
Universality and History: The Concrete as Normative

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Moral nihilism and relativism seem not to carry the academic prestige that they once enjoyed. Philosophers and others are drawn in substantial numbers to affirmations of universality, not just in aesthetics and epistemology but in ethics. The questioning of nihilism and relativism might suggest intellectual ferment and conditions favorable for a much-needed philosophical revitalization, but the new interest in universality may be less a sign of intellectual deepening than of ideological fashion. The assertions of moral obligation typically lack philosophical stringency, and they run in many different directions. Universal “values” or “rights” are cited in support of traditional Judaeo-Christian norms of personal conduct but also of “alternative life-styles,” in support of private property and social differentiation but also of egalitarian reconstruction of society, in support of minimal government but also of socialist collectivism, and so on. The notion of a higher morality is perhaps most widely identified with a sentimental ethic of “compassion” and “sensitivity.” Another common brand of universalism declares “democracy” to be the goal for all societies and buttresses this claim with Jacobin-sounding appeals to “human rights.” The language of ethical obligation frequently looks like a gloss on political or other personal preferences for which the bearer would like to claim universal sanction.

Affirmations of “universal values,” “moral principles,” “rights” and the like must consequently be approached with suspicion. But the spread of philosophically dubious claims must not deter a serious

reconsideration of the meaning of universality. Rethinking the relationship between universality and historical particularity may be the *sine qua non* for a revitalization of Western thought.

The purpose here is to define an approach to ethical and other universality that differs markedly from most contemporary affirmations of moral right, be they philosophically earnest or more ideological. An understanding of universality will be set forth that stresses not just the tension between universality and particularity but their mutual dependence and integral connection. The approach is that of value-centered historicism.

*Abandoning
abstract
universality.*

The reasons why a new understanding of universality is needed are many and varied. In epistemology, abstract universalist reifications and rigidities stand in the way of a faithful account of the dynamics of actual human knowing. In aesthetics, static, mimetic notions of beauty are not sufficiently sensitive to what is contributed by human creativity and the distinctiveness of artistic visions. In ethics, abstract moral absolutism generates a blueprint approach to the moral life and a weak sense of the actual moral opportunities of human existence. As in the case of the French Jacobins and their descendants, such an approach easily turns putative moral principles into moralistic tyranny. More generally, abstract moral universalism creates a gulf between philosophical propositions and concrete human experience. It does not well prepare the individual for embodying universality in particular actions. This kind of universalism tends to lose the substance of morality in merely abstract considerations of “virtue,” “good,” “justice” and “rights.” Conducting intricate discussion to find just the right formulations or to come up with just the right casuistic application of “universal principles” comes to seem more significant than actually improving self or undertaking concrete good actions.

A useful first step in rethinking the relationship between universality and particularity may be to consider the conflict in the modern world between two broad streams of thought concerning that subject. Briefly reviewing these seemingly irreconcilable orientations will help focus attention on the crux of the philosophical matter. The stage will be set for arguing a thesis: that universality should be looked for, not in abstract theoretical “principles” or other ahistorical judgment or vision, but in concrete experience; that normative authority, in so far as it exists for man, resides in historical particularity. That such a thesis will strike many as strange and even as a contradiction in terms shows

the pressing need for rethinking the subject. Widespread and deeply rooted habits of dealing with the problem of universality and particularity are stifling philosophical renewal.

A note on terminology.

The term "universality" has been used here and will be used below to refer specifically to structures that invest existence with a higher and enduring significance. But the term may also refer to human life more broadly and point to its salient, recurring, inescapable elements, whether conducive to or destructive of higher values. Universality in the second sense has connotations similar to "the nature of the human condition" or "what life is really like." While the emphasis in this discussion is on universality as normative, that meaning will be found in the reconstituted understanding here advanced to be closely intertwined with the second meaning. The context will show where the stress is being placed. A similar double meaning can be carried by the word "reality." That term too may be used to indicate what completes and gives value to life, but it can also refer more generally to elements that are always present in human existence, good and bad together. The argument that follows is directed against the artificial separation of normative universality from "life as it is." One objective is to demonstrate that universal good, conceived as wholly independent of what counteracts it in the world, is a highly questionable and potentially pernicious abstraction.

I

Artificial tension between universality and particularity.

To those in the modern world who reject the idea of moral universality, the great diversity of views regarding the content of moral good now and throughout history confirms the truth of moral nihilism or relativism. Not only the differences between cultures but the wide range of beliefs within each belie the existence of any single standard of good. The proliferation of beliefs and life-styles in modern Western society signifies a welcome abandonment of outdated, static notions of morality. Liberalism and derivative currents have demonstrated the need for "pluralism," for individual freedom in setting goals for life. Ethical preferences must not be imposed from without. In maintaining the necessary public order it is essential that the consent of those affected be obtained. The evolving consensus regarding society's general direction and the limits of personal freedom should always be open to revision by the citizens.

Among today's defenders of a higher morality many see thinking of this type as representing an inherently deficient "modernity" or

“liberalism.” To recover a sense of the universal an earlier mode of thought, classical or Christian, must be revived. Study of Plato and Aristotle is often recommended as providing the proper foundation for understanding ethical right. Philosophical leanings of that kind create unease among those who assume the inescapable subjectivity of human likes and dislikes and who think of social and political order in terms of social contract or pragmatic consensus. To relativists and nihilists, a resurgence of interest in universality means a return to a distasteful moral absolutism and a preference for political authoritarianism. Accepting a transcendent source of moral order seems tantamount to discounting or ignoring personal individuality and the variability of circumstance. Many who profess belief in universality today confirm these suspicions by placing their own concern for moral right in opposition to a concern for the particularity, diversity and changeability of human existence. To emphasize the historical nature of life, they assert, is to undermine a proper regard for universality. Historically evolved convention could be conducive to good in particular cases, but tradition as such carries no moral and intellectual authority. The ultimate standard of right must be independent of historically derived beliefs and conditions. How else could the shifting particularities of history be assessed?

Plato places the standard of good beyond what he takes to be the historical flux. He associates the universal with ascent from the world of change and particularity. The highest good is lasting and unchanging. Against the dispersion of the Many stands the ordering transcendent One. Platonic philosophy contrasts sharply with intellectual currents of the type already mentioned that have asserted particularity and subjectivity to the neglect of universality. The latter emphasis has assumed many different forms—Lockean, romantic, existentialist, “postmodern,” etc. In proportion as individualism and pluralism have shed the lingering moral and other prejudices of the older Western tradition, they have tended to extremes of subjectivism. It is not surprising that thinkers who react against those excesses and to a perceived threat to social order should take an interest in Greek philosophy with its strong affirmation of universality and social cohesion. But the return to premodern sources is too often a detour around the deeper philosophical challenges of modernity, specifically, around historical consciousness and the notion of the concrete universal, achievements pioneered by German philosophy. Criticisms of historicizing philosophy in the name of universal values and truths

*Ancient
Greeks and
modernity.*

ordinarily show a fumbling grasp of its more fruitful ideas. Many universalists leave the impression that philosophical modernity as a whole should be rejected in favor of ancient thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, or a Christian thinker like Thomas Aquinas. At the same time, their anti-modernism does not stop them from reading various modern ideas back into their favored authors.

Is there then little justification for the modern emphasis on individual freedom and pluralism? Was the relationship between universality and particularity adequately understood by premodern thought? In order to move closer to the universal, should we shun individuality and particularity as far as possible? Is the universal good pure of our historical existence? Does reality lie somewhere else?

One prominent political thinker who admires the “ancients” for having an ahistorical notion of universality is Leo Strauss. His own way of dealing with universality and particularity, though of limited intrinsic philosophical importance, may illustrate a general contemporary approach to the issue which is not confined to him or his followers. Strauss cannot conceive of the possibility that being attentive to individuality and particularity could be reconciled with a proper concern for universality. This excluded possibility explains his ambivalence about Edmund Burke. On the one hand, Strauss regards Burke’s practical conservatism as being in “full agreement” with classical thought. But, on the other hand, Burke’s thought represents a new historical emphasis that somehow connects particularity, diversity and circumstance with what is normative. The association of universality with historical individuality helps prepare the way for philosophically disastrous developments, Strauss asserts. These destroy the ancient concentration on what is right in itself regardless of historical circumstances. The central issue is identified by Strauss as follows: “The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually, and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of ‘individuality.’”¹

Anti-historicism.

Many who claim to defend universal values attack what they call “historicism,” a belief in the inescapably historical nature of human existence. Historicism sees a need for moral and other judgment to be informed by and adjusted to experience and individual circumstances: a requirement said by anti-historicists to undermine univer-

¹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 318, 323. Considering Strauss’s reputation in some circles, his treatment of Burke is surprisingly awkward. His use of sources is also careless and tendentious.

sal standards. Before considering the plausibility of this criticism it should be noted that over time historicism has assumed very different forms, including some recent ones that have pushed historicity in the direction of a denial of all continuity and meaning. In this discussion “historicism” refers in general to the historical sense that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe and became a powerful philosophical force in nineteenth-century German philosophy—what has been called *Historismus*. As used here, the term “historicism” does not necessarily encompass the special meanings it has acquired in some recent thinking.

According to anti-historicist defenders of universality, letting historical considerations affect the determination of moral right is to slide into relativism and nihilism. History belongs to the flux of change and is inherently incapable of providing moral direction. The sole source of authoritative guidance is reason. Strauss and his followers set up a sharp dichotomy between historically derived standards and what is discovered by reason in “nature.” The following passage not only distinguishes between the two but stresses their opposition.

The conventional is antithetical to the natural in the way that a standard of conduct founded only on the agreement of men is contrary *in its essence* to a standard that would arise out of the nature of men and things independently of human agreements. The standards that men establish are of course artificial. . . .

To be “respectful of the conventional, the artificial, and the traditional” is “to that extent to abjure nature and reason.”² Attributing any authority to a traditional consensus indicates disregard for a universal source of judgment. Formulas like these, oft-repeated though they be, reveal a simplistic understanding of the relationship between universality and particularity.³

² Joseph Cropsey, *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 117-18 (emphasis added).

³ Straussians sometimes stress the importance of distinguishing between two types of writing contained in works by their number: “Exoteric” writing is addressed to the unenlightened and may feign respect for convention; “esoteric,” “secret” writing reveals the truth (which may turn out to be nihilistic) to a circle of enlightened minds. A convenient consequence of this distinction is that criticisms of stated views can always be dismissed as seizing upon the mere surface of ideas, whereas the real meaning of the work is incontestable, although naturally beyond the grasp of the critic. Here arises an opportunity for philosophical self-contradiction and vacillation to present themselves as high sophistication and cleverness.

A claim by a school of thought that its real foundation is to be found in secret writing actually represents a damning self-indictment. Serious thinkers know that in

Under the partly unconscious influence of modern rationalism, anti-historicist admirers of Greek philosophy conceive of universality in a more radically ahistorical manner than was possible in the ancient world. In spite of Plato's and Aristotle's stated epistemological assumption that there can be no knowledge of the particular, the two thinkers, especially the latter, give much attention to the concrete in their philosophical practice. The meaning of Plato's dialogues is inseparable from the particular personalities and states of soul that are described in them. Socrates, the individual—person and philosopher in one—comes immediately to mind. A literary artist as well as a philosopher more strictly speaking, Plato manages to convey much of his view of life through the portrayal of personages, events and states of experience. The concrete *embodies* meaning. Aristotle's reasoning in the *Nicomachean Ethics* implies some familiarity on the part of the reader with the experiential referents of various terms. Aristotle's studies of a wide range of concrete materials, such as the specifics of a large number of city-state "constitutions," indicate an awareness, however vague, that particularity is in some way knowable and a guide to the universal. This assumed connection between particularity and universality is not adequately accounted for in the doctrine that knowledge pertains only to universals.

Although the Greek thinkers did think of normative reality as existing above and beyond the realm of change, it is anachronistic to attribute to them, particularly to Aristotle, a purely ahistorical rationality. They had not discovered particularity and individuality in the modern sense. They did not possess the self-consciously historical vantage from which the present is seen as a conspectus and product of the past. They used the term "history" differently from us. They could not rigorously exclude from their conception of reason something of which they were only dimly aware. The kind of universalism that is espoused by today's anti-historicists presupposes at least a groping modern historical sense that can at the same time be rejected.

Those who see in Plato the exponent of purely ahistorical rationality show themselves to be influenced by modern abstractionism.

philosophy central questions are highly complex and linked to other questions in involved and subtle relationships. To elucidate them is exceedingly difficult even when it can be done in an entirely open, systematic, protracted manner; whole books of such explicit, elaborate writing are sometimes required to achieve the needed clarity. The suggestion that insights of any consequence, as distinguished from loosely formulated ideas, could be smuggled into other writing "between the lines" calls into question the standing of the genre of secret writing as a philosophical enterprise. The deceit may be self-deceiving.

Strauss's followers usually read into the "ancients" ideas derived from the Enlightenment and related philosophical currents. Socrates, for instance, appears as a proto-Enlightenment figure. Plato is believed to have a great deal in common with Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Aristotle with John Locke. These modern thinkers are interpreted in the light of even later ideas. One may ask about this kind of moral abstractionism in general if its conception of universality does not often bear a greater resemblance to the ethical ideas of, say, the French Revolution than to classical notions of ethical good.⁴

*Modern
abstractionism.*

Great philosophical perspicacity is claimed for the view that ethical and other insight must form apart from historical considerations, but the anti-historicist association of universality with abstract rationality or other ahistorical contemplation typifies unawareness or neglect of major philosophical opportunities brought by the last two centuries. Deep-seated prejudices militate against discerning the deeper significance and more promising potentialities of the modern historical consciousness.

Before turning to a very different approach to universality and particularity it should be added and emphasized that a reluctance to adjust to historical circumstance or be tied in other ways to the concrete is not restricted to forms of abstract rationality. Avoidance of the here and now always involves interplay between the intellect and the imagination. A desire to set aside the historical world may mark the imagination of poets, painters or composers but also the imagination of writers of treatises. Doctrines that are highly intellectualistic in appearance may turn out upon closer examination to be animated by dreamy imaginative vision.

*Imaginative
escape.*

Imaginative escape from what is disappointing in real life has always existed, but the last two hundred years provide a particularly rich flora of what may be called the imagination of daydreaming. The individual drifts away into a sphere of his own creation that has little in common with the concrete needs and opportunities of actual life and that, for this very reason, is felt to be more satisfying. While indulging this quality of imagination the person does not have to face the annoying obstacles and burdensome responsibilities of the existing world. This type of imagination may be contrasted with other forms, artistic or otherwise, which, although they create or contem-

⁴ The similarities between recent forms of political moralism and Jacobin thinking are discussed in Claes G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1991).

plate possibilities, personages and events that do not necessarily exist historically, are nevertheless permeated by a strong sense of realism and limits, a sense of what life could and could not become. The imagination of escape expresses a longing to be somewhere else, to enjoy vastly more fulfilling conditions than the present world can offer. The specifics of this type of dreaming may vary greatly from person to person. It may, for example, revel in nostalgia for the past, pastoral reveries, dreams of free erotic love, or visions of society virtuously transformed. In the last two centuries the imagination of daydreaming has increasingly refused to confine itself to quickly passing flights of fancy. It has built up elaborate visions that are invested by the bearer with greater worth and significance than the world in which we act. For many people this quality of imagination has become a permanent accompaniment of daily life, a source of chronic grievance against things as they are. The individual dwells more and more in his favorite dream and uses it as a model for criticizing an existing world that seems ever more boring, nay, intolerable.⁵

The imagination of daydreaming is ahistorical or anti-historical not just in the sense that, as imagination, it is intuitive vision and not perception of historical truth. It is ahistorical or anti-historical also in the special sense that it typically tends to ignore or play down important facts of the human condition as known to living, acting human beings. While this form of avoidance employs and appeals to the imagination, it would be a serious error to view it as unrelated to ways of discounting historical realities that appear to be more rational or scientific. On the contrary, doctrinal, philosophical statements always presuppose an underlying quality of the imagination, whether evasive or more realistic, that orients the mind of the author. To mention a few individuals who seem enamored of a scientific approach, Bacon, Comte and Marx are powerfully influenced by an imaginative vision of a new world. The same is true of other ostensibly dry and rationalistic thinkers, such as John Locke or John Stuart Mill. Indeed, it is appropriate to ask if the attraction of some rationalistic or scientific doctrines does not lie less in their purely intellectual content than in the intuitive vision to which they give intellectual expression. Did anyone ever become a socialist by absorbing the strictly technical rea-

⁵ The classic and pioneering work on the centrality of the imagination in shaping man's sense of reality and on the role of self-deluding forms of imagination in inspiring a flight from the moral conditions of human existence is Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

soning of *Das Kapital* or a liberal by similarly absorbing Locke's *Second Treatise*?⁶

If all doctrines receive some of their structure and inspiration from a certain quality of the imagination, there is no question of denying that some theories, as theories, have the effect of disparaging history. Various kinds of philosophical abstractionism more or less deliberately isolate themselves from the concrete and the actual by becoming absorbed into purely theoretical or "ideal" propositions.

II

Among the philosophers who prepared the way for a more historical, more subtle understanding of the relation of the universal to the particular, Hegel is, in spite of serious flaws, the ground-breaking figure. His best insights were much strengthened and given a more lucid form by the Italian Benedetto Croce, perhaps the greatest technical and systematic philosopher of our own century. Hegelian and neo-Hegelian historicism is sometimes drawn to questionable types of philosophizing—including the schematization of history, progressivism, and a monistic-pantheistic blurring of good and evil—but these tendencies can be resisted in favor of more fruitful strains within this tradition. Among the earliest contributors to the new historical consciousness in the Anglo-Saxon world, Edmund Burke stands out. Burke is not prone to the same weaknesses as Hegelian historicism. Although he is not a philosopher in the same strict sense as Croce, his understanding of society and the individual as part of an evolving historical whole represents a notable deepening of social and political thought. By drawing selectively on these and related thinkers, the idea of universality can be reconstituted.

*Historicist
reconstitution
of universality.*

Choosing between modern and premodern thought is not a real possibility. Helpful and necessary as it is for many purposes to classify and label currents of ideas, such differentiations must be understood as creations of convenience and not be mistaken for sharp divisions within concrete reality itself. Actual thought is marked by a perpetual give and take between points of view and defies the neat boundaries of abstract categories. Today's partisans for either "modernity" or "premodernity," for example, are themselves products of each. A

⁶ The relationship between imagination and rationality of different types is examined in depth in Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Regnery Books, 1986).

more recently invented category, “postmodernity,” may usefully add to the typology of Western thought for some analytical purposes, but that term too suffers from the kind of simplification that must, to a greater or lesser degree, characterize any classificatory scheme of this type.⁷ As commonly used, the notion of postmodernity is rather fluid, and it assumes an eclectic understanding of modernity. In some respects, postmodernity looks like a variant or mutation of “modernity.” From another point of view, a postmodern critique of modernity may be seen as creating openings for revisiting some premodern ideas. While recognizing the always pressing need for classifications, definitions and general terms, it is essential to guard against the danger of reductionism and against rigidly held preconceptions about which ideas belong and do not belong together. Especially in the present historical circumstances, an openness to new and perhaps unexpected philosophical combinations and syntheses is in order.

Central classical and Judaeo-Christian insights can be developed and strengthened by drawing on major accomplishments of Western philosophy in the last two and a half centuries. The converse is equally true. Specifically, it is possible to reconcile a recognition of universality with an historicist appreciation for the particularity, diversity and changeability of human existence. This reconstitution and synthesis of philosophical elements is what is here called value-centered historicism. In the latter perspective, not only is real universality not separated from particulars of history; it is seen to be present to human consciousness only in concrete form. Ethical universality is at the same time transcendent of historical experience and immanent in it—a statement that is not contradictory but expressive of the dialectical nature of reality. Irving Babbitt writes: “Because one can perceive immediately an element of unity in things, it does not follow that one is justified in establishing a world of essences or entities or ‘ideas’ above the flux.”⁸

*Disdain for
the concrete
world.*

Modern anti-historicist moralism takes to an extreme a tendency that has always been present, more or less, in traditional Western ethics, a tendency not to enter into real contact with the concrete texture

⁷ Benedetto Croce distinguishes between pragmatic and philosophical concepts. The former are indispensable but are inherently vague and serve a limited objective. Only the latter express structures of life that do not blur into each other. See, in particular, Croce, *Logic* (London: Macmillan, 1917). Croce’s distinction is developed and incorporated into a general epistemology in Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*.

⁸ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, lxxiii.

of day-to-day human life. In political philosophy, for example, it has seemed dangerous to associate morality too closely with an ordinary mundane life that is really unworthy of it and that could taint it with impurities. Better for the noble soul to remain aloof. Plato's moral and political philosophy contains different strains and is not easily categorized, but it offers many telling examples of a disinclination to deal with the world as it is. Plato even tries to prove the moral superiority of withdrawing from politics as ordinarily found. In the *Seventh Letter* he vents his personal disgust with participating in actual politics, as distinguished from contemplating ideal propositions. Neglecting the concrete moral opportunities of the world is far from the whole truth about Platonic moral philosophy, and in later Western moral speculation that tendency has been mitigated by other factors. Still, a fondness for moral abstractions—"ideals"—has tended to divert attention from the life of actual situations and to create a lack of readiness and ability to act in the here and now. Machiavelli's strictures against older political thought for being less interested in "things as they are in real truth" than in dreaming up models for emulation may be to some extent infected by dubious motives, but it is surely appropriate to challenge a type of moralism that somehow always leaves the politician at a loss in the imperfect, tension-filled and taxing circumstances in which he must act—a moralism that also claims credit for being so nobly poised outside the struggle.⁹

It is common for today's critics of moral relativism and nihilism to assert the existence of universal principles and to regard the nobility of those principles as indicated by their distance from imperfect and often distasteful practical reality. The possibility that moralism of this type is in fact an evasion of the concrete needs of ethical obligation must be seriously considered. Croce writes about anti-historicist moralists that they are anxious "to put morality outside the pale of history, and think to exalt it, so that it can agreeably be revered from afar and neglected from near at hand."¹⁰ Behind incorruptible dedication to an imagined pure goodness may hide a reluctance to face the real world and an inability to seize its actual opportunities, an abdication that is nevertheless accompanied by self-congratulation.

Some writers who today attempt a return to older Western tradi-

*Transcendence
as evasion.*

⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 90 (Ch. XV).

¹⁰ Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1970), 7.

tions in social and political thought invoke transcendent spiritual reality and mystical experience. But that reality is often so loosely conceived and so tenuously related to the ordinary, immanent world that its concrete, specific entailments and implications for how to live remain obscure. If the transcendent is not seen as a potentiality for structuring concrete existence but seen rather as pulling the person away from the need to assert will, imagination and reason in the present, this genre falls into the mentioned pattern of virtuous withdrawal. That type of escape should not be confused with the special and rare kind of otherworldliness known to the religions which involves renunciation of the world in one sense but which also faces up to the obstacles and demands it must confront in concrete action. That striving for holiness embodies its aspiration in pragmatic, down-to-earth conduct. What looks dubious in the perspective of value-centered historicism is a form of spirituality that discounts the immanent world and casts aspersions on the means necessary to act in that world—on compromise, politics, self-assertion, power, economic resources, etc.—and that considers its hands clean for not having touched such shoddy merchandise.

A failure in so much contemporary discussion to connect ethical universality with historical particularity makes it easier for various claimants to appropriate the high-sounding language of universality. If ethical universality is not embodied in concrete aspirations of a particular quality and direction, general terms such as “universal values” and “the transcendent” can mean everything and nothing.

III

The experiential whole.

Value-centered historicism assumes not just the possible tension between but the synthesis of universality and particularity. It is important to show in what sense man’s historical experience can manifest the universal. The deficiency of an ahistorical view of universality should also be elucidated further.

Explaining the coexistence of universality and particularity is complicated by the prevalence of vaguely empirical notions of experience. Experience is usually regarded as derivative of “the senses,” a view that produces a truncated notion of what lies within man’s concrete and direct apprehension. Experience is thought to refer to a mundane, “sensual” reality, whereas “higher values” must be looked for in some other sphere. It should be made explicit that experience is here not understood empirically in the ordinary sense. It refers to all

of what falls within human consciousness, to the whole range of man's awareness of what it is to be a human being. Experience includes the life of morality, religion, politics, economics, art, and knowledge. A part of that whole are the stirrings and satisfactions of goodness, truth and beauty.

The last-mentioned three qualities have traditionally been regarded as the universal values and imperatives of human existence. Here they have been spoken of together as the universal in the singular. Croce presents convincing arguments for adding to the triad of goodness, truth and beauty "the economical" or "the useful." The latter is a quality of efficiency that makes any human activity, whether admirable or contemptible, simply serviceable and coherent. Since the present discussion deals primarily with universality in general, the ways in which goodness, truth, beauty and economy differ and interact need not be elaborated. At issue is the suggestion that universality manifests itself in concrete particulars.¹¹

Aspects of the universal.

How is history relevant to a sense of the universal? All societies and generations have their idiosyncracies, blind spots, partisan preoccupations, areas of special ignorance and other weaknesses which obscure the universal. They must be constantly mindful of the possible presence of such weaknesses and try to work their way out of them. What Goethe calls "masses of world history" is the rich record of what humanity has wrought in the world over the centuries. It speaks of what life may contain—the enviable, the unenviable, the indifferent, and the horrifying. Awareness of the heights of human attainment and of earlier flagrant mistakes helps alert a particular generation or society to its own flaws and to how it might free itself of them. Exposure to history serves as a corrective to the confining biases of time and place and enriches the individual's sense of what has genuine and enduring value.

History as record of universality.

In order to improve self or society it is necessary to envision something better than what currently exists. But here two very different approaches are possible. One is to cultivate an historically informed sense of what advances lie in the realm of the possible and to gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of one's own time through

Historical sense and "idealism."

¹¹ "The economical" and its relation to the ethical are explained in Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of the Practical* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1967). The English translation by Douglas Ainslie is flawed and sometimes misleading. For an extensive discussion of the forms of universality and their interaction, with particular emphasis on problems of knowledge, see Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*.

historical comparisons, so that ameliorative efforts are adjusted to the special needs and opportunities of given historical circumstances. Another possible approach is to define an "ideal" apart from historical considerations and seek its implementation. In the latter case, what should be is thought to be evident from the ideal itself. Reminders of the actual experience of mankind or of the restrictions imposed by existing circumstances are not welcome and may even seem the products of perverse obstructionism.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wants to replace existing society with one modeled after his own conception of what should be. In formulating the ideal he proceeds independently of human life as we know it. His *Second Discourse* offers a history of sorts, written in part to explain the great evils that have befallen humanity and to discredit existing societies, but it does not lay claim to historical truth. Rousseau is aware that the facts of actual history might contradict his reasoning, and he treats them as irrelevant to his purpose. "Let us therefore begin," he writes, "by setting all the facts aside, for they do not affect the question." His pseudo-historical account of the original goodness and freedom of man, which has everything to do with his model for a new political order, is prefaced by the statement that "the researches which can be undertaken concerning this subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings."¹² Rousseau's reflections about human nature and society are assumed to be no less credible for disregarding concrete historical evidence.

Edmund Burke, in contrast, associates an ability to improve with a willingness to learn the lessons of human history. Burke greatly admires individuals of exceptional wisdom and virtue and would lean heavily on their advice, but he also rejects as superficial and dangerous the idea that one could substitute for the slowly accumulating insight and experience of the human race the abstractly and autonomously conceived ideas of a certain individual or group. The notion of ahistorical enlightenment ignores not only the intellectual and other limitations of human beings but the dependence of each individual and generation on preceding generations.

Two opposed approaches to improving self or society are thus distinguished by very different assessments of the significance of actual historical experience. One resists historical considerations as irrelevant to formulating the ideal and as raising questions about the pos-

¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, transl. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 103.

sibility or desirability of enacting it. The second approach distrusts abstract models and would develop the higher potentialities of historical circumstances actually at hand.

Value-centered historicism does not assume the inevitability of progress. Such advances as are made by mankind are forever threatened by lapses, retrogressions and sheer laziness. Since history contains bad as well as good and the potentialities of the present point in different directions, an ability to discriminate is essential. What needs to be better understood is that there is a vital and necessary connection between that ability and the historical sense. They are connected because we discern universality in concrete experience. Whatever may lie outside of our consciousness is just that, outside—unavailable for critical examination. The individual is oriented to life's higher possibilities by being exposed to concrete examples of goodness, truth and beauty. These particulars embody the universal, however imperfectly. To the extent that they stir the individual soul, life is pulled in a certain direction. On the basis of such apprehension, it is possible to frame philosophical terms and definitions for the good, the true and the beautiful, but these intellectual articulations are not ideational abstractions; they give conceptual expression to experiential particulars.

*Universality
and concrete
experience.*

The distinguishing quality and normative authority of universal values become known to the person in specific instances of moral action, thought and art. Through them experience is structured and directed in ways that invest life with special significance. If society at large comes to share in this meaning, new generations can be initiated into the reality of these values. A civilized heritage is pregnant with new possibilities for realizing the universal. Goodness, truth and beauty are never exhausted by their historical particulars but point beyond themselves and their own circumstances.

There is a sense, to be explained later, in which society is enriched by building ever new manifestations of universal values into its canons. Does then the accumulation of examples set a truly authoritative standard for society? What of tradition? Some invoke tradition as the depository of enduring, permanent "principles." In the midst of perpetual change "the tradition" lies firm. Our task, they believe, is to strive to conform our lives to the wise prescriptions of the tradition and to protect it against demands for "relevance." Although faintly aware of a link between historical experience and normative authority, traditionalism of this type hypostatizes the universal. Its adherence to reified, abstract "lessons of history" tends to sever its connec-

*Tradition as
reified
universality.*

tion with the historical world. It becomes another example of the kind of withdrawal from the actual opportunities of human existence that already has been discussed.

A claim to having captured universality once and for all is in effect a denial of the historical nature of human existence. Maintaining or deepening a sense of the universal is in actuality not a matter of copying a standard already at humanity's disposal. Universality is a continuing discovery requiring unending rearticulation of goodness, truth and beauty. Only through creativity and renewal can it be kept alive in forever changing historical circumstances, some of which may be sharply inimical to the civilizing task. In attempting a mere repetition of the past traditionalism loses the experiential reality of goodness, truth and beauty in increasingly empty forms and routines. The weakness of that preference for established ways becomes acutely apparent in an historical era when widely divergent views of human good develop strength within the same civilization and constitute competing traditions. On what grounds can conventionalism favor one tradition over another? Because of its greater age?

*Tradition as
living past.*

Conventional formalism leaves mankind's great moral, philosophical and aesthetical achievements in the past. It tries to live off their reputation and exercise influence in their name. But for these works to acquire genuine authority and move people by their example they would have to reveal their intrinsic value in the present. People living now would have to make them their own in the sense of accommodating them in their own experience and particular circumstances. The old instances of goodness, truth and beauty must come alive by helping to articulate and expand the individual's own groping sense of universality. They must speak directly to the deeply felt needs of the here and now, take their place among the works of the contemporary world. They cannot do so unless society has somehow managed to prepare its members to absorb their meaning.

The compelling experience in which universality is concretized is at the same time and indistinguishably that of a particular and unique individual and that of humanity in general. To the extent that tradition can connect man with the universal, it is, in that sense, a *living past*. In the experience of the particular person, tradition at its best joins past and present in a new, direct apprehension of universality. From within a living consciousness of enduring higher good, personal and social life can be continuously assessed. Stale and formalistic habits and conventions can be identified and weeded out in favor of ways that

better manifest the universal. Sound tradition is at once dependence on and autonomy from the past.

Tradition is often seen as opposed by radicals and defended by conservatives. But if by tradition is meant the living continuity that of necessity underlies every new creative accomplishment, "radicalism" and "conservatism" are but ways of labeling equally necessary and mutually dependent strains within a civilizing process that is indistinguishably renewal and preservation.

*Conservatism
and radical-
ism.*

John Dewey does not quite concede the existence of universality as here understood. But he stresses the importance of continuity. He wholly rejects a radicalism that strikes indiscriminately against inherited ways. Commenting on what he sees as a dangerous element in the philosophy of Henri Bergson, Dewey writes:

A blind creative force is as likely to turn out to be destructive as creative; the vital *élan* may delight in war rather than the laborious arts of civilization, and a mystic splurge be a poor substitute for the detailed work of an intelligence embodied in custom and institution, one which creates by means of flexible continuous contrivances of reorganization.¹³

Dewey does not place his well-known stress on the need for continual pragmatic experimentation and adjustment to circumstance in opposition to an historical sense of the kind previously outlined. Indeed, the following passage from Dewey may serve as a summary of the historicism that has here been sketched, one that actually emphasizes its more conservative side:

We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things of civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received

¹³ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: The Modern Library, 1957), 69.

That Dewey's pragmatism is not as inhospitable to universality as is sometimes assumed is evident, for instance, from his recognition of the possibility of a consciousness of "the enduring and comprehending whole." *Ibid.*, 301. Whether this consciousness in Dewey is monistic and pantheistic or of some other kind is of course an important question.

¹⁴ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 87. Considerable overlap between Dewey's thinking and the historicist perspective here presented should not obscure that there are also tensions between them.

it.¹⁴

Dewey's philosophy as a whole is sharply critical of universalism that looks for reality in essences beyond the actual world. In spite of what looks like openings to the universal within his own pragmatism, he does not pursue the possibility of a reconstituted understanding of universality. In the quoted passages universality only lies implicit. The aim of the present discussion is to bring into conscious and more systematic awareness a universality that becomes concrete in historical particularity.

IV

*History as
normative.*

To anti-historicist universalism, talk of a possible union of the universal and the particular sounds like an endorsement of whatever is thrown up by history. Ahistorical reasoning lacks categories for a relationship that is dynamic and mutual. Explaining how historical particularity and universal values can be intimately related, indeed identical, is complicated by the moral, intellectual and cultural tensions within contemporary Western society, which seem to contradict the possibility of finding universality within history. Many react to the emergence of competing traditions and unsettled conditions by looking for a firm standard of judgment wholly outside the flux of circumstance. Anti-historicists opt for abstract deliberation and "principles" or some other departure from the here and now. Value-centered historicism follows a different course. If some historical forces today are destructive of the higher potentialities of human existence, those developments do not undermine the view that universality, when it does reveal itself, does so only in historical, experiential particulars. To stress the historical particularity of the universal is not to deny the need for moral, aesthetical and philosophical discrimination between historical currents and potentialities. On the contrary, since the universal and the historical exist in simultaneous synthesis and tension, heightened and more subtle powers of discrimination are required.

But is it not inconsistent to assert, on the one hand, that it is necessary to select among the materials of historical experience, and to assert, on the other hand, that universality, the carrier of normative authority, manifests itself in concrete particulars? How could something that is itself historical provide a standard for evaluating history? To ahistorical reasoning such an idea appears blatantly contradictory. The criterion of judgment and the object of judgment, the norm and the

phenomenon, must surely be separate, as a measuring rod is distinct from what it measures. To the proposition that experience itself can be compelling and normative, anti-historicist universalism will object that many different experiences may seem valuable. Since what is felt to be in some way satisfying varies greatly from person to person and even from moment to moment in the same person, a criterion external to all particular experience is necessary to determine what is truly noble and ignoble. Generously interpreted, this objection does contain a kernel of truth, but it springs from a heavy-handed reification of universality and human experience that turns the two into discrete entities without any integral relationship.

*Universality
as maturation.*

Some concrete illustrations may help explain the simultaneous tension and synthesis of universality and particularity. Consider upbringing and education, at their very best. This shaping of the personality can be seen as analogous to the moral, intellectual, and aesthetical maturation of a whole generation, or of an entire civilization over the centuries. In the child, an awakening sense of values is articulated and expanded by the norms, personal examples, stories, music, games, clothes, foods, etc. to which the child is exposed. All of these together convey to the young person, in concrete form, a notion of what life is and should be. This early formation is an initiation to the universal as known by civilization. In time, the universal becomes more fully articulated in experience as absorption of the moral, cultural and philosophical heritage continues at ever more advanced levels.

It is important to note that the individual does not passively and uncritically adopt externally imposed standards. Universality slowly emerges from a dialectical encounter between the individual's own groping sense of values and the riches of civilization. The maturing young person, especially if sensitive and gifted, begins to notice dissonances between the recommendations of parents, teachers and others and his own developing ethical, aesthetical and intellectual sensibilities. In childhood the biases of parents may have been an overwhelming influence, but even then an independent sense of values stirred in the individual, and there were limits to how much the taste of the child could be molded.

Initially lacking in subtlety, the sensibility of the young person eventually becomes more acute and versatile as it is challenged and rearticulated by new ethical, aesthetical and intellectual experience. Tales, melodies and rhymes that were enthralling to the child are seen to be infantile when compared to poetry and symphonies that have

greatly expanded the individual's experiential range. An aesthetical sensibility that once thrilled to cartoons and illustrations in children's books begins to cherish the paintings of Rembrandt. A curiosity about the nature of self and the world, which in childhood was satisfied by greatly simplified explanations, eventually finds expression in the elaborate and systematic study of history, philosophy and science. At the ethical center of the personality, conscience begins to orient life at an early age. The articulation of the person's sense of moral obligation soon moves beyond reliance on simple norms imparted by parents or the moral lessons of children's tales. With an expanding range of practical experience and widening exposure to philosophy and art there can develop a deeper, fuller, and more intricate sense of moral responsibility, one that is marked more and more by moral autonomy in the sense that the ethical conscience is personally and acutely felt. However advantageous the circumstances of the individual, only his own choices can give ethical structure to the personality. The ethically sensitive and aspiring individual will censure his own egotistical self-indulgence in favor of a gradually discovered and more deeply satisfying quality of life. Over a long time, moral habits and individual actions, established and performed in sometimes difficult inner struggle with opposing inclinations, build up a certain character whose experiential tenor is such as to give higher meaning to life. Aristotle uses the word *eudaimonia* (happiness) to speak of a special feeling of simultaneously personal and impersonal satisfaction that results from long trying and increasingly succeeding in doing what is right rather than what is easy and momentarily pleasurable.

*Universality
as creative
and personal.*

As the individual enters adulthood the influence of parents, teachers, mentors, heroes and others may begin to weaken. Sometimes the person must object to established authorities because they are deemed deficient by his own sense of the good, the true and the beautiful. He may feel compelled to challenge them through his own creative expression of the same values. In doing so, the person follows a standard that is in a sense his very own: he knows its authority from personal experience and applies it in his own circumstances by means of his own unique creative gifts. But the standard is at the same time independent and impersonal in that it is felt to be binding not only on the individual but on all human beings. The particular person cannot control its likes and dislikes. It mercilessly censures breaches of its authority. It is to protest the violation or diminution of the standard and to restore or enhance its authority that a truly constructive rebel

takes action, be it in morality, art, or philosophy.

Moral agents, thinkers and artists are free to betray the good, the true and the beautiful and frequently do so. But the best and most honest among them are in a sense also wholly bound to these universal imperatives. They can be at peace with themselves only by honoring them in their life and work. If they betray them, they are in a part of themselves painfully aware of an unfulfilled higher potential. The moral actor knows when he is shirking responsibility and soothing himself with excuses. The thinker knows when he is being less than self-critical and slipping past uncomfortable and unsettling ideas, thus relaxing the commitment to truth. The artist knows when he is letting laziness or pandering to popular tastes intrude upon the aesthetical obligation to give only his best. The moral, intellectual and aesthetical imperatives are intensely private in their demands: the very identity of the particular person is wrapped up in them. But their universality is simultaneously indicated by the fact that they cannot be dominated or turned on and off at will by the individual; the person who flees from their authority is left no peace.

*Assessing
claims of
value.*

As the heritage of humane civilization assists the individual in articulating the moral, intellectual, and aesthetical imperatives of life, it helps make possible not only independence from the tastes of the day but from long-standing convention. Growing internal, personal, first-hand familiarity with the universal puts the person in an ever better position to test claims of value for himself and to rank particular achievements.

The expansion of the range and depth of experience comes in large part from taking the advice of others and from seeking a corresponding exposure to new possibilities. Some of these are discovered to offer indispensable new enlightenment or other enrichment. Some offer perspectives or satisfactions that prove to be trivial or merely transitory or to be disappointing in the longer run. Yet other possibilities are found to be immediately fascinating but destructive of a more fundamental harmony of life. A combination of sensibility and strength of will makes it possible for the individual to create and maintain priorities that build insight and enjoyment into the personality. Because of poor guidance, dullness of mind or imagination, or perversity of will, some individuals may become listless and disoriented, live for transitory thrills and pleasures, or structure their personalities around some pernicious driving passion. They never escape a sense of the final meaninglessness of existence.

It might be said in response to these arguments that they seem to provide yet more examples of the need for a criterion of good external to experience itself. Without a separate model or norm of some kind, how could it be known whether particular experiences are conducive to or destructive of our higher humanity? It should be granted immediately that qualitative discrimination assumes a standard of some kind. But it is essential not to reify and artificially isolate what is living and synthesizing. What must be recognized and pondered is that, in the end, we can be truly persuaded of the validity of a value claim only by concrete experience. Intellectual assertions regarding goodness, truth or beauty must be in some way tested to see whether they keep what they promise, whether they answer to actual possibilities. From the point of view of normative authority, concrete experience is primary, ideas secondary. It is certainly possible to speak of the good for man in ideas, but the meaning of the ideas must be ascertained in ideas and experience together. Theoretical accounts of universal value that cannot in some way appeal to concrete reality will remain unconvincing.

Aristotle had considerable awareness of the normative significance of experience when he stressed the ethical importance of building up sound habits and when he identified the ultimate good for man with happiness. A special feeling of satisfaction, different from mere pleasure, distinguishes the life of ethical action from other kinds. *The Nicomachean Ethics* is a work of philosophy, to be sure, which presents systematic reasoning, definitions and concepts. It is philosophical despite Aristotle's somewhat bureaucratic cast of mind that sometimes produces too great a fondness for classifications and distinctions. But his treatment of what is morally beneficial and dangerous is, in spite of notable flaws, anchored in the concrete reality of ethical action. Such persuasive power as Aristotle's treatise possesses lies in its ability to connect its terms with the experience of the reader. What is most needed in order for a person to discern universality, therefore, is not intense theorizing, however helpful good philosophy can be in orienting the individual. The primary need is that the good, the true and the beautiful should come alive in actual conduct and other experience. How is it known whether this desirable condition is being approached? It is known ultimately by the presence of the special harmony and worth that is intrinsic to the good and cultivated life. *The standard lies in that quality of life itself.* It is the nature of the experience that defines "good" and "cultivated."

Philosophical *concepts* that express these qualities are theoretical accounts of what is also concretely in experience. An adequate philosophy of values is in that sense necessarily historical. The civilized society does indeed need “principles” and rules of conduct, but their formulation is less a philosophical than a pragmatic activity. At their best, they are attempts to guide society’s members toward the good, the true and the beautiful or discourage a slide in the opposite direction. But principles and rules, however general in formulation and however widely accepted, are not themselves normative ultimates. They are transcended by the living manifestation of universality and should be continually adjusted to it.

Universality and “principles.”

It needs to be reiterated and emphasized that the universal is never exhausted by its particular embodiments. The very best philosophers, artists and moral actors fall short of perfection—not in the sense of failing to attain a pre-existing ideal, “perfection,” which is a wholly unhistorical construct, but in the sense that even the greatest human achievements contain potentialities for improvement and development. The universal must be continuously rediscovered and rearticulated. Some tentativeness or uncertainty about how life can be enhanced in particular circumstances is to be expected even among individuals who have gone far in building up a rich and comprehensive experiential basis for judging. They know from history the great complexity of life and the limits of man’s powers. They recognize that the future may disclose possibilities in morality, art and philosophy that will be, at least in some respects, more truly authoritative than the ones they favor.

Universality as potentiality.

The higher purpose of education and upbringing, and of civilization in general, is to foster the moral, aesthetical and intellectual range that will qualify persons to make informed discriminations. This purpose can be, and frequently is, stifled. Imagine a society that confines the development of the person to a very narrow range of experience, a society that makes no effort to expose its members to the quality of life that human beings over the centuries have found most deeply rewarding. The society has for some reason decided to cater to the citizens’ desires of the moment. This people still will experience and value much. But they will not be in a position to assess their own preferred enjoyments authoritatively. They may have an appreciation for rock music but lack the preparation for listening to Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. They may have a large appetite for simple entertainment but be incapable of absorbing Sophocles, Dante and

Experience confined.

Shakespeare. They may enjoy snippets of news and the opinions of journalists but have no capacity for advanced historical and philosophical reflection. They may develop the technical and other utilitarian skills necessary for constructing and acquiring creature comforts but know little about satisfying moral and spiritual needs. They may indulge desires for food, drink, sex, and other pleasures but have no understanding of the deeper and lasting satisfaction that the classical and Judaeo-Christian heritage associates with ethical self-restraint. Should members of this society feel a gnawing discontent, they are not able to identify its sources, for reasons already stated. They also are ill-equipped to assess alternative ways of living, for the same reasons.

Changed character as prerequisite for understanding.

If the aim is to improve the condition of this society, circulating a new doctrine would not go very far. Ideas of classical inspiration, for example, that extol "reason," "justice," "moderation," and "happiness" might attract the curiosity of members of the society who are vaguely dissatisfied. But grasping and evaluating serious philosophical claims requires much preparation. Formal intellectual brilliance is insufficient, for the claims cannot be understood simply in the abstract. Philosophical ideas of some depth give theoretical expression to a certain body of experience, acquired over a long time through practical and contemplative efforts of a particular kind. People whose own way of life has left them unfamiliar with what the Greeks meant by "aristocratic" conduct will interpret the terms of Greek philosophy according to the experience that is available to them and consequently distort their meaning. Truly to understand classical or Judaeo-Christian ethical philosophy means to understand it in experience, or, at minimum, to have sufficient experiential familiarity to be able to enter imaginatively into the ethos it represents. The task of understanding philosophy of this type requires of the hedonistic, whimsical and ignorant person nothing less than a reorientation of personal character through self-discipline, as assumed by the philosophy, so that the range and depth of experience is created that will begin to qualify the person to evaluate the philosophy.

Pseudo-universality of "ideals."

Some ideas or "ideals" that are said to express universality are only tenuously related to historical experience. In fact, as has been discussed, they claim normative authority precisely because they have been formulated apart from historical considerations, without the distraction and the lowering of standards that are alleged to come from adjusting to human imperfections. Testing ideas like these against real life is to discover that they do not express actual possibilities and that

they may mask hidden motives. The great distance between the alleged “ideal” and what historically existing humanity will bear points to a potential for tyranny.

It now can be more easily seen why the anti-historicist separation of the universal norm from concrete experience is not only epistemologically misguided but ethically dangerous. Making universality a matter of abstract rationality or other ahistorical contemplation makes it possible for many different moral preferences to claim universal sanction. There is no reason to expect that people who champion universality but place its essence beyond the concrete world should behave better in the concrete than anybody else; indeed, an insistence that true universality is separate from actual life should lead one to expect the opposite.

What kind of individual is in the best position to judge life’s different possibilities? It is one who can compare them to each other because of familiarity with each of them. Needless to say, the individual cannot try out the leading alternatives in actual conduct before deciding which to choose. For life to have structure and coherence some general orientation has to be favored at the outset. That earliest orientation owes much to parents or other nearby authorities, but it undergoes change as the individual matures. The considered and repeated judgments of past generations are bound to carry considerable weight with a thoughtful person in setting priorities for conduct. To some extent, different views of how man should live can be tried out in practice, but they also can be tested by being enacted *in the imagination* on the basis of fair and plentiful evidence. Some of the human range—from good to evil, truth to falsehood, beauty to ugliness—that the individual could not, or would not, actually try out can be understood through historical accounts and the arts. Experience thus acquired expands and embellishes upon insight gained in personal conduct. The task of responsibly and open-mindedly assessing possibilities is made somewhat easier by the fact that the more enduring and well-supported alternatives have large areas of convergence within which in-depth exploration and evaluation is possible. Excursions into less familiar territory are needed from time to time to test the actual superiority of what has become habitual and well-known.

It is possible for society to be such that it facilitates this kind of comparative assessment of the potentialities of life. Imagine a society in which the rising generation is not confined to the popular tastes of the moment. Imagine a society in which young people are prepared

*Acquiring
authority to
judge.*

*The versatile
society.*

through upbringing, schooling and other education to absorb mankind's major achievements in ethics, philosophy and the arts and to assess these possibilities in relation to each other as well as in relation to more recent claims. Imagine a society which encourages its inhabitants to live the kind of life that seems to represent the best judgment of the ages but which also has the freedom to enrich, expand and deepen this heritage. This would be a society in the best possible position to understand the universal. A truly civilized society does, in a sense, know all the weightier possibilities. *Nihil humanum alienum me puto*. It is the versatile society. It is generally familiar even with what it rejects. The idiosyncratic society previously described, in contrast, knows its own ways, by its own lights, but it is incapable of authoritatively assessing the very different ways of the civilized society. It lacks the experiential range for doing so. If the idiosyncratic society attempts to pass judgment on a quality of life with which it is not familiar, it can only interpret that quality in experiential terms known to the society and hence distort the real content. The more versatile society has no difficulty understanding the ways of the idiosyncratic society. Those ways fall well within the experience of the civilized society, because the latter contains, besides the ways of which it approves, also the self-indulgence, impulsiveness, hedonism, superficiality and ignorance that is never absent from human life. Because of its wider experiential range, the versatile society recognizes the great limitations of the idiosyncratic society and accepts its predilections, if at all, only in tempered and revised form.

The truly civilized society cultivates an openness to new possibilities, but it is an openness that is oriented by an evolving sense of what makes life truly worth living. This structured experiential openness forms the basis for judging. Discriminating between high and low falls in the end to the truly mature and cultivated individuals whose vantage lets them identify what is low and sordid by its distance from what is intrinsically worthy of emulation. In proportion as people in general come to share in this ability to discriminate by absorbing the best that civilization can offer, a sound sense of priorities and proportion can inform social life as a whole.

To object to this view of how universality is ascertained that different traditions claim superiority is merely to draw attention to the high qualifications for judging. Only people of exceptional breadth, depth, and sensibility can rate possibilities of human existence with authority. Conceiving of the standard for what is high and low in ahistorical,

“idealistic” terms has the great appeal over the one here set forth that it presupposes little in the way of character and general cultural preparation. Wisdom is conferred on easy terms.

The individuals who are most qualified to discriminate tend to be the same who incline against categorical, unqualified statements regarding the specific ways in which goodness, truth and beauty can be manifested. Although a soundly traditional civilization manages to weed out many superficialities and perversities as clearly destructive of universal values and to define a general range wherein truly rewarding life may be sought, the ever-present danger of moral and cultural atrophy and staleness creates a permanent need for creativity and reinvigoration. A vital civilization maintains continuity with the past, but it does so precisely to have the moral, intellectual and aesthetical autonomy to seize emerging and perhaps unexpected opportunities. Disagreements about the specific nature of the good, the true and the beautiful will continue. In so far as temporary resolutions are possible, it is not because brilliant arguments can defeat deficient arguments in the abstract, but because superior experience can persuade by its concrete example.

It should be acknowledged that intellectual effort forms an integral and indispensable part of the higher life of society. Pursuing truth is one of the imperatives of human existence. Goodness, truth and beauty also depend on each other for their respective development. Human action cannot proceed without reflection. But although reason contributes greatly to the enhancement of life, it is not itself normative outside of its own realm of truth. The philosophies of ethics and aesthetics are the systematic conceptual articulations of value realities known concretely in the practical and imaginative life, respectively. Logic, the study of thinking itself, takes account of the activity whereby the goal of truth is realized. The wisdom that philosophy may possess resides in the ability to view the different aspects of human existence from the point of view of life’s higher possibilities. Because the task of philosophy is to raise human experience into conceptual self-consciousness, philosophy and the study of history ultimately coalesce.¹⁵

Objections by ahistorical rationalism to this view of philosophy are the protestations of a form of thinking that drains philosophy of our

The imperative of rationality.

Irrelevance of ahistoricism.

¹⁵ The nature of philosophical rationality and its relation to history is dealt with extensively in Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*.

concrete, historical humanity and that is therefore largely irrelevant to life as it must actually be lived. It is no coincidence that abstractionists typically satisfy a need for concreteness and warmth through utopian-idyllic imagination. That kind of imagination is equally unwilling to dwell in the real world, and it only reinforces, indeed makes more enticing, the avoidance of the terms and limits of historical existence.

Summary and conclusion.

V

It is time to summarize and conclude these observations concerning history and universality. It has been argued that universality becomes known to man in concrete experience and has to be discovered by each individual, generation and society for themselves. To the extent that universal values enter human life, they are their own reward and justification. The union of universality and particularity gives to experience a special magnetic quality. In the case of ethical responsibility the synthesis fosters happiness. Universality pulls humanity in its own direction by holding out the possibility of a truly worthwhile life. It challenges and tries to drive from the arena desires that, while promising pleasure, are destructive of a more deeply satisfying quality of being. It is in this sense that experience can be normative, be its own standard. It should be evident from the above argument that this view hides no implication that human beings can arbitrarily decree what is to be good, true or beautiful. The latter impose their own authority. Although the individual must creatively accommodate universal values in the context of a life that is particular and unique, these values can be realized only on their own terms. The special satisfaction that inheres in their realization cannot be forced or commanded, but once universality has come alive in experience, that experience is by its very nature normative.

For these reasons it is not the case that human experience could be evaluated as to its contribution to human fulfillment only with reference to a standard that is external to experience, such as principles of reason. On the contrary, only a standard within experience itself can reveal whether particular principles actually reflect man's higher potential. *Experience that has ethical, intellectual or aesthetic authority passes judgment on experience that is inherently less conducive to, or destructive of, the good, the true and the beautiful.* Abstract principles can be more or less expressive of universality, but by themselves they are, precisely because of their lack of concreteness, actually without real normative authority.

In a time of cultural dislocations and disruptions when society is torn by competing preferences and traditions, abstractionist reasoning and ahistorical, "idealistic" imagination are particularly inadequate. Preferring to dwell beyond the concrete world, these approaches are lacking in historical sense and in acute perception of the actual circumstances and needs of the present. Having failed to cultivate powers of historical synthesis and imagination, they are not suited to performing great tasks of reconstruction and reorientation. They are reduced to feebly repeating formulas or nobly decrying the times, while being swept along in practice by powerful currents of the moment. Since genuine universality lives in concrete particulars, historical ferment and upheaval create a particularly strong need for discriminating and creative reconstruction of continuities. Resources of the past must be brought to bear on actual problems and opportunities of the here and now, be taken up in new, perhaps radical-seeming initiatives. The task requires synthetic abilities out of the ordinary. The cheap and artificial universality of abstractionism and "idealistic" imagination is within more easy reach, hence its popularity.

The proposed philosophical reorientation seeks to overcome an artificial separation of universality and history. As should be clear from the reasoning, the attempt to demonstrate the synthesis of the two is not also an effort to discount the presence of evil, untruth and ugliness in history. Value-centered historicism calls instead for greater sensitivity to the immanent, historical reality of goodness, truth, and beauty. The dualism of life that is expressed in such terms as eternal and transitory, infinite and finite, universal and particular is a dialectical polarity and must not be understood as involving reified, separate entities. The pairs exist in union as well as in tension. Ahistorical habits of thought and imagination are poorly attuned to this dynamic of actual human existence. If epistemology and the philosophy of universal values are to be reinvigorated, those habits must be broken.