

## ETHICS AND THE METAPHYSICAL QUEST FOR WISDOM IN A CULTURALLY PLURALIST WORLD

### I

For most ancient and medieval thinkers of the Western tradition, theoretical and practical inquiry, fact and value, scientific explanation and purpose, merged in an overall quest for wisdom. Knowledge of the facts about the natural world and human beings would also tell us what was good and valuable. Theoretical inquiry into the nature of things (*theoria*) would also answer practical questions about how to live (*praxis*); and explanations of why things behaved as they do, including humans, would tell us what ends and purposes they should pursue.

We know how this worked for the great ancient thinkers. Aristotle held that among the *archai* or explaining causes of all things were final causes or ends that tell us what was worth striving for, for each thing. And for Plato, the intelligible world included not only mathematical forms that inform us about the structure of the natural world, but also ideal forms, such as Justice and Beauty, that tell us what to strive for. In this manner, for these ancient thinkers, theory and practice, fact and value, explanation and purpose, merged in an overall quest for wisdom (or *sophia*), the love of which gave philosophy its name.

The modern age, by contrast, is characterized by what Hegel called “sunderings” (*Entzweiungen*) of these and many other contrasts. There has been a tendency in the modern era to pry apart considerations of fact from value, theoretical inquiry from practical inquiry (about the good) and scientific explanation from purpose, with the consequence that the unified quest for wisdom of the ancient philosophers was threatened as well. A chief culprit in this process, as is well-known, was the development of modern science. As the modern era evolved, explanation of objective fact about the cosmos increasingly became the province of the new natural sciences of Galileo, Newton and their successors, which described a physical cosmos devoid of values, final causes and purposes.

The situation was somewhat different for the human sciences (behavioral and social) which came on the scene later in the modern era. Anthropologists, sociologists and other behavioral scientists did indeed have to talk about human values and purposes. But they embraced a kind of value neutrality of their own in the name of scientific objectivity. Social scientists might tell us what persons or societies or cultures *believed* was good or right or wrong, but they could not say what really *was* right or wrong. That would amount to injecting their own values and points of view into their research—an offense against the scientific ideal of objectivity. So, while objectivity in the modern natural sciences seemed to imply an *absence* of value in the world described by them, in the human sciences it suggested something quite different, a value *relativism*—*too much value*, too many cultures, forms of life, views of right and wrong, with no non-neutral way of deciding between them.

It is ironic that ideals of scientific *objectivity* in both the natural and human sciences, *which had inspired the ancient quest for wisdom* about the cosmos and human nature, should have promoted in modern times *subjectivist* and *relativist* views about values and ethics.<sup>1</sup> But that

is an important part of the modern story.

And it is this part of the modern story I want to address here. Can the ancient quest for wisdom be retrieved or reconceived in a manner that would allow us to respond to modern doctrines of *subjectivism* and *relativism* about values that seem to be implied by the modern problematic? I want to suggest here a new way this might be done.<sup>ii</sup>

## II

Modern doubts about objective values that seem to lead to subjectivism and relativism have their source I believe in two inescapable conditions of the modern world—which may be called *pluralism* and *embeddedness*. By pluralism, I mean just the fact that we live in a world of many conflicting voices, philosophies, religions, ways of life and points of view on fundamental matters, including ethics and values. Such a pluralism is made more insistent by two pervasive features of the modern world—the creation of a global order through information technology that puts people in daily contact with views and values different from their own; and the spread of democratic societies that allow and encourage differences of point of view within individual societies.

The familiar image of a "global village" may be the wrong one for this new order of things since most villages of the past shared a common heritage of traditions and beliefs. A better analogy would be a global *city* in which different cultures and ways of life mingle and are forced to confront one another. In Nietzsche's image, seeing a thousand different tribes beating to a thousand different drums, we become the first people in history who do not believe we own the truth.<sup>iii</sup> By knowing other ways of life and entertaining doubts about our own, people learn something about the complexities of good and evil. But the learning comes with a bitter taste. Having bitten into the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil *in this distinctively modern fashion*, they live "after the modern Fall," so to speak, having lost their moral innocence.

But pluralism itself would not be a problem if it weren't for another crucial feature of modernity—an *uncertainty* about how to show which of the competing views is right. This uncertainty, it may be argued is based on a deeper philosophical problem, which I earlier called *embeddedness*. There is a troubling circularity involved in trying to prove the universal or absolute rightness of one's point of view *from* one's own point of view in a pluralistic world. To show that one point of view is right and other competing views wrong, you must present evidence. But the evidence will be gathered and interpreted from your own point of view. If the dispute is about values, some of the evidence will include beliefs about good and evil that are not going to be accepted by those who have fundamental disagreements with your values in the first place. Your values must be defended by appealing to other more fundamental values that are also *yours*. Perhaps you will refer to the Bible or the Qu'ran or the Bhagavad-Gita or some other sacred text, which is not going to be accepted by those who have basic disagreements with your point of view in the first place. (Even those who share your sacred text may not interpret it as you do).

There is a troubling circularity in such debates, the circularity of defending your own point of view *from* your own point of view, of defending your values or beliefs in terms of other values or beliefs you hold, but others may not. The problem arises because we are finite creatures

who always see the world from some particular perspective, limited by culture and history, in which we are embedded. How can we climb out of our historically and culturally limited points of view to find an objective standpoint about values above all the competing points of view?

This problem—the result of pluralism and embeddedness—haunts the modern intellectual landscape. It gives rise to trendy new theories such as postmodernism and poststructuralism and everywhere challenges beliefs about objective intellectual, cultural and moral standards. It challenges as well the goals of ancient wisdom that were sundered in modernity, including the goal of understanding what is *objectively valuable* or worth striving for in the nature of things.

### III

Now one natural reaction to the challenge of pluralism and embeddedness that is common in modern democratic and pluralist societies is the following. People think to themselves that since it seems impossible to demonstrate that their view is right from their point of view (because of the circularity problem mentioned) and since everyone else is in the same condition, the only proper stance to take in the presence of pluralism and embeddedness is an attitude of "openness" or tolerance toward other points of view. Judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, one might reason, are personal matters that should be made for oneself and not imposed on others against their will. Is it not true that much of the evil of human history has come from taking the opposite attitude, assuming one has *the* correct view and the right to impose it on others?

But this attitude of openness or tolerance, though it comes naturally to those reared in free and democratic societies, is disparaged by many theorists and social critics. A case in point is Allan Bloom, whose semi-popular book of several decades ago, *The Closing of the American Mind*, argued that such openness or tolerance to all points of view (an "openness of indifference" as he called it) affects society, education and young people in perverse ways because it leads to a kind of *relativism* which supposes that no view is any better than any other, and hence to an indifference to objective truth and absolute right.<sup>iv</sup>

Now relativism of this sort is a temptation in modern pluralist societies, as all of us with experience of teaching the young are well aware. But it is a mistake to think that relativistic conclusions of the kinds Bloom has in mind are the inevitable consequence of an attitude of *openness* toward other points of view. I now want to suggest that such an attitude of openness, *when it is conceived as part of a search for wisdom*, need not lead to relativism or indifference. Rather openness, so conceived as part of a search for wisdom, may actually point the way to belief in some objective and universal values.<sup>v</sup>

To see why, the first step is to note that openness need not be an invitation to indifference. It can be a *way of expanding our minds beyond our own limited perspectives*. It can be an effort to find out what is true from every perspective (universally true), not just what is true from our own perspective. Openness or tolerance to other points of view, so conceived, would thus become a way of *searching* for the objective truth about values under conditions of pluralism and embeddedness rather than a denial of that objective truth.

“Openness” and “objectivity” function in a similar way in other areas of human inquiry where there are conflicting theories and points of view. In the natural sciences, for example, where such openness or objectivity functions well, it requires consideration and testing of theories and evidence opposed to one's own theory. Such methods restrict undue bias in favor of one's own point of view as well as mere authoritative appeals to one's own point of view—all in the interests of *limiting narrowness of vision* and finding the *objective* truth about nature.

Why not think of openness in the search for objective *values* in the same way—as a way of expanding our minds beyond our own limited perspectives and thereby limiting narrowness of vision—in order to find the objective truth about values? The thought seems strange at first because of obvious differences between fact and value and between theoretical and practical inquiry (two of the “sunderings” of modernity mentioned by Hegel.) In the first place, systems of value, as great sages of the past, such as Confucius and the author of the *Bhagavad-Gita* remind us,<sup>vi</sup> are not merely abstract theories that can be tested or experimented with in a laboratory. Systems of value are guides to *ways of life* that can only be ultimately tested by being lived. So openness to systems of value other than one's own (in the interests of finding out what is true about the good from every point of view) would mean *respecting other ways of life*; it would mean letting them be lived or experimented with or tested in a way that is appropriate for values, in action or practice.

#### IV

But, once the matter is put this way, we can see why people have shied away from this line of thought. Does it mean respecting or tolerating *every* way of life, allowing it to be lived or experimented with, which would mean tolerating (among others) the ways of life of the Hitlers, Stalins, ruthless dictators, killers and other evildoers of the world? Then openness would amount to relativism and indifference, as critics contend.

But the fact is that such openness does not imply respect for every point of view or way of life whatever. To the contrary, it turns out that you cannot open your mind to every point of view in the sense of respecting every way of life. There are situations in life (many of them in fact) in which it is impossible to respect every point of view. So, while the initial attitude in the search for wisdom is to “open your mind to all other points of view in order to find the objective truth about value,” the truth you find when you do so is not that “you should open your mind to all points of view.” You cannot. Openness of mind is an initial attitude in the search for truth. But “openness of indifference” or relativism is not the final attitude.

Why not? Consider a situation in which you are walking down the street and see a man being assaulted and robbed in an alley. Suppose you are the first to see the event and the outcome will depend on what you do. If you stop to assist the victim by intervening or yelling for assistance, the assailant may see that he has been found out and will run. But if you just “walk on by,” as wary city dwellers sometimes do, the man will be beaten and robbed. In such situations, where the outcome depends on your action, you cannot respect both the points of view of the assailant and the victim, where respecting their points of view means “acting in such a way that their desires and purposes are allowed to be realized without hindrance or interference.” If you do something to prevent the assault (by intervening or calling for help) you will not be respecting

the point of view of the assailant. You will be acting in such a way that his desires and purposes are interfered with and not fulfilled. If you "walk on by" when you could have done something to help, you will be acting in such a way that the desires and purposes of the man being assaulted will be interfered with and not fulfilled.<sup>vii</sup>

In such situations, where the outcome depends on what you do, you cannot have it both ways; you cannot be open to or respect both points of view in the above sense. When pirates under the command of William Kidd attacked Philadelphia in the eighteenth century, pillaging and raping, some of the resident men with pacifist beliefs would not protect their women. They were not thereby choosing a non-violent world in which everyone's desires and purposes would be respected. They were choosing that it be the desires of the pirates that would be respected and not the desires of their own women. They had not chosen a world without violence, but a world in which the violence would be directed at their women and not the pirates.

So there are situations in life in which, when you are thrust into them, you cannot treat every point of view or way of life with respect, *no matter what you do*. You cannot be "open" to every way of life (in the sense of allowing it to be pursued without interference). When such situations occur, let us say that the "*moral sphere*" has "broken down," where the moral sphere is the ideal sphere in which every way of life can be respected in this sense. When this moral sphere breaks down, we must treat some ways of life as less worthy of respect than others. But which ones?

To find the answer we must return to the original ideal of respect for all, or openness. Recall that this ideal was not assumed to be the final truth about value, but was to guide us in the search for that truth. Montaigne once said that ideals are to us as the stars were to the ancient mariners: We never reach them, but we guide our path by them. Similarly, the idea here is that it is the persistent *striving* to maintain the ideal of openness or respect for all to the degree possible in the face of obstacles that is to guide us in the search for the truth from all points of view. Such striving preserves us, to the degree that is within our power, from narrowness of vision and gives us a chance to see the truth.

When the moral sphere breaks down, we cannot follow this ideal to the letter ("cannot reach it"). We cannot treat everyone with respect in such break-down situations no matter what we do, in the sense of allowing their desires and purposes to be fulfilled without interference. But we can follow the ideal to the degree possible ("guide our path by it") in adverse circumstances by trying to restore and preserve conditions in which *the ideal of respect for all can be followed once again*. In other words, when the moral sphere breaks down, the goal would be to try to restore and preserve it by stopping those who have broken it and made it impossible for others to follow the ideal. For, making such efforts to restore the sphere is as close as we can come to maintaining the ideal of openness in adverse circumstances when we must violate it, no matter what we do; and striving to maintain this ideal to the degree possible is our guide in the search for wisdom. In our examples, stopping those who have made it impossible for others to follow the ideal means stopping the assailant and the pirates. We thus arrive at an answer to the original question of *who* is to be treated as less worthy of respect when the moral sphere breaks down and it is no longer possible to treat everyone with respect, no matter what we do.<sup>viii</sup>



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<sup>i</sup> By subjectivism about values and ethics, I mean throughout the view that there are no matters of fact in the world to which judgments of the form “x is good (or bad)” or “x is right (or wrong)” correspond (no matters of fact for such judgments to be true of). Relativism about values and ethics is the view that judgments about what is good or bad, right or wrong, must always be qualified by saying what is good or bad (right or wrong) for some person or group, society or culture, or from some perspective, point of view or form of life. A stronger form of relativism discussed in this paper is also commonly expressed, namely a "relativism of indifference"—the idea that no view about values or ethics is objectively or absolutely better than any other.

<sup>ii</sup> I have developed the themes of this paper at greater length in Ethics and the Quest for Wisdom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Nietzsche, The Will to Power. Trans. By W. Kaufman and R. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1966: section nos. 5, 749, 1011. I am indebted to Kathleen Higgins for these references.

<sup>iv</sup> Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987: p. 26.

<sup>v</sup> Bloom himself admits (*ibid.*, p. 41) that there is another more positive attitude of openness we can take (being open to learning the truth) that does not necessarily lead to indifference. But he does not pursue this suggestion in the way that I do in this paper.

<sup>vi</sup> Huang (ed.) The Analects of Confucius. New York: Penguin Books, 1997, Book 1; Malhotra, Transcreation of the Bhagavad-Gita New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999, Book 3.

<sup>vii</sup> This preliminary account of “respecting another’s point of view” needs to be refined in various ways to meet various objections, something I do in later chapters of Kane 2010 (see note 2.).

<sup>viii</sup> This is not meant to be the final word on the notion of moral sphere breakdown and questions about who broke the moral sphere when it has broken down. Further complications about these matters and a more precise criterion for identifying the guilty party in cases of moral sphere breakdown are discussed in chaps. 3 and 4 of Kane 2010.

<sup>ix</sup> See note 2.

<sup>x</sup> As an example, consider the commandment not to lie and a familiar modern variant of Kant's murderer at the door example. In Nazi Germany, the Gestapo, arrive at your door and ask whether you are hiding a Jewish family on your farm. You are in fact hiding a family and it is not likely to be found unless you reveal its presence. Here is a case where most people, *contra* Kant, feel an exception to the rule against lying is in order. But if so, why? Note that the case is structurally similar to the assault in the alley. The moral sphere has broken down because you (the farm owner) cannot treat all persons involved with respect for their purposes and desires in the situation. If you tell the truth to the Gestapo, you are choosing to favor their desires and purposes over the Jewish family's. If you lie, you respect the Jewish family's desires and purposes, but not the Gestapo's. Again you cannot have it both ways. The only question is who will be treated as less worthy of respect. And, as in the assailant and pirate examples, those who should be treated as less worthy are those whose plans of action have made it impossible for others to treat everyone in the situation with respect. That would be the Gestapo in the present case, whose plan it is to harm the Jewish family, as the assailant and pirates planned to harm their victims. Lying would be the right thing to do in this case, just as the right thing to do would be to stop the assailant or the pirates. The same

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ideal that tells you lying is wrong "inside" the moral sphere, tells you it is the right thing to do when the moral sphere breaks down and you are no longer "inside" it.

<sup>xi</sup> The most comprehensive historical and systematic book-length discussion of the Golden Rule is Jeffrey Wattles, The Golden Rule. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Wattles confirms that the interpretation stated here is a widely accepted interpretation historically (though it is surely not the only one). The addition of "up to the point of moral sphere breakdown" is of course my own and is not a part of traditional formulations.