

## PLURALISM IN MORAL THEOLOGY: RECONSTRUCTING UNIVERSAL ETHICAL PLURALISM

In describing the qualified pluralism of William James, William Marnell, writing as recently as 1966, complains: "The problem of understanding James's pluralism is considerably complicated by the difficulty of understanding what any philosopher means by pluralism."<sup>1</sup> Like philosophical, cultural, or religious pluralism,<sup>2</sup> ethical pluralism, in particular, is a package which contains many levels of meaning. Unpacking them, one discerns three dimensions, or, to use Wittgenstein's figure, three family resemblances. They are the subjective, the methodological, and the substantive.

In its subjective dimension, ethical pluralism suggests the spirit of free inquiry. It evokes notions like that of John Stuart Mill which holds that error must not be suppressed. Truth can only be enhanced, he wrote, "by its collision with error."<sup>3</sup> Pluralism is likewise associated with laudable qualities of mind such as tolerance and openness to diversity and change.

Methodologically, pluralism denotes that variety of interrelated paradigms and structural approaches employed in scientific analysis.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Man-made Morals: Four Philosophies That Shaped America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1968), p. 284.

<sup>2</sup>Sometimes religious pluralism is dealt with in terms of free and unfree relationships with church, state, or state church, as in Franklin Littell's *From State Church to Pluralism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1962). In this context it is distinguished from "complete relativism" by Leonard Swidler, *Freedom in the Church* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1969), p. 18. In *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) Paul Tillich treats pluralism in an inter-religious context. Studies of pluralism in intra-religious contexts usually emphasize doctrinal rather than ethical pluralism, as in Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) and *Dogma and Pluralism*, ed. by Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

<sup>3</sup>*On Liberty* in Jeremy Bentham's and J. S. Mill's *The Utilitarians* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Dolphin, 1961), p. 491.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The

In its substantive dimension, ethical pluralism refers to contrasting worldviews, norms, or concrete decisions. If the divergence is reconciled by the principle of complementarity, the ethical pluralist may be called a qualified relativist. But when the pluralist eschews reconciliation and holds that all contradictory ethical statements are equally valid, his pluralism may be more accurately designated as "total" or "radical" relativism. Those ethicists who would embrace pluralism in every sense but the last (radical relativism), regret the semantic confusion which identifies them with a position to which they are vigorously opposed.<sup>5</sup>

This paper addresses itself to that form of ethical pluralism set forth above; namely, radical ethical relativism, which for the sake of brevity will usually be referred to simply as relativism. It is hoped that this convenient usage will not be taken to exclude the qualified relativism which is so essential to an authentic ethical pluralism. The assumption of the paper is that radical relativism is so prevalent on the cultural and academic scenes that other forms of pluralism are in danger of being deluged. Its thesis is that while radical ethical relativism is an incorrect view, it prompts the validation and construction of a pluralistic ethics within which all men might find grounds for vital political and personal agreements.

Subsequent to further clarification of the meaning of relativism and a statement about its pervasiveness (I), some of the arguments for and against radical relativism will be examined (II). Contending that a productive ethical pluralism collapses in face of a relativism which precludes any universal concurrences, we shall then explore a minimal common denominator on which universal accords may be constructed

University of Chicago Press, 1962) not only documents the scientific need for a plurality of complementary paradigms, but perhaps overemphasizes the relativity of changing paradigms and therefore the subjective aspect of the structures they describe. For a recognition of plurality of methods in religious ethics, see Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1972), pp. 42 and 254.

<sup>5</sup>Heinrich Fries' essay on "Theological Reflections on the Problem of Pluralism," *Theological Studies* 28, 3 (March, 1967), distinguishes pluralism from plurality as if the former term indicates plurality without unity as the sole reality. While gradually he gives up the distinction, he insists that pluralism should be distinguished from "positionless relativism."

(III). We shall further delineate ways in which Catholic moralists, as a paradigmatic type for other religious moralists, may collaborate in this enterprise (IV).

*Forms of relativism.* Ethical relativism must be distinguished from a merely cultural relativism.<sup>6</sup> The cultural or descriptive relativist who recognizes certain cross-cultural ethical conflicts or variant facts is not yet an ethical relativist. The latter affirms, in addition, that disagreements cannot or should not be reconciled. If he is a radical ethical relativist, he extends this affirmation to all disagreements. As a healthy reaction to dogmatic absolutism and to moralistic totalitarianism (the reduction of amoral aspects of life to a moral dimension), this position is appealing. Absolutism and moralism are persistent diseases which deserve a full discussion of their own.<sup>7</sup>

Contrasted with absolutism, and viewed from the perspective of intercultural variations and the dialectical enrichment of opposing mores, ethos, and at least some moral norms (e.g., variant norms which protect modesty, fidelity, or the respect for life), relativism seems to harmonize with other pluralistic attitudes. However, when it is applied to large-scale or "macroethical" issues such as genocide, racism, totalitarianism, or propaganda, the implications of relativism are so ominous that one wonders about the foundations on which it is verified. Consequently, it may be more helpful to define ethical relativism in terms of its sources: epistemological and metaethical premises.

The epistemological relativist is typified in a special way by the

<sup>6</sup>The distinction is elaborated with special lucidity by Richard B. Brandt in his introduction to selections on relativism by William G. Sumner, Ruth Benedict, Ralph Linton, and Solomon E. Asch. See Brandt, ed., *Value and Obligation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961), pp. 434ff. Further distinctions of ethical relativism tend to multiply and overlap due to their various bases. Contrast those drawn by Shia Moser's *Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), pp. 20-43, with those in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Paul W. Taylor (Belmont, California: Dickenson Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), pp. 41-51. In addition to his own essay, Taylor's volume includes other selections on relativism by Walter Terence Stace, Carl Wellman, and Charles L. Stevenson.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Taylor, *ibid.*, and Moser, *ibid.*, pp. 9-19.

extreme noncognitivist who holds that ethical statements merely express subjective emotions, attitudes, or prescriptions.<sup>8</sup> If he is consistent in such methodological skepticism, he is as irrefutable as a person who terminates communication.

In contrast, the metaethical relativist is exemplified by earlier anthropologists who built their relativism on implicit moral universals.<sup>9</sup> In the name of *laissez-faire*, tolerance, intracultural dignity, and the refusal to engage in cultural imperialism, they asserted that conflicting moralities were equally valid.

These two basic forms, epistemological and metaethical relativism, should not be confused with situational relativism. The latter asserts that universal values must sometimes be protected by changing norms when situations alter. When, therefore, we refer to the threatening prevalence of relativism, we are not describing situational or cultural relativism, but a total ethical relativism which is grounded epistemologically or metaethically.

### I. THE PREVALENCE OF RELATIVISM

In his last book and testimony, *My Search for Absolutes*, Paul Tillich wrote that his choice "of this subject was made out of a feeling

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Charles L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," in *Mind* 46 (1937) or in *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory*, ed. by Kenneth Pahl and Marvin Schiller (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 44-60, and Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1932), e.g. pp. 217 and 289. Helpful collections of essays by Stevenson and other noncognitivists like R. M. Hare, Stephen E. Toulmin, and Alfred Jules Ayer are accessible in Brandt, ed., *Value and Obligation*, and in Pahl and Schiller, eds., *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory*. George C. Kerner's *The Revolution in Ethical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) studies Stevenson, Toulmin, and Hare together with the intuitionist, G. E. Moore, who indirectly fathered noncognitive ethical theory. It is doubtful if Nietzsche was truly a predecessor of the analysts when he maintained that moral systems were only a sign-language of the emotions, since he went on to affirm his own universals. Cf. Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

<sup>9</sup>The history of relativism in anthropology is reviewed in Moser, *Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics*, in Abraham Edel's (1955) *Ethical Judgment: The Use of*

of uneasiness—uneasiness about the victory of relativism in all realms of thought and life today. When we look around us, this seems to be a total victory."<sup>10</sup> After adverting to the growth of scientific relativism, the positivistic and formalistic character of much contemporary philosophy, and ethical relativism in theory and practice, Tillich argued, too briefly and not entirely convincingly, that absolute relativism is a self-contradictory term and impossible practically.

Relativism is widespread in the realms of both theory and practice. In the theoretical realm, for reasons we shall investigate, social scientists have begun to veer away from relativism, but the strength of relativistic currents makes future trends unpredictable. The American sociologist, William Graham Sumner, was extremely influential in establishing the relativistic opinion that morality is categorically dependent on cultural mores. Ruth Benedict convinced many fellow anthropologists that ends and means "in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable."<sup>11</sup> More recently, Abraham Edel has traced the continuing diffusion of relativism in biology, behavioral psychology, sociology, and history.<sup>12</sup>

In philosophical ethics, the dominant role of noncognitivists is as well recognized as the communications chasm between metaethicists and social moralists is ignored.<sup>13</sup> William Frankena feels that even the least extreme of the noncognitivists are still too ready to admit a fundamental relativism in which "conflicting basic judgments may be both justified or justifiable."<sup>14</sup>

*Science in Ethics* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), and in *Anthropology and Ethics* by May and Abraham Edel (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1959).

<sup>10</sup>New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup>*Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), p. 223.

<sup>12</sup>Edel, *Ethical Judgment*. Cf. also Moser, *Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics*.

<sup>13</sup>Referring to ethical relativists, logical positivists, linguistic analysts, and persuasive emotivists, Martin E. Lean asserts: "It has become the dominant and prevailing view in meta-ethics that moral terms are not really factual predicates" (Lean, "Aren't Moral Judgments 'Factual'?" *Personalist* 51 [Summer, 1970], 261).

<sup>14</sup>*Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 91.

In the practical realm, the separation between government and social ethics, as if it followed logically from the separation of Church and state, is painfully manifest. In a recent documentation entitled, "The World Behind Watergate," which prescind from social issues of gross political neglect, Kirkpatrick Sale details the positive identification of government with the selfish group interests of corporations and of the American power-block which he characterizes as the "Southern-rim people."<sup>15</sup> Since some of these persons are meticulously upright in the private domain, their refusal to see social issues other than amorally is a practical exemplification of moral relativism.

The practical dichotomy between religion and social ethics has only begun to be bridged. Intrusive as religions have been in personal issues, their silence on social issues, like the lunacy of nuclear standoff, amounts to a surprising relativism. Whatever its origins, even the admirable spirit of intra-religious or inter-religious ecumenism, religious tolerance of contradictory views on the morality of wars or racial and economic oppression cannot escape the name of moral relativism.

It seems that forms of practical or theoretical relativism appear in each of the major religions. The complex Buddhist intermingling of absolutism and ethical relativism is discussed by Winston L. King. On the one hand, Buddhism is truly expanding its search for a social ethic. Yet, analyzing one strain of Buddhist thought, King remarks that man "may project his own values into the situation according to his own fanciful desire, for logically one set of values is as good as any other."<sup>16</sup>

Similar Hindu problems with a social ethic (for example, past difficulties about caste) may be related to the lack of Hindu doctrinal unity,<sup>17</sup> to Hindu convictions about different moral paths (*margas*), or to worldviews like Ramakrishna's that, whatever their doctrinal and

<sup>15</sup>*The New York Review of Books*, 20, No. 7 (May 3, 1973), 9-16.

<sup>16</sup>*In the Hope of Nibbana: An Essay on Theravada Buddhist Ethics* (Lasalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1964), p. 71. Cf. also pp. 70-75.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Hendrik Kraemer, *World Cultures and World Religions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 128.



ethical teachings, all religions are relatively equal paths to the same God.<sup>18</sup>

Aspects of religio-ethical relativism in China may stem from the separate genesis of ethics and religion<sup>19</sup> or they may proceed from the Chinese relativistic conception that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are one religion which may be lived by the same individual.<sup>20</sup> Chinese relativism may also be correlated with individualist and amoral influences in Taoism which grew in reaction to a detailed Confucian ethic.

In Judaism it needs to be further substantiated whether divergent ethical worldviews and norms can be explained by Jacob Agus's principle of dynamic tension or complementarity.<sup>21</sup>

Writing about Islamic morality, Gustave E. von Grünebaum is not able to connect discrepancy in moral practices with normative Islam, but, from a cultural point of view, he does conclude that morality does not seem to be an absolute criterion of belonging to Muslim civilization.<sup>22</sup>

Following the research of Ernst Troeltsch, the Christian relativistic neglect of social morality has received increasing, if still insufficient, attention.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Relevant passages are readily accessible in Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 77-78.

<sup>19</sup>C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 290-93.

<sup>20</sup>According to Fung Yu Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), the true sage synthesizes in his life elements of both Confucianism and Taoism.

<sup>21</sup>Jacob B. Agus's *The Vision and the Way: An Interpretation of Jewish Ethics* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966), esp. p. 333, may be contrasted with Mordecai M. Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Schocken, 1967) which underlines divergent elements in contemporary versions of Judaism. Cf. Also James F. Smurl's analyses of Jewish ethics in *Religious Ethics: A System's Approach* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), pp. 47-49, 73-77, and 102-107.

<sup>22</sup>Gustave E. von Grünebaum, ed., *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. by

While one may take ecumenical comfort in the fact that ethical disagreements within a religion or within a Christian Church are sometimes more profound than those between the religions,<sup>24</sup> it is clear, at a practical level, that religions have not yet led the way out of dangerously relativistic currents in social ethics. Among comparative religionists, the fact that the trend away from explicit normative comparison still prevails may itself be accounted for by relativistic tendencies.<sup>25</sup>

The consequences of theoretical and practical relativism are considerable. Theoretically, since the relativist controversy invades all fundamental ethical problems, Walter Terence Stace warns that it is "disastrous in its consequences for moral theory. It cannot be doubted that it must tend to be equally disastrous in its impact upon practical conduct."<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, relativism blocks interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue. As a basic rebuttal of a moral point of view, it leaves force or manipulation as the only alternative for solving political and personal differences.

Moreover, relativism excuses individual and group egoism and provides a rationale for social non-involvement and toleration of the status quo. In protection of group interests, industrial peoples can relativize values like health and longevity and say of colonial peoples: "they like dirt and disease and a short life-span, because it is part of their way of life and always has been."<sup>27</sup>

Olive Wyon (2 vols.; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Roger Mehl, *Catholic Ethics and Protestant Ethics*, trans. by J. H. Farley (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971) and Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue*, pp. 255-61. In "Future Shock in America," *Critic* XXXI (November-December, 1972), 12-29, Edward Schillebeeckx traces moral and other polarizations less to religious bases than to other cultural sources such as gaps in age and styles of life.

<sup>25</sup>The author explains this trend in "Exploring Comparative Religious Ethics," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10, 3 (Summer, 1973).

<sup>26</sup>"Ethical Relativity," in Brandt, ed., *Value and Obligations*, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup>Edel, *Ethical Judgment*, p. 222.



## II. CENTRAL ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST RELATIVISM

*Metaethical relativism.* As stated previously, some cultural and ethical relativism is based on metaethical assumptions about such universal values as intra-cultural autonomy, dignity, and tolerance. The favorable implications of this position for cultural diversity and freedom are obvious. Applied to values and norms which are not clearly pan-human, such relativism protects peoples from imperialistic designs which may emanate from politicians, philosophers, scientists, or religionists. Applied to *all* values and norms, relativism meets several difficulties.

First, in an era of increasing intercultural relations, relativism cannot logically explain why it should protest Nazi or similar national atrocities as immoral if the moral practices of all societies are equally valid and dependent solely on their mores.<sup>28</sup> Marxists, like Trotsky, would see this failure to protest as unjustified, bourgeois, and self-serving.<sup>29</sup> This dilemma uncovers the fact that the value-primacy of a culture is a universal aprioristically assumed.

Secondly, if the relativist adopts the naturalistic argument (known as the naturalistic fallacy) that the mere facts of ethical disagreements are grounds for considering divergences normative, he cannot logically forbid others to reach the opposite conclusion; namely, that the facts of ethical agreements are likewise normative. In either instance, the illogical step of concluding to norms from facts (to "ought" from "is") is an unsuccessful attempt to close down what remains as G. E. Moore's famous "open question."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup>This argument is developed forcefully by Moser, *Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics*.

<sup>29</sup>In *Their Morals and Ours: Marxist Versus Liberal Views on Morality (Four Essays by Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, and George Novack)* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1966), Trotsky and Novack contrast relativistic currents in liberalism with Marxist insistence on the stability of some ends and the conviction that not all means are permissible.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge at the University Press, 1968) and Paul W. Taylor, "Social Science and Ethical Relativism," in Taylor, ed., *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 68. Walter Kasper discerns the "open question" when he observes that aggressive behavior militates against the conclusion that

Thirdly, the naturalistic argument may be a cover for argument from consensus. Consensus alone can only partially<sup>31</sup> verify the authenticity of universal needs or values like knowledge and love. By itself and without further analysis, the principle of universal consensus could sanction destructive aggression or egoism. On the contrary, the ill effects of egoism, disease, or genocide stand, whether a society disapproves of them in enlightened consensus or not.

Fourthly, some relativists may contend that in spite of thorough concurrence about the facts of a case, valuational conflicts can persist. This contention is speculative, but as Elizabeth Beardsley insists, "so is its denial."<sup>32</sup> It remains to be clearly verified, for example, whether the moral aspects in the debate between a socialist and a capitalist can be reconciled by a similar understanding of facts alone.

It is the first argument, therefore, rather than the last three, which may explain the growing tendency away from relativism among social scientists. Its direction is primarily pragmatic, pointing out that without the possibility of cross-cultural ethical judgments and action, the whole chain of values in a culture, indeed, the culture itself, may collapse. In this age of a shrinking planet, this argument becomes daily more compelling. It will later lead us to the basis of an option to relativism, to an ethics which can sustain an authentic pluralism.

*Epistemological relativism (nuncognitivism).* The main attraction of noncognitive ethical theory lies in the weakness of its alternatives: naturalism, intuitionism, the authority of consensus, and supernaturalism. The Achilles heel of naturalism and the weakness in argument from consensus have already been mentioned. As for intuitionism (nonnaturalism in analytical language), the trouble is that not everyone is in accord on essential intuitions about norms and

what man is in fact, he ought to become in principle. Cf. Kasper, "Christian Humanism," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 27 (September, 1972), 7.

<sup>31</sup>An integral and perhaps exaggerated role for consensus in moral decision is constructed by Aurel Kolnai, "Moral Consensus," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 70 (1969-1970), 93-120.

<sup>32</sup>Monroe and Elizabeth Beardsley, *Philosophical Thinking* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1965), p. 536.

values. Further, some persons are not certain enough of their intuitions to let others risk or spend their lives for them. Lastly, many people shrink from the seeming arrogance which makes each subject who experiences intuition the final arbiter in ethical debate.<sup>33</sup> Even if the insights of some people are valid, there are not enough other people who agree with them for intuitions to be the present basis of a common human ethic.

As for supernaturalism, one dilemma is that religions themselves sometimes instruct their adherents to construct and verify moral judgments without religious guidance. For all his disclaimers even Karl Barth had to waive his misestém for human efforts and give ethics an operatively independent status, so that it is logically compelled to authenticate the grounds of its own existence.<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary ethicists have turned, therefore, to the theory that value judgments are not cognitive, that they say nothing about realities beyond the self. To affirm basic values or norms is merely to express one's emotive feeling, attitude, or prescription for others. It is held that only this subjectivistic hypothesis can account for ultimate disagreements.

The non-relativist can certainly appreciate many aspects of such noncognitivism. If the subjective, noncognitive, and relativistic elements in many moral statements were more fully recognized by all, people would be protected from moralistic domination by others on personal and public levels.

The first difficulty with noncognitive theory is that honest linguistic analysis must admit that moral statements obviously intend to express more than subjective convictions or presumptions.<sup>35</sup> The assertions that freedom is an inalienable right or that sexism and racism are wrong are cognitively intended. A second problem with

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>34</sup>According to John H. Yoder, Barth's system holds that the Word of God comes not by intuition but "in the evaluation of all the alternative ways of acting . . . and in the full use of his intelligence" (Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970], pp. 48-49. See also pp. 89-90).

<sup>35</sup>Paul van Buren's response to R. B. Braithwaite that religious statements are

noncognitivism is that it leaves consensus as the only origin of rights and values, ignoring the logic that what consensus bestows, consensus can withdraw. Basic human rights, like those established in any constitution or in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, become alienable and dissoluble in principle.<sup>36</sup> A third obstacle is noncognitivism's inability to arbitrate ethical disputes or negotiate concordances about needs and values. Herbert Marcuse maintains, as would other Marxists, that noncognitivism's relativistic implications are a one-dimensional and ideological support of the status quo.<sup>37</sup>

In view of all these objections, it is no wonder then that several forms of modified noncognitivism have arisen. Ethical judgments are said to express unbiased and informed attitudes which are held for "good reasons,"<sup>38</sup> to which everyone can assent. Even Charles L. Stevenson recognizes "the possibility of giving factual reasons for evaluative conclusions."<sup>39</sup> Here it appears that noncognitive relativism has circled back to a kind of cognitive accounting for needs and norms which may be universal, an accounting which can avoid total relativism. The point at which this form of qualified relativism has mounted the carousel coincides with the previous pragmatic argument against metaethical relativism. Both will lead to an alternative theory of how an ethics may be grounded which is simultaneously universal and pluralistic.

### III. RECONSTRUCTING UNIVERSAL ETHICAL PLURALISM

In the last two decades, the universality of basic human needs has

intended to express more than moral convictions may be extended to point out that some moral statements are intended cognitively. Cf. van Buren, *The Edges of Language* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972), p. 34.

<sup>36</sup>The United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights refers to matters as fundamental as slavery, torture, discrimination, etc.

<sup>37</sup>*One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 170-99.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Frankena, *Ethics*, p. 89, and Beardsley and Beardsley, *Philosophical Thinking*, p. 534.

<sup>39</sup>"Noncognitivism and Relativism," in Taylor, ed., *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 383.

received mounting attention among anthropologists like Alexander Macbeath, Clyde Kluckhohn, Robert Redfield, and Ralph Linton. These needs are variously characterized as biological, psychological, social, economic, etc. A partial list of positive needs and their negative counterparts would include the following polarities: survival—death, health—illness, happiness—pain, love and affection—hatred and aggression, fulfillment of drives—tension and frustration, creative knowledge—ignorance, the experience of beauty—its lack, etc. Often these needs are represented in the ethical language of universal values, goals, virtues, norms, or laws, as when Kluckhohn states that “every culture has a concept of murder . . . of prohibitions upon untruth under defined circumstances, of restitution and reciprocity. . . . These and many other moral concepts are altogether universal.”<sup>40</sup>

The transposition of needs into ethical language reveals a central methodological problem which confronts people both as scientific observers and as subjects who experience needs. By what rational process can one deduce that factual wants give rise to ethical values and norms? However invariant or universal, a need is not yet a norm. An “is” is not yet an “ought.” Certain consumer needs, for instance, are questionably normative, like the need for oversized and overpowered automobiles, veritably lethal weapons which can kill and maim but not protect, and which account for more deaths, injuries, trauma, and waste than modern warfare. Social critics have perceptively analyzed the superficiality of other necessities which are as artificial as they are universal. Marcuse labels those needs as “false” which are self-induced

<sup>40</sup>“Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 52, No. 23 (November 10, 1955), 672. Ethical language, especially that of universal virtues, is used by Aurel Kolnai, “Moral Consensus,” pp. 93-120, and by Ralph Linton, “Universal Values and Social Functions,” in Brandt, ed., *Value and Obligation* p. 466, and in “Universal Ethical Principles: An Anthropological View,” in *Moral Principles of Action*, ed. by Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), pp. 645-60. The ethical ramifications of Alexander Macbeath’s acclaimed *Experiments in Living* (London: Macmillan, 1952) are analyzed by Brian Crittenden, “Sociology of Knowledge and Ethical Relativism,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 4 (Summer, 1966), 411-18. In his critique of the anthropological relativism of M. J. Herskovits, Moser (*Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics*, p. 172) compares the problem of monogamy with clearer moral issues like war, slavery, trial by ordeal, punishment of the insane, etc.

or superimposed by particular social interests in one's repression, "the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice."<sup>41</sup> As long as people are indoctrinated by advertising and manipulated by the irrational cravings of the technological state which advertising serves, their answer to the question of valid needs "cannot be taken as their own."<sup>42</sup> The apparent ubiquity of other requirements like Nietzsche's will to power or sado-masochistic submission and aggression also indicates the weakness of universality as a sole principle of verification.

If consensus and intuition, taken by themselves, provide similarly unsatisfactory rationales for authenticating needs which are genuine and normative, what remains?

*The Principle of "Chain Reaction" Needs and Norms.* Scientific models may provide a clue. Psychological analysis, for example, can demonstrate that when domination over others is sought not only instrumentally but as an end in itself, it is counterproductive. The power-drive does not diminish. Rather, it increases and creates other lacks which remain painfully incomplete. Attempted gratifications of egoism, the death-instinct, and other invariant tendencies foster similar frustrations.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, there are desires which can be realized productively. Self-esteem and self-love lead to love of others, and vice versa. What psychological theories suggest at their present stage of development is that needs are interrelated systemically.

A comparable analysis may be undertaken at the biological level. Appeasement of drives like hunger or the need to sleep may injure or enhance the satisfaction of other instincts. Authenticity of fulfillment is determined by what it does to the whole organism.

Similar interdependencies are observable at the societal level. Equitable distribution of economic goods is conducive to political stability. Governmental disrespect for life, liberty, or privacy corrupts public morale. When manipulated even for well-meant causes, public

<sup>41</sup>Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Edel, *Ethical Judgment*, pp. 130, 136, and 216, and *The Authoritarian Personality*, by T. W. Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswick, D. J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford (New York: Science Editions, 1964).



opinion crumbles as a foundation for democracy. Without freedom of speech, other liberties cannot be insured.<sup>44</sup> In a karmic chain, oppression induces violent revolution, and so on. The intricacy of the picture multiplies geometrically when it is noted that biological, psychological, and societal needs are symbiotically related in larger systems.

The dialectic of basic human necessities is so complex that it must be further illustrated by the organic models of biological or ecological systems. The breakdown or restoration of one organ or system affects others. The same phenomenon can be clarified through mechanical models. Space engineers have discovered that one malfunction induces another.

Growing scientific familiarity with the hard realities of systems or structures is manifested in every quarter. Structuralist methods are employed not only in logical, linguistic, or mathematical analyses, but in each of the sciences and social sciences. Jean Piaget concludes that the interpenetration of structures makes interdisciplinary correlations imperative.<sup>45</sup>

Structuralist knowledge about *gestalten*, realities which are qualitatively different from the sum of their components, corroborates this central thesis: because genuine fundamental human needs are interrelated, the inadequate or improper fulfillment of one need tends to break down the whole human system. This breakdown may be denoted, not very imaginatively, as the principle of "chain reaction."<sup>46</sup>

The concept of dialectically related systems so far outstrips any concrete level of metaphor that all symbolic representation seems deficient. "Chain reaction," in any event, has the merit of hinting at the

<sup>44</sup>Christian Bay's *The Structure of Freedom* (New York: Atheneum, 1968) states this thesis of political analysis (pp. 14-15) and develops it at great length.

<sup>45</sup>*Structuralism*, trans. by C. Maschler (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), p. 137.

<sup>46</sup>A more diffuse notion of this principle is already partly explicated in Edel's *Ethical Judgment*. Further explication here attempts to highlight the centrality of the principle, to sketch its limits and further implications, and to indicate its potential as a common denominator for a formal ethics universally acceptable, even by noncognitivists.

dynamism of mutual penetration, collapse, and feedback of needs. Consequently, it conveys the notion that one may justify the reality, the basicity, and the normative invariability of a need by assessing how it affects the whole system of human needs. Notice that the principle transposes needs into norms not by metaphysical theory, but pragmatically.

The problem of reconstructing a universal ethic, however, is not entirely settled. To gain consensus about a minimal common denominator of invariant needs, universal concurrence on at least one need would seem to be indispensable. But not all men have agreed even on the value of survival over individual or cultural extinction (Better dead than red). Contrary to utilitarian assumptions, sado-masochists do not wish to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number. One by one, other basic needs like freedom, health, or love are contested.

However, an indirect route to a common denominator remains. If all men cannot be expected to assent to the reality of the same single need, evidence reasonably bolsters the prognosis that they will minimally grant the reality of one of the fundamental needs. If only one link in the chain of needs is grasped, it can be empirically demonstrated that the whole chain follows with it. The pursuit of survival requires the quest for health. The pursuit of happiness involves the fulfillment of other needs, and so on. Conversely, the rejection of any one essential need breaks down the realization of others.

The principle of "chain reaction" needs, it should be emphasized, is empirical, not metaphysical. Like a metaphysical theory, it does rest on an assumption. But the assumption is pragmatic in nature, that few men are inclined to reject the whole system of rudimentary human needs and consequent norms. This ultimate assumption is not finally an argument from consensus, but simply a pragmatic admission that a workable ethics cannot be realized without consensus.

As for those who would repudiate the whole chain or any single need deemed fundamental, the "chain reaction" principle is upheld by a plausible and hopeful hypothesis: the grounds for ultimate disagreement on essential issues are related to intrinsic and extrinsic factors of indeterminacy which can be gradually removed or reduced. To intrinsic elements, like inadequate concepts and formulations of questions, one may add emotional interference, failure of will, and

ignorance of data. The psychiatrist, for instance, might judge that if a subject knew further facts about himself, he would cease or lessen his destructive behavior. To extrinsic components like the complexity and instability of data fields, one may add authoritative obtrusion into free inquiry, propaganda, and other forms of behavioral conditioning.<sup>47</sup>

The theory of invariant and interdependent needs may be amplified by some in a quasi-Kantian direction. Aurel Kolnai concludes to "some inchoate and rudimentary [universal] idea about what kinds of things . . . are right . . . and wrong."<sup>48</sup> One is reminded here of the scholastic principle of *synteresis* (the good is obligatory) seasoned by an intuitional instinct for what is good concretely. Others might extrapolate a similar hypothesis from Noam Chomsky's theory of structural linguistics.<sup>49</sup> If Chomsky can conjecture that there must exist in human minds a universal and innate generative or transformational grammar without which language could never be constructed, the ethicist might likewise infer that there are innate ethical ideas and norms without which life cannot be constructed. But the argument for inherently known general norms, even if some day it should be clearly confirmed, is not intrinsic to the theory of interrelated needs. Whether "you shall not exploit" is a norm congenitally known or not, it can be demonstrated that life breaks down without it.

The model of "chain reaction" needs and norms presupposes no Platonic floating values, nor even essences or values which are incarnate in a person together with his concrete situation. Abraham Edel seems to

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Edel, *Ethical Judgment*, p. 100.

<sup>48</sup>Kolnai, "Moral Consensus," p. 100.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1968). Interesting in its dialogue with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Piaget, and Charles Sanders Pierce, this work provides a background for Chomsky's continued debate with B. F. Skinner. Chomsky's hypothesis about innate grammar is strengthened by the argument of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg that there is an invariant and universal sequence in human moral development. Cf. Kohlberg, "Indoctrination Versus Relativity in Value Education," *Zygon* 6 (December, 1971), 285-310. Chomsky's innatism is contrasted with Lévi-Strauss's unconscious mind structures and further qualified by Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, pp. 81-92, 96, 110-11, and 141.

disclaim such an ethics as one "still full of transcendental ghosts and pure minds intuiting ethical essences."<sup>50</sup> However, if Edel's dismissal of metaethical values is taken as categorical, it is an exclusion not integral to the pragmatic theory of "chain reaction" norms.

Intuitionist theory presents the formidable objection that values are perceived not merely rationally, but through the heart and the whole person.<sup>51</sup> Refusing exaggerated dichotomies between fact and value, subject and object, and intellect and will, intuitionists offer a viewpoint that may in future experience prove more serviceable than the dominantly rational, and possibly "Western,"<sup>52</sup> one presented in this paper. The point here is not to declare that intuition or metaethical values are dead, but to hypothesize that in view of their widespread renouncement, a provisional and partly satisfactory ethics of pragmatic norms can be erected as a common denominator by which men can survive. It can provide standards for the crucial directions of men's decisions.<sup>53</sup>

A conjecture supportive of the theory of "chain reaction" norms is that it conveys a more accurate picture of the way in which decisions are actually reached and communicated theoretically and in practical life.<sup>54</sup> When people attempt to persuade a racist that prejudice is

<sup>50</sup>*Ethical Judgment*, p. 123.

<sup>51</sup>Scheler's ideas on intuition and value are a familiar leitmotiv in Bernard Häring's *The Law of Christ*, trans. by Edwin G. Kaiser (3 vols.; Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1961-1966). Cf. e.g. Vol. I, p. 125. For an analytical defense of intuitionism cf. A. C. Ewing, *Ethics* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), esp. pp. 102-26.

<sup>52</sup>The limitedly "Western" aspects of these dichotomies are explained in F. S. C. Northrop's *The Meeting of East and West* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1946).

<sup>53</sup>While Frans de Smaele is cautious about predicting future success in arriving at these standards, he does see definite progress in moral agreements. Cf. "Pluralisme, Éthique et Vérité," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 66 (November, 1968), 661-87.

<sup>54</sup>The predominance of empirical considerations by ethicist and nonspecialist alike is delineated by John G. Milhaven, "Toward an Epistemology of Ethics," *Theological Studies* 27 (June, 1966), 228-41; also published in *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, ed. by Gene Outka and Paul Ramsey (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 219-31.

wrong, they do not bracket human consensus about this norm. They use it as an indicator that the norm must be examined very seriously. Further, they try to appeal to the racist's possible intuition that human rights are inalienable or that persons are somehow equal. But they rest the central pillar of their exhortation on the consequences that racism brings to the subject and objects of discrimination and to the whole chain of human values and norms. They assume that these effects are as empirically demonstrable as are those of improper diet or hygiene. This cross-cultural and interpersonal objectivity transcends the opinions of individuals or cultures. The argument from consequences on the chain of human needs is pivotal, therefore, but not exclusive and thereby open to the charge of consequentialism. It does not preclude a future and more thorough verification which, like a mosaic, may integrate validation through consensus and intuition.<sup>55</sup>

*Ethical Variants and Absolutes.* When Kluckhohn spoke of universal moral congruences, he inferred that those norms corresponded to human "inevitable" which necessitate certain "'conditional absolutes' or 'moving absolutes,' not in the metaphysical, but in the empirical sense."<sup>56</sup> This formulation, which coincides with the theory constructed here, raises the two issues of variants and absolutes.

The model of "chain reaction" norms does not preordain that all norms are universal and immutable. Even basic needs, like a possibly earlier human need for aggression, may evolve, or they may occasion the appearance of new fundamental needs and norms.<sup>57</sup> Needs which are less primary and more instrumental may change, or they may vary interculturally with even greater fluidity. In other words, an ethics which includes some invariant norms can allow enormous space for

<sup>55</sup>The "mosaic theory" of moral validation is further explained by Roderick Hindery, "Muslim and Christian Ethics," *Cross Currents* 22 (Winter, 1973), 392ff.

<sup>56</sup>"Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non," p. 673.

<sup>57</sup>In its denial of absolute values affirmed aprioristically "pragmatism . . . insists on the need for values, even universal and enduring values; but it insists that these must continually be constructed and evaluated in terms of the complex and changing experience of the community" (Eugene Fontinell, *Toward a Reconstruction of Religion* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1970], p. 144).



ethical variants. Christian Bay, for one, feels that beyond basic values, consensus is not helpful toward the cross-fertilization and enrichment of intercultural and interpersonal values.<sup>58</sup>

The broad horizon of variant norms and the still mobile dynamisms underlying invariant norms may frighten those who are accustomed to deducing absolutes from other absolutes assumed transcendentally or received religiously. But Kluckhohn's concept of the merely conditional or functional absolute is not in itself alarming. The fact that an absolute like "do not kill arbitrarily" is conceived merely operationally neither contests the enduring value of life nor the permanency of the norm. Put positively, it rather supposes that the validity of invariant norms can continue to be verified empirically. It does not imply, however, that *all* norms can be so demonstrated.

*Structural Configurations.* The less linear and more circular model of "chain reaction" norms does not ignore the project of probing for value priorities, say, between life and liberty. But it indicates that an abstract search for value priorities is misplaced. A hierarchical order of values is better discovered in the concrete moral situation where several values interact.<sup>59</sup> The antecedence of liberty before life or life before liberty may vary and can only be determined in view of which value concretely affects the whole value chain most fundamentally.

More important than the abstract hunt for priorities is the analytical quest for value configurations. In facing a provisional list of basic values and norms, it is theoretically helpful to abstract to

<sup>58</sup>Bay, *The Structure of Freedom*, pp. 14-15. The prospect of ethical variability is approached with similar boldness by Louis Millet, "L'Anthropologie Moderne," *Etudes*, 327 (September, 1967), 163-69.

<sup>59</sup>Searching for formal ethical principles beyond those derived from obsolete intuition, instincts, and cultural systems, Peter Krausser lists autonomy, equality, mutuality, public feasibility, and tolerance. Kant's categorical imperative must be supplemented with the value ethic of Scheler and Hartmann which suggests the rule of value priority. Due to its abstract and formal nature, Krausser's analysis offers no hint as to how value priorities may be worked out. This may indicate that little can be accomplished apart from analysis of values as they converge in concrete moral situations. Cf. Krausser, "Plurale Gesellschaften und Formale Ethik," *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 24 (January-March, 1970), 17-27.



configurations such as "life-affirmation" or "interpersonal response." This is what philosophers, theologians, and others are often doing when they build contrasting ethical systems on the primacy of different values such as love, power, or justice. What occurs here is a methodological construction of structuralist tools of convenience. The ability to hear whole chords rather than single notes quickens the process of knowing if a value or norm is in tune with the whole system of other basic values.

A scientific theory of values and norms reveals the false gorge between scientists and ethicists. When the scientist judges that contemporary automobiles are evil, he may certainly be understood to speak ethically.<sup>60</sup> Of course, when he puts on the hat of generalist as well as specialist, a job that someone has to do, he views the interpenetration of many values precisely at their point of convergence. He neglects none of the relevant consequences. In the resolution of what to decide about the contemporary automobile, he exacts the fullest possible inter-scientific knowledge of the situation before he chooses to tolerate automobiles provisionally or to seek alternative solutions. (Hopefully, he will choose an alternative.) The authenticity of public and personal decisions corresponds to the integration of norms which symbolize the widest wealth of inductive information.

The skill and art of ethical decision require an eye for synthesis. There is no short-cut or lazy path to hard judgments. This means that macroethical determinations are increasingly becoming interdisciplinary projects for team analysis.<sup>61</sup> And it means that basic personal choices

<sup>60</sup>"The social scientist need not feel apologetic for making moral evaluations. Not that his contribution to morality is the last or only word" (Robert H. Springer, "Conscience, Behavioral Science and Absolutes," in *Absolutes in Moral Theology?*, ed. by Charles E. Curran [Washington: Corpus Books, 1968], p. 52).

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Abraham Edel, *Science and the Structure of Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 44. Edel's plea for interscientific collaboration may be the point of B. F. Skinner's curious (for a determinist) concluding exhortation for a scientific view: "We have not yet seen what man can make of man" (*Beyond Freedom and Dignity* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971], p. 215). The appeal for scientific method in ethics was elaborated much earlier by John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

should be formed with as much relevant information as possible. The ethical specialist who is conversant with the data and methods of one or two sciences is not *eo ipso* the ethical generalist who watches out for a synthesis of all scientific considerations. The demand for full-time generalists will continue, especially for those capable of correlating the dilemmas of practical problems with the more difficult and unsolved issues in theoretical ethics.

#### IV. COLLABORATION BY CATHOLIC MORALISTS

The functions which we shall ascribe to Catholic moralists are predicated paradigmatically for Protestant moralists and for ethicists of other religions and worldviews.

The trend among Catholic and Protestant moralists to deny specificity of content to Christian ethical humanism is persistent, if still vague, in its ramifications and qualifications.<sup>62</sup> The first modification to the thesis of non-specificity is that scientific ethics must be guided by a Christian consciousness of sin, grace, and the eschatological finitude of human endeavors. This stipulation has not yet explained how humanistic equivalents cannot provide the same cautions. A humanistic realization of human limitations, failure, and the gratuity and finitude of life is by no means incompatible with the scientific spirit. A second proviso to non-specificity must be taken more urgently: even if there are no singularly Christian universal values and norms which do not pertain to all men, there can be a unique ethos. Cultural relativism itself would affirm and encourage this thesis. Both cultures and religions bear within them a distinguishing character, tone, mood, or emphasis called ethos.<sup>63</sup> The ethos of American enterprise,

<sup>62</sup>This trend is surveyed by Roderick Hindery, "Muslim and Christian Ethics," pp. 385-88. Cf. also Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue*, p. 20, and Josef Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, trans. by M. H. Heelan *et al.* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), p. 121. According to Fuchs, St. Thomas (*Summa Theologiae*, I-IIae, q. 108, a. 2) "declares explicitly that no new moral directives are given by Jesus Christ beyond those dictated by human virtue." How specifically Christian, interior and cultic attitudes would affect concrete decisions is not yet clearly explained.

<sup>63</sup>The specific ethos of particular religions is illustrated by P. T. Raju,

for example, has been called pragmatic.

While the literature on a specifically Catholic ethos is still in its incipient stages, paradoxically one may look to the very elements which have seemed to be overemphasized by Catholics as guides to a Catholic ethos. Three such guides would be the alleged Catholic neglect of sin, its rationalism, and its confused and physicalist absolutizing of secondary norms of "natural law."<sup>64</sup> Constructively compared with their contraries, these overemphases may be transposed into an ethos of healthy self-respect, a humble trust in human reason, and a traditionally catholic (translate universal) conviction that God's gifts and commands constitute a universal ethic which is not radically relativistic, but relates to all human persons. What the world needs now is more ethos like that.

The last point of this ethos suggests to Catholic moralists that they might lead the way among religious moralists in asking less what they can do differently, than how they can join in the common human venture which is the search for a universal ethics. This project might be called catholic and ecumenical in the fullest sense of the terms. The Catholic could take leadership in signalling that, in the future, fundamental or concrete ethical disagreements will stem less from religious beliefs than from discrepancies in scientific information and methods in dealing with ethical situations, discrepancies resolvable in principle. Even the controversial symbol of Catholic and papal authority in moral matters could be employed ecumenically if it is communicated less as a fact than an aspiration; and less as an aspiration for decisions made by one man for another than as a desire for a few universal and objectively based judgments which mature men can make on their own.

To recapitulate. A pluralistic ethics is impossible without at least a few basic universal norms by which all men might agree to survive and fulfill their lives together in peace. Ethical pluralism is inconceivable without ethics. Due to the theoretical and practical prevalence of

*Introduction to Comparative Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), e.g., pp. 3-12.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Charles E. Curran, "Absolute Norms in Moral Theology," in Outka and Ramsey, eds., *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, pp. 166-73.

radical ethical relativism, both ethics and ethical pluralism are in jeopardy. By default of arguments from consensus, intuitionism, and naturalism, a pragmatic ethics of pan-human needs and norms offers the most hopeful foundation for a common denominator ethics. Even some noncognitivists are arguing in this direction. The principle of "chain reaction" interrelationship through which this ethics is validated awaits further empirical verification, but it is, in actuality, widely employed. Already pivotal in daily ethical judgments, it may be utilized with growing care and intelligence. A common denominator ethics neither precludes further agreement on ethical theory, e.g. on intuitions, nor charts a monolithic system destructive of ethical freedom and plurality. By contrast, it widens the possibilities for pluralism. Both as ethical specialists and generalists, Catholic moralists, like others, can best support genuine pluralism by continued scientific analysis of the chain reaction or interrelationship between norms and values.

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