306. "On Self-Evident Truths" Symposium: *After Relativism, What?* Academic Questions Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 2002/2003) 11-15.[1]

The National Association of Scholars, at some point, may want to pass a rule stating that since relativism has been criticized to perfection, we shall henceforth dedicate to it not more than 10 percent of our attention and we shall devote much more energy to what will come next. We have had a field day pointing out the abundant flaws in both the old-fashioned form and the multicultural form of relativism, so the time is ripe to focus on what, for me at least, are the more difficult questions: What moral judgments, which universal claims, can we rely on? Are there some basic truths, and how may we establish or find them?

Two asides for those who may or may not have thrown up their hands at the mention of such a project. (1) I am told that Lawrence Kohlberg once asked his class, “Can you tell who is the most moral among you?” When all the students — relativist they were to a man — said “Surely not,” Larry shot back, “I'm going to fail anybody who takes that position.” The students responded as one: “Unfair! Unfair!” Suddenly they had found a shared, solid, and, to them, uncontested standard to judge by. (2) In my favorite New Yorker cartoon, Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the tablets and the Israelites question him. “Well,” he replies, “they really are etched in stone.”

There is no scarcity of suggestions on where to go to find such etched-in-stone principles — the solid truth — on which to base our judgments. I'll list a few, but be warned; none of them quite cut it, although some, most likely in combination, may move us in the right direction.

Social scientists have suggested that all societies adhere to certain universal values. One form or another of the Golden Rule, for example, appears in all cultures. It may follow that, if we want to rise above cultural relativism, we might adopt values that humans seem to share and agree on already.

But the extent of shared values and agreement varies and often does not take us very far toward an answer. To illustrate, I ask, “Might human life have some universal value?” Many cultures abhor killing fellow members of the community unless they've violated some criminal code or committed political or religious heresy. But killing is not universally unacceptable. Eight seems to be allowable as the maximum number of lives that may be taken in revenge killing, and outsiders are fair game in many societies. Other, presumably more enlightened groups, like the Nazis, pay lip service to the sanctity of human life by defining the targets of their aggression as somehow subhuman.

Moreover, consensus is seldom unanimous. Are we willing to grant any small faction a veto power over what we consider moral? Of course, we can always go by what the

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[1] This article draws on chapter eight of Professor Etzioni's The New Golden Rule (Basic Books, 1997).

majority holds to be moral. Majority rule provides a political out, but no one claims, or at least no one should claim, that what the majority decides is, on the face of it, a moral truth.

Alternatively, it is fashionable in some quarters these days to turn to genetics as a source of absolutes. Shared biological attributes, in my opinion, are a dubious provenance for morality, because I doubt that anyone has or will in the near future be able to analyze DNA to find, say, an altruistic gene that we all share and that offers a secure foundation on which to base our standards. Also, scholars, who try to draw on biology for moral truths, face the fact that our genes change very slowly while our moral culture does not. As illustration of this problem, the first half of Francis Fukuyama's The Great Disruption (Free Press, 1999) presents data that show vividly the deterioration in our moral order after the 1960s. In as little as four years, he says, things fell apart in an explosion of drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and violent crime. In the second half of the book, Fukuyama elides into an explanation of how nature drives our ethics. Missing in the middle is a reconciliation of the rapid change of the moral climate in and after the 1960s with the barely mutable movement of biology over that same period.

There is one source of a solid moral foundation. That is religion. The devout are fortunate to have such formulations as “God demands” or “the Bible says,” which provide strong anchoring points, without necessarily stifling discussion and further interpretation. Father John Neuhaus, on one occasion, pointed out to me that religion is beneficial for one's mental hygiene. I teased him with the question, “Are you telling me that I should be religious for utilitarian reasons?” His response has stayed with me: “For those who don't have revelation, you give reason.” It's a powerful line. Those who have a religious revelation of the truth can then apply reason. Unfortunately, such revelation is not available to all of us. We who are without it are left bereft, casting about for secular principles upon which to build.

The principles enumerated in the American Constitution may help us sort our priorities when two rights conflict or when we must weigh a right against a common good. With them, we can negotiate at least part of the way. When we pronounce, for instance, that freedom of speech should trump some concerns for privacy, we base this ranking on absolute values that the Founders vested in the Constitution. Some suggest that the document is indeed God-given, but, as we do with religious authority, we hold the Constitution, and the various interpretations given to it by the Supreme Court, up to independent judgment. Whether we debate vouchers, the death penalty, or affirmative action, we do not simply accept the values expressed in constitutional terms as ultimate, uncontested truth. That is, we have a sense of higher criteria on which we draw when we assess the moral standing, the legitimacy, of various phrases of the Constitution and of court rulings. It is proper that we dismiss, out-of-hand, constitutional anachronisms that refer, for instance, to non-Europeans as people of a lower standing.

Because the jurisdiction of the Constitution ends at our borders, the search for cross-cultural, indeed global, absolutes has led many to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Among other international statements on ethics, this declaration has acquired much the same respect around the world that Americans have for their Constitution. Again, it is subject to some higher criteria. Thus, drawing on divergent concepts of equality and fairness, we wonder if people indeed have socio-economic rights that deserve the same standing as legal and political ones. As

I argue in The New Golden Rule — drawing on the communitarian concept of the essential balance between autonomy and social order — the United Nation's declaration can be faulted for its failure to recognize that people who command rights must also assume responsibilities.

In a rather different attempt, Jurgen Habermas, in some of his writing, advocates what might be called a "procedural" approach through a series of proper and orderly steps to a basis for judgment. This approach is particularly suited to political, as opposed to social, discourse. We settle political differences at the ballot. There the question is not what is right in some moral sense but what course of action the different members of a polity are willing to accept. Voting and other such treatments reflect the legitimacy of the procedure, but not the moral standing of the outcome.

Thus welfare reforms introduced in the United States (and the UK) in the 1990s, which cut off all benefits — including food stamps and health care — after a given period, are morally unappealing to me, despite their having been duly enacted with extensive hearings and the requisite votes. My moral bottom line is that every person is to be treated as if he has a basic human worth, and it is not necessary for him to do anything for us to respect that worth. After all, we provide even convicted terrorists and serial killers with roofs over their heads, clothing, three meals a day, and basic health care. I see no reason for welfare clients to receive worse treatment. That is, I bring a substantive value to bear on political positions that result from legitimate procedures. Simply arriving at those positions legitimately is not sufficient for us to accept them as moral. The basic human worth of everyone happens to be one of my moral guidelines; you may subscribe to another. How are the values we bring to bear to be assessed? Is there some foundation, the validity of which no one can deny?

Proceduralists may suggest that their approach is not limited to political matters and applies to moral judgments more generally. In the broader social realm, however, one must distinguish between two rather different discourses, those of rational deliberations and moral dialogues. Rational deliberations are "cool," based on information and logic. Moral dialogues are passionate. They engage our values. Proceduralists favor rational deliberations because they fear that moral dialogues will lead to cultural wars and then into shooting wars. Furthermore, moral dialogues cannot be settled without some substantive moral principles, while rational deliberations can be resolved on the basis of facts and logic that all can see. (Those who do not see are dismissed as not rational.) I suggest that the ramifications of moral dialogue can be contained, and thence one can work to ensure that they will not lead to violent conflict and that they foster shared moral understandings.

In this way we now accept a moral obligation to protect the environment that did not exist in the 1950s, and we agree that we ought to change the relationship among the races, and between men and women. (Still other moral dialogues on the death penalty and gay marriage, for instance, are currently moving toward closure.) Substantive moral dialogues, though passionate and disorderly, often lead ultimately to shared understanding of a good. We must still ask, however, on what do we base our required judgment of that shared understanding — other than on the fact that we agreed?

Constitutions, universal declarations, and moral dialogues may take us part of the way, but something is still missing. That missing factor consists, in my opinion, of what the Founding Fathers resoundingly called self-evident truths. The founders did

not speak of self-evident truths for Americans, as some would have it, but of concepts self-evident to anyone who will open his mind and heart.

In this regard, there is a thought experiment that I have employed hundreds of times with groups from different cultures and societies. It entails asking them to assume that they are members of a curriculum committee for the third grade, who must deliberate on whether, under normal circumstances, to teach children that truth telling is better than lying, or the converse. So far, in my experience, I've always received the same reaction: "I'm sorry, I don't see the question." Obviously, that is, it's self-evident that one should teach children that truth telling is better than lying, under most circumstances. Rather than going through the utilitarian exercise of reflecting that if he's going to lie, then other people are going to lie, then he's going to live in a world in which everybody lies, and so he probably doesn't want to live in such a world — a person simply recognizes the self-evident truth right away. There are a limited number of such moral statements that speak in an unmistakable voice that is deontologically persuasive to most human beings. After we have heard that voice, we are free to examine it, but reason follows the revelation. Revelation is not based on reason, but protected and specified by it.

People who live in closed societies or isolated communities and who are subject to extensive and prolonged religious or political indoctrination may not hear the same moral voices pronouncing self-evident truths. However, when these societies are exposed to free dialogue, those voices come in clearer. When people can hear the same limited moral claims, they tend gradually to gravitate toward the same truth.

I am liable here to the accusation that I've failed to address Big Answers on this topic offered by philosophies that draw on the human telos, human flourishing, reason, or happiness as ultimate criteria. My short response would be, Guilty as Charged, but it would take a semester to deal with those matters. A somewhat more satisfactory response might be that the champions of these principles treat them as self-evident truths. For those to whom they speak in a compelling way, such principles indeed provide the required foundation.

Let me close by suggesting that, after a period of open moral dialogue, one and all recognize the need for a careful balance of the freedom to make their own choices with an equal measure of restraint, promoted as necessary by mores and laws. Attaining that equilibrium is a complicated matter. All I can do here is lay the claim that there is a limited but crucial set of self-evident truths that speak to us in an unmistakable voice, and that provide a foundation for universal moral claims.