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## UNIVERSALITY AS A REGULATIVE IDEAL

### 1. *Universality as Transcendence*

A way of conceiving philosophy has long been dominant in Western as well as Eastern traditions - the conception of philosophy as *prote philosophia*. Philosophy, according to this conception, is the discipline that defines the preconditions for all of man's systematic efforts to understand the world and his place in it. In the classical West philosophy was a study of the ultimate principles governing nature and man, while the long tradition of moral and metaphysical speculation was its match in the East. It was seen as the task of philosophy to seek the one and absolute truth amid *prima facie* conflicting appearances and opinions. In order to draw a firm line of demarcation between reality and mere appearances, philosophy was conceived as being endowed with an epistemological access to the world beyond the spatio-temporal change and contingency, exemplified by the Platonic world of *eidos*. As philosophy is in possession of the one and true picture of the world, the «mirror of nature», in Rorty's language, it occupies a special place in culture, adjudicating the sciences and the culture as a whole.

Even after naive optimism regarding human epistemological abilities falls into disrepute, the idea of transcendence and normativity continues to be supreme in philosophy. Despite his anti-dogmatism Kant assigns to philosophy the task of clarifying the foundation of the sciences and morals by defining the limits of what can and cannot be experienced, thus making it the highest court of appeal vis-a-vis the sciences and culture. No less adjudicatory of the culture as a whole is the conception of philosophy in the tradition of analytic philosophy. Philosophy, according to this tradition, is primarily concerned with meaning, setting the bounds of meaningful language. Philosophy thus circumscribes the parameters of culture - culture understood as the totality of man's understandings and actions.

### 2. *Universality as Ethnocentrism*

Along with the advance of the Enlightenment conception of progress, science and technology, the idea of universality originally based on transcendence and normativity comes to assume increasingly ethnocentric character. Thus, Hegel described the course of cultural development in its dialectical inexorability as going from the «Oriental» world to the Graeco-Roman culture and finally to its apex, the European culture. In the naturalistic tradition of Comte, humanity is seen as going through three stages, i.e.: the primitive, the metaphysical and finally the positivistic stage. In this conception, humanity is seen as going through successive unilinear stages of savagery, barbarism and finally civilization. It is a conception of cultural evolution that is modelled on evolution in the physical and biological realms, particularly in science and technology.

These are the realms where the measure of progress seems clear and unambiguous.<sup>1</sup> By assuming further that the progress in the material realm determines the worth of a culture, the materialistic theory could postulate a universal cultural evolution according to which cultures and societies are engaged in a single track race, with their respective positions clearly marked at every stage of their progress. Wedded to the idea of a Christian mission, the materialistic conception leads to the idea of a «civilizing mission» or of «a white man's burden» and thus becomes an imperialistic program. That such a cultural universalism is

<sup>1</sup> Michael Adas, *Machine as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology and the Ideologies of Western Dominance*, Thrace, 1989, p. 339.

merely a totalization of the ethnocentrism of the West was clearly seen even during its heyday by such men as Herder, Nietzsche and Boas.

Thus the universality claims of Western philosophy come to rest on two axes: transcendence and normativity of philosophical knowledge on the one hand and ethnocentrism disguised as unilinearism of cultural evolution, on the other. The first axis enables philosophy to have access to the solely true knowledge of the world beyond the conditions of time and space. The second arms philosophy with the ability to predict the goal of cultural development, that is, the direction in which all cultures converge and the stages through which they must go in order to reach that goal.

### **3. Challenge of Relativism**

Today, the conception of philosophy as the adjudicator of culture is under challenge. The challenge comes from relativism. Relativism today permeates human societies both in the East and West, to such a degree that it may be said to be the cultural orthodoxy of the day. It permeates not only peoples' thinking and action concerning social and moral issues, but also all areas of knowledge, including hard-core scientific knowledge. Encouraged by recent developments in psychology, comparative linguistics, and the philosophies of science and of language, there is a wide-spread acceptance of the notion that all knowledge, values and truth which form the basis of human praxis are relative to a cultural background or system. What we perceive, what we think true, what we deem reasonable are no longer explained in relation to objective reality. Instead, they become relative to cultural paradigms, conceptual systems or languages.

There have of course been various forms of value relativism or knowledge relativism. But the novum today is that truth and reason, which in the past provided the basis from which to criticize classical relativism, have themselves become merely functions of conceptual schemes as languages. They are dependent upon the canons of rationality valid only for a particular culture and period. It is this denial of transcendence and normativity to philosophy that characterizes the contemporary relativism. Rorty is typical in this respect. The exalted self-understanding of Western philosophy since Descartes as the provider of one single uniquely true picture of the world, the «mirror of the world», has been shown to be a grand illusion by the thesis of contemporary relativism. Instead of the philosopher-king, who would rule over the culture as a whole by presuming to provide the unique and absolute truth about the world, the «post-philosophical» culture would have «informed dilettantes» who would engage only in «edifying discourse».<sup>2</sup> Their activity would be far from adjudicatory; it no longer makes efforts to find the Archimedean point that is distinct from cultural tradition. It would thus be merely one among many other peer activities, one voice among many, such as poetry, psychology, physical science, etc.

### **4. Cultural Relativism**

The first full-fledged challenge to the universalistic conception of cultural evolution can be said to have been mounted by Franz Boas and the American anthropologists in the early years of the 20th century. In the cultural atmosphere of imperialism, cultural relativism advocated by the anthropologists served perhaps as a palliative for the anguished conscience of the West as well as for the shattered self-respect of the conquered cultures. Cultural anthropology, they believed, should enable us to see the validity of every set of cultural norms specific to a people and culture, and such an attitude entails in practice tolerance and respect for all cultural values and patterns. All forms of cultural imperialism that attempt to replace the cultures of the peoples with what we perceive to be the superior culture of our own are thus, according to the cultural relativism of the anthropologists, morally wrong.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, 1997, p. 317.

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It is difficult to say how much condescension or romanticism is involved in this attitude of tolerance, but it is pertinent to remember that cultural relativism itself is of Western origin. Cultural relativism is being put forward as an antidote to the universalistic claims of Western ethnocentrism. It serves as justification for various independence and liberation movements. It provides the ideological basis for opposition to imperialism in international relations as well as for pluralism in national politics. Pluralistic politics and even separatist movements in multiethnic and multicultural societies draw their ideological strength from cultural relativism.

### 5. *Conceptual Relativism*

Relativism is as old as the history of philosophy itself, but the emergence of relativism as a full-fledged philosophical problem coincides with the formulation of conceptual relativism which denies a determinate relationship between objective reality and knowledge. According to this view, there exist many equally true but mutually incompatible conceptual schemes that interpret the world. Each of these conceptual schemes has its own standards of truth and justification, and no third neutral standards in terms of which the claims of each conceptual scheme can be appraised. The question concerning truth and justification reduces simply to which of these conceptual schemes we have in fact chosen. Standards and norms embedded in each of the conceptual schemes are irreducible, and there is no objective rational basis for the choice. What is accepted as real in one conceptual scheme can no longer be real in another, thereby making the world itself relative to a given conceptual scheme.

There are two interrelated theses underlying conceptual relativism. One is the Kantian thesis that all perception and knowledge are products of the constructive activities of the knowing subject. The other is a thesis of more recent origin, namely that there cannot be a single uniquely valid way in which such construction may proceed. We know that the radically relativistic consequence of the Kantian thesis has been diluted by the notion of the universal, transcendental structure of the mind that constrains all forms of knowledge acts. Now, a series of argumentations in the philosophy of language as well as of science has shown that it is not only impossible to perceive anything without relying upon some conceptual scheme, but also that no conceptual scheme can claim the privileged position of representing the world as it is, since the relationship between world and language is fundamentally indeterminate.

### 6. *Ontological Relativity*

The grounds for this philosophical position were prepared by works of a number of philosophers, including Wittgenstein, Sellars and Quine, which in their various ways put into question the validity of the normative and transcendental conception of philosophy. It was, above all, the notion of ontological relativity expounded by Quine that expresses the relativistic consequences in most unequivocal terms. We need not go into details of the two interrelated theses - the undeterminacy of radical translation and the inscrutability of reference - which together form the essential core of the notion. It is nevertheless necessary to emphasize the radically relativistic consequences of these theses. The problem of reference, which has often been considered to be an objective access to the world as it is, becomes meaningless, once the problem is posed in absolutist language. The question of reference becomes meaningful only when posed relative to a particular chosen language. And no transcendent normative criteria exist in making the choice of the language. Choice is simply an act of «acquiescence».<sup>3</sup>

Since reference is relative, so is ontology. It is meaningless to ask, independently of a previously «acquiesced» background language, what our words really mean or refer to. The thesis of ontological relativity makes unintelligible the idea of any one single description of

<sup>3</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*, New York, 1969, p. 2.

the world as having the privileged position of being uniquely true of the world. For the ontologies which are being presupposed by these descriptions are relative and arbitrary. From the epistemological point of view there can be no fundamental difference among different descriptions of the world - whether it is mythical, metaphysical or scientific. Only perhaps a difference of degree. The objects - whether they are parts of the mythical, metaphysical or scientific discourses - are «cultural points».<sup>4</sup> Choosing among these different descriptions is fundamentally an arbitrary process. We only tend to accept the description of the world as provided by the natural sciences as being epistemologically superior, because we believe they organize and structure our experience in a more efficient way than other descriptions. According to Quine, «there have been philosophers who thought of philosophy as somehow separate from science as providing a firm basis on which to build science, but this I consider an empty dream... I think of philosophy as continuous with science, as a part of science».<sup>5</sup>

### 7. Self-Defeating

How should we evaluate the position of relativism? It has been remarked by a number of writers on the subject that, as in the case of epistemological idealism, a water-tight logical refutation of relativism is beyond pale. One must however point out that there does seem to be a kind of obfuscation in the relativists' argument against universalism. The self-defeating nature of a consistent relativism has often been observed. A consistent cultural relativist cannot claim that all cultures are just as good as his own without ceasing at that very moment to be a relativist. For, if all values with which one measures cultures are relative to the social norms of a particular culture or people, then there can be no intelligible sense in which one culture can be just as good as any other. Nihilism - the thesis that there is no such thing as being just as good - is the only valid conclusion that can be drawn from the non-existence of objective values. Respect and tolerance for all cultures, which the relativism of anthropologists advocate, would require a value other than relativism itself, which simple relativism is unable to provide.

### 8. Unintelligible

This argument based on the self-refuting character of relativism is ultimately unsatisfying, despite its logical force, partly because of its high formalism. A more potent argument against conceptual relativism has been advanced by D. Davidson,<sup>6</sup> in which philosophical considerations on translation and conceptual schemes are intertwined. The crux of the Davidsonian argument is the charge that no sense can be made of different conceptual schemes on which all forms of relativism depend one way or another. A conceptual scheme can be identified with a particular linguistic system which expresses it. If two linguistic systems are mutually translatable into each other, then one must assume they embody the same conceptual scheme. If there exists a scheme of translation between two different languages, the same conceptual scheme is expressed on both of these languages. The criterion of identity and difference of conceptual schemes is essentially linked to translatability among them. In order for the expression «different conceptual schemes» to be meaningful, there must exist a language that is in principle untranslatable into our language, or any of the languages which are translatable into our own.

But there can be no such language, Davidson argues. What makes a cluster of sounds or inscriptions in fact a language? If a cluster of inscriptions and sounds are not translatable

<sup>4</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, in Rosenberg and Travis (ed.). *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, New Jersey, 1971, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Magee, *Men of Ideas*, London, 1978, p. 170.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Davidson, «On the Very Idea of Conceptual Scheme», in: D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, 1984, pp. 188-198.

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into our own language, there would be no reason for us to suppose that these words and sentences are uttered by a language user, a thinking being, and, indeed, a human. If translatability among languages provides the only criterion of identity of the conceptual schemes embedded in the language, then a conceptual scheme different from our own cannot exist. If it is in principle meaningless to speak of alternative conceptual schemes different from our own, then conceptual relativism cannot be maintained.

### 9. *Mental Suicide*

When we accept the theses of indeterminacy of radical translation and ontological relativity at their face value, we are compelled to deny the possibility of all human intellectual activity, and consequently the possibility of culture in general. Not only does translation from one language to another become impossible, so do understanding and comparison of two different epochs of the same cultural tradition. And if we cannot translate the sounds emitted by another living being into our language, that is, if we cannot understand him as a matter of principle, there can be no reason to regard him as a special kind of being quite different from other living beings, that is, to regard him as a human being. There would be no reason to regard him as a speaking being, and, as a corollary, as a thinking being. Radical relativism is, to speak with Putnam, a mental suicide.<sup>7</sup>

### 10. *Freezing the Status Quo*

Popper is only one among many contemporary philosophers who expressed a deep concern about relativism by branding it the greatest of modern irrationalism.<sup>8</sup> There does seem to be a sense in which relativism can be said to have replaced the universalistic claims to an exclusive validity of one particular system of knowledge with a *de facto* claim to its superiority. If there is no objective standard by which to judge the conflicting claims of different systems of knowledge, then we must grant equal validity, or equal invalidity, as the case may be, to all systems of knowledge.

It is not difficult to see how such a situation would lead to a kind of intellectual defeatism. If it is true that there are no objective knowledge or values worth pursuing, then all intellectual pursuit and striving would be senseless. Progress in knowledge is only possible if we believe old beliefs to be false and discover the new belief to be true. Thus, if a relativist continues to talk of «better» or «more effective» or «more widely accepted» knowledge and point to the *de facto* practical and technological superiority of one system of knowledge and values over others, he is in fact contributing to the freezing of the status quo in the progress of knowledge. Relativism thus helps not only to perpetuate the dominance of the hegemonic culture over others and to put a kind of moratorium on the progress of knowledge. It also strengthens the present relationship of domination and subjugation in a subtle way by hindering the progress of knowledge. Relativism, when embraced by dominated cultures, encourages particularistic tendencies in knowledge and tends to encourage an illusory sense of adequacy. The result is nothing but a philosophical endorsement to abandoning the arduous intellectual task of integrating all forms of knowledge into the objective core of knowledge that transcends the boundaries of cultures and forms the common intellectual property of humanity.

### 11. *Twist in the Dialectic*

One may surmise a somewhat sinister political aspect to the contemporary discussion of relativism. Western culture, since its early days, particularly with the advent of science and technology, has laid strong claims to possessing a body of universally valid true knowledge and values that are essential ingredients for the human society to be civilized. Since there has

<sup>7</sup> Hilary Putnam, «Why Reason Can it Be Naturalized», in: *Synthese*, Vol. 52, 1982, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Popper, «The Myth of Framework», in: E. Freeman (ed.), *The Abdication of Philosophy: Philosophy and the Public Good*, 1976, p. 25.

always been an intimate relationship between knowledge and power - one need only think of Francis Bacon - the universalistic claims of truth and knowledge went hand in hand with Western imperialism. One is tempted to say that it is no accident that the proliferation of relativism in the Western world has coincided historically with the demise of political colonialism and the emergence of the Third World and multiple centers. But if relativism is true and there are no standards other than existing cultural traditions which can adjudicate among different claims, the relationship of man to man, nation to nation, and culture to culture becomes one of unmediated will and power. A cultural relativist becomes the worst kind of cultural imperialist. We are thus left with a curious twist in the dialectic of ideas. An idea that was put forward as a means to rehabilitate and revitalize discredited cultural traditions and restore respect and tolerance among cultures seems now to have turned against itself, and seems to perpetuate the very cultural situation which ostensibly it was designed to redress.

### *12. Prospects in an Age of Diversity*

What then are the prospects for universality in this age of cultural diversity? Our discussion has made clear that, both for theoretical and political reasons, neither the transcendent-transcendental conception of universality nor conceptual relativism would be acceptable. A conception of universality that would be acceptable in this age of diversity would have to be one that can do justice to two different demands made on it. On the one hand, it must be able to do justice to the in-controvertible fact that there is a *de facto* wide range of intercultural agreements, contacts and interaction such that mutual understanding and communication across cultures and epochs is sometimes achieved. On the other hand, the notion of universality must be able to respond adequately to the deep roots of suspicion regarding all universalistic projects, as well as regarding the alliance of universalism with hegemonic intentions. The new notion of universality must be one that can preserve respect for cultures in their individuality, while leaving open the possibility of their development and progress.

### *13. The Idea of Cultural Synthesis*

Before proceeding further, it would be useful to come back to the relationship between philosophy and culture. Culture, in its broad sense, is an internally coherent and cohesive set of values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge's and practices by means of which people relate themselves to the world. These ideas, values and practices together constitute some notion of an ordered universe and man's place in it by specifying a set of purposes in relation to himself, his fellow humans and nature. They enable human beings to deal with the environment in relation to that set of purposes. As the world is in constant flux, however, it can be said to be part of the nature of culture to be in constant flux. Culture is a kind of living organism with one internal dynamism of its own, looking beyond the boundaries set by itself.

As the world and our knowledge of it change, culture too must change so as to make itself adequate to its changing and changed circumstances. A culture, if it is to survive and prosper, must constantly adapt its ideas, values and practices to these changing circumstances. Cultures of each time and place strive to forge a cultural synthesis, sometimes in isolation, sometimes in cooperation, and sometimes in a milieu of conflict with other cultures. Each strives to forge a synthesis of ideas, values and practices that would best enable it to deal with the tasks of survival and prospering within the constraints set by the natural circumstances and the cultures' knowledge and understanding of those circumstances. At some point in time, the synthesis would be perceived by those inside as well as outside the cultural synthesis in question, to have reached an optimal point, a point of reflective equilibrium in the continuing process of interaction and interchange of ideas and values on the one hand, and the recalcitrant but changing environment on the other.

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Philosophy, with its natural hang toward argumentation and justification, would interpret, criticize and synthesize the ideas and values. Above all, it contributes toward forging an effective and persuasive synthesis of the ideas, values and attitudes by bringing them into reflective equilibrium. All important philosophies, whether of the West or East, have been such cultural syntheses, expressed in theoretical abstract language. The contribution of philosophy to the synthesis would consist in listening to the voices of a distant past, in forging into a consistent whole the scattered thoughts of today, but above all in bringing into clarity insufficiently articulated ideas of the past and present.

The impetus for the change may come from many sources. Radical changes in the natural environment in which the culture is situated may necessitate it. Or the culture itself may come to see its own conceptual and practical assumptions to be inadequate as a result either of critical reflection within the culture, or as a consequence of confrontation with another culture. Many cultures have been exterminated by imperialistic imposition of another culture. There have also been cases of a militarily strong people who were assimilated into the culture of the people which they conquered. Or a culture may lose its sense of direction at a certain stage of its evolution. When it is confronted with another culture that is conceptually richer and more resourceful, it may then recognize its inadequacies and may transfer its allegiance, either partially or totally. Such a transfer of allegiance need not be an imperialistic imposition, but the consequence of a rational recognition of the need for changes.

### ***14. Optimality and Human Finitude***

At some point in time and place, the synthesis would be perceived by those inside as well as outside the cultural synthesis in question, to have reached an optimal point, a point of reflective equilibrium in the continuing process of interaction and interchange of ideas and values on the one hand, and the recalcitrant but changing environment on the other. A culture, having achieved such optimality, may claim for its synthesis superiority over all others. The basis of the claim would be that it transcends the limitations of its predecessors and competitors and avoids their weaknesses which at the same time incorporate their strengths. Such a synthesis would then become a model for emulation by other cultures, or sometimes the yardstick against which the worth of another culture's efforts at synthesis may be measured and evaluated. Such a synthesis may thus claim universality for itself.

It is clear however that such a universality would be universality in time and place. Given the changing nature of culture, the language of such universality must be fallibilistic, although its ambition may be absolutistic. This must be so, because our knowledge of the world proceeds from a distinctively human and limited point of view, and is acquired by contingent, unprivileged and biased means. If there is a valid insight in the philosophical arguments for cultural relativism, it is one into human finitude. Our conception of reality is never a fully accurate or unbiased picture of the world as it is. It is for this reason that the claim of the optimality of our given cultural synthesis is only for a time and place.

But contingency and bias also mean that other cultures may have access to other aspects of reality and picture the world in terms of cognitive forms more suited to these interests and needs. So other cultures may process information regarding the world in such a way as to form a cultural synthesis that would in some sense be an alternative to our own. Plurality and diversity of cultures are consequences of human finitude. The value of a cultural synthesis is thus a function of the extent to which it enables a culture to deal with the problems of survival and prospering within given constraints. Beyond that it must not be judged absolutely, but always relative to its predecessors and rivals as being more or less acceptable.

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### ***15. Universality as a Regulative Ideal***

My proposal is to regard universality in terms of optimality of cultural synthesis and to regard the possibility of universality as a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense. It guides the efforts of different peoples and periods to forge a system of ideas, values and practices more or less adequate to the requirements of men and the constraints of the environment. As our knowledge of the world increases and our horizons expand in the wake of even greater contacts with other peoples and cultures, our notion of the optimal cultural synthesis and, with it, the notion of what is universal is bound to undergo a similarly evolutionary process of revision and expansion. We should however not be under the illusion that such a notion of what is universal would be valid for all peoples and times. Indeed, given the finitude of men, even if we could be certain by some independent means that the universal in the sense of final optimality has been reached, we would not be able to know that we had such knowledge. Universality is the goal that guides us in our efforts toward optimality in cultural synthesis. The universal remains always a regulative ideal.

What encourages us in holding such a view is the fact that there are species-specific primitive facts in man's natural history that are common to all humans and that basic constraints that the recalcitrant world places on the human lives are essentially the same for all cultures and periods. But so, too, does the increasing homogenization of the physical living environments of different cultures brought about by everwidening globalization of technology. But even these «universals» represent only a small part of the components needed to forge an optimal cultural synthesis. The task would be somewhat akin to that of an archaeologist who, on the basis of meager material, attempts to reconstruct the picture of an ancient, little known civilization. As the picture offered must undergo changes, sometimes minor, sometimes major, whenever some new relic is found, so must our knowledge of the world and our conception of disruption, correction and expansion. But the human finitude constrains us from believing that such an evolutionary process would be linear. A more appropriate spatial imagery would be that of a spiral, but of an irregular spiral.