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Harming others : universal subjectivism and the expanding moral circle

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Citation

Berg, F. van den. (2011, April 14). *Harming others : universal subjectivism and the expanding moral circle*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16719>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

6. Clarifications of Universal Subjectivism

In order to place universal subjectivism in the context of contemporary political philosophy it is important to see what it is not. I will start with the negative in nine arguments, then I will advocate a positive version.

6.1 No Reliance on Religion

A moral and political theory should be secular and *not rely on religion*. Atheism, or at least an exclusion of religion from the moral domain is a prerequisite for morality (moral secularism). Secularism, a strict separation of religion and state, is a prerequisite of liberal political philosophy (political secularism). The political argument against ethics based on religion is that without the use of repression and violence there is no way there will ever be consensus about which god and what religion is right. People cannot reach agreement in a multi-religious society when using idiosyncratic religious arguments, which appeal only to believers of the same faith. And secondly, even if there would be only one religion, then there would still be no consensus, because all world religions have many widely differing sects. It is important to be clear about secularism, because many political and moral philosophers thought (and some still do) they needed some kind of religion in their theory in order to back-up the moral righteousness of their claims. A liberal state is necessarily secular and that religion (or what's left of it) ought to be a strictly private matter, and therefore will most likely disappear from the front stage of the theater of history.

Analytic philosopher Derek Parfit takes an atheist position⁷⁵⁹: 'Belief in God, or in many gods, prevented the free development of moral reasoning. Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at an early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes.'⁷⁶⁰ Thus writes Derek Parfit in 1984.

Paul Cliteur takes a secularist position and argues that in order to communicate, socialize and live together people need a common language of morality, a set of basic moral norms and values, a moral Esperanto. This meta-ethical moral Esperanto, which is a necessary condition for living together peacefully, consists minimally of (1) a strict separation of church and state, that is a neutral state (*political secularism*), and (2) a separation of religion and ethics (*moral secularism*). In moral matters religious arguments are invalid.⁷⁶¹ Rorty acknowledges that the secularization of the

⁷⁵⁹ In my pamphlet *How to Get Rid of Religion. An Inconvenient Liberal Paradox* I combine both the atheist and secular positions. I argue that because religion is an obstacle for ethics and the good life, we must get rid of religion – with liberal means only. I propose a strategy of 17 points in order to liberate humanity of the malignant virus of religion. Please note, in universal subjectivism I take the secular strategy, not the atheistic strategy.

⁷⁶⁰ Parfit (1987: 454).

⁷⁶¹ See: Cliteur (2007). Cliteur outlines the framework (grammar) of a moral Esperanto. I hope universal subjectivism can be that moral Esperanto: like Esperanto it has a simple basic structure and is logically consistent. Esperanto was a noble failure. I fear moral Esperanto will be too, because it seems unlikely a

public domain is one of the central achievements of the Enlightenment.⁷⁶² 'The actually existing approximations to such a fully democratic, fully secular community now seem to me the greatest achievement of our species.'⁷⁶³ In order to reach common ground religious arguments should not be used in public debate about politics and morals.

There is a sharp difference between religious and humanistic ethics: 'Where humanism premises autonomy as the basis for the good life, religion premises heteronomy. In humanist ethics the individual is responsible for achieving the good as a free member of a community of free agents; in religious ethics he achieves the good by obedience to an authority that tells him what his goals are and how he should live.'⁷⁶⁴

Another argument for secularism is the moral argument: when religion gains political power, it is the end of freedom: 'For whenever a religion is in the ascendant, with hands on the levers of secular power too, it shows a very different face – the face presented by the Inquisition, the Taliban, and the religious police in Saudi Arabia. The instinct of a religion, when it has power, is to coerce compliance with its orthodoxy, and to pursue or punish those who will not conform.'⁷⁶⁵ In present day Iran religion has its hands firmly on the levers of power using it to limit freedom in many ways, especially for women. Wherever religion has secular power society is turned in a prison.

6.2 No Reliance on Metaphysics: Political Secularism

Political philosophy should not rely on metaphysics, which I call 'philosophical secularism'. It is not necessary to built or justify a political and ethical conception of justice on a theory of human nature, the meaning of life, or a vision about the inevitable course of history (as Hegel thought he knew) and so forth. Richard Rorty has written an important essay on this topic: 'The priority of democracy on philosophy'. Just as religion should be a private matter, not public, so metaphysical theories should also be private. Metaphysical speculations are irrelevant for political and moral theory.

majority of the world population is willing and capable of taking a step back from their (religious) identity and to discuss moral and political issues solely in moral Esperanto. See chapter 5: Obstacles. But even without reaching Utopia, it is possible to change the world a little for the good.

⁷⁶² In his pamphlet *Nederland seculier!* August Hans den Boef shows that in a liberal democracy religion has a special status and enjoys more privileges than other clubs. Religion is more than a private view; it has a privileged status in the public domain. Even though the secularization (the percentage of the population that consider themselves nonreligious) is high, there is not much enthusiasm for reform (that is the institutional secularization of society). Den Boef argues that in Dutch society religion still has special privileges.

⁷⁶³ Rorty (1999: 20).

⁷⁶⁴ Grayling (2004: 248). See also Cliteur (2007).

⁷⁶⁵ Grayling (2004: 80). Grayling is very strong in his moral rejection of religion: 'My claim is that most human progress has occurred in the face of religious reaction, and that most human suffering other than that caused by disease or other natural evils has been the result of religion-inspired conflict and religion-based oppression.' P. xi. And Hitchens puts it succinctly: 'Philosophy begins where religion ends, just as by analogy chemistry begins where alchemy runs out, and astronomy takes the place of astrology.' Hitchens (2007: 256).

6.3 No Reliance on Altruism

Political philosophy should not rely on the notions of *altruism* or *benevolence*. Of course, being kind to other people is important, and in 'folk ethics' altruism is often seen as the core of morality. The degree of altruism and kindness varies among people. 'The perplexing problem in human affairs is that moral insight is not equally distributed. It may only be partially present in some people, and they may only apply it to members of their intimate group.'⁷⁶⁶ In ethics altruism is important, but in political philosophy and in political institutions the notion of altruism is redundant. Biologists, most notably ethologists, who study moral behavior, emphasize the evolutionary roots of moral behavior, including some degree of altruism. It seems that these biologists sometimes mix up the *evolutionary history* of the moral intuition in humans and other animals on the one hand and, on the other hand the *normative justification* of morality. It might (or might not) be natural not to be nice to strangers, but either way it does not give a normative standard.

It is important to note that ethics is not about the *origin* of morality⁷⁶⁷ or the moral sense, but about a rational *justification* for morality, which could be 'unnatural'. Ethics is normative; the search for the (evolutionary) origin and explanation of morality is explanatory, not normative. Biologist Dawkins agrees on this with biologist and psychologist Hauser: 'Driving our moral judgments is a universal moral grammar, a faculty of the mind that evolved over millions of years to include a set of principles for building a range of possible moral systems. As with language, the principles that make up our moral grammar fly beneath the radar of our awareness.'⁷⁶⁸

Nussbaum agrees that the benefit of a social contract theory is that it is not dependent on altruism: 'The social contract tradition has one big apparent advantage over the approach to basic justice [...]. Namely, it does not require extensive benevolence.'⁷⁶⁹ Nussbaum's theory in *Frontiers of Justice* expands Rawls' theory, but her theory is too depended on the goodwill of people. It seems too unrealistic, utopian even to expect people to be nice to each other. The outcome of universal subjectivism will be much the same as Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice*. But universal subjectivism does not start out with people being nice. Basically, the bottom line in Universal subjectivism is an egotistical outlook. This egotism is, by the procedure of Universal subjectivism, transformed in a just society in which the worst-off are best off.

⁷⁶⁶ Kurtz (1988: 154).

⁷⁶⁷ On the origin of morality see for example: Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*; Paul R. Ehrlich, *Human Natures. Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect*; Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds. The Nature of Right and Wrong*; Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*; Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape*; E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*; E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*; Michael Ruse, *Sociobiology: Sense of Nonsense?*; Elliot Sober, *From a Biological Point of View*; Elliott Sober, David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others. The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*; Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*.

⁷⁶⁸ Dawkins (2006: 223), Hauser (2007).

⁷⁶⁹ Nussbaum (2006: 408).

6.4 No Dependence on Human Nature

Political philosophy is *independent from human nature*. From how human nature *is* it cannot be deduced how people *ought* to behave. The naturalistic fallacy is still going strong, especially among evolutionary biologists.⁷⁷⁰ Science can explain how and why people behave as they do, but not how people *ought* to behave. Justice is an abstract human contrived concept, which does not depend on how people by nature are. Even if human nature would have a natural tendency toward evil, then political philosophy should still try to find ways of overcoming this. Justice might be contrary to human nature.

Human animals have certain physiological, psychological, sociological needs. In order to survive human animals need food and shelter. In order to thrive human animals need company, sex, and (social) activities. Science can tell a lot about human nature, what it is that people need and why. Human animals have a lot in common with each other, but there are also a lot of individual differences, enforced by culture and religion. Political philosophy is about how people *should* behave. For some people this might be natural (in accordance with human nature), for others it might seem unnatural (in contradiction to human nature). Scientific knowledge can and should be used to try to create the good life in a just (world) society. Peter Singer writes: '[...] some of our moral intuitions have an evolutionary basis. This is not, as I argued there [in *The Expanding Circle* – FvdB], as reason for accepting them. On the contrary, it may be a reason for debunking them.'⁷⁷¹

6.5 No Need for Human Dignity

Political philosophy cannot rely on the notion of *human dignity*⁷⁷² or on the notion of *intrinsic value*. The notion of human dignity (which is a form of intrinsic value applied to human beings) plays an important role in moral debates. It seems that there cannot be given a clear meaning to the term. It seems, moreover, that this notion is a relict of religious thinking, which does not fit in with a naturalistic perception of reality: there are no values in nature. Therefore, there cannot be things, which have an intrinsic value. Humans can *attach* value to things. The notion of human dignity is unhelpful when discussing abortion and euthanasia. Humans do not have dignity by nature. Plants, (non-human) animals and ecosystems do not have intrinsic values. Dignity is an honorary title. According to Nussbaum dignity is the primary goal of justice (and thus, ethics): '[...] the point of justice is to secure a dignified life for many different kinds of beings [...]'.⁷⁷³ If human dignity would be defined as 'each individual has equal value (from a neutral perspective)', then the use of the word dignity can be saved. The dictionary does not point in this direction: dignity: 'quality that earns or deserves respect.'⁷⁷⁴ Human dignity deserves respect, according to the dictionary, but again, *what* is it and *why* does it deserve respect?

⁷⁷⁰ See for example Hauser (2007) and De Waal (2007).

⁷⁷¹ Peter Singer, 'Singer, Peter. A philosophical self-portrait', in: Mautner (2005).

⁷⁷² Paul Kurtz, quoted from a lecture at Center for Inquiry Transnational in Amherst, NY, July 2006: 'People are not objects, but ends in themselves. It is a useful notion of equality'.

⁷⁷³ Nussbaum (2006: 350).

⁷⁷⁴ Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

6.6 No Natural Law

There is *no natural law, nor natural rights, no natural duties*. John Locke for example thought that, when contemplating nature, one could not only find the physical laws of the universe, but also the moral laws of the universe. Locke thought there was a natural way for humans to live. This idea can also be found for example in Confucianism.⁷⁷⁵ Humans can *decide* how they want to live. Nature is silent about morality. Morality, in this way of thinking, cannot be discovered. A.C. Grayling looks at natural rights from a pragmatic point of view: people have made use of the concept of natural rights and it works. Grayling calls this the ‘arrogatory theory of rights’: ‘experience and rational reflection show what is required to give individuals the best chance of making flourishing lives for themselves, and these framework requirements we institute as rights in order to make the chance of such flourishing available. It is a simple, yet as profound as that.’⁷⁷⁶

Kurtz defines rights as: ‘the theory that all humans possess certain immunities and privileges that are inalienable and that cannot be abrogated.’⁷⁷⁷ But, when there is no God, where do these rights come from? The best way to look at the (human) rights discourse is as a helpful device. Humans make (human) rights. They decide on what rights and to whom they apply. Through the years the list(s) of (human) rights has changed, and will change. ‘Rights are not absolute entitlements. It is not written in the cosmos that *Homo sapiens* should have inalienable rights. [...] Rights are relations, and the extent of entitlements and the inevitable conflicts between them are the sorts of issues which the ongoing democratic discussion needs to work out.’⁷⁷⁸ They are helpful means to achieve justice and, more important, individual freedom and happiness.

Liberal philosopher Raz writes about rights: ‘[...] those whose well-being is intrinsically valuable can have rights.’⁷⁷⁹ Raz connects rights to the notion of dignity, both of which cannot be grounded. How do we know which beings are ‘intrinsically valuable’? To say ‘X is intrinsically valuable’ appears to be the same as to say: ‘I do think X is really, truly, very, very, very, valuable.’ If ‘intrinsic value’ cannot be defined apart from subjective preferences, it cannot be placed centrally in moral theory, because people might disagree with your notion of what is intrinsically valuable.

6.7 No Need to Focus on *Eudaimonia*

Eudaimonia (‘flourishing of the soul’) is not needed in political philosophy. This notion goes back to Aristotle for whom ethics was about human flourishing. He had

⁷⁷⁵ Mansvelt Beck (2005). Confucianism is the doctrine of an authoritarian social administration system: a hierarchical administration system and social system order to prevent chaos. The structure of ideal social order is part of nature. Humans can decide whether or not to abide by this structure, but if they don’t it will lead to chaos.

⁷⁷⁶ Grayling (2007: 261).

⁷⁷⁷ Kurtz (1988: 181). Paul Cliteur gives a survey of the theory of natural law in Cliteur (2002: 128-156).

⁷⁷⁸ Cooke (2006: 446). Cooke adds his private thoughts, which I share: ‘We may, for example, be getting to the end of the period of history when we can breezily claim the right to drive a car.’ Cooke probably points out a blind spot in morality of our times: not many people feel morally guilty driving a car.

⁷⁷⁹ Raz (1986: 180).

an idea and ideal what it was to be a human being. By incorporating certain virtues we can all become flourishing human beings. Bill Cooke pithily defines the notion as follows: '[...] self-fulfillment through personal excellence and the use of reason.'⁷⁸⁰ Although human flourishing is important, it does not seem a good idea to start a political theory with, because people have diverse ideas about human flourishing. One can read virtue ethicists as giving recommendations one can ponder about.⁷⁸¹ Universal subjectivism can provide the preconditions for *eudaimonia*.

6.8 No Reliance on Intuitions

Ethics should not rely on intuitions or common sense moral judgments.⁷⁸² Ethics should expand and correct common intuitions. Intuitions are built in (hardwired) moral reflexes evolved by evolution (e.g. red as a signal for alertness) and, on a different level, cultural evolution (e.g. prudishness for nudity). Nussbaum speaks from 'vivid moral intuitions'. Human animals are social primates who lived in small tribes. Our hard-wired moral intuitions might not be appropriate to deal with problems of future generations or cosmopolitanism. Intuitions are not a reliable guide in ethics. People might have strong intuitions that men are superior to women for example. Science can change our intuitive worldview. It seems the sun revolves around the earth. But there are good reasons that we are wrong. A lot of strong intuitions have been proven plainly wrong. Wolpert wrote an enlightening book about this: *The Unnatural Nature of Science*, in which he argues that science is essentially *different* from common sense and intuitions. Science revises our intuitive worldview. The nature of normative philosophy is not to be conservative and not to rely on moral intuitions, but to revise them in the light of cogent reasons.

Michael Ignatieff for example bases his plea for universal human rights on his intuition of equal moral status for humans: '[...] we act upon the moral intuition that [...] our species is one, and each of the individuals who compose it is entitled to equal moral consideration. Human rights is the language that systematically embodies this intuition [...].'⁷⁸³ Ignatieff's intuition of equal moral consideration of humans does not seem to be universal (if this were so, there would be peace on earth). Ignatieff's plea for human rights and the idea of equal moral considerations for each individual is worthwhile, but a procedural justification for these claims is needed and should not rely on intuition.

6.9 No Uncritical Reliance on Tradition, Custom and Authority

If ethics would rely on custom, tradition and obedience to authority, it is not likely that (m)any blind spots will be found. Conservatism⁷⁸⁴ and communitarianism⁷⁸⁵ stress the importance of traditions, customs and citadels of authority. Humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont put it thus: 'The highest ethical duty is often to discard

⁷⁸⁰ Cooke (2006: 174).

⁷⁸¹ Cf. Taylor (2002).

⁷⁸² The *locus classicus* of moral intuitionism is in the book *The Right and the Good* (1930) by W.D. Ross.

⁷⁸³ Ignatieff (2001: 4).

⁷⁸⁴ For example: Scruton (2006).

⁷⁸⁵ For example: MacIntyre (1984).

the outmoded ethics of the past.⁷⁸⁶ A criterion is needed in order to evaluate customs, tradition and authority for their merit. Neither conservatism, communitarianism, nor multiculturalism gives a criterion. Conservatism is an appeal to authority: the authority of the past. Communitarianism places the individual under guardianship of the group to which he or she belongs by birth. Multiculturalism tends to tolerate in-group intolerance by placing the group above the individual. It seems that conservatism, communitarianism, multiculturalism do not protect victims in a particular society – these ideologies do not seem to care about changing society for the better for women, nonbelievers, homosexuals, animals. Of course, one should not discard good traditions and customs, but the essence of ethics is that it offers a *criterion* to evaluate customs, tradition and authority.

Bertrand Russell remarks that ‘Among most people at most times, the commonest way of judging is simply by inherited prejudices. Any society which is not in a rapid state of transition has customs and beliefs which have been handed down from previous generations, which are unquestioned, and which it appears utterly monstrous to go against. Such are the customs connected with religion, the family, property and so on.’⁷⁸⁷

But there are, of course, philosophers who think otherwise and who revere (some) tradition. David Oderberg is one of them. He regrets the, what I call, ‘Singerian revolution’ in philosophy which turned down the traditional, religious outlook of mainstream ethics. In the preface to his two volumes on non-consequentialist ethics, which attempts a conservative approach back to traditional (religious) ethics, Oderberg writes: ‘What I will say, however, is that even if the bulk of moral philosophers find the conclusions I reach unpalatable, disagreeable, ridiculous, absurd, anachronistic barbaric, bizarre, or just plain wrong, I console myself with the following thought: that every single one of the major positions I defend was believed by the *vast majority* of human beings in Western society for thousands of years, right up until some time in the 1960s, when the Western Cultural Revolution took place. (I do not speak of the non-Western societies, which even today subscribe to most or all of the views defended here).’⁷⁸⁸ The majority of people often have beliefs, which are plain wrong. Throughout history most people have been religious in an uncritical way. Philosophy is (or should) be concerned about getting things right, sometimes contrary to common beliefs. Justice is independent from what the majority believes to be just. Justice is universal, though not absolute.

6.10 A Humanist Outlook

Humanism is, like religion, a human-made concept; humanists are aware of this and appreciate this fact. According to Grayling: ‘A humanistic view is a starting point, not a finished body of doctrine.’⁷⁸⁹ The foundation of universal subjectivism is a specific portrayal of human animals, which is part of a comprehensive worldview, just like

⁷⁸⁶ Quoted in McGowan (2009: 39).

⁷⁸⁷ Bertrand Russell, ‘What Makes a Social System Good or Bad?’, p. 117, in: *Bertrand Russell on Ethics, Sex and Marriage*.

⁷⁸⁸ Oderberg (2000: viii).

⁷⁸⁹ Grayling (2009: 174).

every philosophical theory and *Weltanschauung* presupposes a portrayal of man, like Rachels' 'moral individualism'.⁷⁹⁰ Universal subjectivism is based on an individualistic portrayal of human animals, because the bottom line of each existence is after all individual life and suffering. This is a humanist outlook on life, truth and nature.⁷⁹¹ Each sentient being with the ability to suffer strives for the avoidance of pain, the satisfaction of needs and the fulfillment of happiness. Human animals differ in this matter only in degree with other animals due to humans' cognitive ability to look forward into the future – humans can be afraid of something that is to come and which is not present at the moment; animals cannot. Humans can think of different ways of how to act. Compare the different outcomes in the mind and then choose whichever seems best. The reason why humans, and only humans, need moral thinking is that people usually take their contingent privileges as if they were holy and meant to be that way.

Privileges can only be justified if others are not harmed, or even better if they are better off. Rawls calls this the *difference principle*: inequality can only be justified when other people are better off than without the difference and no one worse off. In this way it can be justified that an employer earns more than an employee because he or she provides work, so that the workers are better off than without the employer's extra income.

People usually do not identify seriously and sincerely with other beings, or, even if they do, do not appreciate the consequences. Being a universal subjectivist you have to be prepared to step back from your contingent existence, to look at life from behind the veil of ignorance, the original position, and to imagine different perspectives. The problem is that most people stubbornly believe in the necessity and justice of their own moral values and social position. Privileged people will not easily give up their favored position because the universal subjectivist position leads to a different distribution of wealth, a different ordering of society, a different attitude towards animals.

Universal subjectivism requires no exceptional rational powers. It is a simple rational model that only leans on empathic abilities. The difficulty of this model is the willingness of people to perform according to the universal subjectivist model. Universal subjectivism gives a cogent, compulsive and egotistic answer, both *reasons* and a *motive*.

The outcome of universal subjectivism corresponds by and large with what Paul Kurtz brands as *humanistic ethics*. The outcome overlaps, but the meta-ethics, the path towards the outcome, is different. Paul Kurtz has a pragmatic, utilitarian, somewhat intuitionist foundation of humanistic ethics. Universal subjectivism seems to expand humanist ethics with its concern for animal suffering, future generations and nature. Kurtz defines humanist ethics as: 'A fully developed ethical system [i.e. humanistic ethics] involves a concern for the broader community on a more

⁷⁹⁰ Daniel Harbour discerns in *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Atheism* two different kinds of *Weltanschauung*: Spartan meritocracy and Baroque monarchy. Baroque monarchy stands for a way of giving ad hoc reasons for events, based on dogma and hierarchy, like the Roman Catholic Church. Spartan meritocracy means that there is no ultimate authority. Many people (scientists) seek for as few explanations (laws of nature) as possible. Universal subjectivism is concordant with Spartan meritocracy, as is atheism.

⁷⁹¹ Cf. Ayer (1968), Kurtz (1994), Cave (2009), Law (2011).

universalistic basis. It is able to transcend the level of small-group relationships, and has the following ingredients: (1) There is a devotion to general ethical principles, and one does not break them without a just cause. (2) There is an inward feeling of moral sympathy and beneficence, and a desire to not needlessly hurt other human beings.⁷⁹² (3) Reason is used in guiding one's own conduct in terms of the excellences. This may involve some consideration of self-interest, but it includes the interests of one's group as well. (4) There is in addition an ethical awareness of the need to extend ethical considerations beyond one's inner circle to a wider community of human beings.⁷⁹³ This ethical concern is for the preservation and well-being of the community and for humanity as a whole.⁷⁹⁴ But why? One might still ask. '[Persons of good will] are thus considerate, thoughtful, caring; every effort is made to reduce suffering and pain whenever they can; not only for other human beings but other sentient beings in the biosphere.'⁷⁹⁵ Here Kurtz seems to move away from the anthropocentric speciesism of humanism towards sentientism. For sentientists, like Peter Singer, the criterion if an entity has moral value, is its capacity for suffering. Humanists have a tendency to care for fellows humans in the here and now. A fundamental question is, can humanism be expanded from anthropocentrism towards sentientism, or should the concept of humanism not be stretched that much? One could argue: 'Humanism, as the word makes clear, is about humans, so if you want a worldview and ethics which is broader than that, don't call it humanism.' But as I started out, humanism is a human-made concept and it can be reinvented all the time, in the light of reason. Paul Kurtz seems also to take this stance, that it is possible to expand the moral circle within humanism. However, Kurtz does not elaborate this point, he only indicates towards this new direction. This is a direction that probably will alienate some of those who call themselves humanists. The problem with organized humanism and humanism as an intellectual movement is that when you take it seriously and thus include (new) atheism and sentientism, some people who are sympathetic towards humanism will decline.

One on an educational cruise to Alaska to see the melting ice (for the 'disbelieving Thomas' kind of humanists') Paul Kurtz started to revisit his edifice of humanism, adapting it to the environmental problems. Though it seems humanism can and should urgently rephrase itself toward eco-humanism, being more aware of the fact how fragile we are when we trespass the biophysical limits of our habitat, planet Earth. Kurtz ponders: 'It is difficult to deny the reality of global warming, though some scientists and politicians, financed by powerful oil companies, have attempted to do just that.'⁷⁹⁶ 'While aboard ship, we read aloud the following pledge of allegiance, which sets forth our ethical obligations to our planetary abode:

⁷⁹² This seems needlessly speciesistic.

⁷⁹³ Speciesistic again.

⁷⁹⁴ Kurtz (1988: 156). In his *Humanist Manifesto 2000* Paul Kurtz powerfully and succinctly states the agenda of humanistic ethics. This Manifesto is less speciesistic than *Forbidden Fruit*. The content of the *Humanist Manifesto 2000* can be endorsed by using universal subjectivism.

⁷⁹⁵ Kurtz (2010: 41).

⁷⁹⁶ Kurtz (2010: 135).

Planetary Allegiance

We pledge allegiance to the planetary community of which we're all part: one planet, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. We recognize that all persons are equal in dignity and value. We defend human rights and cherish human freedom. We vow to honor and protect the global ecology and biodiversity, not only for ourselves but for generations yet unborn.⁷⁹⁷

It seems to me that a problem with Kurtz' humanism as he defines it, is that it is too anthropocentric. In contrast to any other life stances, humanism is cosmopolitan, and, as noted in the 'Planetary Allegiance' it also takes future generation humans into account. Philosopher Peter Singer has taken the lead in trying to expand the circle of morality by moving away from anthropocentrism towards pathocentrism, taking as criterion for moral standing, the capacity to suffer. This goes back to the famous maxim by Jeremy Bentham: '*Can they suffer?*' It seems that despite its name, humanism *can* be adapted and expanded away from anthropocentrism towards sentientism or even biocentrism.

Humanism is not just an intellectual position; humanism is humane. It is about being friendly, living the good life. This is what Kurtz ponders when in the hospital with serious heart problems:

I say that I am a *humanist*, meaning by that, that we should strive as best we can to do good, to try to help where we can, to compliment other persons wherever possible. By this I mean that we should express an affirmative attitude all the time, to try to improve the situation, if we can, to look at the bright side.⁷⁹⁸

6.11 Not a Panacea for All Problems

The proposed theory of universal subjectivism is *not a panacea* for *all* political and moral ills. The theory is about improving the fate of victims in worst-off positions, to increase (social) justice and to ameliorate the condition of human and farm animals. The theory I am proposing is a framework in which problems can be solved about people living together and sharing resources. Within the framework of the advocated theory problems can be solved by way of 'piecemeal engineering' (Popper) or, in a different term, by using 'social intelligence'⁷⁹⁹ (John Dewey). The theory is more concerned with the method towards normative values and setting the (political) agenda, than with the normative values and concrete policies themselves. There are some clear consequences of this political theory, like taking animal suffering into account. The precise way in which human animals should treat animals is part of the ongoing public discourse and social intelligence. But it should become clear that animal suffering should be a topic of concern for human animals. Universal

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.: 135.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.: 254.

⁷⁹⁹ Social intelligence: 'the ongoing dialogue society has with itself to determine how its priorities change over time.' In: Cooke (2006).

subjectivism is an optimistic theory; it is an attempt to ameliorate (world) society. Some thinkers are gloomy about the prospect of trying to make the best of it. John Gray⁸⁰⁰ is one of these fatalists, who blame all evil on the project of the Enlightenment, the project of trying to make things better by using science and reason. A.C. Grayling, in his review of Gray's *Black Mass*, remarks that: 'trying to make things better is not the same as believing that they can be made perfect. Meliorism is not perfectibilism.'⁸⁰¹

⁸⁰⁰ See Gray (2002).

⁸⁰¹ A.C. Grayling, 'Through the Looking Glass. Review of John Gray's *Black Mass*', *New Humanist*, July/August 2007, p. 34-36.

