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Reflections on the Moral Foundations in the Dialogue of Civilizations

Is it possible today to have meaningful moral discussion and genuine dialogue among civilizations? Our answer hinges partly on whether there are universal moral values. Are there? Is there any way to come together as a planet on the meaning of global justice, for instance? No doubt, this is an intense and extremely significant debate today. To shed some light on these questions, I propose we begin by returning for a moment to Socrates, who found himself, some twenty four hundred years ago, in the middle of a raging debate, which is not entirely unlike many of the moral debates we find ourselves in today. We tend to forget that not only was Socrates struggling against the moral and cultural relativism of the sophists, but he was also challenging the moral conservatism of the absolutists. His answer to both camps was to admit that whereas moral concepts do in fact change, they change *as* social life changes, not *because* social life changes.

From the moment I was faced with this Socratic claim that "[m]oral concepts change as social life changes,"[1] I must confess that I was less concerned with what this meant for the Athens of Socrates, or even for something as grandiose and noble sounding

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge Classics, 1998), p. 1.

today as "the dialogue of civilizations," than for what it meant for me and my own personal relationships. At first, I foolishly and perhaps selfishly translated it into something like "well that's good, then, none of my relationships (as long as they are striving for authenticity) can definitively be pronounced immoral, at least not in any sort of absolute way." For this reason, it was deliciously attractive. The impetus for this came, again, I must confess, from an attempt I was making to morally justify and normalize a personal relationship that was morally unjustifiable, and ontologically impossible to normalize.

My next reaction, in the very opposite direction, and equally as foolish and rash, was to reject it with a vengeance (a commonly immature reaction when we can't have our own way) concluding that it was a piece of sophistic moral relativism and claiming, from an illusory moral high ground, built upon the sands of self-righteousness, that such a position could only lead to the complete moral breakdown of society.

After a long and thoughtful reflection, however, and a more careful and honest enquiry, with a little bit of suffering thrown into the equation, I began to see just how important and balanced and true the claim really was and still is. When I saw for myself that one of the key terms in all moral philosophy, the word ἀγαθός (agathos),[2] in the writings of Homer, for instance, was a predicate, not a noun, and that in Homer it was synonymous with the words kingly, courageous, and clever,[3] then the truth of the claim, as striking the proper balance between moral conservatism on one hand and moral relativism on the other, began to force itself upon me.

[2] By the time of Plato, the term meant something like inherently good, good by nature, intrinsically good, etc.

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Short History of Ethics*, p. 1.

Further study revealed not only that the word ἀγαθός had changed over time, but the words *justice* and *virtue* also.

I want to claim, with Socrates, that moral concepts do in fact change *as* social life changes, and to emphasize, as Alasdair MacIntyre does, that this makes all the difference in meaningful moral philosophy. Socrates saw that if moral concepts change *because* social life changes, this would imply that there could never be any solid foundation for morality. But if they change *as* social life changes, this would mean that they are contained in, and to some extent constitute, the very forms[4] of social life itself, which though dynamic and forever changing, just like life itself, are nevertheless *enduring* precisely because they emerge from what we might describe as an abiding human nature.[5] Without enter-

[4] My use of the term "form" here ought to be understood in the metaphysical sense that Plato uses the term.

[5] For an excellent account of the history of the idea of nature, see Pierre Hadot's *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature,* transl. Michael Chase (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). Hadot presents seven different accounts of nature beginning with *Homer's Odyssey*, wherein it basically signifies the "result of growth," but not simply in general and in the abstract, as was the case some 400 years later in the 5th century BCE and onwards. The context in Homer is not an abstraction: "Hermes shows Odysseus the aspect (*phusin*) – black and white flower – of the 'herb of life,' which the gods, he says, call molu. This 'aspect' is the particular, definite form that 'results' from a process of natural development" (Hadot, p. 18). Odysseus is to eat the "natural" herb molu as a defense against the "unnatural" sorceries of Circe, a minor goddess, and the god of drugs and herbs, who transforms her enemies into animals through herbs and drugs. Hermes is an interpreter of the gods, whose prototype in the Egyptian god Thoth, known as the "tongue" of Ra – so also an interpreter of the one supreme god. The second "definition" comes from fragments of Heraclitus writings wherein he specifies "a division of each reality *kata* (i.e., according to) *phusin*." Nature here has to do with "the process of realization of each reality or else with its result" (Hadot, p. 19) or a "springing-forth of things, an appearance or manifestation of things that

ing into a full-scale investigation of philosophical anthropology, which would be appropriate and helpful at this point, and which is precisely what Plato and Aristotle do, it is enough for our purposes now to point to the enduring fact that individual moral life and social moral life mutually define one another; there can be no social or cultural dialogue unless there is first a personal individual dialogue within ourselves which then spills over, as it were, into a dialogue with the personal other and/or others. We cannot avoid this inner dialogue. We must constantly and continually

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results from spontaneity" (p. 18). Hadot gives five different interpretations of what nature/*phusis* means in Heraclitus's well-known aphorism: "*phusis kruptesthai philei*": 1. The "constitution" of each thing tends to hide (i.e, hard to know). 2. The "constitution" of each thing wants to be hidden (i.e, does not want to be revealed). 3. The "origin" tends to hide itself (i.e, the origin of things is hard to know). 4. What "causes" things to appear tends to make them disappear (i.e, what causes birth tends to cause death). And, finally, "form" (or appearance) tends to disappear (i.e, what is born wants to die). The third account comes from fragments of Parmenides writings: "The origin or birth of the heavens and all that is contained within them" or the "birth (nature) of birth (nature)" or the "origin (nature) of origin (nature)" (Hadot, p. 18). The fourth is from fragments of Empedocles writings wherein nature refers to "a process in the sense of the appearance of a thing" (Hadot, p. 8) (cosmogenic theory: earth, air, fire, water, love, strife). The fifth is from Plato's Phaedo: "The subject of the Pre-Socratics' research: That which is produced by spontaneous growth (earth, air, fire, water) which 'they' (the pre-socratics) consider (wrongly) to be the primary causes of the growth of the universe" (Hadot, pp. 21-22) and then in the Timaeus: "Nature as a Divine Art" (Hadot, p. 23). The sixth is found in Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*: "A principle of inner motion inside each thing, which is also a principle of growth" (Hadot, p. 23). Hadot importantly points out that Aristotle, in accepting the "analogy between nature and art, adds [such] radical oppositions to it" (Hadot, p. 23) that it was to become a "problem that [would] dominate the entire history of the notion of nature." (p. 24). And then, finally, in Stoic thought, nature comes to be personified as "an artistic fire that proceeds systematically and methodically to engender all things" (Hadot, pp. 25-28).

face ourselves.[6] All morality begins and ends, we might say, in man's relation to himself via his relation to others where human hearts meet and love and play in a "playing field" which we have inherited not created, and of which we are a constitutive part. Perhaps we could speak about this playing field in terms similar to those employed by ancient Chinese philosophers when they speak about the *Tao* – which they tell us, nonetheless, can't really be spoken about. This is quite similar to the Logos in Heraclitus and somewhat commensurate, I would say, with the metaphysical vision of Plato and Aristotle. One modern philosopher has described the *Tao* in this way: "The doctrine of objective [though not static] value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are."[7] It is in this playing field, the *Tao*, I want to suggest, wherein we can truly know and love ourselves and know and love another – another expression perhaps of what Socrates meant in claiming that an unexamined life is not worth living – and the only place where genuine dialogue among civilizations even stands a chance.

[6] Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person* (London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), p. 3. Wojtyla writes: "The inspiration to embark upon this study came from the need to objectivize that great cognitive process which at its origin may be defined as the experience of man; this experience, which man has of himself, is the richest and apparently the most complex of all experiences accessible to him. Man's experience of anything outside of himself is always associated with the experience of himself, and he never experiences anything external without having at the same time the experience of himself. Speaking of the experience of man, however, we are primarily concerned with the fact that in his experience man has to face himself."

[7] Clive Staples Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), p. 18.

The dangerous debate that Socrates found himself in the middle of, hundreds of years after Homer, was a debate, then, that partially revolved around the relation between changes in social life and changes in moral concepts. The sophists on one hand, recognizing that the meanings of moral concepts were different in different places and times, wanted moral meaning to derive from rhetoric alone, *their* rhetoric no doubt, so that they could manipulate it at will (seemingly to please the politicians that hired them), while the moral conservatives insisted on using a disjointed, static and muddled moral terminology, pretending that moral concepts are immutable and eternal and claiming to always be *certain* of their meaning.[8]

Socrates found himself in the middle acknowledging that moral concepts are different in different places and times, but also realizing that there was something constant and absolute about such concepts if discussed in the context of the *right* approach to human nature itself. Such an approach assumes the existence of something common and universal dwelling in the very core of each human being – constituting and defining the essence of human nature – but not something extrinsic to Nature and certainly not something static and fixed. Part of this constitutive or defining characteristic is, paradoxically, that it remains open to definition; its suppleness cries out for *form* so to speak giving expression to a tension between the relative and the absolute, between the universal and the particular. It is difficult, in fact, to pin Socrates down. At times you feel as if you are listening to a moral or cultural relativist, and other times, a moral conservative, because at all times he is continuously asking the questions: What *is* justice? What *is* piety? What *is* courage? What *is* goodness?

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Short History of Ethics*, p. 18.

The claim that moral concepts change *as* social life changes does not really threaten the conviction, then, that there is what we could describe as a universal, immutable human morality, or universal moral values. In fact, it actually supports and is supported by it, if properly understood. In continuously asking the questions, Socrates' aim is to approach the abiding answers to these questions about the meanings of such moral concepts, intuiting that there is something abiding and constant about what it *means* to be human. Though this *meaning* is constant and abiding, again, it is never static – reflected in the very definition of the virtues themselves as dynamic qualities of soul that ebb and flow with life's experiences and strike just the right balance or the right mean between extremes in a world where the extremes are always changing.

As we know, MacIntyre's appropriation of this for our times was put forth in his well-known, groundbreaking work, *After Virtue*, wherein he argued for a "virtue-centered" ethics rather than an ethics of moral principles per se. In this regard, the great works of Peter Geach and Philippa Foot, from the English school of analytic philosophy, and Stanley Hauerwas from the Protestant school of Theology, also, of course, made substantial contributions.

The challenge they all faced, and the one we still face, was (is) to articulate the *meaning* of the traditional virtues for our times – times which call out for a dialogue of civilizations. Now since the very term "virtue" itself (in the singular) is a moral concept, and the traditional cardinal virtues (in the plural) of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, along with their numerous corresponding sub-virtues, are also all moral concepts and, as we have said, moral concepts change, we must be clear about how and why and in what sense they change, and this must be articulated in the light of important social changes.

Another way of getting at the difference between "moral concepts change *as* social life changes" and "moral concepts change *because* social life changes" is to, once again, listen to what Chinese sages said about the *development* of the *Tao*: since the *Tao* is a playing field, then all kinds of unpredictable and dynamic play takes place, and the game may develop and grow. In fact, it must grow and develop since it is a game. But the development comes from inside the *Tao*, analogous to the way the branches and leaves and fruit of the tree grow out of the trunk – anchored in the roots – all of which emerge from the seed. The very aim of this growth is more growth as the fruit produces more seed so that the cycle (the game) may continue. Always changing always the same; ever old, ever new. In the words of a contemporary philosopher, "[t]hose who understand the spirit of the *Tao* and who have been led in that spirit can modify it in directions which that spirit itself demands. . . *Only they* can know what those directions are. . . [f]rom within the *Tao* itself comes the only authority to modify the *Tao*. This is what Confucius meant when he said: 'With those who follow a different Way it is useless to take counsel', [a]nd this is why Aristotle said that only those who have been well brought up can usefully study ethics."[9] And I would also mention Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* in this regard, as the entire work is built upon the assumption that there is moral and religious development in history only because human beings are moral and religious by nature.[10] All this helps us to understand what Socrates meant when he said that moral concepts change *as* social life changes.

[9] Clive Staples Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 47.

[10] See my *Out of the Shadows into Reality: A Philosophical exposition of John H. Newman's Grammar of Assent* (Beirut: Notre Dame University Press, 2000).

In rejecting the position of the Sophists, who claimed that moral concepts changed *because* social life changed, and then claimed for themselves the prerogative to affect those social changes since they were the *wise* ones, the experts, the most qualified, Socrates was, in fact, leaning more towards the absolutists, but without falling into the danger of absolutism. The ontological analogy is to be found in Plato's greater sympathy for Parmenides than for Heraclitus – a sympathy which Aristotle inherits but tempers and modifies in profound ways in both his metaphysics and his ethics.

Unless we adopt some sort of virtue-centered ethics, one commensurate with what has been articulated in the Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian tradition, and one that ontologically complements the Logos of Heraclitus and the *Tao* of the Chinese philosophers, in other words, some variation of a natural law ethic, then I do not see how it is possible to even have a meaningful moral dialogue with ourselves, let alone between and among different cultures. Socrates and the ancients saw that human beings had a nature, and that the human soul had certain powers. To know oneself meant to know oneself in relation to oneself, to the *other*, and ultimately in relation to the gods and to the transcendent realm lurking above the gods, that is to say, to destiny or fate. We might say that such a metaphysically rich anthropology was only strengthened by the world's great Abrahamic religions[11] wherein the One True God came to replace this seemingly highest transcendent realm lurking above the gods, otherwise known as fate or destiny. And the fact that this absolute highest reality was a personal one only strengthened the meaning of the philosophical "know thyself".

[11] In Chinese translations of the New Testament, λόγος (logos) is translated with the Chinese word *dao* (道) (e.g. John 1:1), indicating that the translators considered the concept of *Tao* to be somewhat equivalent to logos in Greek philosophy.

The history of medieval philosophy in the West, as we know, consisted in members of these Abrahamic religions all trying to achieve a synthesis between their own scriptural tradition and the classical Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian tradition they inherited. However, beginning around the fifteenth century in the West, once the Nominalist interpretation of Aristotle, given by the influential William of Ockham had had a chance to sink in there was a "gradual erosion of this metaphysical appreciation of human nature and the powers of the soul."[12] To run the risk of oversimplifying the tremendously complex historical account of Western ontology, I speak about a pre and post Ockham approach, and claim that, when it comes to ethics, and to the moral ground necessary for meaningful dialogue among civilizations, the pre-Ockham worldview was more solid and healthier, precisely because it offered a richer, more dynamic ontology and anthropology. The virtue-centered ethics of Plato and Aristotle, and the anthropology this approach to athics assumes, is based on an ontology basically commensurate with the ontology of the Logos in Heraclitus and with the concept of the *Tao* in Ancient Chinese philosophy. Western ontology, after Ockham, becomes more and more static and less and less holistic, until it receives a near death blow in the Cartesian inspired mechanical philosophy of the 17th century.[13]

[12] This is the way my professor of moral theology at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington D.C. Romanus Cessario, O.P., put it. The phrase has stayed with me, but I know not where of it was ever published; thus I cannot give a reference.

[13] Armed with Ockham's novel interpretation of Aristotle's physics and metaphysics, Descartes was led to believe that if the elimination of shape from geometry had borne so much good fruit, perhaps the elimination of quantity from mathematics could bear similar fruit. If the motivation for this had come from Descartes' success in solving ancient geometrical problems by eliminating shape from geometry, the deeper foundation had already been laid by Ockham's

Now just because the metaphysical *appreciation* of human nature has been eroding in the West for the last five hundred years, does not prove that the ancient and medieval outlook was wrong.

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reductionist epistemology and nominalistic metaphysics. For Ockham, mathematical entities were not real because universals were not real; thus, he eliminated quantity from Aristotle's categories and claimed that the other Aristotelian categories of quality and substance were the more appropriate categories to which mathematics must be applied. Once Descartes became convinced that only the mathematical method could produce certitude, and that mathematics was too tied to its traditional object, quantity, and therefore was prevented from having universal application, he began to look for alternatives. He found enough of what he was looking for in Ockham, but then went way beyond Ockham. He had had great success in combining algebra and geometry; his next task was to combine both sciences with logic. In effect, Descartes believed that what he had really done was to show that algebra and geometry were the same science. By combining this one science with logic, he would be creating what he would come to refer to as the universal science, the universal philosophy, which would eventually solve all possible problems in every imaginable domain. He called this one science, universal mathematics, the object of which would be, not quantity, but order. Order here refers to the four rules of method, which form the essence of Descartes' foundational work, *Discourse on Method*. That is to say, in dealing with any problem whatsoever, regardless of the particular "science" involved, one must always follow the same four steps. It is imperative that the order of these steps is observed. One: Begin by accepting through the power of "intuition" only indubitable truths. Two: Analyze complex problems by breaking them down into simple problems. Steps one and two inevitably produce a "list" of truths – the indubitable truths known through intuition and those truths deduced from them. Three: Put the truths in order beginning with the indubitable ones known through intuition, since these are the simplest, and ending with the most complex truths that have been deduced from the indubitable ones. Four: Repeatedly go back to each deduction in order to guarantee that each new deduction is ultimately linked to, and necessarily follows from, the original indubitable truths. Much more needs to be said here, especially with respect to what precisely Descartes means by intuition, which is crucially related to his theory concerning the direct objects of our knowledge being ideas or concepts in the mind, but for our purposes, this should suffice for giving us some idea of how it was that his use of Ockham's philosophy led to modern rationalism.

Once again, ancient and medieval societies assumed, in large part, that there was such a thing as an abiding human nature, and that, to a real degree, we could know and say what that nature was. This "knowing" could not be complete, of course, and was not expressed in any sort of precise systemic definitions proceeding out of empirical dissection; it came rather from the accumulated wisdom of human experience handed down through tradition, which had to be received humbly and gratefully. Once *really* received, then this wisdom could be deepened and expanded. Such a worldview still exists somehow in certain traditional societies and I think it is the only worldview upon which any meaningful dialogue among civilizations can take place. By "traditional societies," I have in mind a number of places in Asia and in West and East Africa, most notably, perhaps, in Ethiopia.

And so I think we need to challenge what one often hears today in the West about the problems facing the "dialogue of civilizations." That is to say, many Western thinkers still too often assume that the dialogue among civilizations is held back by those civilizations or cultures that have either not appropriated the values of the Western Enlightenment well enough, or have rejected it; they argue this, however, without realizing that the Enlightenment itself, based in part on Ockham's *via moderna*, is part of the problem precisely because it does not do justice to the metaphysical dimension of human nature as part and parcel of the metaphysical dimension of Nature. Of course, there *was* genuine light in the Enlightenment, but the errors and extremes of the Enlightenment, especially with respect to the relation between philosophical anthropology and ethics, need to be addressed and corrected, since both have been impoverished by a greatly impoverished ontology. Perhaps what we need is a second Enlightenment – an Enlightenment, though, that shall be a *global* one, based on an authentic dialogue of civilizations,

including traditional societies, and one that takes seriously both the mistakes of the first Enlightenment in throwing out tradition, but also its authentic insights (including the achievements of modern science both natural and social) that sought to address the limits of tradition.

In conclusion, I shall attempt to instantiate my claim and bring these general ideas to bear upon something specific, but still fundamental, to the relation between philosophical anthropology and ethics, as it relates to the question of meaningful dialogue among civilizations. Living and working in the Middle East, and spending considerable time in Asia and Africa, I have had the opportunity to work philosophically with a wide range of thinkers committed to the dialogue of civilizations. And whether in Iran with philosophers deeply immersed in classical Islamic philosophy, or in India, with philosophers engrossed in classical Indian (Shankara) philosophy, or in Africa, with thinkers engaged in developing and defining African philosophy, one area that inevitably emerges as a matter of concern when it comes to achieving a genuine and meaningful dialogue of civilizations, involves the area of sexual identity as an integral part of self identity – and thus a key component of any philosophical anthropology and moral philosophy. One great stumbling block, in particular, for so many philosophers from these places, is the West's growing insistence that homosexuality not be defined as an "objective and intrinsic disorder," as it now is in the majority of countries that these philosophers live and work in. I have witnessed numerous debates wherein the same moral impasse emerges time and time again with philosophers from traditional societies arguing from some form of natural law foundation, and the purported "enlightened" philosophers, usually from North America or Western Europe, claiming that such argumentation proceeds on ahistorical notions of the "natural," and

thus is unsound. Personally, I am very sympathetic to categories like *authenticity* and *human flourishing* as new approaches to ethics, but not in terms of replacing a natural law/virtue centered ethic. It seems to me that *only* a dynamic and robust form of natural law morality guiding, and being guided by, a virtue-centered ethics can provide the necessary common basis for dialogue among all cultures in these global times. The daunting work before us as philosophers is to uncover and clarify what such a foundation looks and feels and smells and tastes like.