

Universalism and Anti-Universalism in Western Philosophy
Supplementary Explanations to the Talk ‘Nietzsche: From Nazi Icon to Leftist Idol’
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Subjective Universalism

Universalism as a philosophical concept is inseparable from *absolutism* in the sense of *absolute authority*. For instance, in regard to morality, it is a mistake to think that universalism is simply *choosing* to see every human being as possessing an inherent dignity and value *qua* human. This is to make universalism into something *subjective*, which in fact is all it can be in the secular culture of the modern West. The anthem of the European Union, Friedrich Schiller’s ‘To Joy’ as rendered in the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, is meant to express a universalist spirit, but it is a *subjective universalism* not intended to imply any kind of theological or metaphysical belief-system. Indeed this subjective universalism is taken to possess the advantage of non-dogmatism and non-sectarianism, requiring only the *good will to solidarity*. The concept of *truth* has no role in subjective universalism. Nor does any *authority* attach to subjective universalism except for the *resolve or decision* to will in this way: there may be declarations by governments or individuals that universalism is required, and even that in certain ways (relating to speech and conduct) it will be enforced, but such declarations and laws reflect decisions, and ultimately subjective attitudes, that do not depend on an authoritative ground.

Objective Universalism

Subjective universalism is utterly different from the *objective universalism* taught in the theological and metaphysical traditions of the West. In Christianity, ‘loving thy neighbour’ is a commandment of God, which, to be sure, one may choose to follow or not, but it possesses *absolute authority and reality* whether or not anybody chooses to will in this way. In the Greek philosophical tradition founded by Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, all human beings are equal in dignity and value through possession of the *divine faculty of reason*, which exists as a fact whether or not people govern their lives according to it. The merging of Greek philosophy and Christianity in late antiquity reflected their common objective universalism, and indeed it is arguable that Greek philosophy is already present in the New Testament itself.

The Death of God (Nietzsche and the Nazis)

In the West objective universalism has been progressively weakening for at least four hundred years. This is because of the weakening of belief in God or the transcendental faculty of reason, which process Nietzsche refers to as the Death of God. On the one hand there is less belief in the theology of Christianity, that is to say in its *truth*. On the other hand belief in and respect for the classical (Platonic) tradition of philosophy has very much diminished. What Nietzsche claims, then, is that if universalism is not groundable (if objective universalism is not credible) then subjective universalism, as expressed in humanitarian egalitarian morality, is the *wrong choice*, for it is *contrary to nature* and produces weak, sickly human beings in a weak sickly culture. This was also the thinking of the Nazis: they rejected what they took as the false (fraudulent) universalisms of Christianity and classical philosophy, and they *declined to choose* subjective universalism for essentially the same reasons as Nietzsche. Nazi morality was not a universalism of any kind but an act of will (a powerful act of choosing) by and on behalf of a particular racial group, the ‘Aryans’. Such an act of will, as they

saw it, cannot be refuted by any objective universalism (which does not exist) and is to be preferred to subjective universalism in regard to consequences.

Different Systems of Objective Universalism

Insofar as objective universalism appeals to a ground which in some way (the laws of God, transcendental norms) is meant to justify its moral willing, the possibility arises of disagreements about willing based on objective disagreements about the ground (in the case of subjective universalism disagreements are quite different for they are just different choices). On the face of it, the reality that Christianity points to is different from that assumed by Plato and other classical philosophers. There are indeed many different systems of objective universalism: there are different types of Christianity, different schools of classical philosophy, and there are Eastern traditions of universalism such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. It can seem that, strictly speaking, these different systems and traditions are inconsistent with one another, and certainly there has been polemic between them which sometimes leads to violence. There are many people in each of the traditions just mentioned who think that only *their own* system or sub-system has any truth or value and who are scornful of everything else. Such people are *sectarians*. But the *perennial philosophy* believes in a unity underlying all the great philosophical and religious traditions of the world. Proponents of the perennial philosophy consider themselves objective universalists and while they will often prefer one tradition to another will be well-disposed towards all who share their basic commitments. Many great religious philosophers – Christian, Platonic, Hindu and other – take this attitude.

Objective Universalism Supposedly Unsound

Most modern philosophers, including Nietzsche, have viewed all systems of objective universalism as intellectually unacceptable. This is because they *disbelieve in the realities posited by these systems*. If they believe in any objective truth at all it is that which is encapsulated in the scientific worldview; they are further convinced that scientific method alone can *discover* objective truth. Modern philosophers sometimes grant that the traditions of objective universalism have value as repositories of proto-scientific psychological insights and methods; this means dismissing the objective ground these traditions themselves posit, substituting instead scientific-psychological explanations for why certain rules of life are desirable. For the most part, philosophers who hold to the scientific worldview do not believe science can justify *any* system of morality, for, they say, *facts cannot establish values*. Obviously the only universalism consistent with such an attitude is the *subjective* type. Subjective universalism is often said to be *beneficial* for the human species, but this leads to difficult questions about what is meant by beneficial. Nietzsche thought that subjective universalism can lead to nothing but the further *degradation* of the species.

Why Subjective Universalism is Tenuous

If universalism is simply a choice then it has *no authority*. It may indeed be a strong choice, whose proponents insist will never change. However without authority it is ultimately a *taste*. It is highly questionable if the sense of truth of human beings can be satisfied with treating morality as a matter of taste alone. In the past fifty years the concept of truth itself has been challenged by many influential writers, often under the influence of Nietzsche. It has been claimed that there is no truth of any sort, moral or otherwise, or rather, as Nietzsche puts it, that people create their own truth if they are strong enough to do so or otherwise follow the truth created by others. On this way of

thinking, objective universalism is to be rejected not because it is invalid from an intellectual point of view, but because, for various reasons, it is seen as a bad choice. Often it is said that objective universalism is dogmatic just in virtue of making claims of objective truth, but in this context dogmatism too is a failure of style or taste. People who think like this may be unwilling to endorse subjective universalism, for they may see this as a deplorable choice. It is hard to see how anybody who rejects truth as such can be intellectually persuaded of anything at all, including the choice to subjective universalism. On the other hand those who hold to subjective universalism, but reject objective universalism as implying pre-scientific systems of belief, face the question of *how firm is their choice*, and *why* it is firm. The history of culture shows that confidence in morality always relates to confidence in some system of truth. If, as Nietzsche says, modern man is unique in not believing he ‘has’ the truth, confidence in morality must fall apart.

Why Secular Liberalism Slides Towards Florid Anti-Universalism

Secular liberalism consists of the scientific worldview plus subjective universalism. It is because the scientific worldview excludes the *grounds* of objective universalism (as superstitious, outdated etc.) that its universalism *cannot be anything but subjective*. But as Nietzsche recognized, moral subjectivism cannot withstand the sense of truth of human beings and so must eventually crumble: subjective universalism *weakens* (for it rests on a mere choice) into what is effectively a-moralism and hypocrisy, or, turning angrily against objective universalism, goes over to a florid *anti-universalism* that denounces *both* objective and subjective universalism. Precisely this trajectory has been followed by very many intellectuals in the last one hundred years and more especially since the Second World War. However human beings cannot do without morality altogether. Therefore *pseudo-moralities* step into the place of universalism; these rest not on ‘superstitious theology or metaphysics’ but on practical loyalties that are confirmed collectively and represented in the *particularist* ideologies of identity-politics. Proponents of these particularist ideologies *hate* universalism because they see it as *threatening their identities*.

How Important is ‘Belief’ Within Universalism?

Subjective universalism is defined by *un-belief* in the reality that purportedly grounds objective universalism. But most systems of objective universalism do not judge the presence of belief by assent to propositions. Certainly sectarianism does, and in some religious traditions at various times sectarianism has been very powerful. But many religious and philosophical thinkers have emphasized the ‘heart’, as revealed by actions and attitudes, rather than the letter of belief. In the New Testament it is said that the laws of God are ‘written on the heart’. Classical Greek philosophy holds that the fundamental norms of morality are present in the faculty of reason possessed by all human beings. But if there is in fact an objective ground for universalism, it seems wrong to insist that universalists who disbelieve in *statements about this ground* (be they Christian, Platonic, Hindu, or any other kind of statements) *must* be just *choosing* universalism. Whether this applies also to universalists who *disbelieve in any ground* is another matter. It is common for people to feel that something is objectively right in morality, and yet be unable to explain why; for the Christian or Platonist or Hindu this shows that moral knowledge resides at the *unconscious* level which defies ‘correct’ articulation. On the other hand, denying any objective ground for moral universalism while nevertheless declaring oneself a moral universalist is a radical disconnection of morality from truth. To persist in this attitude may be verbally possible but in practice

is almost impossible, so that what almost invariably happens is that, the sense for truth having been weakened, universalism collapses and ultimately goes over to florid *anti-universalism*. What this shows is that ‘belief’ *is indeed vital*, but not in the form of catechisms, and, especially, not in a sectarian spirit.

Universalism Makes for Humility, Particularism Puffs Up

Every human being, whether they profess universalism or some type of particularism, is prone to arrogance and conceit. But particularist ideologies reinforce and validate this tendency, while universalism in morality subverts it, albeit never with complete success. Towards the universal the sole valid sentiment is *reverence*, but particularism is inseparable from all kinds of *boasting, glorification and idolizing*. Particularism makes for hero worship, and to the pursuit of hero-status at a major or minor level. In today’s intellectual culture, dominated as it is by particularism, *celebrities* are at the forefront, through whom people attempt to secure their own identities. Universalism is averse to celebrity-culture and to all hero-worship, which does not mean, of course, withholding admiration for individuals. Particularism also *validates fanaticism*, which is the zealous affirmation of some particularist identity; this is especially obvious in the universities, where fanatics of particularism, because they appeal to the emotions of their constituency, have great influence. *Universalism is essentially moderate*, for it does not need fanaticism to promote its cause. There is nothing fanatical about Jesus, Plato, Buddha or Confucius, but stripped of their fanaticism people like Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung and Pol Pot are nothing. The major figures of left-Nietzscheanism since the 1960’s are all fanatics and are valued as such; without fanaticism they could never have garnered a following.

Mendacity as a Weapon of War in Particularist Ideologies

Left Nietzschean particularists who feel their identity is threatened by universalism see themselves as ‘at war’. And since ‘truth is the first casualty of war’, they see themselves as justified in *lying for their cause*. In 1944 the Western allies told lies about where the invasion of France was going to be; nobody complains about this or thinks it was unethical. With their identities at stake, the anti-universalists of today feel obliged to lie. Lenin said that ‘truth is what serves the revolution’. A Nietzschean like Badiou would not disagree. The destruction of the value of truth is the ultimate intellectual debasement currently happening in Western culture. Such a culture is doomed. Who knows how its rotten door will finally be kicked in? Who knows who will settle upon and take possession of the *ruins* of Western culture?