GENEALOGICAL INQUIRY AND UNIVERSAL MORAL VALUES

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In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defines moral autonomy and heteronomy respectively as follows:

> Autonomy of the will is the property (*Beschaffenheit*) of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition). […]

> If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law - consequently if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects - *heteronomy* always results[1].

An autonomous moral will is a rational will acting for no reason other than the sake of morality, while a heteronomous one strives to achieve an end through moral action. Kant argues that morality concerns exclusively the inner motivation of an action and not its outcome; for otherwise it would be impossible to judge the difference between a person who acts only according to the "letter" of the law (legally) – moved by some selfish interest – and a person who acts also according to the "spirit" of it (morally).

Through a closer analysis, however, it becomes clear how Kant's critique of heteronomous morals rests upon premises which are far from being self-evident[2]. This becomes apparent when we attempt to articulate why he classified Hutcheson's theory of moral sentiment as heteronomous. According to Hutcheson, moral sentiment does not derive from a principle extraneous to morality, but rather from an inclination towards the good, independent of any reasoning concerning the ends of the action. God ordered our nature in such a way that our happiness might result from the pursuit of the ends to which we are immediately inclined. Happiness is the result of moral action, but «the notion under which one approves virtue, is neither its tendency to obtain any benefit or reward to the agent or approver [...] [nor] its tendency to procure honour»[3]. A similar theory may appear as heteronomous only if one denies that sentiment could have a universal validity.

Kant maintains that happiness derives from the «particular feeling of pleasure and displeasure» and that it depends on «the differences in needs occasioned by changes of feeling in

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[1] Kant (1997), p. 47.

[2] This has been clearly shown by Max Scheler, who lists eight tacit presuppositions of Kant's moral philosophy: see Scheler (1973), pp. 6-7. However, I will not follow Scheler's exposition here.

[3] Quoted from *A system of Moral Philosophy* in MacIntyre (1988), p. 271.

one and the same person». It is therefore clear that, according to Kant, a) happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) amounts to the satisfaction of needs, the result of which is pleasure; that is to say, happiness is the same as well-being (*Wohlbefinden*)[4]; and b) feeling, being related to passions, cannot have any universal value. These premises align with the basic assumptions of utilitarian thought. Kant rejects utilitarianism, but, in that he applies a utilitarian understanding of happiness to Hutcheson's moral theory, he must also refuse this theory. Kant does not question the idea that individual reason serves to fulfill human needs and desires, i. e. to find the means to reach clearly defined ends; he just denies this reasoning any moral relevance and subordinates it to the imperatives of prudence. Only the categorical imperative of pure practical reason can constitute morality.

The distinction between the two types of imperatives mirrors a dualistic anthropology, according to which the subject is divided into a rational (noumenical) and a passional (phenomenal) sphere[5], the former ruling over the latter. Yet this leads to the problematic assumption that the subject who commands morality through the categorical imperative is the same as she who ought to obey[6]. It is not clear how a passionate agent should ever be able to give herself a law that she is not willing to obey, nor how there could ever be a moral agent if morality is always contrary to the proper will of the agent[7]. Kant himself is willing to acknowledge this problem: «for us human beings it is quite impossible to explain how and why the *universality of a maxim as law* and hence morality interests us»[8]. Kant calls this *impasse* of the reasoning «the extreme boundary of all practical philosophy», the objective insurmountable limit of human reason itself, such that «all the pains and labor of seeking an explanation of it are lost».

To quote a decisive passage:

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[4] Kant (1997), p. 29; Kant (2003), p. 56.

[5] «All my actions as only a member of the world of understanding would therefore conform perfectly with the principle of autonomy of the pure will; as only a part of the world of sense they would have to be taken to conform wholly to the natural law of desires and inclinations, hence to the heteronomy of nature». Kant (1997), p. 58.

[6] Cf. Ricoeur (1992), pp. 208-209.

[7] The accordance of the will with the moral law is called "holiness" by Kant, defined as «a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable *at any moment of his existence*» (1996), p. 238 (emphasis mine).

[8] Kant (1997), p. 64.

> This much only is certain: it is not *because the law interests* us that it has validity for us (for that is heteronomy and dependence of practical reason upon sensibility, namely upon a feeling lying at its basis, in which case it could never be morally lawgiving); instead, the law interests because it is valid for us as human beings, since it arose from our will as intelligence and so from our proper self[9].

This interest, Kant says, is the actual moral sentiment. The law interests us because it provides us with the image of the sublime autonomy of reason («*Duty*! Sublime and mighty name…»[10]), namely, because it arouses our respect. But this respect cannot be the motive of moral action[11], it can only be the effect. When we act according to practical reason, «the representation of the superiority of its objective law to the impulses of sensibility is produced […] in the judgment of reason»[12]. The sentiment of respect follows the judgment of reason upon an action, which in turn derives directly and inexplicably from the moral law itself. Moral action cannot be grounded in this sentiment of respect, for as such it would be a heteronomous principle.

Kant believes that merit is that which we instinctively respect, namely anything we recognize as good, such as free, rational, altruistic action. However, he denies that respect could be the motivation for moral deeds. As Charles Taylor points out, freedom, universalism and altruism are among the strongest moral ideals of modernity, and they are the starting point of the entire Kantian reasoning itself. Yet precisely for the sake of these goods, Kant denies that they are the source of morals, and subordinates them to a formal conception of moral law, whose motivating force remains inexplicable. For this reason, thinkers in the Kantian tradition, concludes Taylor, «are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking»[13].

A fundamental reason for which Kantians deny that substantial ideas of good may play a role in moral action certainly derives from the epistemological claim that natural sciences provide the only trustworthy objective model of inquiry. Considerations about the good or related feelings are viewed as subjective or at least culture-dependent. A notion of the good – according to this argument – could claim universal validity only by basing itself on a metaphysical, teleological account of human nature, which modern science has discredited. Such considerations cannot figure in a neutral account of reality, however important they may appear to the subject.

The strongest moral reason for rejecting any notion of the good, however, is the modern understanding of freedom. Anything that is good independently of human autonomous reason

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[9] Kant (1997), p. 64.
[10] Kant (1996) 209.
[11] Kant (1996), p. 201.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] Taylor (1989), p. 88.

seems to stand as an external authority limiting the freedom of the subject. An authentic moral order ought to be defined by the subject, not by nature[14].

For all these motives Kant excludes that morality could depend on a conception of the good. However, we must now ask: would it have really been sufficient to allow a notion of the good to explain why humans act morally? If we take the sentiment of respect as the starting point, we do not really solve the problem, we just displace it. It seems that we must face an inescapable alternative: either we start from the moral law as an inexplicable «fact of reason»[15] or we start from a no less inexplicable sentiment of what is good. At first glance it seems quite obvious to choose the former. True, the fact of reason cannot be explained, but nevertheless one can demonstrate that moral action ought to accord to the law. Moreover, one can explain how the sentiment of respect arises from the majesty of reason. If one begins with the "fact of the sentiment of respect", it is impossible to give an account of any of these aspects, and we are driven to irrationality.

For this reason, Hutcheson's theory of moral sentiment could be sustained only by a faith in a providential God who ordered the nature of humans, instilling in it a sentiment as the source of moral obligation. Once Kant's radical critique of metaphysics has ruled out the possibility of founding morals upon the concept of God – since theoretical reason cannot state anything about its existence, let alone about the characteristics of its perfection – moral sentiment is deprived of any definite grounding, and can no longer provide any guidance. It is exposed to illusion, just as the reflecting subject of Descartes' *Meditations* could be misled, despite his certainty, by an evil demon.

Since Kant's philosophy has inspired a lasting tradition of thought which – as Taylor demonstrated – never really succeeded in solving the problem of the source of moral obligation, we must ask if there is a way of grounding morality in sentiment which escapes Hutcheson's need for a theological foundation. Such a theory should be able to explain both the genesis and the universal validity of moral sentiment.

Before we proceed, a conceptual clarification is necessary. What kind of linkage exists between moral sentiment and the good? Both Hutcheson and Kant maintain that moral sentiment is linked to the virtuous and the praiseworthy, i. e. with something that is recognized as good. However, for Kant this sentiment is derived from a spontaneous[16] judgment of practical reason, which recognizes that action is compliant with moral law. For Hutcheson, on the other hand, the

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[14] Taylor enumerates other reasons, which are not relevant to the present context.
[15] Kant (1996), p. 164.
[16] Kant says that «*respect* is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit, whether we want to or not» (1996), p. 202.

sentiment immediately recognizes the good, without the mediation of any kind of intellectual reasoning. Since we are trying to follow Hutcheson's path, let us assume that the good is recognized as such without any reflection. Nevertheless, since we refuse his theological presuppositions, we should introduce another concept, namely that of "values". We appeal to values when we try to articulate our moral experience, to explain what makes something good (at least for us)[17].

The concept of "value", as Hans Joas points out[18], gradually took the place of that of "good". While the latter used to refer to a metaphysical unity of truth and good, ascertainable either by rational contemplation of the cosmos or through divine revelation, the former refers to the subject, whose value-feelings are the basis of moral judgment. The German philosophy of values of the 19th century, however, still strove to assign to values an objective and universal meaning, without taking into serious consideration their historical contingency. This is of course an aspect we can no longer ignore, for to ignore it would be to ignore the entire history of philosophy of the following century. The question about the genesis of moral sentiment therefore becomes a question about the genesis of values.

Nietzsche was the first to address this matter. In his work *On the Genealogy of Morality*, values as altruism, reciprocal love, egalitarianism, and democracy are traced back to repressed sentiments of hate and revenge. What we usually consider to be moral values actually derives from «the *ressentiment* of beings denied the true reaction, that of the deed, who recover their losses only through an imaginary revenge»[19]. Yet, far from being a convincing answer about the genesis of values based on a scientific historical or philological inquiry (provided that this was his actual aim), this fundamental thesis is much more the result of a philosophical speculation about the value of values themselves. While in the *Genealogy* – which is *A polemic* – he seems to provide his definitive answer to this question, radically denying any value to traditional ethics, one can find a more cautious answer in his other works. In a famous passage from *The Gay Science* he questions the immediacy of what we have called moral sentiment, namely of our "conscience":

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[17] Charles Taylor uses the word "hypergoods". I will follow Joas in using the term "values".
[18] Joas (2000), pp. 21-22.
[19] Nietzsche (1998), p. 19.

Why do you take this and specifically this to be right? 'Because my conscience tells me so; conscience never speaks immorally, since it determines what is to count as moral! 'But why do you *listen* to the words of your conscience? And what gives you the right to consider such a judgement true and infallible? For this belief – is there no conscience? Do you know nothing of an intellectual conscience? A conscience behind your 'conscience'? Your judgement, 'that is right' has a prehistory in your drives, inclinations, aversions, experiences, and what you have failed to experience; you have to ask, '*how* did it emerge there?' and then also, '*what* is really impelling me to listen to it?'[20]

If the reader remembers the terminological distinctions I have introduced, it can be said that in this passage Nietzsche is asking us nothing more than to articulate our moral sentiment, recognizing what kind of values ground our judgments and how these values came about. Yet the genesis itself tells us nothing about the truth of values: «a morality could even have grown *out of* an error, and the realization of this fact would not as much as touch the problem of its value»[21]. What is important about the genesis of values is that acknowledging it helps us to understand whether what we understand as good is really good for us, or, on the contrary, if it is just an unquestioned inheritance of some external influence. The passage quoted above continues as follows:

You can listen to its commands [i. e. to the commands of conscience] like a good soldier who *heeds* the command of his officer. Or like a woman who *loves* the one who commands. Or like a flatterer and coward who *fears* the commander. Or like a fool who obeys because he can think of no objection. In short, there are a hundred ways to listen to your conscience[22].

In other words, you can judge and act according to morality because this is what society expects from you, or because you fear a punishment. But your morality can also be the fruit of love for your fellow human beings who command your respect, and so on. How these motives result in actions is «unprovable», because «as one observes or recollects *any* action, it is and remains impenetrable»[23]. It is therefore also unprovable that altruistic action necessarily derives from a tacit *ressentiment*. What justifies Nietzsche's interpretation is a radical pessimistic view of the meaning of life as a self-affirmative will to power without a proper scope, which leads him to embrace a strong *ideal*: «the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what is, but who wants it again *just as it was and is* through all eternity»[24]. In contrast, the "Christian" moral ideal is contrary to life and therefore subhuman and anti-nature. It

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[20] Nietzsche (2001), p. 187.
[21] Nietzsche (2001), p. 203.
[22] Emphasis mine.
[23] Nietzsche (2001), p. 189.
[24] Nietzsche (2002), p. 50.

cannot but derive from «a declining, weakened, exhausted, condemned life»[25]. Yet, it cannot be stated whether or not this idea of life is justified.

> Even to raise the problem of the *value* of life, you would need to be both *outside* life and as familiar with life as someone, anyone, everyone who has ever lived: this is enough to tell us that the problem is inaccessible to us[26].

Behind opposing forms of morals there are different conceptions of life, upon the value of which only faith can decide. There can be no decisive argument.

> Virtue gives happiness and a type of blessedness only to those who have not lost faith in their virtue - not to those subtler souls whose virtue consists of a deep mistrust of themselves and of all virtue. So in the end, here, too, 'faith makes blessed' - and, mind you, *not* virtue![27]

Once the genealogist has uncovered the genesis of values, he cannot decide upon their truth. However, Nietzsche's genealogy is far from being neutral, because he describes the opposing view starting from his own ideal. It was quite simple for Max Scheler to show how Nietzsche misunderstood the Christian idea of love. Such an overwhelming and empowering force cannot be the expression of a weak character. As Scheler pointed out, Nietzsche interprets religion as an ideological justification for a restrictive morality, rather than grasping the nature of religion as such[28]. The distinction between morality and religion is central to William James' book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Whereas the moral law, since it mortifies our passions, is a yoke to be sustained, even if reluctantly (as Kant says[29]), «the service of the highest never is felt as a yoke»[30]. While the moral law «must […] produce a feeling that can be called pain»[31], the religious sentiment is accompanied by «a mood of welcome, which may fill any place between cheerful serenity and enthusiastic gladness»[32]. Between morality and religion, says James, «the difference is as great as that between passivity and activity, as that between the defensive and the aggressive mood»[33].

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[25] Nietzsche (2005), p. 175.

[26] Nietzsche (2005), p. 174.

[27] Nietzsche (2001), p. 43.

[28] See Scheler (2007), pp. 63 and following; Joas (2000), p. 33; 84 and following.

[29] Kant (1996), p. 208.

[30] James (2012), p. 40; cf. Joas (2000), p. 47.

[31] Kant (1996), p. 199.

[32] James (2012), p. 40.

[33] *Ibid*.

Nietzsche's critique could therefore apply to Kant, but not to Christianity[34]. He could not understand what kind of blessedness derives from a religious experience because he never had such an experience. On the contrary, exactly this is the starting point of James' inquiry. First of all, this experience consists of a feeling of being in relation with a higher being, which can be – but is not necessarily – identified with a personal God. Secondly, this feeling results in an utterly positive attitude toward the universe. While the moral acceptance of the universe requires strict discipline, in the case of religion «no exertion of volition is required»[35]. The universe is accepted with a joyful and peaceful soul.

This also means that a religious belief cannot be chosen. To some people a religious experience may be, temporarily or permanently, precluded. Such ineptitude for religious faith may be intellectual in its origins, as deriving from «pessimistic and materialistic beliefs», or from «the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful». But some people may even be «spiritually barren» and, even if they «admire and envy faith in others», they «can never encompass the enthusiasm and peace which those who are temperamentally qualified for faith enjoy»[36]. Just as faith cannot be shattered by rational discourses, «we cannot create a belief out of whole cloth when our perception actively assures us of its opposite»[37]. One can interpret this fact either in a theological way, affirming that faith is a gift of God's grace, or in a psychological way. Yet the one does not exclude the other. The origin of a sentiment, as already stated by Nietzsche, is quite indifferent in regard to its significance.

James inquires how this state of blessedness originates in experiences, quoting autobiographical writings and letters of saints and common people who underwent these experiences in their most extreme forms. Sudden conversions, mystical ecstasies, prayers (generically understood as an inward sense of partaking in a higher force) are the case-studies of his book. All these experiences can be labeled under what Joas calls «experiences of self-transcendence»[38]. They are all characterized by subjective self-evidence and affective intensity: the subject feels seized (*ergriffen*) by a force which transcends her, in the sense that it exceeds (*übersteigt*) her will, although it is not necessarily understood as coming from another world[39].

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[34] Several commentators have pointed out the linkage between Nietzsche's critique of morality and the dichotomies of Kant's moral philosophy. See the literature quoted in Joas (2000), p. 191, n. 38.

[35] James (2012), p. 43.

[36] James (2012), p. 161.

[37] James (2012), p. 167.

[38] Joas (2000), p. 1.

[39] Joas (2013), p. 264

In examining religious experiences, both Émile Durkheim and John Dewey deny them any supernatural meaning. They maintain that the feeling of being conquered by such a transcendent force explains but does not justify religious interpretations. As Dewey puts it, «it is not *a* religion that brings it about, but when it occurs, from whatever cause and by whatever means, there is a religious outlook and function»[40]. The actual origin of this feeling is individuated by both thinkers in social phenomena. While Durkheim attributes it to experiences of collective ecstasy, Dewey attributes the genesis of ideals to the intersubjective dimension of human nature. Through communication a human can open herself to another (understood as God by religion) and let herself be shaken in order to realize herself with and through the other[41]. In his analysis, Dewey makes clear that experiences of self-transcendence are always also experiences of «self-formation», insofar as ideals are constitutive of the image of a «whole self», which the subject strives to realize[42].

That there exists a linkage between values and self-formation is a central thesis in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, from which I have already quoted. As he points out, in answering the question "who am I?" we cannot but declare what is valuable for us. If we answer, for example, "I am a Christian", or "I am an Italian", or even "I am an anarchist", we are expressing our commitment to something we strongly feel as valuable (say, respectively, God's love, democratic Republic, mutual aid). A neutral self-description would have no meaning for us[43].

Despite the undeniable social character of values, namely the fact that there cannot be values experienced only by an individual[44], our sentiments are always individual. However much one empathizes with another – to express it in the words of Merleau-Ponty – «it is nevertheless from the background of his own subjectivity that each projects this "single" world»[45]. Our communication terminates in the paradox of «a solipsism-shared-by-many»[46]. If this is true, then our personal value-experiences cannot be inquired from the outside, by someone to whom they are precluded. It follows that genealogy can only be an endless process of self-revising of one's own unreflective judgments. It may have either a biographical or an historical dimension.

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[40] Quoted from *A common Faith* in Joas (2000), p. 116.

[41] Joas (2000), p. 117.

[42] Joas (2000), pp. 113 and following. See also Joas' chapter on Simmel, pp. 69 and following.

[43] Taylor (1989), pp. 28 and following; cf. also Taylor (1985b) and Joas (2000), p. 130. The answer to this question not only implies moral values, but also esthetic ones. However, I will not pursue this question.

[44] For a further clarification of the intersubjective character of values, see the following pages.

[45] Merleau-Ponty (2012), p. 373.

[46] Merleau-Ponty (2012), p. 376. The original has: «un solipsisme à plusieurs» (1945), p. 412.

The biographical dimension aims to find a place for our moral values in our individual self-understanding. As Taylor says, we are «*moved*» from our values[47], and in this very experience we sense that what moves us is infinitely valuable, that it could not derive from our *ressentiment*. However, to prove our own values, we must face the critique and ask ourselves Nietzsche's question: «why do you *listen* to the words of your conscience?». If the genealogical articulation of our moral beliefs does not shatter our adherence to them, our feeling of commitment to them cannot but be strengthened by it. But we can also be forced to recognize our hypocrisy, which in turn can make us either strive to adhere to our values with a more radical coherence, or to recognize them as false. In the latter case, we must bring about a «transvaluation»[48] of our values, i. e. to recognize a higher good hitherto unknown, which better suits our moral experience and self-understanding.

This genealogical self-revising is, of course, not a process that takes place in the solitary conscience of the individual. It always entails a dialogical dimension. That is why we can never reach a definitive certainty about our beliefs. We are steadily confronted by alternative worldviews and lifestyles that ask us to justify our choices[49]. Moreover, in the articulation of our beliefs we cannot but resort to the shared language through which they have been formulated by our traditions. Our social framework is imbued with qualitative distinctions that influence our moral stance[50]. This does not mean that we are compelled to internalize values from which we cannot take any critical distance. Yet they must be our starting point, for we cannot create a new language *ex nihilo*. New formulations can only arise in contrast to older ones, and may have their source in alternative present traditions.

This argument indicates that the biographical and social dimensions of values cannot be completely separated. However, historical genealogical inquiry has its own peculiarities, concerning primarily our collective values and cultural identity. According to Joas, who (drawing on Troeltsch's historicism) developed historical genealogy methodologically, this inquiry must start from the «fact of ideal formation»[51]. In contrast to Kant's «fact of reason», or any "fact of moral sentiment", which turned out to be inexplicable, the fact of ideal *formation* refers to the contingent genesis of values through particular experiences in specific historical circumstances, which are the object of inquiry.

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[47] Cf. Joas: «We do not seize our values, we are seized by them» (2013), p. 108.

[48] Nietzsche's word, quoted by Taylor (1989), p. 65. Some English translations have "revaluation", see Nietzsche (2005), p. 11. The German word is "Umwertung".

[49] On this theme, cf. Taylor (2007).

[50] Cf. Taylor (1989), pp. 27 and following; Taylor (1985a); Taylor (1995).

[51] Joas (2013), p. 102.

Even if the ideal has survived the contingent historical context of its genesis, it cannot be evaluated in abstraction from these conditions. We must understand how individuals, collectives and institutions of that historical moment were moved from the emerging ideal. Only in this way can we give an account of the creative element of human action in history which initiates change. In other words, historical inquiry must strive to understand «the specific individuality of historical phenomena»[52]. Each ideal has its own history, which interacts with that of the others. Rather than as a linear process, history must be understood as the interplay of different totalities, whose development exhibit an approaching to (or a distancing from) the respective grounding ideals[53].

In striving to understand values in their historical context and development, the historian must put into play her own present understanding of them. This is not a scientific deficit, but the very condition of the analytical enterprise. In fact, «we experience values as a demand made of us, or not [at all]»[54]. Should the object of inquiry not provoke the historian's stance on the matter, it would be of no interest, and it would not become an object of inquiry. On the contrary, if the values of the past do arouse the historian's attention, «then this call goes way beyond research, affecting our present, future-directed action»[55]. In this case, we «incorporate historically originating ideals into our action and attempt to realize them beyond their historical manifestations»[56]. The ideology of progress is therefore replaced by a «teleology of the will that molds and shapes its past into the future out of the present»[57].

Joas calls this method «affirmative genealogy»[58]. It is genealogical insofar as it refuses any objective teleology and any alleged naturality of the good. It does not seek an ultimate rational justification of values; instead, uncovering their genesis, it reveals the significance that they have had and may have for us today. In this regard, Joas' genealogy differs from Nietzsche's, whose chief goal was demystification. Joas' method is affirmative, for it aims at a clarification, instead of a deconstruction, of the value of values, in order to provide historical grounds for the subjective evidence that characterizes the present experience of them.

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[52] Joas (2013), pp. 109 and following.

[53] Joas (2013), p. 115. This does not mean that material interests and power do not play any role in history. Quite the opposite, these elements must be considered as part of a totality in which no element can be said to play a determinant role in the last instance. See pp. 130 and following.

[54] Joas (2013), p. 122. Cf. the more incisive original sentence: «Wir erfahren Werte als Anspruch an uns – oder eben nicht» (2011), p. 184.

[55] Joas (2013), p. 123.

[56] *Ibid*.

[57] *Ibid*.

[58] Joas (2013), pp. 124 and following.

However, affirmative genealogy also has a negative, i. e. critical side. First, genealogy as such deconstrues any ideological interpretation of historical development. Second, it casts light on the complexity of each value's history, on the contribution of different traditions of thought to their articulation, and in so doing it carries out a critical function toward any praxis which distances itself from the most profound meaning of the values, and that can be justified only by a narrow interpretation of them[59].

The biographical and the historical genealogy have different functions. It is not only, as I have said, that the first concerns more directly the individual and the second the collective sphere. They uncover different kinds of reasons for judging something as valuable. On the historical level one may believe to have proved that a value – to use Nietzsche's words – grew «*out of* an error, and the realization of this fact would not as much as touch the problem of its value». This is because our commitment to our values is the result of a sentiment that is rooted in a deeper level than that of rational discourse; «something in you absolutely *knows* that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it»[60]. This is actually the meaning of religious faith, which as such cannot be shattered by worldly reasons, but this is true of all our deepest beliefs. For example, an historic-genealogical inquiry could make one cease to believe in religious goods – it happens, according to James, «when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion»[61] – and yet not shatter the personal adherence to the moral values which are attached to them. Imagine a former catholic who no longer recognizes her faith, but still has a strong belief in mutual love, for she experienced its value during her life. The historical dimension of genealogical inquiry always makes us aware of the radical contingency of our values, while biographical narration can open us to the universal validity of our beliefs.

A third difference between the historical and the biographical genealogy is that only the latter is accessible to everyone. It goes without saying that historical inquiry is a matter of studies and that even their most widespread outcomes are unknown to people who do not have access to higher education. However, even if the historical dimension may provide more compelling reasons (be they positive or negative) than the biographical, we have just seen how the latter is in the last instance independent from the former.

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[59] Cf. Joas (2015).

[60] James (2012), p. 63; Cf. Joas (2001) and Joas (2008).

[61] *Ibid*.

Thus, while the biographical is of the greatest relevance for individual beliefs, the final difference between the two is that the historical carries a greater importance for the public sphere. The critical function of affirmative genealogy is fundamental for a positive communication about values between different religious and philosophical traditions. If we are to share our «identity space» – namely to find «a commonly acceptable, even compromised political identity between the different personal or group identities which want to/have to live in the polity»[62] – we must find a way to agree upon certain fundamental values. In other words, our particular values must be generalized. The concept of «value generalization» was coined by Talcott Parsons, but is applied by Joas to a wider spectrum of phenomena. It can be defined with Parsons' words as «the inclusion, *under* a single legitimizing value-pattern, of components which are not only diverse and differentiated from each other, but many of which have, historically, claimed some sort of an 'absolutistic' monopoly of moral legitimacy»[63]. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a valid example of this process, insofar as representatives of different traditions succeeded in acknowledging the value of human rights, explicitly renouncing a discourse about their philosophical or religious grounding.

Since value-commitments are rooted in experiences which are inseparable from the forms they have taken throughout history, they are definitely culture-specific. Each culture cannot but refer to its own particular understanding of what makes a value valuable. To use Taylor's expression, each culture refers to incompatible «moral sources»[64]. We cannot learn what is good, as Kant maintained, by means of pure practical reason; we learn it rather through our inescapable cultural framework. However, this does not mean that our conceptions of the good cannot have any universal value.

Both Nietzsche and James would agree in stating that what is true is that which has positive effects on life. Of course, Nietzsche explicitly denies any meaning to the very concept of truth. Yet if we call "true" what has positive effects on life, it follows that what we understand as true depends on our conception of life. Since Nietzsche's concept of life is that of an irrational self-affirming force[65], he cannot but reject the traditional understanding of truth. What is true becomes any affirmation of life itself, which therefore cannot be universal. The truth of the statement that there is no truth: this is the well-known paradox of any nihilistic philosophy, which cannot be easily

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[62] Taylor (2011), p. 144.

[63] Quoted from *Comparative Studies and Evolutionary Change* in Joas (2008), p. 93 and Joas (2013), p. 179

[64] Taylor (1989), pp. 91 and following.

[65] Nietzsche's concept of life can be elevated, says Joas, «to the status of a post-religious myth» (1996), p. 125.

discredited by means of a logical criticism[66], but has to be faced in its radical and challenging meaning.

On the contrary, if we understand life as a biological fact that does not justify any supremacy of one over another, and whose value is the same with regard to every person, we could accept as true that which makes a potentially universal, positive, practical difference, provided that it is not proved absurd by any other statement[67]. The only way to prove that our values are not absurd (which is our second truth condition) is to undergo the genealogical process of intersubjective self-revising which I have described. Their truth must be understood as the (provisional) result of such an inquiry, until some experience will, if ever, force us to abandon them in favor of higher goods. The first truth condition is their having a potentially universal, positive, practical difference. Introducing the clause "potentially universal", I aim to escape the risk of subjectivism that characterizes James' theory of truth by recalling a Kantian principle. Our value orientations must pass through the «sieve of the norm»[68], i. e. they must be universalizable in the Kantian sense. They must be suitable for a «kingdom of ends». On the other hand, the pragmatic principle allows us to avoid the abstraction of the categorical imperative, which, as Alasdair MacIntyre pointed out, also allows immoral and trivial maxims[69]: our values must make a positive practical difference.

Now, if we link these two principles, we see that this practical difference, in order to be positive, must be in principle universally acceptable. Let us take as an example the Christian idea of love. It is of course not a universal value, for the simple reason that not everyone is a Christian. Yet it can be potentially universal, insofar as the practical differences that derive from it are valued as good by anyone involved, even if they may provide an utterly different interpretation of its value. This is far from obvious, since love can easily degenerate into a degrading solicitude, which denies the other's dignity and freedom[70]. Our values can be proved as true only if the practical difference they make is recognized as positive by all who are concerned. If it is so, it will be possible to find an agreement upon a formulation of that value, which, avoiding any culture-specific vocabulary, will be *generalized*.

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[66] Needless to recall how Nietzsche would respond to such a critique, cf. Nietzsche (2002), p. 23.

[67] If life is valuable as the life of *persons*, it follows, as Scheler shows, that the value of life itself has to be subordinated to the spiritual values of the person, which cannot be biologically justified. Cf. Scheler (1973), pp. 288 and following. The "practical difference" of truth must therefore not be related to the mere self-preservation of the individual, but instead to the whole personality.

[68] Ricoeur (1992), p. 170. Cf. Joas (2000), p. 172.

[69] MacIntyre (2007), pp. 45-46.

[70] Cf. Heidegger (2005), § 26; Ricoeur (1992), pp. 218 and following; Taylor (1989), p. 516.

However, we must admit that this discourse is based on a postulate, namely that universal consensus is better than imposition and violence. An ultimate rational foundation for our values is impossible, if we take Nietzsche's challenge seriously. His critique, however, does not prove the falsity of our assumption. The last word must be left to our faith in the universal value of the person. Fortunately, this value is largely shared, even though different cultures articulate it differently and often limit it to a particular group of individuals, to whom the status of "person" is reserved. Even the most violent oppression is hardly justified by denying this value, but rather by appealing to political and religious principles, to which priority is accorded in specific situations. Nietzsche's conception of life, then, does not mirror the most widespread moral intuitions. According to Taylor, every individual, as an anthropological constant, instinctively reacts with approval to behaviours that foster the respect of those to whom the status of person is accorded, and with disapproval to behaviours that deny it. However much this statement may be exaggerated, it expresses a deep moral intuition which is present in those individuals who are not perverted by violence[71].

To sum up the responses provided in this paper to the question about the genesis and the validity of our motives for moral action: firstly, the "heteronomous" principle of moral sentiment – understood as the subjective evidence that accompanies the feeling that something is valuable – better explains our moral experience then Kantian moral rationalism; secondly, values arise in social contexts through experiences of self-transcendence and self-formation (which is the central thesis of Joas' book *The Genesis of Values*); thirdly, any ultimate rational foundation of these values is impossible and must be substituted by genealogical narration; finally, values can be held true if they make a potentially universal, positive, practical difference, provided that they are not proved absurd by any other statement.

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[71] Cf. Joas (2003).

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