that though there is no way to prove that the source of our safety is flying fairies, this is simply because the theory that explains and proves it has yet to be found and examined. But one day it will, and we shall then grant the flying fairies the gratitude they deserve.

This slightly absurd parallel does not support close scrutiny, though it does underline the weakness of any hypothesis which concludes with the assertion that there is no proof but that there might be someday. There might—to cite a further example with perhaps greater thematic rapport—also be a plague of mice one day, but we probably would be best served by delaying the spreading of poison until we discover nibble marks on the cheese. Poison, after all, can be a very dangerous thing.

If we cannot locate the source of a universal standard of ethics, and since the source of culture based standards *can* be determined—by analysis of what we might broadly refer to as social dynamics and conditions—it seems that the question is in truth resolved. Is Universalism therefore a lost cause? This depends upon two things: firstly, whether the lack of source is

a problem of Universalism *per se*, or one of Stace himself; and secondly, supposing that we do fail, upon further examination, to locate that source, if the discussion of ethical Universalism is then necessarily "idle talk."

Since it can be said, and with all fairness, that the content of Stace's essay is to unwittingly discredit his own credo whilst he belabours the opposite tenet, the total effect is itself little more than "Idle talk."

The Existence of a Universal Standard

We need not spend much time upon the task of demonstrating the existence of a universal code of ethics. Despite the debate, it is essentially a straightforward issue.

The first indication we have of its existence rests in the realm of intuition. There is the indisputable sense we all share of right and wrong which seems, at its most fundamental level, to be independent of and prior to learned knowledge. Just as there is a bonding between human beings—parents and child, man and wife, friend and friend—which is not learned but innate, a facet of the human condition, so too is there a sense of how to treat those people, and by extension, all people.

The second indication comes not from the differences that we find in various culture based standards, which admittedly do exist, but from the *similarities*. Why, if there were no absolute ethical code, would so many peoples agree upon so many things. The fact that certain cultures do not adhere to certain mores which are elsewhere widely established does not relegate those mores to relativity, but rather points to those outside cultures

as being further removed from the universal standard. Can it be chance alone which sees so many cultures denouncing so many identical immoralities? This seems patently absurd. The universalist then should use the same methodology as the relativist: where the latter identifies difference, the former cites concurrence.

But we need not step so far afield. The third indication of an absolute ethical standard lies in our own back garden, for we need not compare our society with another with another,³ but merely with our own. Clearly our sense of ethical progress stems at least in part from the difference we see in our own culture of today as opposed to our own culture of yesterday. Who could possibly argue that the abolition of slavery was an ethical regression? Or that the introduction of universal suffrage was immoral? Or that race based discrimination should be against the letter of the law.

Clearly, if there is only relative morality then can be no actual progress *within* a society—in other words, without reference to another society—for progress requires a movement not only *from* something but *towards* something else; and what else can that something be?

The Source of the Universal Standard

The most perplexing problem the universal ethicist must solve is indeed the source of his code. The fact that we instinctively

³Poetic licence applied for and requires only the rubber stamp before being issued.

feel there is a universal standard, along with the decided obscurity of its source, has indeed been made a serious argument supporting the existence of God. Kant, in his particularly erudite though somewhat obscure, "The Existence of God as a Postulate of Practical Reason," suggests that natural systems alone cannot provide us with a sense of moral obligation—a sense of right and wrong; and that therefore there must be a source outside nature for this idea of absolute morality. Similarly, Hastings Rashdall in "The Moral Argument" asserts that belief in objective⁴ morality implies a belief in God.

The traditional objections which are traditionally unleashed when we apply a religion solution to this question—namely, which God? and, whose God? and, according to what revelation?—are not quite so devastating as they would seem, so long as we refrain from traditional answers. To the question, which God? *The* God. Whose God? Everyone's God. According to what revelation? According to the revelation which comes from within ourselves: that instinctive knowledge we all share of what is truly right and is a manifestation of our kinship, affinity and attachment

⁴Unless the diction of a particular author states otherwise, there has been a concerted effort to avoid referring to Universalism as objectivism since it seems there is a manifest contradiction created by juxtaposing the words *ethic* and *objective*. Even if there does exist a universal cross-cultural ethical standard, it still requires a subjective effort to recognise and apply that standard.

to the single source of all good. *The God. Everyone's God.*⁵

Although this is a valid supposition, clearly we should not jump to a supernatural origin of the moral imperative before we have first exhausted more mundane possibilities.

It is doubly ironic that Ayn Rand's essay, "Value Yourself," an exercise in ethical egoism that in no way supports Universalism, by turning our attention inwards, sets us on a new and possibly fertile track.

Another possible source then of a universal system is what we might refer to as the Pleasure Principle. The proposition, quite simply, is that everything we do is based upon the principle of obtaining personal pleasure. The universality of this thesis lies in the universality of the human condition, and that *true* pleasure—and here we must at once exclude the pleasure of the psychotic—can only stem from doing good. But this still does not account for our knowledge of what good is. The problem is in fact solved when we realise that the argument is circular, meaning that good is that which *gives* true pleasure.⁶

⁵Though this might sound glib, especially since it comes from a self confessed enemy of religion and long standing sceptic, it should be taken as a serious and sound and—as far as I know—original and above all else *genuine* hypothesis. Note: as always, the polysyndeton is deliberate.

⁶The thesis denoted by the blurb *Pleasure Principle* is clearly indebted to the philosophies of ethical egoism and, to a lesser degree, ethical utilitarianism, though by means of the universal

Would I want the thing I am about to do to this person in this circumstance done to me in the same circumstance by the same person?

Perhaps it is a litmus test such as this that allows for our personal interpretation of what is right, and again it is the universality of the human condition which provides the cross cultural dimension. Unfortunately, when we apply this to certain circumstances the answer is, "Yes, I do want this thing done" though it turns out to be clearly base.⁷ Kant's two part moral law: treat other persons as an end and not a means; and, act in such a way that your maxim becomes a universal law,⁸ provides, in the form of a decree rather than as a test, essentially the same principle. And once again, a certain soundness seems present until the test of example is made. The problem though seems always to lie in the phrasing and not in the principle, which seeks to force the individual to relinquish momentarily his individuality and imagine himself, quite simply, in someone else's shoes. It is an axiom which, phrased one way or another, is uttered a million times a minute in every corner of the

connection and the circularity of the argument it avoids the limitations of both.

⁷I make reference here to the example from class in which a female student suggested a male desiring to pinch a female's behind.

⁸These two ideas arose in class and since they are likely as not paraphrases, direct quotation marks have not been employed.

world.

Another possible origin expressed in a pithy idiom is: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Besides its fine rhetorical value, "Do unto others . . ." only works if the individual is moral to begin with; and how can the individual be moral to begin with if morality stems from the statement, "Do unto others . . ." Clearly a sense of right and wrong must already be at work when we ask the question, and so the question itself serves only as a guide and not a source of morality.

The final possible source of universal ethics that we shall examine is the least likely and the most insidious. The law. Few people would disagree that the law is an ass. Unfortunately, it is the law which demonstrates our ethical system and from which ethical judgements, practised from day to day, are derived. It is, nevertheless, a fallacy to suggest that it is the *origin* of universal ethics. We might more accurately say that it is the book of ethics and so the source of ethics in that respect, but not the *author* of those ethics.

The Quagmire of Universal Ethics

The problem with a belief in a universal ethical system is that it represents one of the most treacherous of philosophical terrains. Once we have decided that such a standard exists, how do we know what belongs to it and what belongs only to a culturally relative measure? In other words, when a moral judgement is made, how can we be sure it is based upon an absolute right?

The suggestion that ethical relativism leads to the dangerous

undermining of all moral values is frighteningly far from the truth. On the contrary, ethical relativism, since it is by nature descriptive, is an essentially benign philosophy which does nevertheless maintain that right and wrong *do* exist. It is the neophyte of prescriptive Universalism who represents the real threat—demonstrating by the very existence of his belief a claim to particular knowledge of that standard and, by grace of his lofty position, feeling both willing and able to judge others.

The real dangers arise then when we attempt to compare the systems of other cultures to what we perceive as that universal standard. As Stace points out:

We are accustomed to think that the moral ideas of one nation or social group may be "higher" or "lower" than those of another. (212)

Unfortunately, more often than not, we are not comparing those systems to the ultimate standard but to our own standard—which we *believe* is closest to the absolute standard. The finger of accusation is here pointed at every culture, since each one believes the same thing. In this same vain, when we look to another culture and evaluate it favourably, this is often not because, as we believe, it is close to the ideal, applying the universal and absolute morality, but because it is close to our own, applying our culture based morality.

Why then are local systems so often thought, by locals, to be closest to the universal one? Aside from our natural inclination towards self aggrandisement, it is clear that our own failings,

are own immoralities, being so often seen, so everyday, so very commonplace, habitually go unnoticed; whilst those of other cultures are conspicuous by their variance. When, for example, a westerner sees an Arab woman clad in a full length and long sleeved gown that is topped with a veil, he tuts his tut and shakes his head at such truculence. He then goes merrily on his way, down the hot street, pulling with discomfort at his starched white collar that almost severs his head with every turn and nod; almost strangled by the ludicrous slither of hideously patterned material tied pointlessly about his neck and dangling to his concealed bellybutton; constrained by a tight fitting waistcoat that matches and is worn beneath a woolly itchified jacket which itself matches a pair of woolly itchified trousers. He wipes the perspiration from his brow, takes one contemptuous glance back at the Arab woman, and then enters an office where all the men are dress just as he is. Oh, there was a fellow once who came in jeans and a T-shirt. He was fired.

It is our intuitive notion of universal ethics combined with the inability to see in our own culture what we think we see in others that forms the basis for bigotry and racism and chauvinism. It is from this same source that genocide finds its justification. That war takes defence.

It is for this reason that we should not rely upon our intuitive notion of what universal ethics means, but examine it, fathom it, search out its source and character, for it is a realm of dark holes where the guilty fall, but where the innocent feel the pain. It is for this reason that we should not

blindly blunder into the quagmire of universal ethics

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