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CULTURAL CLASH AND THE MORALIST QUEST

Sari Nusseibeh

There are ostensibly only two ways – both deeply contested – by which human beings can stake a reasonably strong claim to having a unique status in the world – a status almost in the nature of an all-encompassing endowment conferring upon them all those matters which normally go under the name of rights or privileges. One is God – that is, to say that human beings enjoy the special status they claim to enjoy by virtue of being God's special creatures. This claim, needless to say, rests on at least two separate assumptions, one being that God exists and the other that He in fact has singled out human beings for being endowed with that special status. The other way – besides God, that is – to claim uniqueness is to appeal to an absolute or universal value or set of values, uniquely or primarily ascribable to human beings simply by virtue of their being human, such as natural rights, or human rights, or some moral principle from which the supposedly special human endowments proceed – endowments such as the right to life, or to freedom, or to education, or suchlike.

Typically – or, more concisely, historically – the appeal to God has taken religious forms. In other words, it is through God's Word, prophets, messengers, and their interpreters and spokesmen, that human beings have displayed or claimed to possess their special status in the world. In the monotheistic tradition, this display or claim evolved in stages, divine grace first being claimed for one ethnic tribe or blood-line, but eventually gaining wider applicability through the further messages contained in the successive "revelations" associated with the later religions of Christianity and Islam. Thus in theory, at least, God's grace comes eventually to be extended as to cover the entire human race. I say "in theory" because those different religions have come to be so construed as to make that grace conditional upon the fulfillment of a variety of requirements other than that of simply being human; and also because those additional requirements have often been a cause for bloody and cruel conflict between human beings – even within the supposedly same religions – rather than being a common and unifying divine denominator.

The appeal to a source outside of religion for a special human status has also and over time come under sustained criticism, the argument for which for our present purposes can perhaps be subsumed under the general heading of there being no evidence whatsoever to support the claim for the independent existence of absolute values or moral principles or truths, akin to the truths supposed to exist of mathematics or the natural sciences. Few have questioned the basis of this supposed solidity of scientific principles and truths, and the derivative wishy-washiness of the moral principles and judgements consequent upon it. But some philosophers of real consequence have indeed done so – and I am thinking particularly here of the late W.V.O. Quine, to whose image of the various "truths" in the sciences and the moral

spheres I shall return. Even so, the dominant intellectual fashion has been to continue to hold onto this generic distinction between two kinds of basic truths or principles, a fact which has encouraged (or driven) more and more moral philosophers to adopt one or another version of moral positivism, where values are construed in consequentialist terms of one kind or another; but where, significantly and unfortunately also, such positivism has invariably and almost automatically been construed in relativist or culture-specific terms, creating the sense that in this world, each culture is unto its own, and the best that the best of us can do is to keep the peace with or among those cultures whose values approximate most to our own. Here, the prominent philosopher who most comes to mind as a protagonist of such a thesis is that other Harvardian giant, the late John Rawls.

A historical middle course – for some time now quite discredited – steering between religionists and relativists has been what we can perhaps describe as the approach of the metaphysical philosophers. By these I mean such disparate thinkers as quite apart from each other as Aristotle or Plato, Avicenna or Alfarabi, and Spinoza or Leibniz, not to forget Kant with his special dint for our purposes on human dignity as an un-exchangeable and therefore intrinsic human value, to give but some examples. In many ways, these metaphysicians, more than anyone else, can be credited with having consistently held up the torch of a universal humanism, admittedly as an inseparable part of their metaphysical systems, systems in which a variantly defined God or Metaphysical Source is the centerpiece, but in which as a consequence a special status is accorded to human beings on account simply of their being human beings, and not as followers of a particular religion or creed or ethnic group. And even were one to be reminded that many of these metaphysicians, especially the early ones – and contrary to how their philosophical languages were articulated – did not see the privileged class of human beings as extending beyond the circles of their immediate cities or national groups, exactly in an analogous manner to how some of the monotheistic prophets carried out their discourse, yet it could be retorted that these parochial idiosyncracies of the metaphysicians were hardly or never a cause for bloody conflicts among their followers on that account, as the case has been, and continues to threaten to be, among the followers of the monotheistic religions. Indeed, quite the contrary, it is in the writings of these metaphysicians, more than anywhere else, that we can hope to find a lasting common language in which human beings are accorded a special status, celebrating them for being endowed with special values not dependent on race, color, religions, gender, economic class, or contingent social status. It is, in other words, in the language of these metaphysicians, rather than in the languages of religionists or relativists, that we can hope to find a solid basis for human harmony instead of the seeds, intentional or otherwise, of discord.

I have chosen as examples of my metaphysicians men belonging to different races, religions, cultures and times. Yet they shared between them, if we abstract from such contingent matters as their tastes, attires, social

habits, languages, cultures and religious beliefs, a deep respect for a fairly common conception of what being a human being is all about. I might well have drawn on another, not dissimilar list of universalist metaphysicians cited by the Renaissance religious philosopher, Pico della Mirandola, in his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, whose analogous gallery of famous men highlights sources picked significantly indiscriminately from Chaldean, Hebrew, Greek, Arab as well as Latin cultures and times. Indeed, some of these – such as the Andalusian Ibn Bajjah or Avempace – even believed that, at some ontic level or another, not only did all of these intellectual giants share a timeless virtual community with one another apart from the spatio-temporal locales defined by their material existences, but that, incredibly, they even shared a common identity, a cerebral oneness, having conjoined themselves through their intellectual and moral efforts to an ever-existing Active Intellect!

What I would like to highlight here is not so much what must sound to the modern ear like a weird metaphysical system, as what the implications are on how, informed by such systems, human beings have been viewed in spite of what must have been even more seriously varied cultural perspectives than exist now. Highlighting these implications might well encourage us once again to pursue this genre of philosophy, and thus to contribute to our being able to fashion the best possible status for human beings in a future world. If religions and religious philosophers conditioned the conception of the highly-prized human being on the fulfilment of certain requirements, such as the adherence to a set of beliefs and acts; and if relativist moral philosophers sought to define that uniqueness through strictly subjectivist, and eventually culture-specific means, our metaphysicians defined the respect due to human beings simply in terms of their being human. It is not in these humanist systems, or from them, then, that a justification or a rationalization can be found – like it can from the other world-views I mentioned – for so-called cultural or civilizational clashes. Quite the opposite. It is only in or from such perspectives that a universal philosophy of peace and of justice, can emerge, extending its moral principles across humanity. I assure you, speaking now as a non-Jew living in what I consider home, and in a threateningly turbulent political environment, that I have become extremely sensitized to the urgent human need, and the redemptive value, for uncovering within ourselves, beneath our religious or ethnic specificities, our common identity as human beings, in the pursuit of such peace and justice.

But how, it can be asked, should one be able to reconcile between such a philosophy of "emergence," according to which, in some manner, we would have to allow the human condition to become transformed by human acts, with a philosophy of transfixed values and absolute moral truths, which one must presume to be presupposed by a metaphysical system in which the special status of a human being is already a priori defined and assured? We can look for one answer in Pico's *Oration*: a human being's very essence, for which he is exalted above and apart from all other beings, is precisely his

possession of that rational will through which, like a chameleon, he can change, and through which, by changing, he can change the world. Therein lies the secret of human dignity.

But doesn't such a view, again one might ask, not make the metaphysician a positivist of sorts, in whose view moral truths come to be imprinted on the world by act of will, rather than be discovered? The answer, of course, is yes, but then such a positivism needn't mean that ultimate moral truths or principles will be as proliferate as there are different cultures, or will be as divergent and conflictual. Here I would like to invoke the sphere image of our "body of knowledge" which Quine uses to explain his own theory of the "truths" we take the world to be made up of. Think of these "truths" as pieces or blocks from which the sphere is made up, he tells us. None of them is intrinsically sacrosanct, and each of them can in theory be changed or be different. At the center, lie all those basic logico-mathematical principles on which all of our other knowledge-claims are based. Moving outwards, we encounter what we consider to be our indubitable truths of basic science. At the outer edges we encounter those belief and observation statements whose validity we are generally prepared to regard as being less solid or permanent or established. Were we to consider or to decide to change or to replace one of those truth-items lying at the center of the sphere, we could in theory do so, but we would then be compelled to make a readjustment to almost all of the other pieces, by way of seeking to make the sphere "whole" again, so to speak. The extent of adjustment to our body of knowledge which would be needed as a result of instituting any change to any one item of knowledge or "truth" will decrease the closer we get to the periphery of the sphere, and indeed, many of these peripheral truths are by their nature time-sensitive.

Quine's general point, expressed as a scientist, is that we should be constantly ready to modify our theories as we try to account for our observations, but that we should also be aware that our theories could, on the whole and consistently with our observations, be entirely different from what they are, so long as their separate pieces cohered with one another, while at the same time accounting for all those observations. There are two lessons I would like to draw from this account of Quine, one being the empiricist quest for a general theory, and the other being the ultimately foundational, but never independently objective status of the logico-mathematical truths lying at the center of the sphere.

A moralist being challenged with the moral/mathematical truths distinction mentioned earlier can draw comfort from the second lesson: even the very principles of logic can be argued to be posits rather than independent facts. But such a moralist can also draw inspiration from the first, or empirical lesson of the positivist scientist: if the empiricist's quest, through scientific observation, is to develop a coherent and complete body of knowledge with which to understand the natural world and to manipulate it to man's advantage, cannot the moralist quest, analogously, through human interaction, be to construct a similarly coherent and complete moral

system with which to advance Man's human condition? Assuming that Man's scientific quest, right from its amebic origins, in spite of its instantiation in its various sequential and haphazard forms, whether in proximate or in disconnected geographic locations and times, converges through observation on weaving this so-called body of knowledge around some basic denominator of thought, cannot we also imagine an analogous quest on the moral plane, weaving through experience a body of values ultimately centered around some basic denominator informing action? Or are we condemned to believe that human groups are so (morally if not naturally) different from one another as to have or to be predisposed to construct entirely different ultimate moral values that are never likely to converge? And are indeed, likely to lead them to conflict instead?

This latter viewpoint indeed has many adherents. Translated into the world of political reality, it helps accept and rationalize gaping disparities in the distribution of wealth and resources between nations as earlier theories rationalized their existence between classes, sects or ethnic groups in the same society. And yet it is perfectly sensible to submit, contrary to such a viewpoint, that enriched rather than dispersed by the different experiences different peoples around the world have had, a historical process of moral weaving has indeed been in the making, where various moral judgments and value statements have through time and tests either been adopted or discarded, with some coming to be regarded as being more central or basic than others, but all always yet being subject to readjustment in accordance with actual experience. One could cite the convergence on drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments as recent examples of this slow process of convergence. How such a proposal would differ from that of the relativist would simply be in this quest being a reflection of an all-encompassing human experience rather than being confined to one social group or line of history; and how it would differ from the religionists would simply be in the quest itself being the distinctive or dignifying mark of humanity.

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