

THE UNIVERSAL GRID OF PHILOSOPHY

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In the world history of philosophy a small number of intellectual options keeps recurring. However, the way in which they recur in the kind of philosophy that proposes to deal with the whole of reality -- metaphysics -- has been completely different from the way in which they recur in the practical philosophy that deals with social life and human action: politics and ethics.

In metaphysics very little happens, and even less would happen were it not for the influence of two forces. The first force is that philosophers are different, by temperament and circumstance, even before they begin to think and that they are led by ambition as well as by enthusiasm to deepen the differences among themselves. The second force, of increasing significance over the last few centuries, is that natural science changes. Metaphysics must accommodate to such change unless it can force science to temporize, which it almost never can. Because so little happens in metaphysics, metaphysicians can sometimes convince themselves that they have discovered, once and for all, as much of the world as the human mind grasp, by which they generally mean the most important part of the world.

In the practical philosophy of politics and ethics, a few intellectual positions, developed in different vocabularies, have also accounted for the greater part of the most influential ideas. However, much does happen, or can happen, sometimes very quickly. A contest of philosophical positions that may at first seem intractable is in fact resolved in a particular direction, setting thought on a course of cumulative change rather than eternal recurrence or oscillation.

The history of metaphysics has been organized around a single, overriding axis of intellectual alternatives. These alternatives have to do

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with the relation of being to appearance and therefore also with the relation of being to knowledge. We are more familiar with the expression of the main alternative positions in the categories of our Western philosophical tradition; we first learned from the ancient Greeks the words with which to name them. However, they have close counterparts in Indian and Chinese philosophy as well as in the Arab philosophers who developed the thought of the ancient Greeks in forms different from those that became established in medieval and modern Europe.

At one extreme of this axis lies the idea that the manifest world of distinction and flux is not for real, not at least ultimately. It is an epiphenomenon: an artifact of our perception of the world. Being is one and, insofar as we are real, we form part of it. The theory of the manifest world, in its variety and transformation, is, on this account, an illusion. We can rescue ourselves from this illusion by clinging to what I earlier called by Leibniz's label: the perennial philosophy. Spinoza's Ethics presents a version of this view that tries to make sense of the implications of early-modern science.

Further along this axis, in the direction of greater acceptance of the reality of the manifest world is a doctrine of hidden prototypes. Plato's theory of forms (as explored in the Parmenides) is the classic instance. There is a hierarchy of forms of being. The distinctions and transformations of the manifest world exhibit a repertory of natural kinds or basic types. All have their origin in the prototypes. The more real the being, the less manifest; the more manifest, the less real. True knowledge, to be won only at great cost, is knowledge of the hidden but plural prototypes rather than of their shadowy and ephemeral expressions in the phenomenal world.

If we move further in the direction of an attempt to save the appearances, to the extreme opposite to the doctrine of being as one, we find that it is not as extreme as we may have expected. The metaphysician as realist, determined to hold firm to the world of the manifest, needs somehow to ground appearance in structure if he is to gain purchase on the reality he seeks to uphold. By so doing, he comes

closest to the tenets of the common-sense realism that has always been the trading partner of this metaphysical position: contributing beliefs to it, and receiving them from it.

In the absence of such a structure just beneath the surface of appearance, the mind will dissolve the world of appearance into indistinction; it will lack the means with which to bring the individual phenomena and events under the light of a categorical structure. Consequently, it will begin to lose clarity about the boundaries among them. As they sink into a mush, the effort to save the appearances will risk turning into its supposed opposite, the doctrine of the unity of being. Such an extreme phenomenalism has appeared from time to time in the history of metaphysics, but it has never succeeded in preventing the effort to the appearances from turning against itself.

The solution to this problem in the history of philosophy in many different traditions and civilizations has been to stop one step short of the last step. The metaphysician imagines that just under the surface of appearances there is a structure of kinds. Built into that structure is a set of regularities governing the realization of the kinds in individual phenomena and events. Aristotle's hylomorphism – his doctrine of form and matter -- as presented in his *Metaphysics* is the most famous example of such a structure, and the doctrine that each kind tends to the development of the excellence intrinsic to it is the paradigmatic instance of such regularities.

This solution creates, however, another problem. If the structure of kinds and the regime of their realization are not apparent, how are we to prevent them from keeping the ultimate reality of individualized being just beyond our grasp? The individual is the prize -- not just the individual person but also the individual phenomenon or event. However, the individual, Aristotle reminded us, is ineffable. Suppose we grasp the particularities of the individual phenomenon or event by subsuming it under a long list of kinds: each kind scoops out a little more of the particularity of the event or the phenomenon. In the end, however, the particularity of the particular remains an unreachable limit. We risk dying of thirst for the real, our idea-laden perceptions

outstretched to realities that remain just beyond their reach. From this derivative problem and from the familiar stock of attempted, inconclusive solutions to it there arises a familiar set of disputes in the world history of this metaphysical option.

The natural scientist, or the worshiper of natural science, may attempt to escape this fate -- failure to reach the residue of particularity in the particular -- by making two moves. First, he may insist on attributing to the concepts and categories of his science an uncontroversial reality. He may think of them less as conjectures and metaphors, warranted by the interventions and applications they inform, than as part of the furniture of the universe. Second, he may dismiss the individualized remnant of the manifest -- the part that fails to be captured by the kinds into which he divides up the world and by the law-like relations of cause and effect he claims to reveal -- as a unimportant residue, a byproduct of the marriage of necessity and chance.

It is, however, only by an hallucination that we can mistake the ideas of science for the structure of the world. What dispels this hallucination and returns us to our perplexity is not a metaphysical objection; it is the history of science. Scientific ideas change, sometimes radically. Their periodic subversion saps our ability to convince ourselves that they are nature itself rather than constructions of our minds. Bereft of the consoling hallucination, we find we have sold too cheaply, in exchange for counterfeit goods, the longing to grasp in the mind the particulars of the phenomenal world.

The recurrence of these intellectual alternatives in the history of metaphysics is too universal and too persistent to be marked down to the power of tradition and influence. What Kant said of the antinomies of reason holds true for these conundrums: they result from an overreaching of the mind. The overreaching, however, is not necessary. We can stop it, and so we should.

Meta-physics would better be called meta-humanity. Its secret ambition is that we see ourselves from the outside, from far away and high above, as if we were not ourselves but God. We are, however, not God. We cannot begin to divinize ourselves, little by little, until we

acknowledge this fact. The naturalistic prejudice -- seeing from the stars -- is the beginning of the insuperable problems and of the unsatisfactory options that beset our metaphysical ideas about the relation of being to appearance.

The world history of practical philosophy presents a wholly different situation. Here too we find a small repertory of recurring problems and solutions. Something, however, can happen and has happened that changes everything. Political and ethical thought have no need for meta-humanity. This fact proves to be their salvation.

The central question in political theory is: What does and should hold society together, enabling men and women to enjoy the benefits of social life? There are two limiting solutions. By their extremity and partiality, each turns out to be insufficient. Nevertheless, each contains elements that must be used by any compromise struck in the large middle space these extreme solutions define.

At one limit, the answer to the question is coercion, imposed from above. At the other limit, the answer is love: given by people to one another.

The ruler, having gained power, will put a stop to the relentless struggle of all against all. He will attempt, so far as possible, to achieve a monopoly of violence. He can then offer society its most fundamental good -- security, deprived of which people are unable to pursue all other goods.

He who brings the sword soon discovers, however, that he needs additional instruments to rule. For one thing, to consolidate his rule, he must destroy all intermediate organizations just because they are rivals to his power. If, however, society remains unorganized it cannot be easily just because there is no way of delegating a power that in the absence of such delegation may be both omnipresent and ineffectively. For another thing, unless power becomes authority, acquiring legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled, rebellion will lurk always and everywhere. Sooner or later, fear will give way to ambition.

If coercion is not enough, neither is love. People may be bound together by both fellow feeling and erotic attachment. The difficulty lies

in assuring both the constancy and the diffusion of this force. It wavers, and, as it moves through a larger social space, it weakens. Fellow feeling weakened becomes trust. Erotic attachment weakened becomes allegiance or loyalty.

Coercion and love are both insufficient. Both, however, are necessary props to the social bond. Both are warm. They must be cooled down. In the cooler, middle space of social life, we find law and contract. Coercive violence is turned into the ultimate, delayed guarantee of institutionalized practice and legal order. Love, diffused and rarified, shades into trust: especially into the ability to trust strangers rather than just other members of a group united by blood.

The rule of law and the experience of trust among strangers, backed ultimately by regulated coercion and diffuse love, are two of the three essential instruments for the preservation of the social bond. Or so we have been taught in the world history of political theory. They are fragile. The different ways of understanding their fragility, and of compensating for it, account for many of the main options in the history of political ideas.

Law becomes more necessary the more different people are from one another and the greater the range of the differences they create. If, however, such differences, of experience, interest, value, and vision, become too great, the shared basis on which the law can be interpreted, elaborated, and applied falls apart. Where law is most needed -- in the presence of radical difference of experience and vision --, it is least effective.

On the other hand, trust cannot easily dispense with bonds sanctioned -- in fact or in imagination -- by blood. When it does dispense with them, it is likely to be the low trust required, for example, by the traditional form of the market economy -- a simplified form of cooperation among strangers; not the high trust, required as a background to the most advanced practices of cooperation and cooperative experimentalism.

Something must therefore be added to the rule of law and to minimal trust. This third element is the social division of labor, provided

by a hierarchy of classes or castes. It is not enough to appeal to brute facts of class society; they must be enveloped in purifying and sanctifying ideas. A widespread conception is that society is naturally divided by classes or ranks, shaped by the distribution of social fates and individual capacities at birth. The belief, common among the ancient Indo-European peoples, of a natural division of society into three major groups -- one charged with propitiation and guidance; the second, with fighting and ruling; and the third, with labor and production -- is the most important historical example of such a conception.

An account must be provided of why the apparent accident of birth into a certain social rank, with its hereditary prerogatives or disabilities, should be accepted, and why it should be seen to imply a natural distribution of the talents required for the work of each of the social ranks. The position of each person in such a hierarchy of birth may, for example, be determined by what each accomplished or failed to accomplish in a previous life.

The outward hierarchy of classes and castes supports, and in turn draws sustenance from, an inward ordering of the emotions: the right disposition of the different faculties of the human spirit, with reason in command over striving, and striving fueled by bodily appetite and vigor. Social disharmony and moral derangement feed on each other.

The different ways in which law, trust, and the class-bound division of labor can and should be related, against the eternal backgrounds of coercion and love, generate the familiar repertory of problems and positions in the history of political ideas all over the world. It all seems similar, in character although not in content, to the history of metaphysics: a small set of concerns and ideas endlessly recombined in minor variations.

However, it only seems that way until everything changes. What changes everything in the global history of political thought are two connected developments: each of them, at the same time, a shift in our social ideas and a transformation in the practical arrangements of society.

The first development that changes everything is the halting,

unfinished destabilization of the idea of class society: of an hierarchical social division of labor, sanctioned by natural necessity if not by sacred authority. The differences among us, however, real fail to go all the way down. The class organization of society -- which, in its weakened, contemporary form, continues to be reproduced by the hereditary transmission of economic and educational advantage through the family -- is not, according to the new idea, a natural or invariant fact. Its content at any given time and in any given place depends on the nature of the established institutions and the prevailing beliefs.

The vast differences in the measure as well as in the direction of talents among individuals should never override the recognition of our common humanity and the duty of equal respect to which this recognition gives rise. We should not deny or suppress, by failure of material support or moral encouragement, the essential doctrine of a democratic civilization: the constructive genius of ordinary men and women. By improving their cooperative practices and by equipping themselves with more powerful ideas and machines as well as with better practices and institutions, ordinary people can make vast problems yield to the cumulative effects of little solutions. This ingenuity is a homely manifestation of our power to do more than the existing organization of society and culture can readily accommodate.

The second development that changes everything is a sudden, vast enlargement of the assumed repertory of institutional possibilities in the different domains of social life. The implications of the idea that society lacks any natural form assumes their full dimension as we begin to rid ourselves of necessitarian illusions: the illusions of the classical European social theory -- with its characteristic idea of a predetermined evolutionary sequence of indivisible institutional systems -- and of contemporary social science -- with its rationalizing trivialization of structural discontinuity in history.

Our interests, ideals, and identities are hostage to the practices and institutions we accept as their practical realization. By motivated and directed tinkering with these arrangements, we force ourselves to revise our understanding of those interests, ideals, and identities. We both

illuminate and quicken the dialectic between the reform of society and the revision of our beliefs about ourselves.

The conviction that class division fails to go all the way down joins with the enlargement of the institutional imagination radically to expand our sense of alternatives. One of the consequences of this breakthrough is the ability to develop the four sets of preconditions of the most developed forms of cooperative experimentalism. The result is therefore also to moderate the interference between the two great imperatives of practical progress in social and economic life -- cooperation and innovation.

The first condition is the development of the capability-enhancing economic and education endowments. These endowments are shaped by arrangements that, although they withdraw something from the agenda of short-term politics -- defined as fundamental rights, only minimally rigidify the surrounding social and economic space. The second condition is subversion of entrenched and extreme inequalities of opportunity as well as rejection of a commitment to rigid equality of resources and circumstances. The third condition is the propagation of an experimentalist impulse through all of society and culture, an impulse nourished by the school. The fourth condition is the preference for discourses and practices that make change endogenous, lessening the dependence of transformation on crisis.

Each of these conditions in turn provides opportunities for experimentation with institutions, practices, and methods. None has a self-evident, uncontroversial institutional expression. Together, they strengthen the practices of experimentalism both directly and indirectly. They do so directly through a loosening of the hold of any closed script on the forms of association. They do so indirectly by making it more likely that in dealing with one another strangers will be able to move beyond the low trust required by the conventional form of the market economy to the high trust demanded by the most fertile cooperative practices.

The marriage of the idea that class division fails to touch the fundamentals of our humanity with the discovery of the institutional

indeterminacy of our interests and ideals and indeed of the ideal of society itself puts an end to the endless refrains of political thought. Law and contract as the cooler, feasible middle point between the two impossible warm extremes of coercive order and erotic attachment now become simply the undefined, open space in which to accelerate the reinvention of social life.

A similar shift has taken place for similar reasons in the world history of moral theory. No one could guess from the histories of philosophy written by the professors what the chief line of division in the development of moral thought has in fact been. You might suppose from reading their accounts that it has been some high-order contrast of approach: whether, for example, the overriding concern of moral judgment should be the pursuit of pleasure, the quest for happiness, the achievement of virtue, or the obedience to universal rules. As soon as we begin to examine these supposed contrasts more closely, however, we discover that they begin to collapse into one another.

Then we hit on a more basic weakness of this view of what is at stake in the history of moral philosophy. We can translate any given vision of what to do with a human life into any or all of these seemingly incompatible ethical vocabularies. The message will not be quite the same in each of these translations. Neither, however, will it be clearly different.

The two overlapping questions that trump all others in the world history of moral thought are: What should I do with my life? and How should I live? To the extent that decrees of society and culture have predetermined the choice of life, the second question has been submerged within the first.

There are two main directions the answer to these questions has taken: stay out of trouble and get into trouble; serenity or vulnerability. In the history of moral philosophy, the reasons to take the first direction have until recently seemed overwhelming. Although certain religious teachers began to urge the second direction over two thousand years, their prophecy achieved its present astonishing authority only in the last few hundred years. It has done so by what must be considered the

greatest moral revolution in world history.

Faced with the unchanging conditions of human existence, with its rapid march to dissolution in the midst of meaninglessness, the first response is: let us compose ourselves. Let us cast a spell on ourselves that can bring us serenity. Let us detach ourselves from vain striving in a world of shadowy appearances and insubstantial achievements.

It may seem that the doctrine of the epiphenomenal nature of change and distinction and the related idea of the unity of real being -- the perennial philosophy -- offer the most persuasive metaphysical backdrop for the ethic of serenity. Nevertheless, all the major recurrent positions about the relation of being to appearance -- not just the one that denies the reality of change and distinction -- have been bent into the service of this ethic of composure. We can see as much by considering the age in which the relation between these metaphysical options and ethical options was most transparent: the Hellenistic period. Before then Aristotle had already combined his apology for contemplative passivity as the experience bringing man closest to the divine with his campaign to vindicate the world of appearances.

We must relate to other people in a way that affirms our overriding concern with putting a stop to vain and restless desire. The way to do so has often been to settle into some practice of reciprocal responsibility, recognizing one's duties to other, according to the nature of the relation, as defined by society. A posture of detached and distant benevolence is then most to be desired. This posture may be infused by love. However, it will not be love as the radical acceptance and imagination of the other person and as the demand for such acceptance and imagination, with all its consequent dangers of rejection, misunderstanding, and heartbreak. It will be love as kindness, whenever possible from afar or from on high.

All this changes when there takes place in the moral history of mankind an event that is at once intangible and unique: another vision of human life and its possibilities. The effort to reconcile our need for another with our fear of the jeopardy in which we place one another is now changed by a new insight into the relation between spirit and

structure. We recognize ourselves as structure-transcending beings and require more than the middle distance from one another. Our relations are infected -- or sublimated -- by the unlimited demand for the unlimited.

The goal is no longer composure. It is to live a larger life, for ourselves and for others. To this end, we must change the world -- or, at least, part of our immediate world -- the better to change ourselves. We must look for trouble. We must be prudent in small things the better to be reckless in big ones. The good we gain from such sacrifices and adventures, and from choosing lead over gold, is priceless: life itself, the ability to continue living and to escape the many small deaths until we die all at once. It is to live more fully as the infinite imprisoned within the finite that we really are. It is to begin the work of our divinization without denying the inalterable circumstances of our existence.

On the way, as the moral thinking of humanity begins to move in this direction, and to abandon the ideal of a serenity at once deathless and lifeless, there comes the moment of universalizing obligation, of Kant's categorical imperative. It is a movement toward the other person, but under the distancing shield of moral law, with the hypochondriac's fear of others and the ascetic's fear of the body and its desires, as if incarnate spirit would read from a rulebook and wear an undershirt.

The acceptance of personal vulnerability and the struggle for world transformation (however small the part of the world thus changed) for the sake of self-transformation, and for self-transformation for the sake of world transformation, become organizing ideals of life. This way of thinking two roots. Over time these two roots become entangled in each other. One root lies in the history of our moral ideas, interrupted and redirected by prophetic inspiration and religious revolution. The other root lies in the progress of democracy and in the consequent loosening of the hold of any entrenched scheme of social division and hierarchy over what we expect and demand from one another.

A breakthrough bearing a message of universal value to humanity, such as the message conveyed by this world-historical reorientation in political and moral thought, cannot be the privileged possession of any

civilization or any time. If indeed we can never be completely imprisoned by a society or a culture, such a message will have been anticipated in the countercurrents of even those times and situations that seem most alien or antagonistic to it. Long after the contests produced by the spread of the message, scholars will look back and say, for example: see, the thinkers of pre-imperial China shared similar concerns and made similar proposals. And indeed if the truth revealed by the turn is deep and strong people must have recognized it -- often only dimly but sometimes more clearly -- always and everywhere.

Yet if time, change, and difference are for real and if history is as dangerous and decisive as it seems to be, the discovery and propagation of this universal message must have become entangled in the scandalous particularity of historical experience: carried by particular agents, in particular situations, through experiences of conflict and conversion that turned a precarious countercurrent into a triumphant creed. The particularity missing from the message belongs in spades to the plot. We have to take care only that the particulars of the plot -- its passage through particular nations, cultures, classes, and individuals -- not contaminate the universality of the message. The plot, full of surprise, accident, and paradoxical reversals, reminds us that embodied spirit must bear all the weight of a world of particulars -- including the weight of imperial power and of resistance to it. Who would hear truth from the conqueror or accept wisdom from those who refuse to give recognition?

It is, however, a fact intimately related to the insights conveyed by this change in the direction of political and moral thought that our traditions and civilizations are not for keeps. Although they help make us who we are, we, in the end, are not they, if only because they are finite and we are not. In the worldwide competition and emulation of the present time, the distinct national cultures are in the process of being jumbled up and emptied out. In the contest of cultures the waning of actual difference arouses all the more the enraged will to difference. Emptied of content national cultures cannot be objects of half-deliberate compromise, as they had been when they lived as detailed customary ways of life. There is less and less to compromise; only an assertion of

willed difference, made the more poisonous by having been deprived of tangible content.

The solution, however, is not to preserve these traditions and civilizations as fossils under a glass. It is to replace the fictions of the collective will to difference by institutions and practices that strengthen the collective ability to produce real differences: distinct forms of life, realized through different institutional orders. It is to reinterpret the role of nations in a world of democracies as a form of moral specialization within humanity: the development of our powers in different directions and the realization of a democratic society in alternative sets of arrangements. It is to obey the law of the spirit, according to which we can possess only what we reinvent, and reinvent only what we renounce.

The combination of the moral and the political turns breaks the world-historical mold of philosophy. The two turns, combined, abandon metaphysics to its routines, barely modified by the tenets of present-day science. But they change our ideas about ourselves forever.

What is the conclusion to draw from this inquiry into the universal grid of philosophy? It is that we cannot become God and that we can become more godlike.