



# 'THE PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSALISABILITY...'

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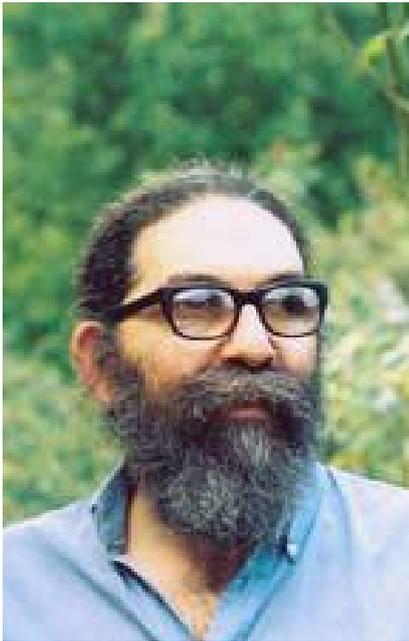
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## INTRODUCTION



The concept of universalisability was introduced by Kant and states that the only morally acceptable maxims of our actions are those that could rationally be willed to be universal law. In other words, only if an action could be universalized (i.e., everyone should do it under similar conditions) then it is morally acceptable. This essay argues that it is possible to uphold moral relativism and yet still have a functioning moral theory with moral actions that we can aspire to and be proud of. Below it is shown that Mahayana Buddhism can accept the moral relativism of ‘*hybrid-expressivism*’ and yet still maintain the need for traditional moral actions aiming towards enlightenment. It further makes the claim that this principle can be argued more broadly.

The philosopher GK claimed of ‘universalisability’ that “*we have the choice ... whether to battle it out or alternatively retreat to a position of complete mutual tolerance and forbearance. We face the stark alternative, in other words, of either being fanatics in seeking to impose our moral principles on others through force, or, alternatively ceasing altogether to make moral judgements about the actions of others*” and while this seems reasonable this essay argues that there is a middle way between these positions.

## NATURAL LAW

Natural law theory suggests that certain rights or values are inherent in the universe, and universally cognizable through human reason. It follows that natural-law theory is an empirical matter in-which moral facts to be deduced from states in the real world.

Natural law theory has been a mainstay of western philosophy and is especially associated with Aristotle. Western religion agreed but added that this universal law was imprinted on our hearts by God and accessible to anyone who looked hard enough. For example, according to Islam, “*every individual has been bestowed a clear standard of judgement of 'good' and 'evil'*” (Surah Al-Shams" (91: 7 - 10)) and it is a doctrine of the Catholic Church that “*the natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie*” (Catholicism 1954).

Despite its attraction moral-law theory has its problems and as Whitehead noted, “*the concept of natural law is one of the most confused ideas in the history of Western thought*” (Whitehead, 1982, p. 181). The problems it faces are many such as its various conceptions and the lack of even basic agreement on the particulars. One such problem with natural-law is moral acceptability varies between place, time and culture. Slavery, for instance, was considered moral for much of human history and now is almost universally declared as morally abhorrent. In fact, it has been argued that natural-law theories lead to relativism since each person need only look to her own version of it imprinted by God or nature to find out what is the good (Rushdoony, 1970, p. 122).

And since it is indisputable that people disagree about moral issues many philosophers have concluded that terms such as "good", "bad", "right" and "wrong" do not stand subject to universal truth conditions at all but depend rather on one's own personal views, culture, customs and so on (Rushdoony, 1970, p. 122).

## YAY-NAY AND THE MORAL RELATIVISM OF EXPRESSIVISM

If there is scant evidence of a moral law then, where does morality come from? One answer is "expressivism" which claims that the meanings of claims in a particular area of discourse are to be understood in terms of whatever non-cognitive mental states (ie, feelings) those claims are supposed to express (Sias, n.d.). Some common examples of non-cognitive states are desires, emotions, pro- and con-attitudes, commitments, and so forth. Truth for an expressivist holds the sentence (i) "*p* is true" expresses a certain measure of confidence in, or agreement with, *p*, and that (ii) whatever the relevant mental state, for example, agreement with *p*, that state *just is* the meaning of "*p* is true". In other words, when we claim that *p* is true, we neither *describe p* as true nor *report* the fact that *p* is true; rather, we express some non-cognitive attitude toward *p* (Strawson, 1949) (Sias, n.d.). Similar expressivist treatments have been given to *knowledge* claims, *probability* claims, claims about *causation*, and even claims about *what is funny* (Sias, n.d.), but here we are only concerned with moral expressivism.

Moral expressivism is sometimes called 'yay-nay' or 'yay-boo' morality as they claim that making an affirmative moral claim is nothing more than saying that they approve of it (saying yay!! to it). For example, saying (1) "*stealing is wrong*" is nothing more than saying, "*stealing-nay!!*" It is argued that there are no trans-cultural judgements about the rightness or wrongness and that given the same set of facts different individuals and societies will have a fundamental disagreement about what is the right thing to do (they differ in their *yaying* and *naying*).

"Ethical expressivism", then, is the name for any view according to which (i) ethical claims like "x is wrong", "y is a good person", and "z is a virtue"—express non-cognitive mental states, and (ii) these states make up the meanings of ethical claims. In other words the meaning of (1) "*stealing is wrong*" means nothing more than (2) "*stealing-nay!!*" and (3) "*generosity if good*" means nothing more than (4) "*generosity-yay!!*"

The obvious problem expressivism faces is that ethical claims seem to be different from non-ethical problems. For example, they want to claim that (1) above is meaningless, or at least means nothing more than "*stealing nay!!*" but as a sentence it behaves in a way that is just like a non-ethical counterpart such as (5) "*it is snowing*". In fact, it appears that both claims are (a) embeddable into unasserted contexts, like disjunctions and the antecedents of conditionals, (b) involved in logical inferences, (c) posed as questions, (d) translated across different languages, (e) negated, (f) supported with reasons, and (g) used to articulate the objects of various states of mind, for example, we can say that Jones *believes* that lying is wrong, Anderson *regrets* that lying is wrong, and Black *wonders* whether lying is wrong, to name just a few. Historically this criticism of expressivism was formulated as the famous Frege-Geach Problem and the general problem that this expresses has been called the Continuity Problem.

One solution to the Continuity Problem is to deny traditional propositionalist semantics according to which sentences mean what they do in virtue of the propositions they express and claim instead that they are to be understood in terms of the mental states they express. As an example, let's revisit the cases (1) and (5)

(1) Stealing is wrong.

(5) It is snowing.

The meanings of both (1) and (5) are to be understood in terms of the mental states they express. For example, (5) expresses the *belief* that it is snowing, as opposed to the proposition that it is snowing. Similar approaches are called hybrid expressivist theories which say that ethical claims express both non-cognitive *and* cognitive mental states. After all it is clear that a single statement can contain two mental states as do slurs and pejoratives (Hay, 2013). An example of a sentence containing two mental states would be Ben stating that "*Man United lost 6:0*" in which the speaker both believes that (a) Man Utd lost and also feels (b) joy at the score. It is easy to see that the sentence expresses both of these states—one cognitive, the other non-cognitive. This is similar to how hybrid theorists in meta-ethics suggest that ethical claims can express both beliefs and attitudes. In fact, a single sentence can express a huge range of complex and sometimes contradictory mixture of beliefs and attitudes including disbelief and humour and is in reality far away from the traditional idea of a sentence containing a single proposition.

In this view, someone who sincerely utters (1) '*stealing is wrong*' communicates two things: (a) she either expresses a belief, or asserts a proposition that stealing is wrong and (b) she has some sort of non-cognitive attitude toward lying. Therefore, a moral statement such as (1) means nothing more than "*stealing upsets me and therefore I assert it must be wrong*".

## BIOLOGY AS EXPRESSIVISM

Even if we are tempted to accept some version of expressivism then one still has to explain why we have moral feelings (ie, why is it that 'stealing upsets me?'). An obvious candidate is that morality is an evolutionary biological adaption that supported a connection with social coordination, cooperation and stability. In this view the state of accepting a moral-social-norm is a standard part of human moral psychology and its capacity for "linguistically infused motivation" (Gibbard, 1990, p. 55). In this view the reason (1) 'stealing is wrong' is because stealing discouraged working in groups which is the one great advantage humans have when dealing with nature. Cooperation gave humans a massive evolutionary advantage and stealing is often a clear disadvantage and so evolution punished the act of stealing and rewarded generosity. Our biological ancestors did not discover the existence of external moral truths but rather the pressures of natural selection favoured the development of capacities, tendencies and traits that supported biological fitness. On this view there are no moral truths and no possibility of moral knowledge independent of our evaluative attitudes (Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 2006) (Joyce, *Irrealism and the Genealogy of Morals*, 2013) (Street, *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*, 2006) (Street, *Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About*, 2008).

This neatly explains why moral feelings are to do with justice, sympathy, cooperation and doing fair by other people since they all aid the survival of the human species. These attributes are not unique to humans and all the attributes we associate with morality such as fairness, reciprocity, empathy, cooperation and caring about others are found in the animal kingdom [(Rowlands, 2012)][(Waal, 2015)][(Pierce, 2009)] although animals don't sit around wondering the why and wherefore of them. And furthermore, if we take the 'survival of the species' or 'survival of your family' as a moral action in the consequentialist sense then it clear evidence that one does not need a theory of morality to act morally. It also indicates that one does not need a principle of universalisability since as long as most animals (human and non-human) don't steal most of the time it is still acceptable for the greater moral purpose (eg, survival of the species, survival of a family, protection of the weak, etc).

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND MORAL RELATIVISM

Beyond the survival of the species humans have other moral aims. One example is the goal of enlightenment found in Buddhism which like emotivism is related to moral relativism and does not require the principle of universalisability to be consistent.

Buddhist ethics are often taken to resemble the '*natural law*' theory of Aristotle [(Keown, 2001, pp.18-20)] which claims that certain rights or values are inherent by virtue of nature and therefore assert universal truths [(Keown, 2001, p.21)] and this is largely because "*eschewing hypothetical speculation in ethics as in other matters the Buddha formulated his definitive normative response to ethical questions within the framework of a Path or Way*" (magga) [(Keown, 2001, p.5)]. Nevertheless Buddhist ethics is largely consequentialist since it derives from the effects an action, state, or thought has on oneself (and those around you). For example, in the Kalama sutra the Buddha gets the Kalama's to agree that greed, hatred and delusion are states which are harmful to a person when they arise (A.1.118-93). This is because of the action and reactions associated with karma which will have effects in this, and the next life (Harvey, p10). In essence Buddhism strives towards the greatest good with the theory of karma describing how moral actions lead to enlightenment. This of course begs the meta-ethical question: *what is karma and why does it punish greed, hatred and delusion?*

The answer takes us to the Buddhist theory of consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). In a nut-shell, the *ālaya-vijñāna* is pure undefiled consciousness of which the search for enlightenment is aimed at. The *ālaya-vijñāna* is often termed the 8th consciousness whereas ordinary, suffering consciousness that we are using to debate and we are trying to control and subdue is called the *kliṣṭa-manas* (disturbing emotions or attitudes) or 7<sup>th</sup> consciousness.

If then we take this rather simplified explanation then we can use a metaphor to explain why such an action is good or bad. If we take the *ālaya-vijñāna* as a large and peaceful lake and it's the winds of the *kliṣṭa-manas* which disturb the lake and create unruly waves (karma). This metaphor has its limits, but it shows why unskilful actions are bad - since they disturb your consciousness. The store-house consciousness receives impressions from all functions of the other consciousnesses, and retains them as potential energy, *bija* or "seeds", for their further manifestations and activities. Since it serves as the container for all experiential impressions it is also called the "seed consciousness" (種子識) or container consciousness. This being the case, when we are talking about 'normative ethics' we are really asking to what extent will an action effect one's ability to subdue and control the *kliṣṭa-manas* and allow one to become enlightened. The implication of this is that Buddhist ethics is not to ask if fighting war is wrong, but rather to ask if one would one be more disturbed by shooting people, or feeling guilty for not standing up for those your friends, family, community, country and so on.

Buddhist ethics, then, is relative to each and every one of us as far as gaining enlightenment is concerned and normative ethics needs to determine under what conditions one can become enlightened. The Buddha was clearly a very sensitive person who was disturbed by high-beds, politics, and idle gossip (see appendix I) and many other things, but it doesn't follow that everyone is equally sensitive and will need to do the very same thing to achieve enlightenment. The path to enlightenment is thus an empirical question as Buddha pointed out when he said, "*you should not accept the teachings through tradition, speculative reasoning, personal preferences, what one thinks should be true, or respect for a particular teacher*" but rather you must "*know for yourself*" that these states are conducive to harm and suffering (A.1.118-93).

And since the astute practices of Buddhists monks is not the only way to enlightenment one must ask which way is the best way for us individually. It might even be that that some people can break all the precepts, join the army, eat meat, drink wine for their whole life and yet reach enlightenment whereas a bad conscience could cause another to hell for sleeping on a high-bed. After all it all depends on how disturbed about the suffering caused by the wars and high-furniture. Put like this then normative ethics becomes an empirical question about what course of action causes people to become enlightened.

Therefore, following Buddhism and assuming that enlightenment is the highest good the question becomes what I need to do, or refrain to do to become enlightened? There is no requirement in Buddhism for one's moral actions to be universal but rather one is required to save not just themselves but all beings (human and non-human) and the whole of ethics becomes an empirical question based on gaining enlightenment for oneself and all other living beings.

## GENERALIZING THE ARGUMENT

Using a variant of Buddhist theology it seems possible that morality can be relative towards individual actions (eschewing Kantian universalisability) while still requiring us to make moral decisions for ourselves and others. The argument is that consequentialist morality allows for different people to act in different ways when working towards a goal involving moral consequences. If this is correct then it is indeed possible for there to be no universal morality in the sense of the '*Kantian categorical imperative*' but nevertheless one can still work towards moral goals such as enlightenment, community living, survival of the species, or other higher purposes which would still require moral actions (even if they were just shared nays and yays).

It seems probable that adherents to traditional brimstone, and fire approaches would find this version of morality to be rather less concrete than they would like and that would be equally true of some schools of Buddhism. Nevertheless, it seems that it is both possible to not believe in an absolute morality and yet still aim to adhere to high moral standards.

## APPENDIX ONE

Although the Buddha is famed for finding the so-called Middle Way the regime he set out for himself and his followers is quite difficult including singing, dancing, gossip, watching shows and using high beds and seats. Below is a summary of the five, eight, and ten precepts of Buddhism.

**The five precepts** (not taking life (panatipata); not taken what is not given (adinnadana); sexual misconduct (kamesu-micchacara); lying (musvada); taking intoxicants (surameraya-majja-pamadatthana).

**The eight precepts** (eating at the wrong time (vikala-bhojana); dancing, singing, music, watching shows, using garlands, perfumes, cosmetics and personal adornments (naccagita-vadita-visukadassana-malagandha-vilepana-dharana-mandana-vibhusanatthana);

**The ten precepts** (using high beds or seats (uccasayana-mahasanyana); accepting gold and silver (jatarupa-rajata-patiggahana))

**The ten good paths of action** (absention from slanderous speech (pisunaya-vacaya-veranmani); abstaining from harsh speech (parusaya-veramani) **abstaining from idle speech** (samphappalapa-veranani); non-covetousness (anabhijjha); non-malevolence (avayapada); right-views (sammaditthi);

### **IDLE SPEECH**

One should avoid talking about "*kings, robbers, & ministers of state; armies, alarms, & battles; food & drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, & scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women & heroes; the gossip of the street & the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity, the creation of the world & of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not.*" In fact, what Buddha said monks and serious meditators should talk about is "*modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge & vision of release.*" AN 10.69

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