

IS THE COMMON GOOD A UNIVERSAL ETHIC?

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At the time when I first began, as a young Australian, to study Western philosophy, it wasn't fashionable to talk about the "Common Good." Ethics had become a study of moral **language** – **meta**-ethics – on the assumption, scarcely disguised, that the business of testing **truth** claims and using **descriptive** language belonged to science, while morality dealt in human sentiments which had been codified in **prescriptive** statements – a useful language game, but in no sense embedded in objective reality.¹

There was no Common Good as such, only a process of judging between private goods according to either intuition or a calculus of the greatest good of the greatest number, or some such. If these courts of appeal failed to convince, then the fall-back position was to endorse a Liberal view of society, which substituted individual rights for the Common Good, permitting any behaviour provided that it didn't harm any other individual's pursuit of private satisfaction.

I've now lived through several decades, in which time I've seen the Liberal society sliding into moral anarchy. Social research is documenting widespread family dysfunction, friction between diverse interest groups and ethnic enclaves, and attempts to replace waning trust with increasing legal regulation. In addition, my country has become part of the global village, from which there's no escape, thanks to extensive cross-cultural migration, transnational economic ties, and a commercially driven media coverage that blandly bares all. We flounder in a sea of conflicting values and world-views.

In an attempt to rediscover the convivial society, many recent philosophers, particularly those often called Communitarians, have tried to revive the notion of the Common Good, and the term is beginning to reappear in social and educational theory.² On the other hand, many **other** thinkers are dismissing such moves. Speaking usually from a Relativistic position, they claim that not only did the Common Good in the past fail to be an effective ethical ideal, because the ruling classes defined it to their own advantage; but also, in this present time it's **too late** to renegotiate the Common Good because of the value pluralism which now characterises all modern democratic societies. The Liberal ethic, however thin, is all that democracy has left.

THE APPEAL TO A UNIVERSAL ETHIC

Meanwhile some other thinkers are using a different strategy to revive the Common Good. They appeal to a universal ethic. They claim that empirical inspection of ethical codes across the globe reveals some fundamental principles common to all.

The strongest claims of **this** kind come from people with religious viewpoints.³ Claiming to have received divine revelations, various religious traditions say that **they** have captured the essence. For example, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism each do so, citing divine enlightenment. The big difficulty **is** that though there **is** some significant common ground, there are also some crucial differences in the values they nominate, not to mention even deeper differences in their

ultimate visions of reality and human destiny: views which condition how they interpret the relative importance of the principles they put forward.

The same applies to Christianity. I myself am a committed Christian. I'm prepared to affirm my belief in a self-revealing personal God, and in the biblical passages which teach that at the most basic levels of human existence, our well-being **is** defined by a universal ethic. I believe that this ethic derives from our creation as animals into whom God has breathed spiritual awareness, which includes a moral sense. Consequently, I find that I can endorse many of the ethical principles espoused by other faiths, and also by many philosophers who reject religion. I welcome, for example, the principle of "respect for persons" which even many atheistic philosophers single out as primary. And I warmly endorse what many Jewish philosophers call the Noahide Laws.⁴

Those are **my** beliefs. But I also embrace some ethical principles which derive very specifically from Christian teaching, such as forgiving my enemies: principles which appeal much less to some of my friends who profess no religion or follow other faiths. And secondly, these principles make a great difference to which values are at the **core** of my value system. So **my** conclusions about a universal ethic differ from some other people in at least these two respects.

Some noble attempts have been made in recent times to negotiate agreements between people with diverse world-views, and some projects, like that of "The Parliament of the World's Religions",⁵ base their hopes on achieving rational agreement at the world-view level. But it's my conviction that at these **ultimate** levels of belief, agreement depends not only on rational considerations but on deep-laid cultural conditioning and significant experiences of relationship.

It follows that we are unlikely to achieve agreement in the foreseeable future on what constitutes the **Ultimate** Good. Our chances of averting the collapse of society into moral chaos and civil war – such as some modern societies are experiencing – depend on our being able to agree that the fairest political compromise is democracy – which is what I've called the Liberal fall-back position. But can we build on this a more positive and benevolent vision of community as well?

THE "MIDDLE GROUND" ARGUMENT

In some of my own writings⁶ I've tried to develop a more modest proposal, based on the notion of the middle ground in a democratic society. As an alternative to societies in which a dominant minority group enforces its will on the general populace – something we've seen too often in history and in modern times – the democratic ideal is one where a society allows individuals and close-knit sub-cultures the freedom to pursue and even advocate their own particular visions and values, subject to an agreement to respect the equal rights of all citizens to legal protection and freedom from poverty or persecution.

Thus far the Liberal ideal takes us. But beyond this, such a society necessarily involves people in many situations of sharing resources and engaging in common political, legal, economic and welfare provision. One thinks of health, education, the market economy, and so on. Beyond basic services of this kind, there are many other arenas of possible interaction, of a more convivial and enriching kind. In a healthy democracy, people from many different backgrounds can mingle and share in a diversity of cultural, sporting, and compassionate activities.

Such activities also pave the way for mutual trust to develop, opening up the possibility of dialogue about each other's ultimate visions and values, pursued freely within a bond of

mutual respect and friendship. This doesn't mean that we must all agree on everything, or endorse a common world-view, or even a universal ethic, before such sharing can take root. What is required is an agreed minimum, a value consensus which encourages us to promote each other's well-being; in short, a negotiated Common Good.

SOME HELPFUL PROCEDURAL RULES

On one occasion I was involved in a structured negotiation of this kind. A consortium was brought together representing the Anglican, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim schools in my home city.⁷ A curriculum had been formulated at national government level, which put considerable emphasis on the use of performance outcome statements in school assessment. In the opinion of my colleague Dr Tom Wallace and myself, these statements were woefully lacking in the identification of values outcomes. All the emphasis was on learning facts and skills.

Our consortium was formed to bid for a financial grant from the Commonwealth Government, which was funding a teacher development program. The money came through. We felt that a necessary first step would be to see if we could negotiate a working agreement between the consortium partners on the values they held in common. Certain procedural rules evolved as we attempted, through a modified form of the "Delphi" research technique, to develop what we came to call an "Agreed Minimum Values Framework." Let me briefly share with you some of these rules.⁸

1. Initially, we asked each participating group to describe its own core visions and ethical values.

We did this, not in order to collapse them all into one world-view and ethic to which all would be expected to conform, but in recognition of the fact that the values a person lives by gain both their ultimate justification and their motivating effect from the degree to which they are compatible with the person's own ultimate framework of meaning. This was something we needed, non-judgmentally, to understand about the other.

2. We then looked for potential agreements on shared visions and values which could also be justified at a practical level in terms of what is needed to sustain democratic life.

3. We asked participants to nominate not only the values they thought were minimally required for the maintenance of a democratic society, but also their ultimate visions and core values.

Our reasoning here was that education would be impoverished if its *raison d'être* were confined to the minimal conditions for democratic co-existence. We were trying to identify the shared aspirations and common goods which could enrich our interactions.

4. We agreed that if we encountered points of serious disagreement, we would, if possible, put them on hold and focus at this stage on our agreements.

This was not to be taken as a way of dismissing areas of disagreement, as though they were unimportant. Participants were still left free to pursue goals of their own, provided that these were compatible with whatever middle-ground values we agreed on. We hoped that no disagreement would arise that was so incorrigible that we could not continue the consensus process. Admittedly, that was an act of faith, or shall I say of growing trust in each other as people of good will.

5. We accepted that just as democracy is a procedural notion, not an ultimate vision for living, so the values framework we derived from this consultation would be a provisional minimal agreement.

That is, this is work in progress, coupled with the hope that, without infringing on the ultimate visions of any, we may progressively enlarge each other's perception of the Common Good. I've no time to spell this out any further, except to say that a robust values framework did emerge from this consultation⁹, which even moved the State Education Department to embark on a similar exercise. The result, as it turned out, was significantly indebted to the Framework our consortium had earlier developed.

CONCLUSION

So then, with regard to my topic – “Is the Common Good a Universal Ethic?” I conclude that many people, myself included, believe that ultimately it is. But in the interests of democratic co-existence, I believe that our best hope lies not in seeking to obtain agreement to this proposition up front, but in attempting to identify and enlarge the areas of agreement that may already exist in relation to shared visions and values. This can be done while honouring the right of all people to live by their ultimate meaning frameworks, and in the meantime encouraging mutual dialogue about them.

Such a process does not belong only to the philosophers, remorselessly correcting each other's logic, but also to ordinary people who value community life and in good faith seek reconciling relationships with those who hold different views of reality from themselves. For a person like myself who believes in a universal ethic grounded in the nature God has given us, there's a reasonable expectation that such a process of negotiating the Common Good will in fact draw us closer to that ethic.

¹ The doyen of mid-century was R. M. Hare (1952). See *The Language of Morals*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

² Notable recent works are McIntyre, Alasdair (1984). *After Virtue*, 2, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; and Charles Taylor (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

³ This is well demonstrated in Singer, Peter (ed.) (1991). *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell.

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noahide_Laws.

⁵ See Küng, Hans and Kuschel, Karl-Josef (eds) (1993). *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, London: SCM Press. The World's Parliament of Religions was founded in 1893 by Unitarians and Universalists of the Free Religious Association, and continues to attract wide participation. Its 2004 meeting in Barcelona, Spain, had over 8,900 participants from over 75 countries.

⁶ Most recently in Hill, Brian V. (2004). *Exploring Religion in School*, Adelaide, South Australia: OpenBook Publishers.

⁷ This work is described more fully in Hill, Brian V. (2000). “Seeking a Value Consensus for Education”, in Leicester, Mal, Modgil, Celia and Modgil, Sohan (eds), *Education, Culture and Values – Vol. II: Institutional Issues: Pupils, Schools and Teacher Education*, London: Falmer, 2000, 198-207. Also Hill, Brian V. (2001). “Educating for Moral Responsibility”, in *Creating Our Common Future*, ed. Jack Campbell, Paris/Oxford: UNESCO/Berghahn Books, 61-78.

⁸ These procedural rules were more fully spelled out in Hill (2001).

⁹ Values Review Project (1995). *Agreed Minimum Values Framework*, Perth, Western Australia: National Professional Development Program. The Framework itself is reproduced in the Appendix below.

APPENDIX: THE AGREED MINIMUM VALUES FRAMEWORK

1.0 ULTIMATE VALUES

1. Life Perspectives	2. Individual	3. Society	4. Natural World
<p>We affirm God as creator and sustainer of all things.</p> <p>1.11 God as creator <i>God created the world and sustains its continued existence.</i></p> <p>1.12 God as self-revealer <i>God's nature and will through the natural world, conscience and prophetic revelation.</i></p> <p>1.13 Religion <i>Religion arises from the human response to God in the search for purpose and meaning in life .</i></p> <p>1.14 Spirituality <i>Humans sense that they are more than animal, and are to be encouraged to cherish and interrogate their experiences of transcendence.</i></p> <p>1.15 After-life <i>We affirm the belief that there is life beyond physical death which takes into account our previous life-choices.</i></p>	<p>We affirm our creation in God's image and our dependence on Him.</p> <p>1.21 Social nature <i>We are created social beings, and the full realisation of human potential requires inter-dependence and the conquest of selfishness.</i></p> <p>1.22 Individual uniqueness <i>Each person is different, and should be encouraged to develop self-respect and realise their full God-given wholeness.</i></p> <p>1.23 Open to learn <i>Each individual should be continually open to the possibility of learning from the cultural tradition and from people of divergent views.</i></p> <p>1.24 Compassion <i>Each individual should have a sensitivity to, and concern for, the well-being of other people.</i></p> <p>1.25 Responsibility <i>Each individual has freedom of will and so must accept personal responsibility for their conduct and impact on other people and nature.</i></p> <p>1.26 Imperfection <i>Each individual is imperfect and fallible, and is given the opportunity of repentance.</i></p>	<p>We affirm that we are constituted to live in community.</p> <p>1.31 Authority <i>We affirm the legitimacy of authority structures, the rule of law, and the recognition of human rights, consistent with what we know to be the law of God.</i></p> <p>1.32 Morality <i>We affirm that the moral institution of life arises from a God-given sense of personal responsibility for our conduct and relationships in accordance with God's commandments.</i></p> <p>1.33 Family <i>We affirm the primary importance of a stable, moral and caring home environment.</i></p> <p>1.34 Community <i>We are committed to encouraging interpersonal co-operation and social responsibility.</i></p> <p>1.35 Diversity <i>We recognise the richness of many cultural expressions, and welcome ethnic diversity in the context of shared community life.</i></p> <p>1.36 Contribution <i>Society has something to gain from every individual life, and should maximise the opportunities for all persons to contribute to the common good.</i></p> <p>1.37 Reconciliation <i>We affirm the need for reconciliation between those who are estranged.</i></p>	<p>We affirm that God made a good world for which we are to care.</p> <p>1.41 Nature is good <i>The natural environment is good and beautiful in itself, and to be respected and appreciated as a gift of God.</i></p> <p>1.42 Stewardship <i>Our relationship to nature is neither that of dominators or guardians, but rather that of stewards, charged with managing it in trust for future generations.</i></p> <p>1.43 Development <i>Development is an appropriate exercise of stewardship, provided that it maintains the ecological balance in nature through policies of sustainability.</i></p> <p>1.44 Exploitation <i>Recognising that human sinfulness has led to much degradation of the environment, we accept a special responsibility to encourage the ecological repair of such areas.</i></p>

2.0 DEMOCRATIC VALUES

1. Life Perspectives	2. Individual	3. Society	4. Natural World
<p>2.11 Search for knowledge We affirm the search for knowledge, especially that which enhances the achievement of the other ends valued in this Framework.</p> <p>2.12 Religious quest We affirm and encourage the human quest for ultimate meaning and purpose in life.</p> <p>2.13 Religious freedom We affirm the right of individuals to choose and advocate their own life perspectives, consistent with the right of others to do likewise.</p> <p>2.14 Freedom of worship We affirm the right of all individuals to freedom to worship or not worship as they see fit.</p>	<p>2.21 Equality We affirm the equal worth and basic rights of all persons, regardless of differences in race, gender, ability, and religious belief.</p> <p>2.22 Opportunity Each individual should be given the opportunity to explore and develop their own unique endowments.</p> <p>2.23 Tolerance Each individual should be encouraged to show tolerance towards those of different opinion, temperament, or background.</p> <p>2.24 Citizenship Each individual should be encouraged to contribute to the community services consistent with good citizenship.</p> <p>2.25 Caring In particular, individuals should be encouraged to express caring concern towards all people, especially those in need.</p> <p>2.26 Responsibility and Freedom Individuals should have the freedom to choose their way of life, subject to being held responsible for the impact of their choices on nature and other citizens.</p>	<p>2.31 Social justice We recognise the rights of all persons to a fair share of the economic and cultural resources of the democratic society.</p> <p>2.32 The common good We are committed to exploring and promoting the common good, and to ensuring that people's needs are met without infringing the basic human rights of others.</p> <p>2.33 Participation As a democratic society, Australia should encourage and train its citizens to participate in the political process.</p> <p>2.34 Multiculturalism We welcome the varied ethnic contributions possible in a multicultural society, and encourage their expression in ways consistent with the common good.</p> <p>2.35 Welfare Society has a responsibility to provide a safety net for those who lack the capacity, through sickness, disability, or unemployment, to sustain a viable life-style.</p> <p>2.36 Reconciliation In regard to personal and group conflicts, we affirm a preference for strategies of reconciliation rather than coercion and confrontation.</p>	<p>2.41 Conservation of the environment We affirm the enjoyment of nature, and the need to preserve its diversity and balance.</p> <p>2.42 Sustainable development We affirm the need to continue to develop natural resources to sustain human life, provided it is done in a way consistent with long-term sustainability.</p> <p>2.43 Rehabilitation We affirm a need to rehabilitate habitats degraded by human misuse.</p> <p>2.44 Diversity of species We recognise a need to arrest the extinction of presently surviving species</p>

3.0 EDUCATIONAL VALUES

1. Life Perspectives	2. Individual	3. Society	4. Natural World
<p>3.11 Study of world views We affirm the need to equip students with the tools to examine world-views (both religious and non-religious), especially those dominant in their background and school community.</p> <p>3.12 Personal meaning We acknowledge the need of all persons for a sense of personal meaning, and we encourage critical reflection on questions of constituting the self in relation to the natural and social worlds.</p> <p>3.13 The Family We affirm the primary importance of family life and the responsibility of parents for the educational development of the child.</p> <p>3.14 Value systems We encourage students to explore the moral point of view and to develop a personal value system.</p> <p>3.15 Knowledge We affirm the tentative and limited nature of socially constructed knowledge, and the need to make students aware of this.</p>	<p>3.21 Access We affirm the right of every child to be given access to available knowledge at an appropriate developmental level.</p> <p>3.22 Individual differences We affirm that the curriculum should take into account, both in its planning and implementation, the individual's readiness and ability to learn.</p> <p>3.23 Empowerment We value the development of critical thinking, the creative imagination, interpersonal and vocational skills, and basic competencies in the various forms of disciplined enquiry.</p> <p>3.24 Learning climate We seek to encourage a learning climate free of coercive or indoctrinative elements, whether in the explicit or the covert curriculum.</p>	<p>3.31 Critical reflection We encourage critical reflection on both the cultural heritage and the attitudes and values underlying current social trends and institutions.</p> <p>3.32 Benefits of research We acknowledge a social obligation to support research that promises to improve the quality of human life, and to share the benefits as widely as possible.</p> <p>3.33 Value dimension We are committed to demonstrating the existence of a value dimension in all knowledge.</p> <p>3.34 School as community We view schools as communities in which all persons should be seen to have rights, and be encouraged to participate in decision-making related to the school's corporate life.</p> <p>3.35 Conflict Resolution We endorse peaceful means of conflict resolution at personal, social, and international levels.</p>	<p>3.41 Quest for truth We recognise the human drive to understand the realities of the social and natural worlds as being a valid quest for truth in its ultimate unity.</p> <p>3.42 Domains of knowledge We aim to promote understanding of all the domains of human experience, especially the physical, intellectual, aesthetic, social, moral and spiritual.</p> <p>3.43 Science and values We affirm both the value and the limitations of the experimental methods of science, and their dependence on human values.</p> <p>3.44 Environmental responsibility We are committed to developing an appreciative understanding of the natural environment, and encouraging a concern for forms of resource development which are regenerative and sustainable.</p>