

Franklin I. Gamwell, "The Moral Ground of Cosmopolitan Democracy."
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1. Analysis and Interpretation

Present problems of the human community, both regional and global, make the question of world government an urgent question. But if there is to be anything like *consensual* world government (i.e., world government pursued out of respect for, or attachment to, a properly moral ground, as distinct from even enlightened self-interest, balance of power, military coercion, and so on), a universally human moral ground needs to be critically explicated. One possible contribution of contemporary philosophy and theology, accordingly, would be to work out just such a critical explication.

The main challenge to doing this, however, is the conviction dominating contemporary Western philosophical discussion that no such universally human moral ground can be critically validated because no moral argument can be convincing universally, independently of some historically or socio-culturally specific context. This conviction is of a piece, of course, with the more general "postmodern" critique of modernity, according to which the characteristically modern reduction of reason to the formal rationality of logic and mathematics, on the one hand, and the scientific-technological rationality of a solitary subject, on the other, follows from the claim for its universal validity. Underlying and supporting this critique, then, is the further shift of philosophical reflection beyond "the subjective turn" to the so-called linguistic and hermeneutical turns, i.e., the sustained attention given to the dependence of human subjectivity as such on participation in language and thus in some specific historical, socio-cultural "communication community."

Plausible as it is, however, this widespread critique of universal reason, including universal moral reason, is vulnerable to a telling objection—namely, that any claim made or implied for its own validity pragmatically refutes it, in that the validity thereby claimed is precisely universal, the whole point of the critique being to deny so much as the possibility of any such universally valid claim. To demonstrate this, however, is in effect to develop

a "transcendental argument," whose importance, like that of any other such argument, is to clarify the necessary conditions of the possibility of human subjectivity as such. But notwithstanding a widespread view to the contrary, this defense of the importance of transcendental arguments in no way denies their severe limitation, which derives from the fact that none of the particular or specific features of any human subject or of anything that she or he might possibly understand can be validly derived from them.

Critics of transcendental arguments are insofar justified, however, as the two affirmations of (1) the transcendental nature of the moral law; and (2) the inescapable historicity of any actual moral understanding cannot be consistently made together. Therefore, if there is to be such a thing as the moral pursuit of consensual world government, and thus a universally human moral ground, what is required is an alternative account of actual human understanding that qualifies its alleged complete historicity.

A moral law presupposed by human subjectivity simply as such must itself be understood as universally valid precisely because it prescribes decision with understanding in conformity with it. But then a distinction is required between *the original understanding* of the moral law as well as of human existence as such and the greater or lesser diversity of *other understandings* that individual human subjects can and do also have. Whereas all of a subject's other understandings are indeed historically, or socio-culturally, specific, in that they are dependent on learning or on reflecting on learning, her or his original understanding is not and cannot be thus dependent, because, being precisely original, it is always already present in any life where there is any understanding at all. To be human is to live understandingly. But this means that to be human is to decide with understanding to live either in conformity with or in violation of the law that is always already originally understood, no matter what else may or may not be understood.

The distinction between original and other understandings is related to and can be clarified by the other distinction between implicit and explicit understandings. This is so, at any rate, provided it is recognized that some understandings that are implicit in experience at a particular moment have

not always been so because they were previously learned by the subject and thus were the contents of earlier explicit understandings. Always already implicit, however, is an original understanding that has never been learned and never could be learned.

But if human existence as such thus includes an original *understanding*, and specifically, an original understanding of the universal moral law, it also is or includes an original *decision*—namely, the decision for an understanding of oneself made possible and necessary by one's original understanding. In this sense, human existence is existence by way of a self-understanding, decision for which is itself made possible by what one originally understands.

Being-in-the-world, then, is not dependent in all respects on some historically specific setting, cultural system, or "lifeworld." Although communication among us requires participation in language and we can become the human subjects we are only through membership in some communication community, meaning and truth are not completely circumscribed by any specific human location. On the contrary, each human subject as such originally understands her- or himself, if only implicitly, in relation to a comprehensive good or purpose that she or he either affirms with integrity or denies with duplicity. Because this understanding is original, it cannot require any specific lifeworld.

A comprehensive good or purpose, however, requires that there be a divine, universal individual. Why? Because the possibilities of good in the world cannot be greater or less in the manner that makes sense of our moral obligation to maximize the good unless the differing realizations achieved by the diverse world realities are not a mere collection but are rather received and unified again and again anew as an actual totality, and thus as the concrete state of a universal individual.

It is also important to note, however, that, among our linguistically constituted meanings, there may well be some that validly designate the character of self-understanding and therewith of the metaphysical ground to which humans necessarily relate understandingly, whatever else they may or

may not understand. In other words, a natural language typically includes concepts and symbols, or the potential therefor, in terms of which we can explicitly represent our original understanding relation to the comprehensive good. But, then, the plurality and diversity of lifeworlds does not mean that common moral pursuit of cosmopolitan democracy is impossible. Because each lifeworld includes at least the possibility of representing in its own terms what all humans always already understand, each is or can be the setting for communication about valid self-understanding and thus for explicit pursuit of civilized advance on a global scale.

But granted that there is indeed a universally human moral good in the form of the comprehensive purpose of a universal, all-inclusive, and therefore divine individual, no understanding of this good can be valid that does not consistently include a principle of universal human rights. True, universal human rights necessarily imply a comprehensive good or purpose in the very nature of things that is and must be understood as valid wherever life with understanding occurs and that we can pursue with integrity only through living together in such a way as to secure these rights. But it is just as true that no conception of that comprehensive purpose can be valid that does not consistently prescribe applying it not only directly but also indirectly through just such a community of rights.

Of course, achievement of cosmopolitan democracy depends on more than its explicit moral pursuit as required by the comprehensive good or purpose at the heart of things. It also depends on circumstances and possibilities, on what Kant called a "cunning of nature," or Whitehead, a conspiracy of "senseless agencies." Apart from a context provided by other favorable historical changes, moral commitment to achieving consensual world government cannot attain its objective. Thus, however threatening modern science and its associated technological powers may be, they have made possible the global systems of interaction and communication apart from which the achievement of world democracy would be impossible. So, too, achieving world democracy presupposes, among other things, sufficient capacity throughout the world to participate in full and free political discourse and as well as sufficiently effective commitment to this form of political determination. But these necessary conditions of world democracy are demonstrably wanting—the single greatest

reason for this being, perhaps, the massive disparity in economic and socio-cultural resources available to people in different countries and regions and, especially, the abject poverty of so much of the human community.

Also wanting, however, are greater and more pervasive capacities within the human community for communication with others inheriting very different historical forms of being-in-the-world. In this respect, another prerequisite of world democracy is the more secure emergence of lifeworld formations more or less global in scope beyond those supportive of technological and economic interaction. But such formations are hardly likely to emerge without directly addressing underlying religious differences. And this in turn requires a common willingness to submit conflicting religious claims to the final sovereignty of discursive adjudication, in the confidence that they can be assessed by argument. In this sense, commitment to religious discourse, and thus to "interreligious dialogue" in the strict meaning of the term, is an especially demanding condition of advance toward world democracy.

2. Criticism

2.1 What constitutes human existence *qua* human?—Again and again, Gamwell writes as though what constitutes it were simply "relation"—relation, as he puts it in one of his formulations, to "a form of reality ever-present to human existence, or present to human subjectivity as such" (574). But, of course, he means, and must mean, not simply "relation," but "*understanding* relation." For on the metaphysics that we both take to be valid, to be anything actual or concrete at all is to be related to others, and—whatever other things one may or may not be related to—to be related to *the* Other, and therewith to the necessary conditions of the possibility of anything whatsoever. So what is constitutive of human existence *qua* human, and thus as distinct from existence more generally cannot be simply relation, or even relation to strictly ultimate reality; it can only be *understanding* relation thereto. That Gamwell commonly writes so as to obscure this, however, is clear from other places as well, such as, for example, "Democracy and the Theological Task," where he says, "adherence to formative principles cannot itself be prescribed unless relation to the real ground of ultimate worth is a necessary condition of human existence as such" (363).

Clearly, this sentence can succeed in conveying what he means to say only if his reader tacitly reads "relation" as "understanding relation."

2.2 And what, exactly, does he mean by "reality as such"?—Does it refer to something utterly abstract, or rather to something eminently concrete? Or does it refer to something that, in suitably different respects, is both, so that the term as such is ambiguous, even if systematically so? My guess is that he often uses it to refer to something utterly abstract, as he clearly seems to do, for example, on 582, where he takes the referent of the phrase to include "the nature [*sic*] of God" and glosses it as "nothing other than the necessary conditions of temporal actualizations that are always contingent."

2.3 What, exactly, does Gamwell mean by "the traditional metaphysical project" (567 f.)?—He hardly means, simply "classical metaphysics," although the three representatives of the project that he specifically names are all, arguably, to some degree or other, classical metaphysicians. On the other hand, if he means something like what Hartshorne calls "ultrarationalism," in the sense of applying an unqualified principle of sufficient reason, Aquinas hardly fits the profile insofar as he certainly affirms (however consistently!) that some things are and must be contingent rather than necessary. But if one attends to what he evidently takes to be the defining characteristics of the project—namely, its assertion of something in all respects absolute or eternal and its denial of anything historically contingent; and if one notes the qualified way in which he speaks of denying contingency "explicitly or implicitly," one may very well take him to mean precisely ultrarationalism, Leibniz and Hegel being understood to deny contingency explicitly, Aquinas, to deny it implicitly in denying that God is in any respect contingent, temporal, relative.

2.4 Gamwell is surely right in arguing that the understandings a given human subject enjoys can occur at all only because they necessarily include a self-understanding, which he further speaks of as "a discrimination of self from anything else that is or might be understood" (573). But I see no reason to speak so vaguely simply of "anything else that is or might be understood." Why not, rather, explicate the phrase and say, flat out, that a self-understanding is a discrimination of self both from *others* that, like the self, are but parts of the encompassing whole of reality and from *the Other* that is that whole of reality

itself as not only many but one, "the one which is all"? In any event, Gamwell is also exactly right in arguing both (1) that self-understanding occurs only by way of an original decision for it, which is itself made possible by an original understanding that, being transcendental, doesn't require to be learned or achieved through reflection on learning ; and (2) that because, with respect to this original understanding, our life as an understanding life is not necessarily constituted by socio-cultural, and so linguistic, participation, the dependence of our meaning intentions on a historically specific setting is qualified.