



Nature and History as Justifications of Universalism in Virtue Ethics

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Universalism does exist. What agency/ies made it?

It seems that because of recent resurgent nationalisms in Asia, Europe and America, there is a growth of moral differences among the various peoples, contrasting globalization.

But this is not true: nationalism too belongs to globalization. Already in 1951 Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* understood that Nazism was as internationalist as Soviet communism. Hitler had only tactically used the Old Prussian nationalism to win the Weimar scene. But his national-socialist ideals were international, and during the war he reshaped the SS as a sort of international 'religious order' (e.g. the Jesuits).

Even more so today, we see the new populist nationalism spreading throughout very different environments such as Turkey, the USA, Italy, India, Burma, etc., because the ethical traits of this "international nationalism" are universal and not local: xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, etc. In fact, Steve Bannon in Rome stated that the ('nationalist') 'revolution' began in Italy, but will expand internationally to the US and everywhere.

Here I maintain that homo sapiens has moved towards a universalization of ethical norms and customs.

There are two ways to justify universalism.: 1) by using the agency of the allegedly timeless 'faculties' of human "nature"; 2) as outcome of another agency: historical development.

Agency of Reason

As for nature, we see how the theory of cardinal virtues from Aristotle continued for millennia until the 20th century. For example, fifteen centuries after Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas wanted to show why the principal human virtues are just four as Aristotle said, and invoked the universal features of humankind: reason, will, feelings.

According to Aquinas the CV (cardinal virtues) are the hinge around which all the other virtues are grouped together and are human, that is, implanted on what is most peculiar in man, namely reason, which deals with four problems that they are natural for the human being, that is, deriving from its characteristics of species, and, as such, without time and place, universal in the two senses of the word (remember that we are before Darwin!).

1) the problem of Justice: interpersonal relationships ... with people X, Y, Z how did it go? Did I submit? Did I idealize? Have I been seduced? (did I seduce?), did I communicate? I hid? Did I lie or at least exaggerated? Have I been mistreated? Did I mistreat? Am I ignored? I forgot, omitted? I'm in debt"? Am I in "credit"? ...

2) the problem of Strength: of the relationship with the Evils of Life ... how to face them by rightly regulating the fear (fear, despair) and the audacity (initiative, aggressiveness, hope) ... facing the

obstacles and the Enemies and supporting their bump ... both in the "attack" (Courage) and in the "defense" (Patience, Firmness) ... evils of different type as the hatred and envy and the slander of others, or the threat and intimidation, or the illness and death, and sacking and poverty, and forgetfulness and contempt, and the invasion of others and loneliness ... With this X person, or in that Y situation, was I vile, brave, weak, reckless, firm, yielding, resistant, oscillating, constant?

3) the problem of Balance (Temperance): the management of pleasures and pains ... of various kinds such as bodily ones (gluttony and diet, sexual fantasies), but also the "bitter pleasure" and the "sweet sorrow" in 'Wrath and resentment, and the pleasures and pains in pride and humility, and shamelessness and modesty, meekness and cruelty, curiosity and boredom ... in activity and rest and hyperactivity and inertia, in the buffoonery, in the recreation of the game, in the gloom and seriousness ... Am I incontinent and unruly? Do I control effortlessly or naturally? Am I numb and frigid? Am I gloomy or in a good mood? Am I friendly or cold?

4) the problem of Wisdom: that is, the problem of thinking! .. to think not to theorize, but to act, and to act not in the field of techniques, skills, abilities, but in that of the other three CVs ... acting morally seen in its aspect of practical thinking, that is aimed at deliberating and giving orders (deciding) ... not based on theories as much as on my own past experience of my life and - in the present - experiencing me ... Thinking for to find the particular means I need to act and reach my goals and therefore observing the particular concrete circumstances of the present, to think of those realistic means offered to me here and now as means / instruments / tactics possible for me and as effective means (opportune and effective) towards the purpose ... that is the purpose of how to be Just and Strong and Balanced now!

Why are the CVs 4? : "These four virtues are taken from some as four general conditions of the human spirit, present in all the virtues: so that Wisdom is nothing but righteousness in discriminating between the various acts, or matters of operation; Justice is a certain rectitude of the soul, by virtue of which a man performs what he owes in any field; Temperance, then, is a disposition of spirit that imposes moderation on all sentiments and operations, so that they do not go beyond what is due; and Fortress is a provision that strengthens the spirit in what is according to reason, against any impulse of the passions or difficulties encountered in operations".¹

However, Norberto Bobbio in his 1990 *The Age of Rights* examines this ethical rationalism, also called jusnaturalism. The Natural Law thinkers (like Hugo Grotius, Alberico Gentili, Samuel Pufendorf) in between 17th and 18th centuries argued that the local laws must conform to the universal rights of nature, if not they are merely legal but not just. And legality and justice do overlap but do not coincide.

However, Bobbio observes that the conception of "Nature" is problematic: one observes the divergent interpretations by the three major jusnaturalists Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke. Moreover: what rights are "natural" (immutable)?

The example of the history of property laws shows that it is not possible to decide. Never throughout history a single property-law was held as right and just by all peoples (consensus gentium) and all thinkers and jurists (consensus philosophorum). This illusion was common for centuries to the naturalists, who supposed they had placed certain norms (but not always the same) above the possibility of any refutation, of picking them up directly from nature of man.

- 1) But, says Bobbio : "The nature of man proved to be very fragile as the absolute foundation of irresistible norms. To give an example: the dispute over which of the three possible solutions to the succession of assets (return to the community, family transmission from father to son or

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, 61, art. 2.

free disposition by the owner) was the most natural and therefore should be preferred in a system that accepted as fair all that was based on nature. They could play for a long time; three solutions are perfectly compatible with the nature of man.

Also: most definitions are tautological: the rights of man are those who fit man as a man.” , or also : "Human rights are those that belong, or should belong, to all men, or from whom no man can be stripped.”

- 2) Second, the human ethical rules constitute a variable class, as the history of these last centuries sufficiently demonstrates. Rights that were declared unresolved at the end of the eighteenth century, such as the sacred and inviolable property, were subjected to radical limitations in contemporary declarations; rights that eighteenth-century declarations did not even mention, such as social rights, are now proclaimed with great ostentation in recent statements. It is not difficult to predict that in the future new claims may arise that we can not even imagine at the moment, such as the right to respect the lives of animals and not only of men. This proves that there are no fundamental rights by nature. What is fundamental in a historical epoch and in a particular civilization is not fundamental in other times and in other cultures”.²

Agency of History

If it is not nature, is it history the force that led us to an universal morality?

In the 19th century Hegel, Marx and Darwin showed powerfully how philosophical and artistic ideas, laws and practices of economy and even living species change and develop throughout history. And it was right in the 19th century when Nietzsche gave us a powerful investigation of the historical development of morals, even though he did not explain clearly how history can provide universality.

As Benjamin Olson summarises: “For instance, Nietzsche in the preface of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche sets up the basic argument that he will be presenting throughout the remainder of the text. In his highly distinctive, ironic, rather intimate writing style, Nietzsche begins by reminding the reader that contemporary humanity does not really know itself; the essential truths that we accept about the world are not only false, but also a distraction from a more careful analysis of the origins, or genealogy, of values.

In Nietzsche's first essay he sets out his understanding of the distinction between Good/Bad and Good/Evil that developed in the ancient world. Prior to the advent of Judeo-Christianity, humanity understood *good* to be that which was associated with strength and power. Conversely, that which was considered *bad* was the opposite of *good*, which is to say, weak, humiliating, and impoverished. Nietzsche closely associates this ancient and aristocratic notion of goodness with creativity; he, who has the will and the power enough to create his own values, assigns meaning to the world.

Nietzsche argues that this ancient conception of *Good/Bad* was first challenged and eventually replaced by the Judeo-Christian conception of *Good/Evil*. For Nietzsche, *Good/Evil* is based on the resentment that slaves in the Roman Empire felt towards their masters. In this new **slave morality**, *good* came to be everything that the slave was: passive, meek, and humble. Conversely, *evil* came to be everything that the masters were: violent, strong, greedy, etc. Nietzsche argues that this historically specific conception of morality has been handed down to the European cultures of his own day, but contemporary

² Norberto Bobbio, *The Age of Rights*, Polity Books, Cambridge, 1990.

humanity has forgotten the historical origins of their morality, instead mistaking it for universal, essential morality.”³

So, according to Nietzsche, it is history and not nature that shapes and moulds ethics norms or habits.

But do these historical forces lead to universality? We see that N. assumes it implicitly as already assured, but he does not explain at all how, by what means and ways. It is therefore reasonable to hold that rights are historical. However, if they are historical, how do they become universal and non-local?

However, once that we have focus on history and not on nature, the answer on ‘how’ becomes much easier: it has been the long-lasting phenomenon of the ‘empires’. A empire is a multinational state where one nation is dominant and holds the political power whereby it spreads custom, habits and values. It is not necessary that this set of values belongs to the dominant nation: the most important ancient empires were led by the Macedonians of Alexander the great and the Romans, but they spread the Greek culture and, eventually the Jewish born Christianity. Similarly the most important medieval and early modern empire, the Turkish Ottoman empire, spread Arabic religion, morals, language and knowledge. The modern empires, called colonial empires, spread the European religion, culture, languages, institutions, ways of dressing and eating, education systems, etc everywhere in the other continents: Portuguese, Spanish, English, French and Dutch empires.

But, all this having been said, there is a further problem: even if we accept that history is the agency that shapes morality, how could we know whether and to what extent this historically shaped morality is universal?

Ascertained Universality

A good solution of this last problem is provided by Bobbio: it is the "consensual" universality (within a given historical act) of human rights. That is, from Roman law onwards through Christianity and Enlightenment, the prevalent tendency is uniformity and intercultural accord. This political movement had its climax in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of the United Nations of 1948, in which an agreement between concrete and historical subjects (the signatory States in 1948) built a real universal criterion for judging "unjust" some moral behaviour, even if they were made (or meant to be made) "legal" by local laws.

There were implementations: in 1952, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women; in 1959, the Declaration of the Child; in 1971, the Declaration of the Rights of the Mentally Disabled; in 1975, the Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; in 1982, the first World Assembly in Vienna on the rights of the elderly, which proposed a plan of action approved by a UN Assembly resolution on December 3.

As Bobbio reports: "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents the manifestation of the only evidence by which a system of values can be considered humanly founded and therefore recognized: and this proof is the general consensus about its validity. The jusnaturalists would have spoken of consensus omnium gentium or humani generis.

1. ³ Benjamin Olson, *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals: Summary & Analysis*, Study.com
[<https://study.com/academy/lesson/nietzsches-genealogy-of-morals-summary-analysis.html>]

This universalism was a slow conquest. In the history of the formation of declarations of rights, there can be at least three phases.

Its first phase must be sought in the work of philosophers, who formulated and discussed the new ethical codes.

Then there are the changes (scientific, technological, religious, economic) in the society and the change of norms, virtuous behaviour and rights to be respected change

The very fact that the list of these rights is continually enlarged not only demonstrates that the starting point of the hypothetical state of nature loses plausibility but should make us aware that the world of social relations from which these claims are derived is much more complex, and that for the life and survival of men, in society, society does not suffice for the so-called fundamental rights, such as the rights to life, freedom and ownership. There is currently no charter of rights, to give a convincing example, recognition of the right to education - growing, moreover, from society to society - , first elementary, secondary school, and little by little even university. I am not aware that, in the most well-known descriptions of the state of nature, that right was mentioned. The truth was that this right had not been put into the state of nature because it had not emerged in society from the time when naturalist jus doctrines were born, when the fundamental requirements which departed from those societies to reach the mighty on earth were principally the requirements of freedom in the face of the Churches and of states, and not yet other goods, such as education, which only a more evolved society could economically and socially express. ⁴

Conclusions

Now I want to systemize all the matter.

- 1) Certainly history shapes the ethical norms: the today's political correctness about gender would have sounded weird in the 1970s and in the 1970s would have sounded nasty to treat the staff (butler, waitresses, cleaners etc) of an household as they used to do in the Victorian era , let alone how criminal would have looked in the Victorian era to entertain the masses in arena filled with ruthless gladiators fighting to death.
- 2) As much certainly history spreads and universalises these ethical values, as I said mentioning the empire of Alexander and the others. Spreading which is facilitated by the technological development and education : the amount of people able to write and read, the improvement of sailing, the invention of the printing press, trains, cars and planes, telephones, television and the internet.
- 3) However this historical development mentioned in point 1) seems to be a progressive branching out of specifications of practical behaviours rather than a continual creation of new values. We have seen that almost 16 centuries after Aristotle had written *the Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* was holding the same 4 cardinal virtues of Aristotle (moreover, quoting Aristotle hundreds of time). Aristotle was pagan, Greek and married with children . Thomas was Christian, Italian, living in France, celibate and studying Aristotle on translations of Arab texts. However , he proposed the four virtues to the people of his age. 700 years later in 1986 the Polish pope Wojtyla wrote the *Catechism of Catholic Church* where , again, the 4 virtues are

⁴ Norberto Bobbio, *The Age of Rights*, Polity Books, Cambridge, 1990.

described, praised and prescribed: and this text, being an official catechism, is the basic book for one billion Catholics belonging to hundreds of nations and speaking hundreds of languages in the 5 continents.

- 4) I say these things, because the long lasting destiny of this set of ethical rules tells us that there is an universal human nature, but this nature is similar to a seed not to a tree. The seed contains the shared internal characteristic of every plant of that species. The tree grows in a way instead of in another because of what happens in its environment during its life time, its "history"; but what happens – although not identical - is similar to what happens to other trees: sun, raining, insects, gravity, mineral in the soil, oxygen in the air, etc. Therefore, both the dynamics, the internal and the external, produce similar outcomes, both tend to universality.

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