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Towards Understanding of a Shared
Humanity
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"Respect consists in consideration and understanding of variety, not in merely tolerating the bare existence of other human beings without evincing care for them."— Beate Ulrike Sayed

Facing a world of increasing cultural friction and ongoing violence, one is tempted to ask, as Thomas Mann did at the end of his Magic Mountain: "From this world feast of death, even out of the worst conflagration of fever, kindling the rainy evening sky, will love ever rise?" Groups holding varying comprehensive doctrines seemingly aim at establishing their values at the expense of annihilating others by means of silencing, oppression or even killing. Insistent attitudes of cultural superiority, moral self-righteousness, self-certainty and the exclusive possession of truth only fan the flames of global conflagration. Conferences organized to promote dialogue amongst differing groups have their participants ending up holding monologues against each other, aiming only at reinforcing or even imposing one's own beliefs and values. Even the declaration of human rights becomes meaningless, if it is abused as a means to act out power over others. Thus, the one thing we desperately are in need of is a valid basis for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, which is universally applicable. Descriptive attempts such as Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, giving an account of incompatibly different cultures, are inherently destructive in this context. Empirical conceptions of morality also devalue the possibility of a universally possible code for moral actions totally. Instead, attempts focusing on common grounds rather than on differences, emphasizing shared characteristics amongst differing human beings seem to offer a more meaningful basis for intercourse. Normative philosophical conceptions of universalism developed in the field of moral philosophy might be considered capable of providing such a basis. In particular, thinkers standing in Aristotelian and Kantian tradition, such as John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Martha Nussbaum or Hermann Cohen, try to propose abstract, universalized theories that still leave room for the diversity of human lives. By following the idea of a common practical reasoning ability in all human beings, such conceptions aim at an understanding of a shared humanity.

In developing his theory, the quest for Rawls is to formulate universal principles that everyone, regardless of his moral conception, would be willing to abide by. He considers the realisation of this objective to be attained in what he calls "an overlapping consensus". This consensus is to be grounded on the differing moral values offered by the varying doctrines individuals hold. What such a conception mainly demands of its participants is mutual respect, which is based on some cardinal virtues that are to be derived from the varying comprehensive views. What is to the forefront in this theory of Rawls' is the individual and his reasoning capabilities. Each person is understood to have two moral powers, which consist in the capacity for a sense of justice and the capacity for a conception of the good. Since all human beings are considered to have the same moral capabilities, Rawls understands them to "...share a common human reason, similar powers of thought and judgement...". Equipped with these two powers, individuals are capable of reasoning in an objective and impartial way on just principles and action. Furthermore, these moral capabilities enable the various citizens to engage in reasonable disagreement about their divergent values. The sources of reasonable disagreement itself are to be found in what Rawls calls the "burdens of judgement". The first problem to be recognized consists in the fact that all individuals as individuals pursue a plurality of ends. The means towards these ends or the ends themselves may exclude each other. The rational person then has to opt for the most choiceworthy end, after rational intercourse. Additionally, individuals have to evaluate the validity of

ends pursued by others. While doing so they need to respect and take seriously the moral and reasoning capabilities in themselves as well as in others. Others, although differing, are to be granted to have as much authenticity of thought and belief as oneself has. Furthermore, it needs to be taken into consideration that the reasoning of an individual concerning himself or others is subject to varying influences from his cultural and social background.

Habermas's theory of communicative reasoning, following Kant's idea of practical reasoning, takes a direction similar to that of Rawls. In establishing an ethics of discourse, he also addresses the difficulty of arriving at a meaningful consensus in questions of moral values, arising out of the actuality of what he calls "a pluralism of final orientation values". For him it is an urgent need for the moral philosopher to establish a bridge-building principle that makes consensus possible in the first place. Discourses on ethics amongst groups holding varying doctrines are to be designed as broad as possible instead of narrowing them down to discussions about specific actions in specific situations. The more general and abstract the discourse is, the more likely a consensus is to be reached. However, it is of utmost importance that the participants draw on moral considerations given in their doctrines, because communicatively acting individuals engaging in meaningful dialogue must necessarily base their arguments on value considerations, which are to be grounded on reasoning. In the course of the dialogue, values that fail to promote a consensus must fall off the scope. Cultural values might have intersubjective validity, but in being interwoven with the life-style of one culture, are limited in their reach. Thus, being interested in consensus, a drawing on, but also a distancing from one's own conceptions, needs to take place.

In trying to address the problem of establishing a theory, which is universally applicable, Nussbaum develops an account of shared human capabilities. In a way similar to Rawls and Habermas, she wants to ground her approach on an overlapping consensus between persons holding varying comprehensive, moral doctrines. The capabilities held to be undeniably necessary for human functioning are considered to be important to any human life and therefore are to be agreed upon by everybody. From among her established, detailed list of capabilities, which are all interconnected, Nussbaum considers the capabilities of practical reasoning and affiliation to be the most important ones. They constitute truly human life in the first place. Missing one of the mentioned capabilities would declare a life not worthy of being called a human life. The ability to use ones own reasoning capabilities consists in an ability to form up ones own conception of a good life, being able to plan and to choose toward it. This concern with ones own good life must also entail the ability to interact with other human beings in a meaningful way. Affiliation is of great importance, because it makes compassion, feeling or thinking-along-with the other possible. In acknowledging another's suffering, one comes to consider oneself as sharing in the same world of restricted possibilities of human action and of vulnerable human beings. This makes way for a new understanding of fellow human beings that leads to respect for them. Such an understanding becomes important in situations of superiority or conflict such as, for example, in war. The virtuous person must therefore be capable of pity as a tool of recognizing the humanity in the other.

Herman Cohen offered a concept of compassion described in his Religion of Reason that even exceeds the idea of affiliation put forward by Martha Nussbaum. To act in a reasonable way is only possible in entertaining and applying compassion for others. The compassion is only true and worthy of praise if it is evinced towards a real other, a "stranger without rights", as Cohen formulates it. Acting virtuously towards equals, towards those sharing the same considerations as oneself, does not demand much of the individual. It is rather an extension of self-love. Being capable instead to develop understanding and love for the one absolutely different and recognizing his humanity to be the same one as mine, is what constitutes true morality.

What makes the considered concepts particularly important is their desire to bridge the differences amongst human beings, which appear unbridgeable prima facie. Clearly, universalistic concepts need to make room for considerations about cultural traditions, social integration and socialization. Thus, a concept aiming at reconciliation should be formulated as broadly as possible, in a way such as that Saint-Exupéry suggests in his book The Wisdom of the Sands. There he states: "To build peace means to build the stable wide enough so that the whole herd might sleep in it. It means to build the palace wide enough, so that all human beings can be united in it, without abandoning something of their baggage. They are not to be mutilated so that they find space in it." The examined accounts precisely offer this. Instead of asking for alikeness, they aim at equality or "mutual recognition of humanity" as Nussbaum puts it. However, respect for diversity is not to be used to explain harmful traditions away. There might actually exist malignant practices in some cultures that one might still want to be able to resist, instead of excusing them on the grounds of an argument out of cultural relativism. Doctrines arguing against respect and care necessarily need to be repudiated. In this context one might take into consideration that probably most traditions contain ideas of mutual respect, as well as, simultaneously, ideas of segregation on grounds of particularity. This would mean that the individual is requested to distance himself from those parts of his tradition, which do not go along with ideas of a shared humanity. Those processes of distancing might be painful, in demanding that beloved attitudes be given up. However, this seems to be the only way towards a less cruel and violent world. It requires of the individual the capability to be self-reflective and critical towards his society, instead of lulling himself in permanent self-righteousness. Instead of letting any discussion about moral norms deviate into a strife for recognition, one should take a turn towards self-examination and self-criticism. Furthermore, another attitude is requested of an individual, namely to take a stand for, not to or against, an other. If a person has a right to a certain treatment, but is deprived of it, other persons recognizing this deprivation might be bestowed with the duty to interfere. If a fundamental right of a Kantian sort, such as "the dignity of a human being is inviolable" is to have any validity at all, it needs to be defended universally, regardless of differing value systems or even culturally-based dislikes. To be able to act out one's humanity in such a way for others requires courage. It first and foremost demands having "...the courage to make use of your own reason", as Kant says, because it is difficult to free oneself of one's "mental immaturity" and to avoid treading a beaten track of thought. Furthermore, it takes courage to resist giving into pressures of assimilation and alikeness, which aim at the annihilation of others due to their differing convictions. Respect consists in consideration of and understanding for variety, not in merely tolerating the bare existence of other human beings without evincing care for them. In at least partly accepting and applying conceptions of universalism, one might at one place in time be able to exclaim, as Erich Fried does in his poem Entreaty of the Stone: "...I woke up, I want to take courage to go against the wind...",

against the wind of all those who sell their disrespectfulness and cruelties as defences of moral righteousness on grounds of their culture.