

Z księgozbioru
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THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL ETHICAL STANDARDS*

by
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I

The Topicality of the Problem

The question whether there are any universally accepted moral standards is of long standing. It recurs throughout the ages, becoming now and then a subject of more or less animated discussion. Twice in modern times have we witnessed the rise of deep interest in this problem. The XVIII century and modern scholars seem to consider it to be a matter of topical interest, though in either epoch they do so for some reasons of their own. In his *Essay on the Human Understanding* John Locke denies the existence of commonly accepted "practical" rules. He refuses to admit the latter's innate origin conceiving human brain to be a *tabula rasa* at birth. The universality of practical rules being a necessary condition of their innateness, he who denies the existence of the former must simultaneously deny the existence of the latter. The question of the universality of moral standards reappears in Locke's writings once again, but this time the philosopher reaches another conclusion. The very existence of universal moral standards serves him this time as an argument in favour of the assertion that morality is prior to Christianity and the Revelation. The acceptance of certain religious dogmas is neither indispensable nor sufficient to let people profess and put into practice certain moral laws. To prove this assertion it is enough to quote the instance of the high morality of the Chinese people who know these truths and put them into practice though they are not Christians. Universality therefore, refuted at one time as a condition of innateness, is accepted at some other time by Locke and used by him to prove that in spite of differences in religious faith there are moral feelings common to all people. The latter view is held in his *Reasonableness of Christianity*. Christ is presented here as a great reformer and systematist of laws held in common by all people, long before him. These two contradictory opinions were both directed against traditional religious views; one

* Abbreviated version.

refuted the belief in a divine sparkle with which every human soul was said to have been inspired, while the other claimed that Christian religion should not keep morality in monopoly since the highest and perfect standards of morality are also found among non-Christians.

In our times we again revert occasionally to this question of universally accepted moral standards. The problem had lost much of its importance for ethnocentrically-minded scholars who cared little for universality because they believed that even when wanting, it should be a matter of time to have their own scale of values absorbed by everybody and all. The belief that only their moral opinions were true was shaken by thinkers who rejected the assumption that moral norms and value-judgments could be false or true. That denial of their logical value caused that people returned to the idea of universality seeing in it a support for their convictions. That point will be discussed in the further part of this study. Also various other theoretical and practical causes have enhanced the topicality of the problem:

Thus e.g. in an epoch, that is characterized by a violent breach of fundamental moral rules, people seek eagerly for an evidence to prove that their moral laws have evolved from some universally and deeply felt needs of all men. The cruelties perpetrated by Nazism — wrote Bertrand Russell — made it impossible to assume the attitude of *de gustibus non est disputandum*¹. Neither would it be admissible for cultural relativists to maintain in this case that we should respect the scale of values of every kind of culture².

This resorting to universally accepted moral standards was also bound with definite tasks, as with those, for instance, which were set forth by the Nuremberg trial. The conception of the law of nature was revived on this occasion that is, it was admitted that there were moral convictions shared by all people. It was necessary in order to sit in judgment over the war criminals whose crimes have not been foreseen by the international law.

Finally, the universal character of moral norms and value-judgments was sometimes stressed by those who protested against the opinion claiming they had been formulated solely to serve the interests of the ruling classes. In every such case discussions on universal moral standards had been admixed with strong emotions. The frequently recurring question what is the sense of human life has to be usually interpreted as a question whether good will triumphs in our world. That question in turn

¹ B. Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1954, Part I, chapter I.

² See R. Redfield, *The Primitive World and its Transformation*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1953.

implies the belief that judgments concerning good and evil are common to all.

It is quite evident that an answer to the question, whether there are some universally acknowledged moral standards and values can be found only empirically by recurrence to facts. Comparative studies have already been undertaken to seek that answer. Yet the difficulties the specialists must face are considerable, so that it will take time before any satisfactory results of this research are produced. Whoever though desires to find an answer must make it clear to himself what meaning, precisely, he assigns to the term "universal" as well as to the term „accepted”³. The word "universal" must have time and space limits. For it is impossible to deal with the opinions of all people who have ever lived on earth. It seems quite natural therefore that we shall give up an attempt at recreating a fully detailed picture of the past, the more so that a minute part only of our heritage has been recorded in writing.

Consequently, we must concentrate on modern times. Should we impose on our epoch restrictive limits of space? Let us assume that we have done so and have decided to examine only our own society. We may ask then whether universality should require absolute unanimity, or should it merely stand for the consent of the majority. Locke had excluded children and idiots. Those were entitled to voice their opinions on the subject who could comprehend the norms and values.

Now a few words about the term "accepted". Long ago Locke knew the fact that it is one thing to accept the statement about the earth moving around the sun, and quite another, to accept practical principles. In order to show that there are no generally accepted practical rules Locke insisted that the word "accept" had not only the meaning of the conviction that a given rule was right, but also he demanded that the rule should be followed in practice. In view of this demand it was quite easy to convince the reader that universally accepted standards do not exist. In our considerations we may provisionally assume that he accepts the norms who condemns the cases of breaking them.

II

Attempts at an a priori solution of the problem

Those interested in the question have paid little attention so far to these preliminary points of primary importance in reaching an empirical solution. They could disregard them as they discussed the problem in a purely abstract way. One of their a priori suggestions asserted that the

³ For a detailed analysis of both these concepts see: Arne Naess, *Objectivity of Norms. Two Directions of Precization*. Oslo 1948 (mimeographed), pp. 23-47.

obviousness of certain norms and values is clear to everybody. Another leaned against the argument that moral norms are shared by all as they serve to satisfy basic needs, which are common to all people. Let us examine these two propositions.

1. When we state the obviousness of some at least of the norms and values, their obviousness may be of dual nature.

a. it may be due to the lack of precision in the wording of the statement. In that case it can be nothing else but pseudo-obviousness.

b. Or, it may denote genuine obviousness that has nothing to do with the moral character of the statement ⁴.

a. A well-known slogan says that every man should be given such conditions so that he may develop all his capabilities. The general acceptance of this truth will stop when we ask, whether we do really mean *all* capabilities? Should we promote the development of a tendency to exploit or humiliate? It appears now that we tacitly assumed: "all his *good* capabilities". But this restriction would require general consent as to which capabilities should be selected as good ones.

"We must tend to achieve the happiness of all", is another, highly convincing slogan of wide popular appeal. E. Dupréel has pointed that the word "happiness" is frequently supplemented in people's minds with the word "true" ⁵. And when speaking about true happiness every man implies his own vision of happiness and his personal pattern of excellence. Let us recall here the acrobatics we find in J. S. Mill's *Utilitarianism*; when he tries to prove that virtue is "part" of happiness. Similarly every attempt at filling up the idea of happiness with some substantial context will have a tendency to annihilate obviousness, and at the same time to annihilate the general acceptance of this general tenet.

"Neminem laedere" appears in many textbooks of ethics. Yet one might like to ask what we mean by "laedere"? Locke betrayed mildness in educating the children of the privileged classes, for whom before all, was destined his work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. At the same time he proposed that the children of poor parents be kept together in a shelter, where they were to work, and be fed on bread and water, with a little gruel heated on the stove that was to warm up the room during winter days. In Locke's opinion this measure was not at all harmful, on the contrary he called it beneficial to them. It meant doing good. This instance is quoted here because the law that forbids to treat badly a helpless child is most frequently cited as one of the obvious and generally accepted rules.

b. Genuine obviousness. Here I should like to draw the reader's

⁴ Cf. A. Naes., l. c.

⁵ E. Dupréel, *Traité de Morale*, vol. I, Bruxelles 1932.

attention to its two varieties: one is implied by the tautological character of the statement; the other, though not the obviousness of tautology, is still an obviousness of nonmoral character.

The element of tautology has always been quite considerable in ethics, and though stressed by many authors it still deserves some additional remarks.

In the *Principia Ethica* G. E. Moore considered all the sentences with the predicate "good" as self-evident though synthetical. Yet, if we look more closely into the mechanism of definitions, that appear in ethical studies, we can easily notice an abundance of value-judgments which ought to be considered as analytical. How, for instance, are we proceeding when we construct a definition of egoism? Usually we reject the assumption that he who seeks his own good is an egoist, as there is nothing wrong with a man going to a concert, or hurrying up to the dentist's to get his aching tooth anaesthetized although in both cases he seeks his own good. We call an egoist a man who seeks his own interests against the interests of others. Thus we restrict the denotation of the word "egoism" so narrowly till it falls in with the opinion that egoism is bad. When we have done so, what is then our condemnation of egoism if not a tautology? Likewise, when defining veracity we determine the range of its denotation until it embraces positive values only. Not every statement, even when it conforms to reality, is a manifestation of veracity, but only that one which conforms to reality and *costs us something*. Thus to say that veracity is good is nothing else but the mere wording of the emotional content of the word.

Some scholars propose as an undoubtedly universal and commonly accepted standard the one which bids solidarity with one's own group. That standard seems to imply two possible meanings: either it is — self-evident but then it is a tautology, or if it is not it loses its convincing force. What in fact can "my group" or "one's own group" really mean? If "my group" is one I have joined of my own free will, that means that I have felt solidary with its opinions or activities. In that case this solidarity principle is rather tautological. If on the other hand "my own group", means for instance "the group in which I was born", like the caste of a Hindu determined by birth, then our principle is no more tautological but for a European at least seems no binding obligation.

Out of numerous tautological norms and value-judgments that have already been cited as self-evident by various authors it is worth mentioning here one more statement which has been quoted as a supposed synthetic and yet self-evident value-judgment. The example is to be found by P. Weiss in his article, *The Universal Ethical Standard*⁶. It

⁶ *Ethics*, 1945, vol. LXI, p. 41.

reads, "It is absolutely and always wrong to kill a friend deliberately and wantonly". The author adds that this statement plays in ethics the same role as the following assertion in ontology: "It is absurd that some day in some place I shall meet myself coming toward me".

Abstraction made from the fact that one can hardly imagine an action undertaken "thoughtlessly and for no cause whatever", it seems to me, we cannot possibly deny the tautological character of the quoted sentence. "What sort of friend is that whom one kills deliberately and wantonly"? will ask any unbiased reader, feeling the presence of some inner contradiction in this statement. A friend is a person whom by definition we have to wish well.

There has already been mentioned another kind of self-evidence which like the self-evidence of tautology is *not* a self-evidence of a moral character. It springs from other sources. Let us suppose that in a certain kindergarten a game is played with the children. During that game the youngest among them up to the age of four are to receive extra toys. The daughter of the teacher is an older girl, having already passed that age-limit, and for this reason she cannot have an extra toy. Yet because of the position of her mother she is treated exceptionally. By doing so, there has been violated the principle which says that if a variable has a determined range it must always assume the same value. Each "x" and only "x" receives the toy. The "x" denotes a child up to 4 years of age. The teacher's daughter is outside this specific limit and therefore should not be given a toy.

In his study of justice Ch. Perelman⁷ gives to the principle of justice the form of a syllogism of the type "Barbara". That syllogism reads: All A's should be B's. *M* is an A, *M* should be B". The evidence of this principle is analogous to that of the *dictum de omni et nullo*. And is not an evidence of a moral order.

A similar principle of consistency is meant by the wellknown principle about "clean hands". It rules over the very procedure of evaluation and forbids the pot to call the kettle black. What has been tacitly admitted here? It is that the same things should be blamed in the same manner. Again if we think this rule self-evident this evidence does not seem moral.

III

A quasi-empirical solution of the problem

2. We shall examine now the attempt to give a positive answer to the question whether there exist universal moral standards by referring to the

⁷ Ch. Perelman, *De la Justice*, Bruxelles 1945.

assumption that moral norms together with other social norms serve to satisfy the needs of man, his basic needs at least, which are common to all people. This opinion is professed also by cultural anthropologists who have an instrumental conception of culture⁸. Namely, they consider that the culture of a given society serves to satisfy the needs of its members and moral standards form one of the elements of culture.

The opinion that ethical standards must satisfy human needs since they have been accepted by that society and they continue to exist, is usually formulated as a general statement⁹. Now, according to the interpretation of the word "need", this statement may be either a sterile truism which cannot be falsified or a false statement. It is a truism when by "need" we understand every desire. In that case one can always find a need behind a rule of conduct. If somebody wanted to cite the law of divorce, binding in the majority of the states in the United States, as obsolete and thus contradicting the above statement we might explain, why it has not been dropped by referring to the need for continuity and stabilization indispensable to social cohesion.

If we mean by needs only those whose satisfaction is necessary for biological survival, it will be a false assertion to claim that every moral standard takes that survival into account. The rules of fighting adopted by the chivalry proved fatal to those who professed them. They were fatal to individuals as well as to the survival of societies.

Now, if we admit that only some of ethical norms serve to satisfy basic needs, it is not possible to decree in advance, whether we can find some moral standards, accepted by all, because in each society the selection of needs protected by moral standards can vary. Through a painstaking comparative study only can an answer be found to the question.

IV

Universality of ethical standards as compared with the universality of other standards and of descriptions

Emotional approach to the problem of the universality of some at least of moral standards is, as we know, more striking than the engagement of people in the question of universal aesthetical norms. Many people assert that the first of them are universal, while the others are of a great

⁸ Any cultural practice must be functional or it will disappear before long. Cl. Kluckhohn, *The Mirror for Man*, Premier printing 1959, p. 28.

⁹ To simplify the matter I do not ask whose needs are to be satisfied; I make this unreal assumption that every society is a monolithic body although it can be made up of various groups which may have various needs that cannot be satisfied, all at a time.

variety. Let us consider what factors bear upon a difference in both these attitudes.

The fact that there are no universal tastes even within one social group seems to be obvious. Paul switches off the radio whenever classical music is on the air. On hearing his neighbour's radio broadcasting his favourite melody John switches his radio on, greatly displeased with himself for having failed to catch the first bars of the tune. Your furniture may become an object of vigorous disapproval freely expressed by your friends, though you know them to belong to the same social group as their host. A fondness for different colours is a striking feature of women's dresses and every woman thinks she is right in her choice.

The lack of tendency to show a unanimity of opinions in the matters of beauty is caused not only by the obvious divergence of tastes but also by the fact that in the matter of aesthetics we are not especially interested to have the norms and values commonly shared by all people. On the contrary, people endowed with a keen sense of beauty fear boredom which might be caused by the spread of European culture facilitated by modern means of transportation. Travelling might lose much of its attraction were we to find in every visited country the same motifs in arts or music. Still, a tourist who goes on a journey in order to find new and unexpected stimuli in the world of colours and tones prefers to find in the exotic lands, where he travels, the principle "thou shalt not kill", fully respected, in particular in its version, "thou shalt not kill tourists".

Within the same culture the variety of tastes has been made use of to show one's own superiority. In class societies this difference has been employed to guard members of one class against the transgression of social barriers. As everybody knows, the lower classes imitate the fashions of the upper classes, the latter guarding their privileged position by means of a new fashion.

The variety of taste is usefully employed in trade. Profitable trading of Europeans with the natives during the period of colonialism made good use of it in bartering the notions for ivory. Still to-day various sorts of shoddy goods or those out of fashion are sold in the colonies.

Several other examples can be quoted to prove that a variety of tastes can suit many practical ends. Much more difficult it would be to look for similar instances in the sphere of morality. It is much easier here to cite examples showing that we are interested in having moral opinions shared by all people. One can hardly imagine any instance of peaceful cooperation among groups or within one group, if one individual in that group or groups does not accept the obligations which other men follow; if one man respects the precepts, "thou shalt not kill", "thou shalt not cheat", and another man is of a different opinion.

To a certain extent, some kind of universality is a necessary condition of the binding force of ethical standards. Hobbes was aware of this fact when he added to the laws determining a peaceful cooperation of citizens the restriction that they are binding only if our partner observe them too. The rule "thou shalt not kill" loses its obligatory force when we are assaulted by somebody, who wishes to strangle us.

It has already been mentioned that our search for universality concerning ethical standards used to be bound with the necessity for finding some support, since the logical validity of the principles could not be relied on. Here too we have much difference between beauty and moral good. The sphere of beauty is largely the domain of art. In art there are specialists who can act as authorities in doubtful cases. No plebiscite is needed here, specialists pass their judgment on a selected monument, and decide whether it should be erected in their town and where. In art we can acquire certain historical knowledge and certain skill, both adding to the qualifications of the men selected to act on the jury. A judgment expressed by an art or music specialist carries more validity than the opinion of a layman. Moral matters acting by analogy is hardly possible. Conscience is attributed to all men. And pointing to a philosopher as a specialist in moral matters arouses doubts as to who has to be a greater authority in such matters: a man of blameless conduct who has never bothered to reflect and theorize on this subject, or a man who acts as a sign-post though he does not practise what he preaches. In moral matters the very choice of the judge is a case of moral decision, while the choice of an authority in the domain of art is not a matter of aesthetics.

Now let us examine our final point, namely the question, why the problem of universality is non-existent in descriptions, in the same form as we find it in the sphere of moral standards.

Although we may endeavour to keep unchanged the observations that lie at the basis of experimental sciences while the person of the observer is changed, yet nobody cares to assess the logical value of empirical statements by falling upon their universality nor resorting to a plebiscite. When we say, "Notre-Dame in Paris has two towers", we assume that this observation must be accepted by everybody who understands the words used and who has seen the cathedral. Another matter is with the statement: "Notre-Dame is the most beautiful church in France". In *The Fable of the Bees* Bernard Mandeville maintained that nothing would prove better the incorrectness of his opinions than their acceptance by the majority of men. This opinion was repeated after him by Voltaire. It expresses the belief that the universality of one's own views does not confirm them. Who would like to prove that the earth moves round the sun, and not vice versa, by circulating a questionnaire?

A theoretician frequently takes universality as an evidence that values

are objective in the sense that they are a quality of the valued object. If men judge a thing in the same manner, independently of respective tradition and upbringing of each of them, it is because — so are their arguments — good and evil is in the things, and is not a mere projection of capricious emotions. Alf Ross has shown that thus conceived objectivity, as applied to judgments of perceptions at least, must not necessarily go with universality. Two kinds of wine or coffee may objectively differ from each other, though this difference may not be universally stated since it can be discovered by wine tasters, i.e. by exceptional men only. Their opinion is confirmed by the fact that the chemical components in one kind of wine or coffee differ from those found in the other. In such a case we follow their judgment against the opinion of the majority of people. Even if there were large numbers of daltonists, we should support an objective conditioning of the qualitative difference in the perception of red and green colours by the difference in the length of the waves serving as their stimuli¹⁰. There leads only one way from universality to objectivity viz, when we identify one with the other, taking subjective values as the expression of personal whims.

Against those who seem to invalidate the standing of values by showing that they are fewer universal opinions in the sphere of evaluation than perception, Cl. I. Lewis¹¹ in defence of value-judgments maintains that this difference is only apparent and due to the fact that differences in perception usually come to light only by accident, as for instance, when we learn by accident that our friend is colour-blind. Besides, the differences in evaluation are in his opinion more striking because they are in a greater degree reflected in action.

Both these observations do not seem to be correct. We have frequently to do with divergences in perceptions, and they need not be illustrated with such examples as the above case of colour-blind people. One man may see a twin star in the sky where another man will see only one. One man feels cold on entering the room, another will say it is quite warm. On entering the house one man, again, will alarm everybody saying that a gas pipe is leaking, another corner will smell no gas at all. It is not in the number of divergent opinions that we see the difference between perceptions and evaluations. The number — let us state that in passing — can hardly be an object of comparison. As far as perceptions are concerned we have at our disposal a variety of methods thanks to which we can obtain a unanimity of opinions. No such methods are applicable to values. When seeing a twin star we can convince our

¹⁰ Alf Ross, *On the Logical Nature of Propositions of Value*, *Theoria* 1954, vol. XI.

¹¹ Cl. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, La Salle 1946, pp. 414.

opponent who sees in the same place only one, by letting him scan the skies through a telescope or opera-glasses. Divergent opinions as to the warmth or coldness of the room can be checked by examining a thermometer. The only remaining point of controversy will be then the question, whether one likes to live in a cool or warm house. These two attitudes can be expressed in two introspective sentences, which cannot be contradictory each speaking about something else.

In the sphere of evaluation — as we know — when the difference of opinions concerning facts is removed, the only means of bringing our opponent to an agreement is his emotional reeducation. While there is no reason why we should doubt a potential universality of perceptions, notwithstanding every possible distinctions in the cultural background, universality of evaluations seems closely bound with their levelling. As regards Lewis's observation, stating that a difference of evaluations is a more striking one because it is revealed through action, we must object that differences in perceiving are no less influential than our valuations upon our activities.

When comparing moral valuations with descriptions — as regards their universality, we have tried to show that the latter would be neither a characteristic of the truth of our valuations nor of the objectivity of value as a quality proper to the things. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that an empirically proved universality might have its great emotional significance. It might strengthen our conviction that moral values express, indeed, men's most essential needs, and that the whole mankind can reach understanding without losing specific features of particular cultures. Thus comparative studies to this effect are worth while and should be continued. But they must be speeded up since modern transportation facilities may establish universalization through uniform standards of education. This situation would make it impossible for us to resolve our problem of universality which had to be a universality in spite of cultural differences.

Cultural anthropology, as the mirthless joke of some specialists goes, is gradually acquiring distinct features of entropology, because nowadays the principle of entropy finds more and more its application in the sphere of culture ¹².

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¹² Cf. C. Lévy-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris 1945.