

UNIVERSALISM: A GROUND FOR ETHICS

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This presentation is a search for an approach to an ethics for the contemporary world in the thought of universalistic thinking first set forth by Janusz Kuczynski. From the outset, the view of Universalism, says Kuczynski, assumes that human valuing is open to review and revision based on what is learned from collective human experience. Universalism is a global response to this review and revision. For Kuczynski:

...universalism is a metatheory, an a priori synthesis and cocreation of the divergence, codependencies and unity of the components of an ontical-ontological and ethical order of the world, including, above all, the meaning of history and the meaning of life.¹

From a universalistic view it is true that not all of humanity now, as could be said, stands in the same place or even lives in the same world. The driving force of universalism is this very fact. It is the attempt to take formal recognition that we all live in different worlds yet in the same world, on this same globe. It attempts to globalize the view, to in fact, universalize the scope of the ethical order.

The ethical order is a guiding network which identifies and through choice guides right human action. Challenges to the contemporary ethic serve as a platform for the changes in direction taken by humanity itself. Initial work and thought on this project has, says Dieter Claessens and R. Mackensen, already begun in the Universalism movement:

...founded with the aim to investigate the problems arising from the differences between our knowledge about Earth as a unit and the existing variety of religions, philosophies, and ideologies and values/value standards.²

Ethics as the way to describe an understanding of what constitutes good and right action is essential in all facets of human living because human beings are not perfect. From the days of Socrates and Plato the search to understand, explore and to continually re-define the nature and role of ethical conduct has, as the act of rationality, been seen from the view of what constitutes the good life (Aristotle), as being happy as the aim of life, to professing that the goal of life and the motivation for being good is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (Mill). These historical definitions describe the best possible ways for human beings to conduct themselves and are based on a vision of humanity in and for itself. That is,

they have placed the person at the center of all understanding with the rest of the world seen as grist for the mill, as tools to turn the wheels of movement and change, that is, progress. Kuczynski's vision for universalism expands these horizons toward an inclusive vision, seeing the Earth as a unity itself, as a thinking planet:

...that a thinking planet is being born—before our very eyes, and to a high degree with our participation—the Earth of the intellectual community of those who can see the farthest and who already today can perceive the global horizons.³

The discoveries revealed by the contemporary scientific endeavor as well as the sweeping changes in the political and social realities of nation after nation are affecting, on a global basis, the understanding of humanity's place within and its relationship to the universe. It is the process of unifying through diversity. The established and historical boundaries to human knowledge and understanding are facing challenge after challenge. From the possibility of interstellar exploration to establishing a new definition of the boundary between life and death, humankind has now collectively surged forward beyond a point of no return. It has now come to stand on a new plateau of understanding, reaching a watershed backward from which it cannot return. These boundary-breaking changes have brought with them a critical need to examine not only what has now become possible but what should or ought to be done given new knowledge and changes in our self-other understanding. That is, what is the best possible way to proceed in successfully integrating new understanding into the arena of human action and valuing. This might best be understood as a new stage in human evolution described by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

The ethical principles which hitherto we have regarded as an appendage, superimposed more or less by our own free will upon the laws of biology, are now showing themselves—not metaphorically but literally—to be a condition of survival for the human race. In other words, Evolution, in rebounding reflectively upon itself, acquires morality for the purposes of its further advance.⁴

Teilhard not only describes how the metamorphosis of evolutionary change contains within it the vision of those ideas of science which transform the living reality of human existence but bring along with them the need for a new standard of ethical conduct. Going beyond this, Teilhard indicates that within this vision will also be found seeds for finding the answers to the new ethical questions which are raised by the discovery. This revolution in human thought and action permanently shifts human reality and self-understanding. Ethical conduct given this new context, flows naturally as part and parcel of the change wrought by evolutionary forces.

Human conduct, understood as action, is guided by what is valued. As Leo Zonneveld says:

All action may assume moral significance once ethics rule the inner evaluation of human conduct. Ethics induce the human person to compassionately assess the intermediate effects of a process of change between intention and result of which oneself is the originator. The desire to be human may emerge with the purity of a moral will which knows how to embrace the perishable—the realm of things and facts—in order for the perishable to ultimately contribute to the immortal: the progressive evolutionary ascent of human values and ideals.⁵

All action assumes ethical and moral significance within a context of current knowledge. Decisions to act are based on valuing activity and are informed by the qualities inherent to self-understanding and the knowledge one possesses at that time. With today's global view, the potential to directly influence and affect one another on a worldwide continuum, that is, on a universal continuum, commands an all-inclusive framework within which informed decisions can be made. With these circumstances in view, the ground for a universalistic ethics has been broken by William A. Myers who has set out the following principles for this important task:

- 1) It is communitarian rather than individualistic;
- 2) It is eudaimonistic, in a somewhat special sense;
- 3) It argues for expansion of the scope of moral patiency;
- 4) It relies on a view of humanity as co-creative in the development of the human future; and
- 5) It holds mindfulness to be the most valuable of other moral virtues in our time.⁶

Mindfulness, as set forth here, is comprised by a threefold structure: a) thoughtfulness; b) moral imagination; c) compassion. For Myers:

The reason mindfulness recommends itself as the preeminent virtue in a contemporary ethics is that our actions can be communicated across space and time as never before: we act globally because we have the means to affect very remote others, and as we create the future for humanity we create even humanity itself.⁷

Mindfulness, as described above allows for the continual integration and reintegration of global knowledge and understanding to reside in the personal domain. It vivifies the need to be fully aware and ever-increasingly conscious of the results of action upon each other, the environment, the world, the universe itself. Mindfulness, as an inclusive awareness, is a call to

thoughtful action in the attempt to create a common future, to create human reality and in many ways, each other and ourselves. This is in itself a universalistic principle and may well serve as the foundation for and a context within which to comprehend the shifting boundaries in self-understanding, the understanding of the natural world, our place in it and the valuing activity which guides human action. “Mindfulness is methodological consciousness itself.”⁸ From the view of Theravada Buddhism, Rina S. Sircar says:

We all know in general what mindfulness is. We all know that the practice of mindfulness makes us more and more alert, more and more precise, and more and more careful in whatever we say or do. We also know that the absence of mindfulness results in the occurrence of accidents and errors which frequently disturb our lives. ...The Buddha treated mindfulness as a special subject of mental culture... The meaning the Buddha gives is this: the practice of mindfulness should be taken seriously...as if our life depended on it. ...When the awareness becomes sharpened, one proceeds to observe the changing nature of body and mind, and experiences the universal truths of impermanence, dissatisfactoriness, and insubstantiality, or soullessness.⁹

Ethics in the contemporary world, that is an ethical standard for human action in the face of what seems to be ever-increasing and complexifying scientific, political and social changes, must be derived from continually reflecting upon the evolution of the human situation. Ethics are, in fact, a manifestation of those changes. As Ramakrishna Puligandla says, “Change, according to the Buddhist, is the interaction of one thing with another.”¹⁰ Universalism, says Kuczynski, “has to be open in order to sum up dialectically common values and be tolerant towards differentiated and antagonistic values.”¹¹

Notes

- 1) Janusz Kuczynski, *Dialogue and Humanism*, 1, no. 1 (1991), p. vi.
- 2) Dieter Claessens and R. Mackensen, “Preface”, *Proceedings of the Second International Symposium of Universalism*, 22-26 August 1990, Berlin, Germany, p. i.
- 3) Janusz Kuczynski, “Foreword”, *Dialectics and Humanism*, XVII, no. 3 (1990), p. 5.
- 4) Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964), pp. 203-204.

- 5) Leo Zonneveld, Personal Communication, 18 November 1991, Reeuwijk, The Netherlands.
- 6) William A. Myers, "Toward a Universalist Ethics", *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium of Universalism*, 28 August 1991, Ontario, Canada, p. 6.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 8) The Writing Caruso, Personal Communication, 17 February 1993, San Francisco, USA.
- 9) Rina S. Sircar, "Maha Satipatthana-Vipassana Meditation", *One Vehicle*, M.C. (P) no. 157/4/84, pp. 167-168.
- 10) Ramakrishna Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Thought* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 99.
- 11) Janusz Kuczynski, *Dialogue and Universalism as a New Way of Thinking* (Warsaw: Warsaw University, 1989), p. 14.

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