

**THE QUESTION OF
"UNIVERSALITY VERSUS PARTICULARITY?"
IN THE LIGHT OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE OF NORMS**

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Universality and particularity are two relative terms. Some would prefer to call them opposite concepts.

This antithesis, which we are expected to deal with in this session, is quite obviously reflected in two main tendencies which characterize our times: on the one hand we promote human rights as *u n i v e r s a l* norms, but on the other hand we promote "equal respect to all cultures", whose one main constituent is local-parochial, i.e. *p a r t i c u l a r*, norms that distinguish a culture from other cultures.

"The dialogue of civilizations" or, as some others say, "the dialogue of cultures" is considered as a way to overcome the assumed clashes between cultures or civilizations –a way that could lead to peaceful coexistence of all "cultures" or "civilizations" of our world. Here I shall try to challenge this approach.

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To deal with the question of our session –"Universality versus Particularity?"– within the framework of the general theme of the Conference, presupposes, I think, to be clear at least about the following few points: about the historical developments which created the present situation whose remedy is anticipated to be "the dialogue of civilizations" or "the dialogue of cultures"; about the ontological or epistemological specificity of the "thing" whose "universality" is in question, and subsequently about the meaning of 'universality' as a qualifier of the "thing" in question.

I shall not dwell here on the historical developments that have created the situation we had to face in the last decades of the Twentieth Century and that are closely related to the widespread understanding of the idea of development, in the fifties and sixties, underlying many decisions taken by the United Nations. I did it repeatedly since the late seventies¹. I shall confine myself to only summarizing the outcome of my analysis, and only in connection with the theme of our conference, in order to focus on the present situation and to show that the alternative which constitutes the title of our

session is closely related to the problem of the epistemological and axiological specificities of norms.

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Now, if we trace the global developments, taking as starting point the establishment of the United Nations until the last decades of the Twentieth Century, without losing sight of the ideas underlying them –i.e. without losing sight of the fact that the idea of development understood as economic development, yet differently in so-called developed and developing countries, and put as main objective of national policies in almost all the countries of the world, has led to certain outcomes contrary to the expectations of its introducers, as a result of which the need was felt to add a "cultural dimension" to development, also understood differently in developed and developing or Third World countries²–, it is not, I think, difficult to see that what gave rise to the situation we had to face at the end of the Twentieth Century is a r e v o l t, of the people of non-western as well as of western countries, against the same thing: against the state of so-called "western culture" in the second half of the Twentieth Century³.

In this revolt the citizens of countries members of the Western World demanded –and still demand, as many recent events⁴ organized by international NGO'S or other civil groups show– an administration which would allow them to develop their potentialities as human beings, while those belonging to groups of other cultures demanded, and still demand, a world order affording also them the possibility to bring their contribution in the building of the present and the future of the world, and aspire to be treated no more as the Turkish astronomer in *The Little Prince* of Saint-Exupéry. This astronomer who discovered the asteroid 612, i.e. the planet where the Little Prince came from, had reported his discovery at the International Congress of Astronomy, but nobody gave an ear to him, because he was dressed in a strange fashion. Fortunately –comments the narrator– a good statesman got the power in Turkey, who made his people wear European garments. Thus the fame of the asteroid 612 was saved. When in 1930 the same astronomer, in modern dress, made the same communication, everybody in the congress affirmed the truth of his discovery. We can learn a lot from Saint-Exupéry's criticism to his own culture, made already in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

This essential aspiration and demand of the people of non-western countries, coupled with other factors, was misinterpreted both by many people in western and non-western countries. In many non-western countries it has led to the attempt to revive what was considered to be "their own" culture, –i.e. to the attempts to revive world-views and norms, many of which hinder the development of human potentialities, its most typical example being the spread of fundamentalism we observe all over the world–; while in the West led to the claim of equal respect to all cultures, which amounts to claim respect also for cultures which favour practices which give damage

to human dignity, like polygamy, or practices which violate human rights, like blood feud. The latter demand was also theoretically justified by postmodernism which was cordially welcomed in many non-western countries.

At the origin of these facts I see lack of philosophical/epistemological knowledge about norms, as well as of philosophical knowledge about the human activity of evaluation and about values.

This is very obviously seen in the debates on human rights, going on at the turn of the century, i.e. in the claims of representatives of non-western countries in the United Nations, who, when their countries are accused of violations of human rights, claim that human rights are a "western product" and has little or nothing to do with "their own values". What they do by claiming this, is putting in the same pot norms of different kinds: u n i v e r s a l norms and local-parochial c u l t u r a l norms.

In the West, on the other hand, we observe that even most of the most enthusiastic advocates of cultural relativism and of postmodernism, come to an impasse in connection with the cultural relativity of human rights, and in order to break through this impasse they advocate the view of "overlapping consensus" in connection with human rights.⁵

For these and similar reasons the "dialogue of civilizations or cultures" is promoted all over the world.

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Now I shall try to scrutinize the terms 'universality' and 'particularity' in connection with the topic of our Conference, on the ground of human rights.

One of the main characteristics usually mentioned in connection with human rights is their universality. The most widespread understanding of this 'universality' is that they are accepted by e v e r y b o d y, or that they are valid e v e r y w h e r e. In this understanding it is not clear whether what is accepted everywhere are the principles of human rights themselves or the instruments in which they are codified. Even in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* we see that the word 'universal' qualifies the *Declaration*, and not human rights.

A less widespread understanding of 'universality' in connection with human rights, claims that human rights are not universal but universalizable norms –in other words, that they are not in fact valid everywhere, but that they have a quality which makes them worthy to be made valid everywhere.

This is a more promising understanding of universality in connection with practical principles, which leads to inquiring into this quality, as a consequence of which clearly conceived human rights have to be accepted by everybody and to be made valid globally.

Such an inquiry –which also presupposes a given concept of knowledge⁶ – has led me to the following assertions: the principles of human rights are propositions of norms, but of one kind of norms among other kinds. For our purpose here, I shall compare them only with cultural norms.

Put very briefly: the norms of human rights are deduced from premises concerning the ontological specificity of the human being, by *reductio ad absurdum*, in view to protect human dignity; while cultural norms –which differ from culture to culture and change with the time– are deduced, successfully or unsuccessfully, from empirical premises related to the existing (and changing) conditions of a group by a kind of induction, mainly in order to protect the benefit or the interests of the members belonging to that group.

These epistemological distinctions make us see that the norms or principles of human rights express demands concerning the treatment of all human beings – independently of all their differences in “race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, natural or social origin, property, birth or other status”, i.e. independently of their natural and contingent characteristics. I think that this specificity or quality of the norms of human rights –that they bring demands for every human being– is what makes them universal, whether they are accepted or made valid everywhere or not. And it is also this quality of theirs, which makes it necessary to try to make them accepted and valid globally. This is also the reason why the norms of human rights should constitute the basic premises for the deduction of positive law.

Thus the norms of human rights appear to be ethical norms not only in the passive but also in the active sense, demanding from each of us to treat all other human beings in life, in the way they express.

As for cultural norms: in spite of the fact that in many cultures there are also certain universal norms, that what distinguishes a culture from another are –besides its specific world-view and its conception concerning the human being– its specific norms concerning what is assumed to be good and bad, reflected in all products and expressions of human endeavour in a given period of a civilization.

Thus if from 'culture'⁷ –a culture– we understand the world-view and the conceptions concerning the human being and what is considered to be valuable, which prevail for a longer or shorter while in a human group, whose limits can be drawn according to varying viewpoints, and which determine the way of living of this group and the

expressions of their way of living (the attitudes in everyday life, the so-called 'modern ideas' in arts, literature, language, philosophy and in other human activities, and also the social institutions and their functioning), and if from 'civilization' we understand the totality of the products of such a group, provided that we wish to distinguish the concept of civilization from that of culture; it is obvious that particularity is a characteristic of what we call cultures or civilizations.

Opposing universality to particularity in connection with civilizations or cultures, betrays a value-free approach to them. In fact, there is nothing value-free in the human world.

This is why we need knowledge of the value of each expression of human endeavour. To acquire this knowledge we have to be able to make right evaluations.

Right evaluation of norms, first of all, is indispensable in order to face clashes of different norms on the same issues, that we encounter in life. Still this clash may be a clash between two norms of different cultures, as well as a clash between a cultural norm and a universal norm, e.g. a human right.

Dialogue between members of different cultures or "dialogue between civilizations" can help us avoid clashes stemming from different norms on a given issue, when both these norms are not discordant with universal norms, but their clash stems from subjective reasons and not from objective ones. In such cases we need to promote tolerance.

Dialogue between members of different cultures can contribute, I think, very little –if at all– to avoid clashes between universal and cultural norms, because this clash is an objective one. This is also the reason why in case of clash between a universal norm and a cultural norm on the same issue, there is no place for tolerance.

Philosophical knowledge of value, values and norms can better help us to evaluate such clashing norms on the same issues, and subsequently to find appropriate strategies for preventing cultural norms to determine the course of events in multicultural societies and in the world as a whole.

On the ground of these considerations I think that restricting the antithesis of "universality versus particularity" only to norms –the latter clearly distinguished from values– and understanding from the 'universality' of a norm its bringing a demand for the treatment of every human being, we could better tackle certain global problems we are faced with at present. Clearly conceived human rights are such universal norms whose aim is to bring an ethical dimension in the administration of public affairs and to introduce ethical concerns in positive law. Carrying out the implications of human rights in the existing conditions could make a greater contribution to the fulfillment of the intentions which made the international community bring on the agenda "the dialogue of civilizations".

Dialogues can be conducted only among persons. In order that a dialogue can be meaningful, it has to focus on a given concrete issue of common concern for those engaged in the dialogue. But in order that such a dialogue can be constructive, those who wish to engage in a dialogue should share a clearly defined valuable goal and have already overcome their own prejudices related to the issue of dialogue, as well as, at least partially, their prejudices to each other.

To overcome such prejudices training in ethics is indispensable. Still this training should not be a teaching of cultural norms, but a training which, by using the Socratic method of education, simulates young people to raise questions on concrete problems they are faced with in everyday life, helps them reflect on them and thus find themselves the answers to their questions, on the ground of philosophical-ethical knowledge.

This is the reason why I wish to recommend the introduction, in the curriculum of pre-university education, of one or two courses whose aim is to help the pupils become aware of their human identity –our only common identity– and to exercise them in making right evaluations of actions, situations, events, norms etc., on the ground of which they can reflect on values, and thus gradually sharpen the eye –as much as each of them can–, so that it can spot in given situations in life, the point where human dignity is at stake –his or her own dignity. And our human dignity is at stake not by what we suffer, but by what ourselves do.

Notes

¹ For this point see: Ioanna Kuçuradi, "Tradition and Revolution or Philosophy and World Politics", in *First Afro-Asian Philosophy Conference*, Cairo 1978, pp. 185-196; or "Cultures and World Culture", in *Philosophy and Culture, Proceedings of the XVIIth World Congress of Philosophy IV*, Montreal 1988, pp. 457-460; or "'Cultural' Morals and 'Global' Morality in the Light of Ethics", in *The World Community in Post-industrial Society 4*, Seoul 1989, pp. 176-185.

² For these different understandings of "development" and of "cultural development" see: Ioanna Kuçuradi, "The Idea of Development. Its Past and its Present", in *The Idea of Development, Between its Past and its Future*, Ankara 1993, pp. 3-17.

³ For this point see: Ioanna Kuçuradi: "Tradition and Revolution or Philosophy and World Politics", in *op. cit.* in Note 1.

⁴ In Seattle, in Genova.

⁵ For this point see: K. - O. Apel, "Une éthique universaliste est-elle possible?", in *Philosophie en Europe*, Gallimard, Unesco 1993, pp. 487-564.

⁶ For this concept see: Ioanna Kuçuradi, "Introduction to the Seminar" and "Knowledge and its Object", in *The Concept of Knowledge*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 170, Dordrecht 1995, pp. IX-XV and pp. 97-119.

⁷ From 'culture' in the plural sense, as I call it in order to distinguish it from 'cultur' in the singular sense, e.g. in the context of '*cultura animi*'.