Veiled Assumptions and the Failure of Ethical Conversations

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Abstract:

What we learn from history is that thought and knowledge and their often unarticulated assumptions are not hermeneutically sealed off from the hopes and dreams or ordinary people, or from a nation and its leaders seeking to bring forth a democratic vision. Innocuous as it may seem today, the utilitarian doctrine of the 19th century brought forward as American pragmatism bears out attention. This *so-called* ethical theory finding its roots in the Enlightenment as reason was being flushed from its medieval and religious influences, but had a disguised and, philosophically, unarticulated meaning. Perhaps put forth as a defense of reason over faith, but now, in the throes of the Industrial Revolution, and threatened by the Great Awakening and Christian fundamentalism, intellectuals were searching for a practical way of promoting science and its technological developments. Now redefined, pragmatism was put forward as an ethical principle, but the popular mantle, "the greatest good for the greatest number" revealed an unspoken belief that minorities didn't count, especially "blacks", who were thought of as mentally and culturally unable to carry forward the economic and democratic successes flourishing in Europe and America. In broad strokes, this article identifies the veiled assumptions of utilitarianism and pragmatism that today underlies the American moral crisis, emanating from pulpit, pew, and the hallowed halls of Congress. This may have been an unattended consequence, but it is real nonetheless.

Keywords: assumptions, culture, epistemic, ethnocentric, essences, human rights, hope, intrinsic, mind, normative, pragmatism, pre-rational beliefs, sentiments, theism, utilitarians.

Introduction

Ideologically (from a political, cultural, or religious point of view), the nation we so fondly call "America" was in part a creation of the influence of myth and fact, reason and hope, fear and anxiety. As these cultural forces were overlapping and bumping into one another, the ideal of American democracy was taking shape. Seemingly, today, without rudder or anchor we have succumbed to an unprincipled and unthinking trajectory making drilling down to the foundations of our values, our democratic culture, both complicated and treacherous. As this history becomes more remote, it leaves an ever-widening gap to be filled in by old stories and beliefs. These, says A. C. Grayling, "are so much easier to understand, and provide the neat narrative structure – beginning, middle, end, and purpose – that human psychology loves." (Grayling, 2016, 323)

As we most assuredly know, our myths, including the veiled assumptions about our genealogical past, cannot be dispelled by facts alone. They lie quietly within and operate in the background of our logic and beliefs hidden deep inside with an emotional force helping us to get our bearings in a world of confusing ethical messages. Many remain in denial about their veiled cultural assumptions, living in the popular ideologies of the present ignoring history past. The psychological and social (cultural) factors that reinforce prejudice, a politics of bigotry, or a culture of freedom and dignity for all are difficult to admit and even more challenging to identify. Like it or not, we are our beliefs, our values, and they live quietly within us often as a collective opinion providing reassurance, considered natural and difficult to vanquish.

In broad strokes, this article attempts to lay bare several clues to this dilemma. This will not only be found in the uneasy balance of faith and reason, emanating from the European Enlightenment, but in the seemingly innocuous mantle of a pragmatic philosophy touted generally as "The American Philosophy" with its call to arms, "the greatest good for the greatest number."[1] Looking through the veil of "white" eyes, this statement seems innocent enough, but a closer look reveals its masking the assumption of "white supremacy" driving life and politics in the 19th century and remains a serendipitous energy weaving our political and religious convictions in the 21st century in uneasy affiliations.

As America became the center of scientific and industrial achievement, the *utility of reason* was promoted as common sense and pragmatic, as it was, but uniquely moral is was not. Utility or pragmatism provides no ethical content and has a tendency to float in the contaminated air of political expediency and an ill-defined hope that whatever is deemed by the majority as politically or socially important will eventually morph into what Dewey called "human flourishing", the best kind of life a person can live and what it entails. (Dewey 2008, 87-95) Looking through the eyes of minorities, "human flourishing" takes on a different and unexpected meaning. Referring to President Trump's treating the entire nation as black, Michael Dyson says, "After a great deal of resistance, combat, and protest, some white folk have come around to seeing race, especially this brand of whiteness, as a fiction, something Baldwin said more than 50 years ago. Many whites now see the truth because they believe that what Trump is doing is deeply and profoundly flawed, even lunatic. His obsessions and perverse preoccupations are the stuff of a whiteness that never had to be held accountable. Trump's total lack of knowledge, and the enshrinement of ignorance in the basis of power and authority is the personification of white supremacy and white arrogance." (Dyson 2018, 63-64)

With the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, a clash inevitably occurred. The more secular promoted the utility of reason leaving their faith in the rear of their ethical musings as only a patina directing their discourse. For the more religiously inclined, belief in God and the Scriptures became the criteria of truth and morals. But as we know, belief in God is no guarantee against prejudice and unprincipled behaviors. In the 19th century, faith and reason – a combustible duo – were firmly fixed into a so-called "American Philosophy" pushed forward by a

spirit of conquest and industry, supporting slavery and, in our time, discrimination against minorities. In time, hotbed issues such as the feminist movement, integration, same-sex marriage, homosexual inclusion, and now the immigration crisis would bring American ethical beliefs into contact and reveal their tensions and differences.

The causal links supporting this interpretation are difficult to procure, but just ask, "What if I'm in the minority?" How then does the "greatest good for the greatest number fit into my life and does it support universal human rights and benevolence?" Philosophically and historically are views and actions of decent people supporting a universal view of humanity and the dignity it compels.[2] (Taylor 2001, 23; see also, Meacham 2018) In broad strokes, we are challenged to assess the neglected and often hidden assumptions of the "the greatest good..." mantle which has caused and is causing a dialogical failure blurring the edges of ethical discussion and moral genuineness. Looking back, our history is replete with presidents and politicians, ministers and ordinary folks struggling with their own personal and national identity. Strong is the hold of the past as its myths and atrocities are often reinterpreted and justified camouflaging their amoral assumptions. Recommended is searching for a common ethic that does justice to these shared opinions and, guided by hope, using the power of reassessment as an instrument of dialogical healing.

Pre-Rational Assumptions and the Inadequacies of Utilitarianism and Theism

Conspicuously, our cultural, often pre-rational beliefs and assumptions are revealed in the language we use and in the language we choose, and, importantly, in the normative force our words imply. Culture and its often unarticulated grammar constitute the normative reality in which we live. It is a defining aspect of what it means to be human. But, pinpointing the impact of culture and its assumed but often unarticulated moral intentions is not as straightforward as it seems. Terry Eagleton comments, "Culture, like civilizations, involves material institutions; but it can also be seen as a primarily spiritual phenomenon, and as such, can pass judgment on social, political and economic activity. It is less under the sway of utility than civilization, less hamstrung by pragmatic considerations." (Eagleton 2016, 18) Given our cultural disparities, any ethic – secular or religious – to be effective must harbor a wide stance (Daniels, 1979, 256-282) and gather into its wicker many dissimilar views to unveil our common humanity and to lay bare the ethical vision that sustains us. For this reason, a reductionist ethic – either materialistic or theistic – misses the depth of the humanity that we are. It ignores the definitive value-suppositions of our cultural dissimilarities, and, within the practicalities of politics and everyday life, resulting in name-calling, labels, and caricatures. Building walls around our beliefs not only shuts others out, they also encapsulate us within a narrow view of the rights and dignity of others.

Both science and religion are replete with unspoken, often hidden, and seldom discussed beliefs. From a moral point of view, these assumptions are antecedal to the conclusions drawn about the sources and foundation of ethics. Thus, ethics, both secular and religious, emit an *iffy* quality with reference to that which has yet-to-be-discovered and/or confirmed, the motives and unspoken

values they entail, and, especially, the decision or indecision to follow a recognized ethical rule or intuitive ethical belief. These involve interpretations of the real and recognized—the physical and social nature of human living and the cultural expectations by which we direct our lives. And although *empiricism* is the hallmark of science and scientific utilitarianism, important to ethics is what is unspoken and assumed as much as what is said and placed in theoretical discourse. And what engrained suppositions do the faithful bring to this discussion? Belief-in partakes of absolutism, looks back to ancient authorities for truth and guidance, and projects what many consider to be an untenable (mythological) future. Faith can be uplifting, but it can also be demeaning and deceitful. Of course, just as we cannot build a bridge from faith to certainty, we cannot build from logic a bridge from fact to value, from *isness to oughtness*. Ethics is and remains a precarious undertaking.

We are quick to judge a theory, or an idea, by a theoretical misstep by an over-zealous theoretician. Nothing written goes forward with unblemished simplicity. But in our judgments, we often forget the *kernel of insight* they have brought forth. Despite his misjudgment about our hidden moral grammar, Marc Hauser's[3] assumptions require our attention. This will entail a search for the "hidden grammar" of moral discourse, the unspoken assumptions that drive our conclusions. This we should consider in both ethics and science. Whether this grammar is biological or cultural, intuitive, or determined by a belief structure remains to be determined and its complications are obvious. Rational discourse is prized by both the faithful and those espousing a scientific view of the world. Revealed in both is "hope" as a guiding metaphor for their discussions of ethics. Given our differences, understanding depends on our being able to communicate our values openly and consistently.[4]

The Utility of Reason

Digging deeper into both utilitarian and religious literature – not shutting down our inquiry – remains a challenge. An examination of the "utility" of reason, especially moral reasoning advocated by utilitarians, provides a hint to the presuppositions guiding much contemporary inquiry into ethics and the open dialogue recommended. Understanding the epistemic complications of ethics and guided by an excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques when applied to ethics, utilitarian Richard Rorty (1999, 23 ff.) recommends we replace talk about "knowledge" – trying to know reality as it "really" is – with "hope". This was his final word on ethics, but what lies behind this suggestion? Rorty's epistemological skepticism is obvious as he seeks to avoid discussing anything that smacks of the intrinsic. Acknowledging doubts about *absolute knowledge* and *knowledge of the innate and intuitive*, he appears to abandon his utility hypothesis and floats aimlessly in the ethereal notion of "hope."

"Hope" is a metaphor expressing what could be, but is not, a pressing vision of the future, driving our thinking with unarticulated suppositions and, in Rorty's case, premises. Understanding the metaphorical and perhaps intrinsic nature of hope we are able to uncover the hidden conjectures of Rorty's theory of knowledge (itself a metaphor) as he dispenses with much of Platonic and

Cartesian metaphysics replacing the "supposed reality" behind "reality" with plain talk about the *utility of knowledge* as a means toward greater human well-being and happiness. From what unspoken ontological reservoir does he pull his idea of hope? Of course, there can't be one for he denies the existence of "supposed reality." And from where does the desire for pleasure and happiness originate? This "supposed reality", the hopes and dreams of ordinary people, Rorty calls "essences" and defines as "nonsensical speech", including belief, faith, God, mind, the reality of hidden assumptions, and anything that smacks of the human spirit. Although drawing on *hope*, he fails to mention that *hope* is also a "supposed reality", as he says.

Examining the language of ethics through a scientific filter and pronouncing much in cultural discourse as "nonsense" is the veneer of utilitarian discourse. Thus, Rorty and those of the same ilk are satisfied with examining speech acts only, revealing the veiled supposition that only the physical is real, and that insight, belief, and perhaps even reason, which he prizes, are an unreality. From where do these spring? And if "mind" is metaphor only, as we suspect, does it have a referential stopping place? What correlation does it express, one of similarity or one of identity? And *similar* to what and *identical* to what? *Confusingly*, Rorty says, "If it makes any sense to speak of the existence of universals, it *would seem* that they must exist immaterially, and that is why they can never be identified with spatio-temporal particulars. I conclude that we cannot make non-spatiality the criterion of mental states, if only because the notion of 'state' is sufficiently obscure that neither the term 'spatial state' nor the term 'nonspatial state' seems useful." Obscured in this statement are the epistemic assumptions lying at the foundation of his utilitarianism. Using the criteria of "utility", Rorty dispels with the intrinsic revealing a bare epistemic physicalism. (Rorty 1979, 20-24) Upon deeper inspection, utilitarianism is a moral theory its own methods cannot confirm or disconfirm leaving us in a bottleneck of contradictions.

Charles Taylor, a critic of utilitarian theory, says, "The notion is never that whatever we do is acceptable. This would be unintelligible as the basis of a notion of dignity. Rather, the key point is that the higher is to be found not outside of but as a manner of living ordinary life. For the Reformers this manner was defined theologically; for classical utilitarians, in terms of (instrumental) rationality. For Marxists, the expressivist element of free self-creation is added to Enlightenment rationality. But in all cases, some distinction is maintained between the higher, the admirable life and the lower life of sloth, irrationality, slavery, or alienation." (Taylor 2001, 23) What Taylor seeks in any moral theory is an affirmation of the ordinary life. He says, "The notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life flies in the face of that were originally the dominant distinctions of our civilization. For both the warrior ethic and the Platonic, ordinary life in this sense is part of the lower range, part of what contrasts with the incomparably higher. The affirmation of the ordinary life, therefore, involves a polemical stance towards these traditional views and their implied elitism." This he says is carried over and transposed in secular guise "which powers the reductive views like utilitarianism which wants to denounce all qualitative distinctions." Then, are we left, as Karl Jaspers reminds us, "[with]... no firm ground

under us, no principle to hold on to, but a suspension of thought in infinite space – without shelter in conceptual systems, without refuge in firm knowledge or faith. And even this suspended, floating structure of thought is only one metaphor of being among others."[5] (Jaspers 1997, 187-188)

Hovering behind much utilitarian and pragmatic talk is the assumption of "the greatest good for the greatest number", but only in terms of its utility value for the greatest number. Clothed underneath these words was not hope only, but hope for the majority and fear of the minority. In the closing years of the 19th century in America, as John Meacham writes, "Whites reigned supreme." During that time, Justice John Marshall Harlan in the aftermath of *Plessy v. Ferguson* wrote, "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country... But in the view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant ruling class of citizens." (Meacham 2018, 68-69) Thus, historically and in the minds of many, as the 19th century was drawing to a close, the utilitarian thinking, which had now morphed into pragmatism and the idea of "manifest destiny", and based on a belief in white supremacy, was confounding the waters of equality, freedom, and justice *for all* supporting first, slavery, and then discrimination against people of color and many other ethnically different and foreign people flowing into America.

Theoretically, for utilitarians, happiness as "the good" is ill-defined except by reference to "the greatest number" leaving their ethic and that of pragmatism as only an expedient way of thinking and behaving. Expediency alone – what is good for the majority – became a justification, in the minds of many, for racism, anti-Semitism, and the like, but omits the veiled assumption that "happiness for the majority (rich, white, and powerful) ought to be pursued." Looking more carefully at utilitarian theory, "happiness" and its "implied ought" are pre-rational suppositions, normative and not descriptive only, and antecedental to their idea of social hope. In retrospect, this was not the happiness talked about by Aristotle, that life finds meaning and purpose within human relationships that the good of the whole is crucial to the genuine well-being of the individual. Happiness, says Aristotle, is something we choose for its own sake because it is a universal impulse in all humans. Happiness is not a "means" to something else.

Ironically, pragmatism was decreed as "the American philosophy" but carried with it the unspoken assumption of fear that minorities would gain a public voice. Thus, it veiled the deeper negative values of the American heart and spirit. Still, today, pragmatism has a certain "common sense" hold on the American psyche bringing forth unexpected and, perhaps, unintended consequences. But what those who still hold onto this doctrine are discovering is that words that flash on a screen or actions that have no moral foundation in human decency can't adequately display the unspoken tremors of the heart or dispel the energy alive in those seeking, what Jefferson described as happiness, freedom, and equality for all. Some utilitarians have tried, expressing a social hope couched in the words of the Golden Rule, but this remains a vain and inadequate attempt. (Rorty 1999, 23 ff.)

I think it honest to ask, "Have some in America lost their hold on what is truth and what is morally right and decent?" Reading the words, "Let's make America great again", we see that the

problem of our moral identity is still with us today. We wonder to what era in our past is being referred to in these words. It is a truism that most history is what people choose to believe, hiding their knowledge under the veil of their assumptions. This may just be the key to unraveling our current political situation. There is no mystery in this for we live in the genetic and social fabric of our past the flux of which often hides our motives and intentional activities. This amoral *trajectory* didn't start yesterday or in 2015; it began long ago and now we are suffering its unintended consequences.

Unarguably, G. E. Moore is in agreement with utilitarian theory. He says, "All moral laws, I wish to show, are merely statements that certain kinds of actions will have good effects. (...) What I wish first to point out is that 'right' does and can mean nothing but 'cause of a good result', and is thus identical with 'useful': whence it follows that the end always will justify the means and that no action which is not justified by its results can be right." (More 1960, 196) What Moore leaves us to explain is "what is a good result?" How is "good" to be defined? How would we know anyway? Strangely, Moore's view is echoed by William James who commented out of practical necessity, "The true, to put it briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving." ("Pragmatic Theory of Truth" 1969, 427-428)

Philosophers often leave us in a values-confusion. Moore's "statements of a certain kind," and James' "expedient" are concepts weighted with pre-rational postulations – unspoken suppositions about the nature of good, right, and true. When applied to the majority only, their meanings become clear as the mantle of "white supremacy" was a weighted scale favoring the rich and the powerful. To be sure, "truth" often finds its articulation in logic and science and is closely aligned with "fact," but "good" and "right" find their meaning in the unspoken genealogy of our cultural histories. Upon examination, we are caught in a language quagmire of *metaphor swapping* leading to a slippery slope of meaningless dialogue.

Lying behind the utilitarian hypothesis (like any theory) is a concept of "culture", a concept that appears plainly descriptive but is not, as utilitarians slip in prescriptivism under the covers of their "greatest good" hypothesis. Yes, we can study and describe culture(s), but the culture that "we" are is often obscured by our moral grammar and swings unperceptively with prescriptive force and many times articulated as "social hope". Revealing our expectations culture includes, among other things, the elusive normative values driving our lives. Language is often deceptive, as referring to our inherent physical nature only may state a fact or it can formulate a value judgment, one that limits our discussions to what is perceived and ignores that which is intrinsic, intuitive, or based on belief. What we have in utilitarianism is a narrowing of culture using one version of culture as his source. This is a classic circular argument, perhaps engorged by a genetic fallacy, but in the end, most of our arguments are circular involving the presuppositions that are antecedal to our conclusions.

We often ignore this, including the social results of an insulated philosophical theory. Mostly, philosophers are content with picking through the entrails of an argument and revealing its consistencies or inconsistencies. We attend to its logic and not its social implications. Those

espousing utility and expediency as a measure of truth and morals have begged the question of slavery, of reconstruction, the wave of immigrants coming into America at the end of the 19th century, and the nature of humanity itself. Although rooted in moral theory, utility, as the sole judge of what is "right" and "good" became "what works". While the idea of "good" was never adequately defined, this bland moral conundrum supported our capitalistic impulse while limping into our consciousness as "the great American philosophy" often defined as "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Morality as utility has a reductive effect making ethics just another commodity that we may or may not pursue. We are reminded of this by the phrase "Let the buyer beware" uncovering an amoral foundation to capitalism, an economic driver of Democracy. There has always been an uneasy and trepid balance between capitalism and democracy. Keep in mind that logic and reason cannot and do not create our values; their purpose is to add clarity and consistency. Our values have a different place of origin than simple utility. And, again, we must remember that the origin of our values in no way constitutes their justification. Calling upon the origins of our beliefs, either epistemological or religious, begs the question of their meaning, content, and moral significance. It is similar to an ad hominem fallacy leveraging existing negative perceptions to make someone's argument look bad, without actually presenting a case for why the argument itself lacks merit. This is something the religious should understand when calling on the authority of God or Scripture as a means of justification or labeling those who disagree with their religious beliefs as atheists or agnostics and their political beliefs as traitors. Utilitarians are correct on this point and it's a point of simple logical reasoning, but they too have this problem when denying the inward nature, true substance, or constitution of anything, as opposed to what is accidental, phenomenal, illusory, or material.

Religious Absolutism and the Lack of Dialogical Conversation

Reasons are required in the throes of dialogical conversation to support our choice of values from the cultural mixture that is us. This never occurs automatically and absolutism, as found in many religious values, is not sufficient to convince. Absolutism, in religion and in politics is the ethos of the ego, not the community; it has no universal appeal as it favors a one-sided interpretation of belief, political policy, or the Constitution. (Meacham 2018, 68) Absolutism is revealed as a top-down directive, singularly interpreted, and has a slippery slope effect as it herds the many into its wicker. But ethics and civility are often unarticulated cultural norms requiring our constant diligence, dialectical interaction, and moral leadership. Meacham writes that President Lincoln gave us a leadership of hope and progress, but Andrew Johnson failed in this regard playing the white supremacy card and catering to his white southern constituency. (Meacham 2018, 62) An ethic of hope opens both heart and mind to a future of human dignity for all. A reductionist ethic, faith-based or utilitarian, is hope-denying. Also, care must be taken for as Oswald Spengler[6] reminds, all cultures eventually petrify and externalize themselves into civilizations which suggest a decline from

the organic to the mechanical. This we find in both utilitarian theory and religious practices, as both the secular and religious ethic are transposed into a sterile mechanical impulse, a utility value only. Given the liturgical practices of the faithful, a mechanical, perfunctory ethic appears to stain their ideals of right, fair, justice, and decency as well.

Civilizations evolve, not mechanically, but through the ideals, creativity, and decisions of people, as John Stuart Mill says, through...

> ...the multiplication of physical comforts; the advance and diffusion of knowledge; the decay of superstition; the facilities of mutual intercourse; the softening of manners; the decline of war and personal conflict; the progressive limitation of the tyranny of the strong over the weak; the great works accomplished throughout the world by the co-operation of multitudes.(Eggleston 2010, 266)

Given Mill's definition, the slogan "Let's make America great again" strains both our consciousness and our knowledge. The history being referred to by the word "again" is seen by many in only their peripheral vision, not quite myth, and not quite fact. It submits to varied interpretations. When confronting this slogan, we are faced with the conundrum: what does it mean to be an American within the diversity that America is and always has been given the hodgepodge of its genetic history, social activities, and traditions? Probing even deeper we discover that the 19th-century phrase "manifest destiny" referred only to whites and excluded all others. This too can be linked to utilitarian doctrine as people of color (minorities) – Native Americans, Africans, Asians, and Hispanics – have been and are being pushed out of the way, by policy and violence, by white Americans hell-bent and destined – by God, some say – to secure their dominance as if white supremacy is Constitutionally demanded. This remains a veiled assumption in pulpit, pew, and the halls of Congress, state and federal. It seems that the pre-Enlightenment mind of religious myth and fundamentalism is today an activity in control of many lives in and outside of America. Again, it is the self-consciousness and unselfconsciousness of experience in our time that can explain this.

Especially important to the concept of culture is Ernst Bloch's introduction of the ontological priority of the "not-yet", of becoming, of what might happen sometime in the future suggesting that we are a people in the making; we are not a finished product. "It is therefore not", says Dennis J. Schmidt his translator, "the static or finished self-identity of concepts but their dynamic relativity to other concepts that lets them be meaningful or intelligible" (Bloch 1986, xii-xiii). This dynamic relativity suggests a more expansive notion of ethics preferable to one that is narrow, legalistic, self-centered, logic-based, scientific, or religiously one-sided. Ethics, which pursues human equality, happiness, and responsibility for all – which views the self as it views others and which asks *not what it is right to do but what it is good to do* – cannot be allowed to decay on the horns on an unsustainable view of American exceptionalism or be diminished by unreasonable self-interest, the narrow absolutism of religious doctrine, or a survival-of-the-fittest hypothesis implied in neo-Darwinian ethics ignoring the least among us. Morality is an affirmation of everyday life, the commonplace, and the normal; and, as Kant reminds us, owes nothing to the order of nature less we

forget the dignity of life as it is lived. (Taylor 2001, 83-84) Thus, ethics and the moral impulse which lies at its heart are organic – natural, alive and growing within each person seeking a non-dehumanizing expression in equality, freedom, and happiness for all.

Rorty correctly says that the ideas and arguments of philosophers, theologians, educators, and scientists are embedded in a morass of unstated beliefs and assumptions. The clarity of their statements, the logic of their arguments, and the axiomatic assumptions guiding their theories provide only an illusion of objectivity. With this I am in agreement for we more often than not project our values onto the events of our day and into our descriptions of such events including their causes. When "utility" and "belief-in" become an uncompromising foundation for ethical values, we are required to dig a bit deeper. They both represent an objectivity-illusion, the hidden assumptions of which have yet to be overcome. More often than not, both utilitarians and theists slip in *prescriptivism* under the covers of their ontological hypotheses, revealing a theory of what ought to be rather than what is. (Jacoby 2018, 76-77)

E.A. Burtt[7] (1965, 28) notes that presuppositions are the given – the intuitively given – we present to reality that in turn modify reality and become reality itself. We tend to shape our moral views, perhaps unaware of their cultural origins, by our own cultural genealogy. "The greatest good for the greatest number" as the assumed culture of the majority was the "there" that was "there" but not-yet fully realized or openly stated except by a few; yet, plainly articulated in various views of white supremacy. (See: Meacham 2018. See chapters 1 & 2, 23-79, especially quoting Thomas W. Dixon who said, "The white man must reign supreme.") We sometimes get a peek at these presuppositions through the language of discourse and argument as they garnish our emotions with a quiet motivational quality, but ever so often they remain unarticulated so as not to reveal their intended consequences. Sometimes they are just unconscious utterances (habits of the mind and heart) ingrained in our cultural heritage to which we give little thought.

Ideologically (from a political, cultural, or religious point of view), the nation we so fondly call "America" was in part a creation of the influence of myth and fact, reason and hope, and fear and anxiety. As these forces were overlapping and bumping into one another, the ideal of American democracy was taking shape. The unspoken and often assumed tentacles of our history have enslaved us in seemly irresolvable ideologies. As we most assuredly know, our myths, including the veiled assumptions of our genealogical past, operate in the background of our logic and beliefs, hidden deep inside with an emotional force, helping us to get our bearings in a world of confusing ethical messages. The psychological and social (cultural) factors that reinforce prejudice and a politics of bigotry are difficult to admit and even more challenging to identify. Ironically and practically, the key finding common moral ground is held by us whom the past has enslaved. Unwittingly, perhaps knowingly, we have developed the skill to mask our moral beliefs and embed them in political loyalties, rhetoric, and ecclesiastical doctrine. We are now at the crossroads of choice: what would we have 21st century America to be? Admittedly, drilling down to the foundation of our values is

both complicated and treacherous, but this we must do to uncover the heart and moral power that is us.

Thus, presuppositions (our assumptions, beliefs, and conjectures) are a driving force – habits of expectation – pushing us to discover the causal links that complete the ethical and ontological principles they entail. But we often move along unconsciously and perform many everyday actions with only a vague conception of what we are up to, and with hindsight support our actions by the self-attribution of reasons. Reasons are thus procured and forced onto the stage of life as self-vouching but are internally prejudiced, prejudiced by unarticulated and unjustified beliefs we bring to the table of dialogue. This dynamic relativity calls for discussion – the dialectic of conversation – for agreement and consistency to be sustained. It is through active communication, neither condemnation nor authoritarian pronouncements, where ethical meaning is to be discovered.

In Conclusion

Harkening back to the beginnings of American democracy – a moral ideal – we understand that the American Revolution was influenced by the moderate wing of the Enlightenment, which embraced order, harmony, and a balance of faith and reason. Although Jefferson made Deism an essential part of the nation's fabric when he appealed to "the laws of nature and nature's God", by the second half of the 20th century it was evident that Evangelicals had begun to battle this notion and reclaim America for "the God of the New Testament". This narrowing once begun has been difficult to harness. Americans (and evangelicals in particular) remain confused and divided over the relationship of reason and faith, whether there can be a relationship or whether the one supplants the other. Americans remain a separated people, generally along secularists and theistic lines, but this is often veiled by their view of immigrants, especially Hispanics, and African-Americans. In a strange way, utility has united both the secularists and the religious in a conundrum of ethical assertions. Confounding America's religious history is the fact that theism – belief in one supreme God – is represented by a strange mixture of beliefs and ideas, usually ignoring the hidden assumptions implied in our own Constitution, notably, "Nature's God"(See: Stewart 2015). For Jefferson, "Nature's God" was not the "God of the Bible", but evangelicals continue to push their beliefs into its interpretation. This is an undercurrent seldom mentioned any more, but the 2016 presidential debates have demonstrated its continuing influence.[8] (See: New 2012; Raeder 2017)

Noting these differences, *the capacity for reassessment* is perhaps our only hope of reaching a consensus, discovering truth or meaning, or bringing our discussion to a point of some agreement. In ethics it is not conclusions we seek; important also are the ethical meanings and the applications deeply embedded within our cultural histories. Ethical meaning is not only found in the concrete moment of decision-making where we bring our assumptions about what is right and what is wrong to bear on a tangible situation but in our vision of the morally possible. Looking back as we often do, it's difficult to see where we have been. Our history can be perplexing. Our rearview mirrors provide only a narrow and restricted view of the past. To make America great, again and again,

requires our moral presence, not only in the moment but in our moral vision of the future and its applications in our lives.

Thus, ethics, if it is anything at all, is a precarious vision waiting for universal articulation. Within this muddle, our assumptions about right and wrong are moral visions and lifestyles to be lived, perhaps not absolute rules to obey. Rules change and commandments are archaic, but there is a staying quality about a universal ethical vision when articulated broadly and wisely, and with reason, avoiding ethnocentric domination. (See: Hester & Killian 1975) Accordingly, this will necessitate some honesty in revealing our assumptions about ethics and morals, trying to slide them aside as we give others the opportunity for individual expression and dialectical discourse. This will be more occasional and rare as you believe it to be for getting agreement on ethical issues is perhaps an impossible task.

So, is there any hope for some kind of ethical objectivity or for agreeing on a common and unified idea of "the good" and the behaviors it entails? Of course, this hope is only an ideal but it is an ideal to which we should aim. Charles Taylor explains is view of this hope,

> But our identity is deeper and more many-sided than any of our possible articulations of it. (...) this person [the utilitarian] doesn't lack a framework. On the contrary, he has a strong commitment to a certain ideal of rationality and benevolence. He admires people who live up to this ideal, condemns those who fail or who are too confused even to accept it, feels wrong when he himself falls below it. The utilitarian lives within a moral horizon which cannot be explicated by his own moral theory. (Taylor 2001, 28-29)

In the same manner, Alasdair MacIntyre warns of the pretensions of "reason" as he comments in a long passage from his book, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry,*

> Descartes symbolized for the nineteenth-century encyclopaedist a declaration of independence by reason from the particular bonds of any particular moral and religious community. It is on this view of the essence of rationality that its objectivity is inseparable from its freedom from the partialities of all such communities. It is to allegiance to reason as such, impersonal, impartial, disinterested, uniting and universal, that the encyclopaedist summons his or her readers and hearers. And it is, of course, this very same conception of reason as universal and disinterested that the genealogist rejects, so that genealogist and encyclopaedist agree in framing what they take to be both exclusive and exhaustive alternatives. Either reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested or it is the unwitting of particular interests, making their drive to power its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness. (McIntyre 1990, 59)

McIntyre goes on to say, "To share in the rationality of a craft requires sharing in the contingencies of its history, understanding its story as one's own, and finding a place for oneself as a character in the enacted dramatic narrative which is that story so far." To this advice the theist should

attend and perhaps the utilitarian and New Atheist should peer over their own shoulders to get a glimpse of their own genealogical assumptions.

Maybe we should not despair but make an effort to keep our ethical conversations moving in a positive direction. As Raymond Williams says,

> A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized. The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience. A good community, a living culture, will, because of this, not only make room for but actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need... We need to consider every attachment, every value, with our whole attention; for we do not know the future, we may never be certain of what may enrich us. (Williams, 1958, 334)

Endnotes:

1. "Extracts from Bentham's Commonplace Book", in *Collected Works*, x, p. 142; He credits Joseph Priestley in his *Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1768) or Cesare Bonesana-Beccaria with inspiring his use of the phrase, often paraphrased as "The greatest good for the greatest number", but the statement "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" actually originates with Francis Hutcheson, in his *Inquiry concerning Moral Good and Evil* (1725), sect. 3. In an unpublished manuscript on utilitarianism, written for James Mill, he later criticized this formulation: "Greatest happiness *of the greatest number*. Some years have now elapsed since, upon a closer scrutiny, reason, altogether incontestable, was found for discarding this appendage. On the surface, additional clearness and correctness given to the idea: at bottom, the opposite qualities. Be the community in question what it may, divide it into two equal parts, call one of them the majority, the other minority, layout of the account of the feelings of the minority, include in the account no feelings but those in the majority, the result you will find is that of this operation, that to the aggregate stock of happiness of the community, loss not profit is the result of the operation. Of this proposition the truth will be the more palpable, the greater the ration of the number of the minority to that of the majority: in other words, the less difference between the two unequal parts: and suppose the condivident part equal, the quantity of the error will then be at its maximum." – As quoted in *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill* (2003), p. 92.
2. Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, page 23 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Taylor also reminds us that like Kant, utilitarianism promotes a procedural conception of ethics (page 85); he says, "Thence arise some of the perplexities and fudging of utilitarianism, such as the difficult in understanding what the moral motivation is that it appeals to, the relation between hedonism as a motivational theory and the benevolence that utilitarian practice seems to suppose... utilitarians feel, there must be answers, and meantime they plunge forward into their homogeneous universe of rational calculation." (page 83)
3. See: Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universe* (New York: Harper Perennial; Reprint edition, September 4, 2007). Hauser argues that both Utilitarians and Pragmatists protest that they are eminently reasonable and empirical and scientific, involving no assumptions of mystical or magical thinking (i.e. "intuitions")—yet Hauser believes they almost certainly and clearly do. See also: http://forums. Philosophy forums.com/threads/pragmatism-vs.-utilitarianism -28246.html; and David Dobbs, "A Rush to Moral Judgment, What Went Wrong With Marc Hauser's Search for Moral Foundations," *Science and Science*, *http:// www.slate.com/articles/health _and_science/ science/2010/09/ a_rush_to_moral_ judgment.html*, September 3, 2010.

4. See the following: Arnett, R.C. and P. Arneson, *Dialogic civility in a cynical age: Community, hope and interpersonal* relationships (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1999). Arnett, R.C., J.M.H. Fritz, and L. M. Bell, *Communication ethics literacy: dialogue and difference* (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009).
5. See also discussion by Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others* (New York: Other Press, 2017).
6. See: Spengler, Oswald, *The Decline of the West, the Complete Edition,* pages 104-106. Internet Archive: https://archive.org/stream/Decline-Of-The-West-Oswald-Spengler/Decline_Of_The_West#page/n573/ mode/ 2up/search/ depopulation (1926).
7. Burtt, E.A., *In Search of Philosophical Understanding*, Chapter 2: "From Common Sense to Basic Presuppositions," pages 28-43 (New York: A Mentor Book, 1965). See also, Hume, David, *A Treatise on Human Nature,* (London: John Noon, 1739) as discussed by Daniel C. Dennett who says, "But Hume notes, the impression of causation we experience comes from the inside, not outside, it is itself an effect of a habit of expectation that has been ingrained in us over many waking hours." Dennett, Daniel C., *From Bacteria to Bach and Back, the Evolution of Minds,* page 355 (New York: Norton, 2017).
8. For a more complete discussion see: David New, *Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History* (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland, 2012). Also see: https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx and Linda C. Raeder, *Political Religion and the Death of God* (N. Palm Beach: Sanctuary Cove Publishing, 2017). In a review, Michael Henry, points to the confusing mixtures we today find in Christian and non-Christian circles, "For the past few centuries ideologies have been laboring to eliminate God in order to deify man, a process that in the absence of Christianity probably never would have taken place because it is really, in Voegelin's and Raeder's analysis, a revolt against the demands that Christian faith makes on the psyche. The ersatz religions, such as Marxism and Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, have been created to fill the spiritual void, but to the extent to which they have been politically successful they have brought about considerable instability and some of the worst evils in history. By their nature ideologies are relentlessly aggressive, expansionist, and intolerant rival "truths" that cannot coexist with belief in a transcendent God. The divinized state is their avatar in a dedivinized cosmos, something that is daily apparent in the increasingly emboldened efforts by the radical Left in the United States to silence and suppress, or at least marginalize, Christians and Christianity." https://voegelinview.com/political-religion-and-the-death-of-god/.

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