

Universal Ethics in the Context of Globalization and Humanistic Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

This article starts with a discussion on the nature of universal ethics. By reviewing ideas from Confucius, Mencius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey and modern moral philosopher Louis Pojman in regard to this issue, the author tries to define universal ethics as indispensable for human beings, for creating better well-being of individuals and communities. Universal ethics is also defined as expedient, valid and flexible in its reaching out from philosophers' metaphysical thinking to human lives for daily application. This application endows ethics with value, and makes it an inseparable part of human progress. At the same time, this application makes the character of ethics evident as from its many faceted variations in human use though its core principles are usually very few. Universal principles are not in change, but their applications should be. This implies a two-in-one character of universal ethics. The permanent and the impermanent are not in conflict. On the contrary, they are two in one. The same is with the relation between the one (few) and the many, or the principle and the application. These ideas underlie many important philosophies, and they are explicitly expressed in Buddhism.

According to Yogācāra Buddhism, concepts and language are basically in the form of "universal attachment." "Universal ethics" is also a concept, in one sense. Concepts are created by human beings, and of course originate in accord with the law of dependent origination. Due to the ignorance of their nature, many sentient beings misconceive them as fixed and permanent, and are attached to them as if they are sacred goals. Why can sentient beings create the concept of universal ethics? It is because sentient beings have the purest nature that is the core or the true reality of universal ethics. They project that purest seed in their contemplation. Therefore, universal ethics is both inherent and created.

Humanistic Buddhism as propagated by Master Hsing Yun is a Bodhisattva Way leading towards perfect enlightenment. Based on unlimited compassion and wisdom, sentient beings may practice Bodhisattva Way to benefit themselves and other sentient beings. Bodhisattvas should not only learn the highest and perfect wisdom, but also all kinds of worldly knowledge and skills. They learn to know themselves as well as other sentient beings. Their practice is beyond space and time limit, and signifies a globalization of teaching universal truth to all sentient beings at all times and through all generations from the past, present to the future, based on a kind consideration of individual difference among sentient beings, cultural and other factors. This consideration requires a localization of Buddhism. One uniqueness of humanistic Buddhism among many is to use expedient, valid and beneficial methods to teach universal truths inherently shared by all sentient beings, in order to help them awake from ignorance, greed, hatred and arrogance.

When we say something universal, we mean it is transcendental in time and space. It is not conditioned by time and space. It also implies that it crosses over ages, and extends over states, countries, continents, and even planets. Its nature does not change along with the flow of time and geographical difference, while its application can be valid and fitting to various environments and situations. A principle which is

universal possesses the characteristic of not being conditioned but being always applicable.

We will ask these questions. Is there really a universal thing in this world? Or, is there really a universal thing out of this world? If the answer is no, then we do not need to go ahead with this topic. This would mean that we are talking about something that is not existent. Therefore we need first of all to prove that there is something that is universal.

Logically speaking, it does not seem difficult at all to solve this problem. We may have a logical reasoning like this: even given the case that there is nothing universal, the proposition that nothing is universal is universal. Therefore, at least one thing is universal.

But in order to make this speech meaningful, it is necessary to demonstrate that there is one thing, at least, that can be called universal ethics.

Now these questions: is there universal ethics? If yes, what is it? How can we demonstrate that there is, or we should have, universal ethics? Is the universal ethics inherent in this universe or is created by human beings?

From the viewpoint of Buddhist Consciousness Only theory, the concept of "universal ethics" may be created by our mind just like physical things and many other concepts in this world.¹ All these existent beings are images projected from, and reflected of our consciousnesses. If we think and have strong motivation to decide that we need universal ethics, then it will arise. We may make it or set them up in order to teach people about the truth of the world and human beings. In this sense, a universal ethics may not only be existent, but also prove necessary and desirable.

Some philosophers say that there are "universal" principles, and others say that there are no universal principles. The same is with ethics. There is universal ethics, and there is no universal ethics in this world.

We may take Aristotle as an example. As Aristotle said that golden mean or the principle of moderation is a universal principle, he did mean that it is unchanging. It is a criterion, and the only one criterion that serves as a rule by which all human conducts shall be examined, no matter when and where.

But Aristotle also emphasized practical wisdom on which one shall base his/her analysis and choice. Every one of us encounters a lot of decision-making everyday. The range from which we may choose always includes a great variety of options, either for the trivial daily decisions such as what we will eat at lunch and what movie we will watch after lunch, or the less trivial ones such as to decide whether we should fight against terrorists or not. Some issues are very ethical, some are not ethical, but some are non-ethical at all.

One of the ethical principles that Aristotle might enunciate to advice us is that one should be generous and one should not be stingy. But more detailed and concrete instruction on what kind of action is more appropriate for A and what is more

appropriate for B to take to be regarded generous or not stingy will be difficult if it is considered on a general ethical basis. This can only be made on a case-by-case basis consideration. Here what we need is practical intelligence instead of a universal principle though this universal principle should not be disregarded at the same time.² No one, and no moral philosopher or any religious guru can guide you through every detailed analysis and decision making in your daily life. Only you can do things like this by yourself. It is like eating food, no one can eat for you, you need to experience it by yourself. You are aware of some unchanging principles or moral precepts, and you memorize them well, always keep them in your mind, and you may even teach that to other people. But your intelligence and your own decision made through careful scrutiny and examination of every particular factor as well as all possible situations are essential, so that you may say this is morally right, or this is the best way.

For this part of human conduct in ethical judgment, there is no short cut or fixed criteria and guidelines that always prove valid, effective or right at all times for all people. Therefore, there is no universal means or way that proves universally and permanently correct and valid. We may set up an ethical hierarchical structure and look at their articulations. Yet, you will find the structure so complicated and sophisticated. We will see that no one can just adopt any of ethical rules and principles without any self- reflection in their minds. That is why people say that there is universal ethics and there is no universal ethics.

Confucius talked often about moral issues with his students. In *Da-xue* (The Great Learning), *Zhong-yong* (The Doctrine of Golden Mean) and his *Analects*, Confucius raised these questions very often: What is the correct conduct? What is the best way (Dao, 道)? What is moral behavior (De, 德)?

Confucius set up humanity (Jen, 仁) and sage (sheng, 聖) as the ultimate goal in moral development and education. For him, "sagehood" is an embodiment of humanity, the perfect stage that human beings can achieve. By humanity, it means a combination of all perfect characteristics that qualifies people deserving the name of "human being." Humanity also signifies the ultimate, universal ethics for human life and education that crowns the splendid peak of morality. But when asked by his individual students what "Jen" was, Confucius used a lot of explanations and examples from different perspectives to define it. He gave different answers to different students only because each student had different disposition and situation, and thus the answers each needed were not the same either.³

Confucius said "Jen" is the highest virtue that everyone should aspire to practice with all efforts in every minute of life, no matter in good fortune or in suffering and hardships. But he also said that the middle way for individual situations is crucial for the actualization of moral principles and virtues in daily life.

Therefore, if we attach to universal principle(s) as absolute and fixed, we misunderstand the perfect meaning of universal ethics. What Confucius said implies that universal ethics is already there, that is the law of universe as well as human society. But practical application of this basic law, or more than one basic laws, will presuppose not only the cognition and understanding of the true meaning of laws, but also a further reflection of them and appropriate individual actions being taken.

Therefore, Confucius said: "Learning and knowledge to the utmost will lead to concentration, concentration to the utmost will lead to quietude, quietude to the utmost will lead to being secure and free, being secure and free to the utmost will lead to reflection, reflection to the utmost will lead to new gaining in thinking."⁴ Again Confucius said: "Gentlemen and gentlewomen always abide by the golden mean, while ordinary people are to the opposite."⁵ He further explained: "Sincerity is the path of heaven and also the path of human beings. Sincerity means to be on the track of golden mean without much effort. It also means gaining without much reflection. This is sage's way, so natural and spontaneous. Sincerity means to observe the good and keep on doing it. How could ordinary people achieve this? First is broad learning, then follows careful questioning, in-depth thinking, clear analysis and examination, and finally putting your understanding into practice."⁶

We may have so far brought some ideas from what we have investigated and become aware that universal ethics is used as "law" for human conduct. But the law must be correct and broad enough so that all human behaviors may be measured by it. This means this principle (or few, more than one principle) must be applicable to all human issues in various situations. Second, this principle in ethics will be learned by people, not as simple and clear guidelines that you may easily follow, such as that you follow rule one to get result one, and rule two to attain result two. You must learn not only its definition, but also its connotations, its related areas and sub-areas. Besides, you must learn how self-reflection and self-analysis are made so that your choice and decisions, if not at all times, but most of the time, are appropriate and good enough. This is the so-called moral education. Therefore, this is an educational process which has nothing to do with merely memorizing some ethical rules, though memorizing itself is necessary too.

Philosophers have classified ethical study into three areas: descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and meta-ethical ethics (analytical or critical study). Psychologists and anthropologists focus their studies on descriptive ethics. Universal ethics may be stated in normative way as that of the Ten Commandments in Christianity or the Five Precepts in Buddhism or the Five Disciplines of Jainism. But a reflection or examination on universal principle and its practice is usually based on an analytical and critical approach.

Moral philosophers may be classified into two large groups based on their theories: (1) morality for the sake of morality and (2) morality used as an instrument for other purposes of human life than morality itself. Mencius and Immanuel Kant fall in the first category, while Motzu, Epicurus (egoistic hedonism) and Utilitarianism (other-oriented hedonism) belong to the second category. John Dewey tried to integrate both and had successfully developed ethics encompassing both Instrumentalist and Rationalist points of view.

Mencius thought that moral behaviors must be always guided by human nature which is originally positive, as well as by appropriate affection based on the reason of middle way. People intending to do this or that morally should not take effect and self-interest or others' interest as primary consideration. It is one's motivation or intention, such as if it is pure or in accord with reason, that should be considered mainly, and solely. Mencius advised people to follow our pure intuition derived from our original

nature. As a Confucianist, Mencius integrated Humanity (Jen) and Justice (Yi) in his moral philosophy, and viewed the former as ultimate reason in accord with the Law of universe, and the latter as manifestation of Humanity in daily behavior.

Kant kept affective factors from the door of pure universal morality and emphasized solely on "categorical imperative," which means that universal ethics is always in compliance with God's will, and of course with perfect goodness, and therefore should be kept in mind whenever and whatever people intend to do. This signifies the purest mind without any thinking and consideration based on affective reaction, self-interest, and interests for other people or for human society. This also implies that perfect goodness will always benefit people and society though interest-oriented and affection-oriented thinking should not be allowed even just for a very brief moment in our mind when we intend to do something morally.

For the hedonistic philosophers, morality or justice equals happiness: either for self-happiness and self-tranquility like Epicurus, or for the benefit and happiness of others like Motzu and English Utilitarianists, Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill. For these philosophers the rationale for doing something morally is to think about the outcomes of your action rather than intentions and motivations as asserted by Mencius and Kant. If this action will result in "positive" outcomes to benefit others or yourself (but not harming others), you may do it. It is therefore important for moral education to train students how to predict the things to happen in the future and grasp causality between one action and its result. Mencius and Kant will focus more on how to purify students' intention and make them never deviate from universal ethical principle(s) for moral education.

Ancient Greek sophists were among the most extreme ethical relativists. They thought that there was no universal moral principle at all. But if they viewed this assertion as an expression of the universal truth, they at least admitted that there was a universal principle. Socrates spent most of his lifetime arguing against sophists' ethical relativism. Both Socrates and his pupil Plato held a strong position that the real world, the permanent world of reason, is the one where universal laws of universe abide. The beings in phenomenal world are temporary and unreal. The moral principles that people should abide by are not supposed to reside in this changing phenomenal world. The world of reason is a world of Idea that means perfection and purity. We cannot "sense" this ideal world, but we can experience it in our mind. That is our conscience, our reason, the traits we are given at birth to be a human.

We can see that all these philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Confucius, and Mencius decide that there are universal principles of ethics and these principles should be experienced and understood by people and further practiced in human life.

In Buddhism, the universal ethics is the ultimate, perfect reality of the truth. Only the Buddha, the fully enlightened one, can attain this perfect understanding and relief. That is nirvana, a complete wisdom of perfect liberation; a complete realization of rules of change and non-change, of the reality of sentient beings and non-sentient beings in this world and out of this world. The Buddha, in his teachings appearing in various forms, had continually showed and guided people in the ways and methods of

practice leading to this complete understanding in around fifty years of his educational career. Though the reality of truth is permanent, tranquil and unmoved, it is also creative and productive and inspiring. It is unchanging in nature but at the same time always available for changes and applications. It is the source of peace and harmony, as well as a core for out-reaching, active, progressive and morally positive impacts and developments.

Many philosophies and religions share some similar universal moral principles. They vary in degree of understanding and validity of practice. Some explore deeper and are more comprehensive than others. Some are more accurate in knowing and demonstrating those principles. Some suggest more useful and perfect ways for practice.

Humanistic Buddhism is not a new religion, nor a new branch of Buddhism. It emphasizes a new hermeneutics that originates from the Buddha's teachings, and comprises with equal respect the interpretations from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Humanistic Buddhism is neither a localism, nor an ethnic or cultural biased centralism. By following the Buddha's compassionate view that all sentient beings and non-sentient beings are equal, humanistic Buddhism views all ethnic and cultural differences equal. But it urges a course of localization for Buddhism, that is a practical wisdom in accordance with Buddhist universal ethics for individual differences due to geographical and cultural factors. It is neither a pro- nor an anti- tradition. It starts from and is based on tradition, and initiates a refreshing basis in education and philosophy for modern people. It is an inspiring way for modern enlightenment.

As for ethical relativism, Louis Pojman summarized that there are two kinds of it: conventionalism and subjectivism.⁷ Conventionalism means that moral principles and criteria for deciding right and wrong should be varied due to different cultures and customs. There are no so-called universal principles applicable to all communities and cultures. Subjectivism is a much more extreme viewpoint which contends that individual point of view and subjective recognition will formulate ethical system for human society, and this implies that no ethical standards are available for all. Some might think that conventionalism is quite reasonable because the attitude of mutual respect and tolerance implied in it will eliminate cultural bias and discrimination. It is possible. But Pojman also pointed out that we should be careful before over reasoning and generalizing. If in one certain society and culture there is no so-called respect and tolerance, how can we expect that they will respect other ethnics and tolerate cultures and customs alien to them. This again presupposes the necessity and importance of a universal ethics. The one that interests me more is moral objectivism⁸ that Pojman raised. In moral objectivism universal principles are existent but not as fixed as absolutism. Ethical absolutism believes that universal principles are always prevalent and dominating and no variations or alternatives are allowed. Relativism is just on the opposite side and will mean no principle at all. Pojman proposed in his article that some core principles are established and other secondary principles are textured into a hierarchy of ethical structure to make the practical actions based on core principles possible.

In Buddhism, existent beings are divided into two categories: the beings with limitation and change, and beings without limitation and change. The former beings

are unconditioned and permanent, and universal as well, while the latter ones are subject to dependent arising and conditioned, and therefore neither universal and nor impermanent. For the enlightened sages this dualistic classification is not necessary. This classification is an expedient concept set up in order to aid "ordinary people" to understand the truth. *Tathata* or the true reality of beings is universal and permanent, and transcendental in time and in space. The reality of ethics is also the same. As an expedient method for truth teaching, we may also divide ethics into the permanent and universal aspect, and the impermanent and non-universal aspect. The non-universal ethics is the one with imperfections and afflictions that cannot really fully solve human moral problems. Moral education programs or moral codes and laws that are not immune from shortcomings in their implementation will fall in this aspect. The fact that moral education curriculum is not perfectly planned and implemented, laws are not perfectly made and executed, leaders of various professional communities do not perfectly guide members with correct ideas and thinking, and mass media do not perfectly convey right ideas and thinking to the public, and so forth, will make a world that is imperfect. Truths partially understood and practiced will result in partially effective outcomes. Sometimes, partial truth is totally wrong and distorted and misleading. Whenever people totally understand the reality of things as they really are (that is the *tathata* of things), merge them in their lives, and express them in daily behaviors, they will really grasp universal truths.

Buddhism teaches that people who want to know the world need to be aware of difference and sameness. People should be taught to fully know these details, but they should also be warned not to be attached to or indulged in any beings and their principles.

Globalization means many things:

- (1) People living on this earth in modern age share much more knowledge than at any time in human history.
- (2) People living in this globe communicate much more frequently and easily than at any time in the past in human history.
- (3) People living in this globe today are more accessible to each other physically, and for information.
- (4) Therefore nowadays people are more mutually influential than at any time in human history. They are inseparable parts of one unity that becomes more harmonious and perfect due to a better role each part plays.

Now some issues are also raised because of these more mutually dependent people of the world:

- (1) When people become closer physically, are they really more caring about and paying more attention to this closer relationship? Do they become aware of this phenomenon that they witness?
- (2) Do people really know their world, the nature of it and its characteristics as they currently appear?
- (3) Do they really know other groups of people? Or do they really want to know them?

- (4) With what attitude do they view and have dialogues with different ethos and cultures?

When these issues appear in our mind, other relevant issues will follow too. We have to admit that the so-called globalization is not only abstract but also complicated. But globalization is a fact and a tendency that we encounter now. Issues and problems derived from this tendency are such that we must confront and deal with well. Some of the issues are:

- (1) Do people understand that each of them is an inseparable part of a unity and each action taken by anyone will inevitably have impact directly or indirectly on many others?
- (2) Do people really try to understand others with empathy rather than from a critical mind and are people so educated to do so?
- (3) Do people know how to get along with others well and comfortably especially with those of diversified ethos and cultural backgrounds and value systems? Are people taught in families and schools the attitudes and strategies of effectively accomplishing this educational goal?
- (4) Do people think it is desirable to get along well with others especially with those with different religious, cultural and living beliefs? Do they think they should do so and want to try?
- (5) Do people think we may and must teach better ideas for better life, just with a good intention to aid people and without the intention to get benefits from them in return? And, not less important, do we know how to teach and aid others in appropriate and expedient ways?

As we have said earlier, some basic ethical principles are the same no matter where or when. They may be applied adequately to all human beings for various problems. But due to the fact that cultural, educational, and value beliefs diversify, moral principles need to be transformed into useful individual practical paradigms and strategies. We see the differences existing not only among cultures, values and races, but also among individuals. Furthermore, different situations appear in day after day practice even in the same person. We again have to admit that practical wisdom emerging from and in accordance with those very few basic and crucial universal principles is not universal at all.

Human beings have to live in a psychic state of continuous “anxiety” and “tension,” as existentialists say, worrying about every particular independent choice and decision. They should be responsible for every action they take or will take. And this is always a great challenge for “ordinary people” who are already overloaded with a heavy burden of suffering. Existentialists said this is the reality of human beings. For those people who are not enlightened and suffer, what they said is true.

Humanistic Buddhism pays attention to globalization as well as localization. Master Venerable Hsing Yun in Fo Guang Shan meeting 2001 in Taiwan reiterated that localization does not mean a narrowing of Buddhism into regional folklore. On the contrary, localization will lay a solid foundation for Buddhism in its way towards globalization. He is aware of the difference resulting from diversified cultural, geographical and temporal factors. The universal principles are always there that we

should observe, though strategies and approaches may and should differ in order to turn principles into actions. The Three Dharma Seals in Buddhism indicates universal principles of the truth of this world and human beings. The Buddha says that all phenomenal beings are impermanent, the reality of all phenomenal beings is not real, and the truth regarding the reality of the universe and all beings is inherently tranquil and permanent. A complete grasp of these three seals and other universal ethical principles derived from them, as well as a perfect practice of them in our life, will gradually improve human beings, and finally assure a perfect life for each individual and the world as a whole. In the process of self-cultivation and daily practice, a variety of recipes used to fit differences and satisfy individual people and groups are required.

Humanistic Buddhism has inherited the Buddha's great legacy that teaches both *śrāvaka* and *bodhisattva* practice to attain self-liberation as well as benefit sentient beings based on compassion and wisdom. As the word "humanistic" has shown, this current life span is valued and people are encouraged to make the best use of it to improve himself/herself and help others. Humanistic Buddhism does not ignore other sentient beings or future life, but it urges people to value and grasp the privilege to be born as human being during this present life. Being bodhisattvas, expedient and effective methods are always kept in their minds whenever they are ready to extend Buddhist universal ethics to benefit more sentient beings. Expedient and effective methods are based on practical wisdom, while practical wisdom is based on universal ethical principles. Great, limitless compassion always cares for those sentient beings we do not know or not directly associated with us. Great, limitless mercy always reminds us that we are each an inseparable part of a large unified entity. Humanistic Buddhism thus clarifies the goal for giving and caring.

It is becoming more and more difficult to say that I am an alien to this globe or you are an alien to my culture. Even aliens when they arrive and stay long enough on this earth will find out they share the same destiny of this entire globe. Not only human beings but also all sentient beings as well as non-sentient beings breathe the same air and share same atmosphere. We must believe that we have the same moral principles, and we must strive to make every sentient being to believe this. It is not the issue that whether we have universal principles or not. It is the issue that we must build up universal ethics for ourselves and for generations to come from our Buddha nature. It is we, the high-talented human beings, that should create our pure land on this earth by exploring our inherent universal principles first. It is from our perfect wisdom that we may set up universal rules for the survival and better life, and more civilized and progressive world for all sentient beings. The destiny and tomorrow of all sentient beings are based on our positive willingness and perfect consideration in founding and managing a pure land on this earth. We respect every particular style and idea and taste, we appreciate creativity and novelty, and we also pursue a better world for all based on universally accepted ethical principles.

Notes

¹ Please consult *The Sutra of Understanding the Profound and Secret Truth (Samdhinirmocana Sutra)*, trans. by Xuanzang into Chinese, Chapter Six.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by David Ross (New York: Oxford University press Inc., 1998 [1925]), Books II: Moral Virtue and following.

³ There are many examples of this kind especially in *Analects*, a book recording Confucius' talks with his students. *The Great Learning (Da-xue)* is originally a brief statement made by Confucius regarding the goal and process of Great Learning (the learning that one may follow to become a sage) and recorded by one of his best students Zenzi and commentaries made by him and later scholars.

⁴ Confucius, *The Great Learning (Da-xue)*, the text (this usually put as the first chapter).

⁵ Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Golden Mean (Zhong-yong)*, chapter 2.

⁶ Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong-yong)*, chapter 20.

⁷ Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990), p. 26.

⁸ Louis Pojman, "Ethical Relativism versus Ethical Objectivism," in Louis Pojman (ed.) *Introduction to Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1991), pp. 513-514.

The five-skandha explanation is a behavioral/perceptual analysis of the workings of our everyday minds. The Buddha said that the workings of this mind are almost always deluded because people fall into the trap of believing that there is an agent or a self lurking within them, and that this agent or self is the ultimate beneficiary of all that the mind does. The five-skandha explanation of this mistaken notion about the mind is intended to deconstruct the foundation upon which this mistake rests. If we can see our minds for what they are, the Buddha said, we will know how to use them to help rather than harm the world we live in. When we do not understand them for what they are, we tend to become selfish and to be motivated by greed, anger, and ignorance.

– *Buddhism: Pure and Simple*, Hsing Yun, pp.36-37