

### Topic 3

“Because a (narrower or wider) universal community widely prevails among the Earth’s peoples, a transgression of rights in *one* place in the world is felt *everywhere* (...).” –Immanuel Kant, To Perpetual Peace.

## **In the search of universal ethical duties in a globalized world**

In the modern globalized world, “shared” conditions among different societies extend to economic, political, linguistic, and even cultural aspects, getting to the point that modern countries would probably become unsustainable without the international trade that is nowadays happening. For this reason, the necessity to find some equally shared ethical stand points that can grant a harmonic way of relating with others seems clear, especially now that we live a world more inter-connected than ever before. In this essay I argue that some basic and fundamental ethical notions must be defended among multiple human societies, regardless of their differences, in order to grant a rational and sustainable kind of relationships between all of them. As a support of this, I would be making use of a personal interpretation of Kant’s categorical imperative in order to ground the necessity of universal ethical judgements that are required for this thesis. For this purpose, I will make a separation between the different aspects that need to be taken into account in order to make an appropriate conclusion on the topic.

### 1. Analysing the basis of a shared sense of responsibilities towards the others

Kant once described that metaphysics was like navigating into a dark ocean without clear lights that could illuminate us on the way. Intending to avoid getting into confusions as pointed out by Kant’s description of metaphysical debates, one of the first things to consider and analyse would be the ground basis for defending why would it be that the transgression of rights in *one place* would be felt “everywhere”. For this we need to investigate and establish where this sense of *responsibility-for-others* comes from. There

are mainly three<sup>1</sup> possible options that are more likely to be the answer. Firstly, they could be anthropological conditions that are part of “human nature”, thus a special characteristic which is specifically of human individuals and human societies. They could also be just pragmatic considerations (As John Dewey said, that propositions must be defended only if they work in practice) that are necessary for mutual survival in an interconnected world, so that we would apply them just because for practical effects, they work in guarantying that we don’t kill each other without any regard. Or finally, they could be ontological properties that are an intrinsically inseparable part from rational beings, regardless of their specific differences (such as culture, social status, or even species, for example).

In the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant stated that he supported the third option, since he was trying to find some *a-priori* universal conditions that would work for every situation. Thus he separated from the propositions which stated that it is because of an anthropological condition or for practical effects, so that ethical considerations would be always necessary in a deontological way. Then, for Kant the sense of an universal community, was probably more closely related with a sense of rational subjects coexisting in the same world, and thus having apodictic duties towards the others, even if they live in some distant place or have some specific differences. In this sense, there couldn’t be practical issues, because that would transform its “necessity” into some sort of *a-posteriori* consideration, and also they couldn’t be “anthropological conditions” because that would exclude other possible rational beings outside of the human species<sup>2</sup>.

Here, I would disagree with him in which I would consider that the other conditions should also be taken into account for making an ethical analysis of any given moral

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<sup>1</sup> Religious explanations are not being considered as the answer for this question since they rely on accepting the doctrines via faith and thus cannot be easily falsifiable. Further paragraphs would explain deeper the problematic of the justification of knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> It could be possible that there is some sort of alien civilization which is even more intelligent or developed than us. Or that we could eventually create an artificial intelligence which could act in a sentient and rational way. Then this proposition is based in considering all the possible cases, and the intellectual developments of this two possible non-human rational creatures, would be left outside if we just considered anthropological characteristics.

problematic, analysing and then explaining the possible importance of evaluating multiple factors in order to see why it is necessary to take care of the problems of the others, and in this case, of the transgression of rights happening in one specific place. Having stated the importance of taking into account multiple factors such as pragmatic reasons and ontological properties like human rights, in order to consider the basis of ethical responsibilities towards other “peoples” or societies, then we can continue to explain why this is the case.

2. Stating the necessity of these universal considerations towards the others as a synthesis of the three perspectives, and not as choosing only one.

Following this, it seems that we need to react upon some sort of violation of rights, because of multiple reasons. First of all, because of the *a-priori* conditions we collectively agree on to apply in a global scale (i.e. human rights). Thus we establish these conditions in order to guarantee a sense of harmonic relationships among individuals and nations. The problem is that in an epistemological analysis we cannot get to conclude if these “intrinsic conditions of every human” (as what is intended with human rights) are certainly true or absolutely valid, since that would require to know if human life does have an intrinsic sense or meaning, something that can’t be completely affirmed with absolute certainty.<sup>3</sup>

Not even the greatest scientific propositions are unquestionable truths that guarantee perfect knowledge as the neo-positivist tendencies so-deeply desired one century ago. Advances in epistemology like the *criterion of falsifiability* from Karl Popper, the *sophisticated falsifiability* from Imre Lakatos, or the concept of *paradigm shifts* from Thomas Kuhn, can show us directly that our knowledge is not perfectly certain, and this same condition applies to ethical “properties” that we think that apply in an universal sense; v.g. human rights. After seeing this, what could in fact be taken into consideration

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<sup>3</sup> This is the intention of religions and certain philosophies like German idealism. E.g., Christianity relies on the fact that God created all humans equal, and we need to act in a good way following his will because that is the ultimate purpose of human existence.

would be the shared agreement on the a-priori validity of human rights, and following this, those notions would be extended to every single human individual, not only the ones near us, or the ones we care about. And this would be the reason to care (or in Kant's words, to feel the transgression) for the violation of rights even if it is some specific place far from us, because in this approach, it would depend on the duty we have to *every* human, not just to the ones we like or the ones that are part of *our* place.

Then, contrary to Kant's deontology, a pragmatic condition is also necessary, especially in the age we are living now: the era of globalization. The past section showed that we cannot be absolutely certain about the "real existence" of properties such as human rights, but that nevertheless we intend to apply them because we consider that as rational, sentient, conscious and empathic individuals, if there are no basic regulations in human relations at all, things could become absolutely chaotic and unsustainable. This is how it becomes closer to the pragmatic thesis, since we need something that now, in practice, can help us to coexist among different people. Then, the necessity to care about some "transgression of rights" that would be happening in some other place would be universal in order to guarantee that society in the *praxis*, does not collapse.

### 3. Possible objections to this approach

Multiple possible contra-arguments could emerge against this proposition: cultural relativists and post-modernists may argue against this thesis, since defending it would imply there are in fact some sort of universally applicable ethical notions so that we are able to define that there is going on "a transgression of rights" in some place. In this perspective, what we would be considering as a "transgression" is just how it would look in our culture, or in the values established by the economic structure we were raised on, as in a Marxist analysis. Similarly, a defender of moral expressivism, like A.J. Ayer, could tell us that what we are considering as an ethical fault towards the "rights" of some individual or group of individuals is just a personal desire we want others to agree with us, not an objective fact. Similarly, the ethical emotivist would tell us that we are not

expressing some rational fact, but just our *emotional* response to what we consider as wrong. Thus, following all of these approaches, we would not have any right to get into the situation of *one* specific place without almost trying to impose some sort of “colonization of our moral values” upon them.

What I consider is wrong with all of these perspectives is that they degrade the universality of ethical values to some sort of subjective category, meaning this that we are actually not capable of objectively act in response to this transgression we saw. If there were absolutely no universal principles, then some situations like killing an innocent child that has done nothing wrong to us, would be acceptable in some cases. The idea of establishing a concept such as “human rights” is that there are some basic and fundamental notions that ought to be protected in order to guarantee a sustainable development for societies and individuals. If everything were relative, then the whole sense of searching for universal principles becomes nonsense, and thus, the capability of acting against negative actions too. For solving this problematic, the next thing to do is to analyse how the Categorical Imperative can help us in this situation.

#### 4. A new interpretation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative as a possible solution to the problem of the universality of ethical values

Considering this last problematic we just saw, it would be important to analyse what could Kantian’s ethical theory can tell us nowadays. The mere reason why Kant argued in favour of his categorical imperative, was that he considered it could apply for “everyone and in every situation”, that is the reason it is a-priori and necessary. The problem is that in Kant’s view of what constitutes the necessary duties, certain actions are absolutely *never* allowed. So if we were hiding a Jew during the II World War, and a Nazi knocked on our door asking if we have seen him, we would be *necessarily* obligated to tell the truth and let him go away with the Jew. What I would propose as a solution to the traditional interpretation of something valid “for everyone and in every situation” would be to consider it for specific versions of the situation, and not in a version without

context. This means that for example, in an entirely abstract and des-contextualize sense, telling the truth is preferable than lying, but in certain specific versions of “lying” what will *always* be desirable would be not to tell the truth. Thus we could universalize the case of lying under the case of intending to protect a life, since every-single-person, regardless of their specific conditions and being in the case of the II WW, can always lie, in this case (or a similar one) and act morally correctly.

In this sense, we would be sacrificing the case of *lying-as-being-bad-in-itself* (without context and specific details), but would be conserving the idea of a “universally applicable action” for *a specific case* of lying. Granting this way that people could respond to actions that could go against the rights of some individual (the transgressions), following a universally applicable ethical method. In this sense, the whole “shared community” described by Kant in the quote has now a reason to protect the rights of someone who is being damaged in *any* case.

## Conclusions

Thus, it seems that the sense of a “universal community” would be related to the idea that we, regardless of all our current differences (culture, gender, social status, nationality, etc.) have some basic shared values that are concerned with all of us as humans, and as rational conscious beings.

The diverse theses that stand against the idea of some “universal ethical values” applicable to all human societies were evaluated and then refuted. Considering a new interpretation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative as a way of granting a method of action for the community that corresponds to our current modern situation towards the inter-relation process we are experiencing. More than in the eighteen century where Kant lived, in the current globalized world the idea of a shared community has extended even to cultural and economic aspects. Thus, trying to establish this “universality of basic principles” can be really useful in getting us to stand prosperous relationships among different societies that preserve diverse cultural and religious views. Getting this way, a

“grounding” that stands before the specific differences of the multiple civilizations around the world.