



## Societies Without Borders

Volume 7 | Issue 1


Article 4

2012

# Universal Moral Grammar: An Ontological Grounding for Human Rights

Vincent Walsh  
*Lehigh University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb>

 Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Walsh, Vincent. 2012. "Universal Moral Grammar: An Ontological Grounding for Human Rights." *Societies Without Borders* 7 (1): 74-99.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol7/iss1/4>

This Notes from the Field is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Societies Without Borders by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

***Notes From the Field***  
**Universal Moral Grammar: An Ontological  
Grounding for Human Rights**

**Vincent Walsh**  
Lehigh University

*Received August 2011; Accepted January 2012*

---

**Abstract.**

In this article I connect the principles of the UN Declaration of Human Rights to the issue of global social justice, and ask the question: is there a genetically endowed Universal Moral Grammar common to all human beings comparable to the Universal Grammar for language acquisition demonstrated so convincingly by Noam Chomsky and others?

**Keywords**

Social Justice, UN Declaration of Human Rights, Universal Moral Grammar

I present these comments on the broad and highly complex topic of social justice with the cautionary proviso that my purpose here is not to suggest any conclusive arguments, but rather to describe new developments in ongoing inquiry into this domain. Let me begin with a little bit about my background, since it plays a role, though not necessarily a straightforward one, in shaping my analysis today. For better or worse, I was educated in the Catholic school system from first grade through graduation from college, though I did experience some relief from this regimen during Kindergarten, and again during the summers following my junior and senior years in high school, when I had to repair to the local public school to take summer courses in trigonometry and driver's ed, respectively. I don't recall any corrosive effects from these secular exposures; in fact, the public school teachers seemed quite a bit more civilized, at least to my naïve adolescent mind, than many of the nuns and priests I had encountered in my supposedly academically and morally superior home parish environment. For one thing, they didn't slap, punch, or hit you with a pointer stick across the back the legs when you distracted the class by

~74~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

staring out the window, the way my religiously inspired instructors were inclined to do; frankly, I was getting more than enough of that kind of punishing pedagogy at home. You could say I was on overload in that department.

So naturally I was a bit perplexed, if not right downright confounded, when I heard my college freshman English professor — an eloquent Jesuit and ardent apologist for all things Roman Catholic — repeatedly insist that the birth of Christ was a unique event in human history, the debut not only of direct divine intervention into human affairs, but also the initial introduction of any serious human discourse on morality, in contrast to the brutally corrupt ‘pagan’ cultures that had preceded it. Prior to the birth of Christ, he argued, humans labored under a gloomy cloud of hopeless ignorance, doomed by Adam’s Original Sin (for which Eve was clearly to blame), condemned to perpetual wandering amidst the darkness of unredeemed evil. I do not mention this casually, for the same notion still holds great sway among us today, in our public discourse here in America, both from official Roman Catholic Church promulgations as well as from more scattered but no less influential voices among the powerful Christian evangelical movement, that select group of divinely sanctioned ‘reborn’ who eagerly, and confidently, anticipate Armageddon, both as a purging of all worldly evils, as well as the promised release of the Elect (i.e. ‘saved’ people like them) from the misery of the material plane into the eternal bliss of their predestined heavenly abode. I imagine it must be quite comforting to feel so assured of one’s unchallengeable self-righteousness, not to mention eventual assured safe destination. Personally, I find great difficulty in trying to engage in meaningful dialogue with those who radiate such a constant aura of patronizing condescension, as if, in Paul Tillich’s memorable phrase, ‘they had just finished having lunch with God.’ I must confess I do not feel inspired either by the postmodern crusades currently being waged against what is conveniently termed ‘Islamic extremism’ -- in spite of post-structuralist convictions about the ‘slipperiness’ of linguistic meanings; apparently, there’s no need to worry about ‘iterability’ when we discuss ‘jihadist extremism,’ since there’s no issue of moral relativism whatsoever when it comes to condemning the evil deeds of enemies, naturally. Only our own crimes require such subtle nuances and distinctions. Maybe I’m just too far

~75~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

‘outside the box,’ I don’t know, but it seems quite obvious to me that we already have more than our share of fanatical Christian jihadist fundamentalists to deal with right here at home.

I must admit I became quite encouraged when I learned two years ago that our English Department here at Lehigh has now officially adopted the theme of social justice, for this crucial concept receives far too short shrift, in my opinion, within American academic discourse. It is certainly true that feminist studies has been courageously addressing this issue, as it pertains to women, over the past several decades, an intellectual enterprise I support with unqualified enthusiasm, since the liberation of women from the bondage of prevailing patriarchy is clearly central to any prospects for achieving social justice for all peoples in the broadest possible sense. In other domains, however, such as discussions of economic, legal, and political justice, there is obviously still much work to be done, particularly, I would argue, for scholars in the American academy, who are currently confronting the ruthless dismantling of crucial social support systems for the vast majority here at home, particularly since the onset of the Great Recession. It is also important for us American academics, I think, to respond forthrightly to the challenge posed by Edward Said: that American scholars honestly examine and account for their own government’s overwhelmingly dominant role in perpetuating social injustice globally by means of forced implementation of neoliberal economic policies and unprecedented expansion of military aggression. Intellectuals and scholars in the U.S. are severely constrained by unrelenting, career-determining pressures to practice unquestioning acceptance of conventional doctrinal assumptions regarding official discourse concerning ‘democracy promotion,’ ‘the sanctity of free markets,’ ‘humanitarian intervention,’ dedication to ‘human rights’ and ‘the right to protect’— all of whose actual implementation, it turns out, depends on self-serving ideological assumptions.

Spokespersons for the U.S. government, as well as mainstream media commentators who typically fall into lock-step with officially sanctioned discourse, have employed all these rhetorical strategies rather cynically in recent years to promote neo-imperial projects in the Balkans and the Middle East, interventions that have no justification whatsoever under the provisions of the UN Charter or

~76~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

international law. Recent targeted assassinations of high-profile enemies such as Osama bin Laden and Omar Gaddafi are only the latest examples of a new imperial hubris shaping U.S. foreign policy, amplified further through the Obama administration's radical expansion of drone strikes, as well as the extremely dangerous pressure it is putting on Pakistan's military (a proud, well-trained, fiercely nationalistic organization that is in control of the world's fastest-growing nuclear arsenal) to crush insurgent havens on their side of the border, warning of unilateral action by the U.S. if Pakistan fails to act. The crucial fact that U.S. policies in the area are stirring outrage as well as enormous opposition among Pakistanis, and that many members of Pakistan's army are jihadist sympathizers, or deeply committed to jihadist principles, who could easily gain access to Pakistan's formidable nuclear arsenal in order to retaliate against U.S. forces (a risk Obama deliberately ran by ordering the Navy Seals he sent to assassinate bin Laden to 'fight their way out' if necessary) — causing unimaginable horrors throughout the region and perhaps even world-wide — seems to be of no concern to Washington planners; it is crucial that we ask ourselves why.

Of course, it is always easier for us to point the finger at moral lapses in others, conveniently neglecting our own serious violations of the very same principles we claim to champion; U.S. support for the recent military coup in Honduras comes to mind, as well as current renewed support for the barbaric Karimov government in Uzbekistan, even as we celebrate the brutal torture and killing of an equally monstrous dictator in Libya. Karimov has become infamous for Gaddafi-style mass slaughters of peaceful demonstrators, similar and even surpassing in scale the Tiananmen Square massacre of the early nineties, as well as Trujillo-style execution strategies, including boiling political prisoners alive. These are just two examples; there are countless others, ongoing at this moment, and extending all the way back through U.S. history, including a deliberate, centrally planned, systemic campaign of genocide waged against America's sizeable native population. Recent scholarship indicates that there were between ten and eighteen million Native Americans residing in North America alone at the time of Columbus's 'discovery;' by the end of the nineteenth century, there were a mere few hundred thousand survivors left, and these were crowded onto reservations where

~77~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

poverty levels to this day stagger the imagination. All this was part of a deliberate policy boldly announced by George Washington, reiterated by Thomas Jefferson, and continuing on through John Quincy Adams (who at least had the grace to express deep remorse for his participation in these massive crimes later in his career), Andrew Jackson, and every American president from 1865 through the culminating massacre of unarmed women, children, and old people at Wounded Knee in 1891. Many liberal academics today feel that it is perfectly okay to simply ignore these historical facts because they are inconvenient, especially in light of their habitual knee-jerk justifications for America's 'democracy promoting' policies, and its current commitment of vast resources (desperately needed right here at home) to fighting a global 'War on Terror.' Careful, dispassionate scrutiny of recent, as well as not so recent, U.S. diplomatic and historical records demonstrates unequivocally that American citizens might well be complicit, knowingly or not, in long-standing, ongoing state-sponsored terrorism both here at home and across the globe. One has only to consider the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, beginning in 1962 with John F. Kennedy's genocidal program of massive bombing and chemical defoliation, driving millions of terrified peasants (by means of B-52 carpet bombing raids over the heavily populated rice fields of the Mekong Delta) into what were rhetorically disguised as 'strategic hamlets,' but which were, in fact, actually nothing but concentration camps. The stated goal of Kennedy's program was 'protection' of the peasant population, the same population that we were massacring and brutally terrorizing by means of unparalleled military violence.

It is important for us American academics to pay close attention, I believe, to the way rhetoric is employed in furthering these strategic state goals, which are designed primarily to satisfy the insatiable drive for increased profits by the powerful transnational corporations that increasingly dictate U.S. policy, not only domestically, but across the geopolitical spectrum of our globalized economy. We have arrived at a stage in American political discourse where one must almost automatically assume, in Orwellian fashion, that words employed in official government pronouncements actually connote the exact *opposite* of their denotative dictionary definition; if this is indeed the case, then we literary scholars and critics have an

~78~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

especially important role to play in interrogating and clarifying public discussions concerning matters of social justice, for as professionals claiming special expertise in semantics, we are uniquely qualified to expose such disingenuous, highly toxic deceptions. This comprises no straightforward task, obviously, as our reading of Derrida, with his insistence on the virtually unlimited iterability of individual words clearly demonstrates. In brief, for Derrida and the post-structuralists, what the term ‘social justice’ means for the individual has definite subjective limitations – and points of exclusion. In the midst of a recent departmental discussion of social justice, for example, when I cited the UN Declaration of Human Rights as a reference point, a colleague turned to me and summarily countered, ‘You can’t appeal to those, because not everyone agrees with them.’ It seems clear that we cannot even begin to engage in meaningful conversation about social justice until we agree on some basic moral principles that meet with general acceptance.

Of course, my colleague joins distinguished company in his scornful expression of skepticism. The American philosopher Michael Ignatieff — ironically, the former director of Harvard’s Carr Center for Human Rights — as well as other notable figures in the U.S. philosophical academy, including Richard Rorty, along with contemporary British philosophers Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Mackie, Kurt Baier, Bernard Williams, and Alisdair MacIntyre<sup>1</sup>, all utterly reject any claim that human rights have any foundation whatsoever in human nature; these modern thinkers express mere contempt for the idea that human rights might be grounded in innate universal moral principles. They reject out-of-hand the Enlightenment consensus (shared, among others, by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith — this last name might come as an unwelcome surprise to Friedman and his Chicago Boys) in this regard, as well as a philosophical tradition of assuming an innate moral nature in human beings dating via Aquinas all the way back to Aristotle. I find this modern skepticism particularly troubling, especially since these core Enlightenment principles served as the implicit basis for Thomas Jefferson’s idealistic claims in the Declaration of Independence; Jefferson remained convinced throughout his political career that a sense of justice is ‘instinct[ive], and innate, that the moral sense is as much a part of our constitution as that of feeling, seeing, or

~79~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

hearing' (letter to Peter Carr).

Social scientists, too, have generally rejected Enlightenment as well as Classical principles, arguing instead that morality is merely a product of social construction, and thus varies significantly from one culture and society to another, beginning with nineteenth century French pioneer Emile Durkheim, and continuing on through the work of Americans George Herbert Meade, as well as Ruth Benedict (credited with coining the well-known term 'cultural relativism'). The idea of cultural relativism has proven especially useful for state propaganda, for example, for justifying claims that Orientals do not 'value life as we do,' a mantra repeated frequently in official discourse concerning the Vietnam War, and that all Muslims hate 'our freedoms,' George the Second's memorable phrase as he launched a new phase in the War on Terror initiated twenty years earlier by Ronald Reagan.

Psychologists faithful to Freud's heavy-handed and profoundly pessimistic (and patriarchal) view of human nature, which, Freud argues, fails to rise above the level of 'savage beasts,' likewise reject any notion of a moral sense that is innate in humans. There are important exceptions — particularly Alice Miller, a German psychiatrist who practiced Freudian psychoanalysis faithfully for twenty years, until she gradually became convinced — through her patients' consistent testimony -- that Freud's theories of infantile sexuality, the Oedipal Complex, and the death drive were entirely false. Miller, who died only recently, dedicated the rest of her career to articulating an alternative paradigm — beginning with publication of *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979), and on through twelve more books — wherein she insists that clinical evidence shows uncontroversially that it is neglect and abuse of infants and young children, not 'innate drives,' that causes psychological disorders, from neuroses and post-traumatic stress, all the way to full-blown sociopathy and psychopathy. For Miller, infants and young children are innocent victims of what she refers to as a punishing 'poisonous pedagogy' which assumes that children are inherently evil (Eve to blame for this one, as well, of course) and therefore must have moral values imposed upon them -- by physical force, if necessary. Miller argues convincingly that children's basic human rights to fair and decent treatment by adults must be carefully safeguarded if we can

~80~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012



*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

ever hope to achieve social justice in societies across the globe.

Interestingly, recent research in developmental psychology lends strong support for Alice Miller's claims; young children, it has been found, typically manifest feelings of compassion, empathy, and a desire to help others; children appear to be innately predisposed to comfort others in distress, and to encourage and assist the efforts of others. Children as young as six years-old demonstrate a clear understanding of what is fair -- which supports Miller's assertion that neglected and abused children intuitively understand that the way they are being treated by adults is unjust, and thus they experience profound anger as a result, anger they know they cannot express, since it would only make the abuse worse. Instead, according to Miller, these children repress their inner rage at this unfair treatment; but this rage inevitably resurfaces after the child has grown big and strong enough to act on it. Tragically, this long-repressed rage is often unleashed at others indiscriminately, affecting countless persons who had nothing whatsoever to do with the original neglect and abuse. It is highly significant that Miller produces detailed case studies of the brutal childhood experiences of both Hitler and Stalin for the light they cast on both these men's monstrous behavior toward others, including complete strangers, as adults.

It is also important to note that Miller's viewpoint finds strong support from Darwin's empirical observations, whereas Freud's claims about human 'savagery' clearly do not. Despite the false social theory, supposedly based on Darwin's science, formulated by Herbert Spencer, an intellectual scourge commonly referred to today as 'social darwinism,' according to which human beings are inevitably trapped in a brutal life-and-death competition where only the strongest *deserve* to survive, and thrive, while weaker members of the species naturally deserve to be exploited and eventually die out — for the sake of the evolutionary 'progress' of the species. This social darwinist discourse — based on ideology rather than science — depicts human nature as essentially depraved, and thus valorizes heartless competition and violent social struggles as intrinsic to evolutionary development; this highly pessimistic view of 'human nature' proved rather convenient for nineteenth century industrialists in England and America, who were working their cheaply hired labor quite literally to death, under the most horrific of workplace

~81~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

conditions, in their obsessive pursuit of geometrically multiplying profits, even as they protested their noble dedication to furthering the goals of human ‘progress.’

Spencer’s social darwinist theory also fed directly into the contemporary European obsession with eugenics, which provided convenient justifications for unimaginable atrocities that were being committed by representatives of the European and American ‘civilizing missions’ across the colonized and militarily subjugated globe, particularly notable among which was Belgian King Leopold II’s genocidal policies in the Congo, so ambivalently referenced in Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. British valorization of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority correlates directly with Hitler’s claims that Aryans constitute the ‘Master Race,’ and thus are entitled to conquer, exploit, and if necessary even exterminate their less worthy neighbors, and we know where all that led. Yet 1945 did not end that disgraceful chapter in human history; Hitler was responsible for the extermination of six million European Jews; we have already surpassed that number among African victims in the Congo alone during the past decade, not via glaringly obvious methods like forcing victims into gas chambers, but rather by means of corporate and Western governmental support for hiring and turning loose numerous mercenary gangs of armed thugs who rape and murder at random across the region, creating the exact kind of social chaos required for ensuring cheap access (primarily by means of slave labor) to valuable mineral resources that provide the raw materials for enormously profitable Western technology companies. Freud’s observations about human savagery might seem apt here, with one *huge* qualification: the savagery exhibited in all of these cases, from Leopold’s policies, to Hitler, to the genocide ongoing at this moment in the Congo are all the direct result of deliberate policies designed and implemented by powerful elites to enhance their imperialist agendas; they do not necessarily represent the characteristics and qualities of human nature typically manifested by ordinary citizens — a crucially important distinction.

Charles Darwin’s empirical observations actually convinced him that human beings do indeed possess an innate moral faculty, and that an intuitive sense of right and wrong, along with a capacity for feeling remorse of conscience, is, in fact, the single most important difference between humans and other animals. Further, Darwin found

~82~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99

that this moral sense in humans has clear antecedents in the social instincts of other animals, which include a strong desire for companionship, anguish at isolation, collaboration in meeting basic needs and organizing for self-protection, as well as clear manifestations of mutual affection, sympathy, empathy, and compassion. So powerfully compelling were these impressions, indeed, that Darwin became convinced that his observations could only lead to the conclusion that there is a natural basis in nature, and particularly among humans, for the Golden Rule.

Darwin concluded that individual members of a species act not so much out of self-interest, but rather out of instinctive concern for the goals, needs, and interests of the larger community. So it must be viewed as a tragic irony that Darwin's empirical data became twisted and perverted into a form of dominant discourse that serves the interests of those who act in the *exact opposite* manner that Darwin describes. The pernicious consequences of this false, toxic discourse known as 'social darwinism,' although thoroughly debunked in Prince Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1914), still reigns supreme on the contemporary American social-political scene, thanks to the predatory ideology conjured up in the 1940s by Ayn Rand, who, in my view, is neither a fiction writer nor philosopher in any serious sense of those terms, yet whose monumental tributes to unbridled selfishness and ruthless self-aggrandizement, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, continue to be all-the-rage across U.S. college campuses today, not to mention corporate board rooms. Rand's writing directly influenced Milton Friedman and his 'Chicago Boys' as they formulated the prevailing doctrines of neo-imperial neoliberal economic policy and financial and market deregulation, which have produced the disastrous consequences we face today, with more than one out of seven billion people either starving or severely malnourished, two billion with no access to potable water or basic sanitation, widespread epidemics -- including AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, to name just a few — pervasive, rapidly escalating environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, and so on, with all signs indicating that things will only get worse — unless ordinary people can find some way to slow down and eventually halt the runaway train of greed so eloquently and authoritatively described in Naomi Klein's landmark study *The Shock Doctrine*, along with

~83~

© Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

numerous other sources.

In that same departmental social justice discussion that I referred to earlier, near the end of our lively colloquium on our departmental theme, there arose some rather heated controversy over Ngugi's use of the term 'Word' (with a capitol W) in the closing lines of an important essay he wrote on the topic. I alluded to the opening line of John's Gospel as a reference point for Ngugi's semantic strategy, and also described its relevance to Christ's compelling statement at the close of John's account of the Last Supper, where Jesus admonishes his companions that there is indeed really only *one* commandment — that we love and care for one another, just as God loves and cares for us. The implication is that human beings ought to collaborate with and help each other, acting as members of one human family. From this, I then extrapolated to the time-honored adage of the Golden Rule, and again made reference to the more recent UN Declaration of Human Rights, which to my way of thinking represents a detailed articulation of these same principles. Yet once again my argument was perfunctorily dismissed -- which leaves us mired, I fear, in the trackless wasteland of moral relativism, a position from which we become hard-pressed even to legitimately condemn the monstrous crimes of a Hitler or Stalin.

There are many people, of course, particularly among those comfortably situated in positions of wealth, power, and privilege, who dismiss the UN Declaration out-of-hand. Jean Kirkpatrick, for example, Reagan's ambassador to the UN, cynically referred to the Declaration of Human Rights as a childish 'letter to Santa Claus,' a pathetic instance of naïve wishful thinking. Several years later, Morris Abrams, UN ambassador under George Bush the First, went even further, damning the document as a 'dangerous incitement.' American elites seem to fear that importunate demands from those Frantz Fanon described as 'the wretched of the earth' might pose a serious threat to elites' ability to follow the injunctions of Rand and Friedman to maximize profits for self, disregarding the needs and desires of everyone else, not only in advanced societies, but among victims of their obscenely wealthy puppets in the underdeveloped world as well; these miserable, undeserving unfortunates, Kirkpatrick and Abrams seem to be saying, have fallen into an intolerable heresy, and are thus seriously undermining sacrosanct doctrines regarding unregulated

~84~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

markets, unrestricted financial speculation, and unlimited profiteering — what Joseph Stiglitz referred to twenty years ago as the ‘religion’ of neoliberal economic theory, with its core dogma that teaches us, infallibly, that ‘markets know best.’

Despite this prevailing neoliberal doctrine, however, the vast majority of human beings, both here and abroad, seem to remain convinced that a system that allows most of society’s wealth to become arrogated to just the top 1% of the population (or less — some argue .01% is more like it; William Black, Associate Professor of Law and Economics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, even claims we’re actually talking about only.001%) is, in fact, innately unfair, and therefore extremely unjust, a commonly accepted conclusion made readily manifest in the currently expanding OWS movement. These ordinary citizens, the ‘99%,’ seem to continue to be laboring under the delusion that it is only logical to acknowledge that other human beings might naturally want to claim the same rights that members of the so-called elite automatically arrogate to themselves, to their families and intimate friends — namely, the right to a decent, wholesome, fulfilling quality of life. Nevertheless, it seems that the vast majority of ordinary citizens across the globe regard the UN Declaration of Human Rights as a reasonable exposition of core principles of social justice that all human beings can and should readily subscribe to, beginning with Article One, which states: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood,’ a claim that hearkens straight back to Jefferson’s stirring words in the Declaration of Independence: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed . . . with certain inalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,’ even if implementation of these noble ideals was woefully lacking for the African slaves Jefferson owned, and from whose bondage labor he profited handsomely.

Science has, in fact, established that all seven billion of us currently populating the planet descend directly from one small breeding group of humans in East Africa who appeared roughly 50,000 years ago; this means all human beings on the planet today share the same basic genetic inheritance, a fact that makes us all

~85~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

members of one human family, biologically speaking, despite our numerous apparent, wide-ranging differences. According to renowned paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall<sup>2</sup>, it appears that a single genetic mutation occurred in one individual member of this group ‘that set the stage for language acquisition . . . [this mutation] depended on the phenomenon of emergence, whereby a chance combination of preexisting elements results in something totally unexpected,’ and thus can only be described as a ‘sudden and emergent event . . . [which] probably had nothing whatever to do with adaptation.’ Noam Chomsky asserts that there is ‘good evidence that language capacity is the same for all human groups . . . there are individual differences, but no known group differences. It follows that there has been no meaningful evolutionary change with regard to language since the time our ancestors, perhaps a very small group, left Africa and spread around the world; about 50,000 years ago it is commonly assumed. Somewhere in that narrow window, there seems to have been a sudden explosion of creative activity, complex social organization, symbolic behavior of various kinds.’<sup>3</sup> Since empirical evidence points to a common ancestry for all human beings, and because the universal grammar for language acquisition which Chomsky and other linguists have been studying for more than a half century lends further support for the idea that we are all — all seven billion of us — genetically descended from this small breeding group in East Africa, I think we become forced to accept the possibility (one is tempted to say *reality*) that we are all, in fact, members of a single human family. This realization carries enormous implications for compelling arguments in support of the UN Declaration, and for the idea of universal principles of social justice that are ontologically grounded in human nature.

Reading carefully through the thirty articles of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, it becomes immediately obvious, interestingly, that most, if not all of them, correlate directly with the founding documents that established the United States’ legacy as the world’s first democracy, with its guarantees of ‘inalienable’ rights, including the right to due process under the law, freedom of thought, speech, religion, association, and so on. I suspect that what troubles scornful skeptics like Jean Fitzpatrick and Morris Abrams most are the provisions specified in Articles 22, 23, 25, and 29; Article 22 refers

~86~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

to 'economic' rights 'indispensable for dignity,' Article 23 grants all global citizens 'the right to work . . . [as well as] just and favorable conditions of work,' and 'protection against unemployment,' guarantees that have been seriously compromised under the neoliberal economic regime initiated in the U.S. during the early 1970s. Article 23 confers the right to 'equal pay for equal work,' a cornerstone of feminist aspirations. Furthermore, Article 23 explicitly endorses 'favorable remuneration ensuring . . . an existence worthy of human dignity . . . supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.' Article 25 is even more explicit (perhaps what Abrams was objecting to as a 'dangerous incitement'): 'the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being . . . including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [one's] control.' Going a step further, Article 25 stipulates that 'Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.' Article 29 would seem, at face value, to be less controversial, beginning with the phrase, 'Everyone has duties to the community in which the free and full development of his personality is possible,' although, based on recent behavior, corporate CEOs and Wall Street hedge fund managers would certainly object to the notion of their having any duty whatsoever to others, since that might interfere with maximizing profits, which Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman have assured them is their sole mandate.

Of course, as scholars devoted to the nuances of textual exegesis, we must examine the authorship of the UN document; who is it exactly that posits these rights, and on what basis? It turns out that this landmark document was drafted by prominent writers, legal scholars, and philosophers from around the world who, despite significant cultural and ideological differences, found themselves, to their collective surprise, arriving at almost immediate agreement on a core set of universal principles. The document opens with an argument for its own justification, coming as it does in the immediate aftermath of the global catastrophe that was World War II: 'Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind . . . [this document] has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the

~87~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

common people.’ How can we be so sure that this is the case, one must ask, and for reassurance on this point, thankfully, we have extensive documentation provided by Mary Ann Glendon, the Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard University, in her highly regarded 2001 scholarly study, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*, which provides a detailed account of how the sitting First Lady drew together moral philosophers, legal theorists, and human rights experts from all over the globe to compose the carefully articulated provisions of this transformative document. Glendon argues that, given the painstaking care exercised by Mrs. Roosevelt, this declaration does indeed represent the ‘aspirations of the common people’ throughout the world, or comes as close to doing so as could be expected, given the urgency of the project after the horrors of the Holocaust, not to mention the fascist predations that had occurred in Africa as well as throughout the Far East, and beyond.

Mentioning Mary Ann Glendon in this context, however, only underscores the daunting complexities inherent in any discussion of social justice. Professor Glendon, widely acclaimed as an ardent advocate for human rights, recently declined a prestigious award from Notre Dame, the Laetare Medal, after she learned she would be sharing the stage with Barack Obama, whose stand on human rights she finds highly objectionable. She was not referring to Mr. Obama’s expansion of war and torture and domestic spying on U.S. citizens, but rather what she regards as his promotion of abortion rights. It turns out that Glendon served as George the Second’s ambassador to the Vatican, and currently functions as special advisor to the Council of Catholic Bishops. Apparently, Glendon considers Obama’s support for a woman’s right to choose far more objectionable than his expansion of torture and his intrusions on constitutionally guaranteed rights of individual privacy; she also turns out to be a virulent, outspoken critic of liberation theology.

The latter is the name given to the response by Catholic bishops and clergy all across Latin America after Pope John XXIII’s call, in convening the Vatican II Council in 1962, for a return to the Church of the Gospels, with its unwavering commitment to core principles of social justice. All four of the New Testament texts -- especially Matthew, but also Mark, Luke, and John -- make it clear that

~88~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012



*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

Jesus was crucified because of his perceived role as a political subversive, a social activist, because of his brazen public excoriations of extremely wealthy religious leaders in Jerusalem for their ruthless greed and vicious hypocrisy, and for the cruel injustices they were inflicting on the poor. The Scribes and Pharisees had already been sending spies to report back to Temple headquarters about this troublemaker's activities for some time, as well as to try and trick him into committing blasphemy through their clever sophistry (with no luck). Apparently, however, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem in triumph on that fateful Palm Sunday, hailed by adoring masses of the city's worst oppressed, and then proceeded to storm directly into the holy Temple precincts to overturn the tables of the moneychangers operating there (the Wall Street speculators of his day), powerful elites finally decided that enough was enough. Within a matter of days, Jesus was arrested, barbarously tortured, and then publicly executed as a common criminal, a fate all too familiar to social activists before and since, from Socrates, to Martin Luther King, Jr., to El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Pope John XXIII had called for ecumenical dialogue as well as a return to the spirit of the early Church, the beleaguered Church of martyrs that had existed prior to the fourth century edict by Emperor Constantine that established Christianity as the Roman Empire's official state religion. In effect, according to eminent Catholic theologian Hans Kung, Pope John was calling for a return to the Church's original role of steady advocacy for the poor and oppressed, to what Kung refers to as 'the Church persecuted,' before its transition to what Kung refers to as 'the persecuting Church' under the aegis of Constantine. John XXIII died unexpectedly, under mysterious circumstances, soon after his ascension to the papacy, which prompted widespread speculation that he had been murdered, possibly by poison, for taking his courageous, highly controversial stand. By all accounts, it had to have been an inside job; perhaps the best-known reference to speculations about a possible planned assassination of John XXIII, who had foolishly desired to follow in his Master's social activist footsteps, can be found in the explicit references to just such a plot in Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather III*.

It seems that Mary Ann Glendon strongly prefers the persecuting Church, for reasons related to power and privilege, one

~89~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras, 2012*

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

can only assume. Beginning with John's immediate successor, Paul VI, the Catholic Church quickly reassumed its normative, domineering role in world affairs. Under John Paul II, the current candidate for sainthood who worked so closely with his friend Ronald Reagan to make sure that the Latin American bishops' 'preferential option for the poor' would be smashed utterly, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of assassinations and 'disappearances,' wholesale torture of hundreds of thousands others, leaving millions of orphans as well as millions of internally displaced and voluntarily exiled citizens in the bloody wake of this state-sponsored terrorist war on proponents of clearly heretical liberation theology. The U.S. 'School of the Americas' located at Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia, since renamed the 'Western Institute for Security Cooperation,' played a major role in training the Latin American military who were directly responsible for perpetrating these horrific atrocities over several decades; the U.S. Army still boasts to this day, as one of its proud talking points, about its decisive role in 'defeating liberation theology; 'one might expect professional soldiers to depend for their pride on successes against comparably trained and equipped worthy opponents on a battlefield, but apparently, in today's U.S. military culture, it has become perfectly appropriate to boast about glorious, near-genocidal 'victories' against unarmed priests, nuns, union leaders, peasant activists, and defenseless indigenous peoples as well, a further indication of the depths to which we in the U.S. have descended, both as a society and a culture. Interestingly, the U.S. sponsored 'death squads' organized and turned loose on the civilians and indigenous peoples in Central America in the 1980s proved so effective in subjugating local populations that they were later transferred as an explicit counterinsurgent strategy to U.S. military operations against troublesome rebels in Iraq, again with significant success.

Frankly, I cannot see how Glendon justifies her extreme opposition to a woman's right to choose, other than persecuting Church doctrine that has no foundation whatsoever in the Gospels. Glendon's passionate attacks on women's reproductive rights also raise serious questions about Law Professor Glendon's commitment to the core Constitutional principle of separation of church and state, a legal cornerstone of American democracy from its inception. It seems somehow contradictory, moreover, to campaign for the rights

~90~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

of the as-yet unborn, while casually ignoring the rights of those who are, in fact, *already* born, and are now languishing under conditions of extreme poverty, both domestically and internationally. One can only wonder how Glendon rationalizes Catholic Church support for a draconian bill passed several weeks ago by the U.S. House of Representatives that literally requires Emergency Room staff to refuse to provide medical care for a woman who shows up at the hospital in the throes of childbirth complications that guarantee she will die if she does not receive an immediate abortion; this new legislation (which, fortunately, is not expected to pass into law, at least not yet) requires that hospital staff simply leave the woman on a gurney in the hallway and stand back and watch while she dies a slow, agonizing death. One can only wonder how Glendon rationalizes such a drastic 'ethical' position, and how she reconciles this astonishing severity with the original mandate of the Gospels that we love and care for one another. Certainly, allowing a mother in labor to suffer and die in such circumstances will not save the unborn child, so what justifies allowing *both* mother and child to die just to satisfy 'right to life' ideological rigidity? It seems that although the fetus enjoys this right, its mother does not, something I find rather contradictory, not to mention problematic, to say the least.

Glendon also seems unconcerned that we live in a world where one billion human beings, the majority of them young children, are currently facing starvation, where two billion among us have no access to potable water or adequate sanitation, and where hundreds of millions — again, mostly children — die each year from easily preventable diseases. The list of horrors is far too lengthy to spell out here, but the following statistics reveal a great deal. A UN sponsored study published in 2000, arguably the most comprehensive of its kind ever undertaken, points out that 'the richest one percent of adults owned 40 percent of global assets in 2000, and . . . the richest ten percent of adults accounted for 85 percent of the world's total. In contrast, the assets of half of the world's adult population account for barely one percent of global wealth.'<sup>4</sup> Predictably, the countries where this wealth is concentrated are limited to just a few — the U.S., Canada, Western Europe, Japan, and Israel — with the rest of the world rather hopelessly far behind. One must assume that now, one decade later, these gaping disparities in global wealth have only become

~91~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

exacerbated further, especially as a result of what we now refer to as the Great Recession, the product of the Rand-Friedman ideology prompting deregulation and unprecedented corporate and financial greed.

Fortunately, there is significant empirical research being conducted across the U.S. that seems to verify the existence of an innate, genetically endowed 'universal moral grammar' in human beings comparable to the universal grammar for language acquisition discovered more than half a century ago by Noam Chomsky. John Mikhail, a professor at Georgetown Law School, recently completed a doctoral dissertation in philosophy under the direction of Chomsky; in his work, Mikhail resolves problems associated with John Rawls' important earlier work on the theory of justice. Mikhail's extensive dissertation has recently been published by Cambridge University Press under the title, *Elements of Moral Cognition: Rawls' Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment*. Mikhail's conclusions are receiving significant empirical support from ongoing research in the computational, ontogenetic, physiological and phylogenetic, as well as philosophical domains, including work by evolutionary biologist Marc Hauser at Harvard University, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, a philosopher at Dartmouth College, psychologist Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, as well as cognitive scientists Michael Koenigs of the University of Iowa and Antonio Damasio of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, Jorge Moll, a neuroscientist at Labs D'Or Hospital Network in Rio de Janeiro, Joshua Greene, a cognitive neuroscientist and philosopher at Harvard, and Jordan Grafman, a neuroscientist at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, MD. Results so far, while still tentative and controversial, seem to point to the possibility that there is indeed an organic, genetically endowed human capacity for distinguishing between right and wrong, across all cultures and consistent throughout various stages of human development.

Mikhail's hypothesis regarding the possible existence of an innate universal moral grammar is now considered to be at the forefront of current research in the cognitive sciences; his investigations are closely correlated with the groundbreaking work of Marc Hauser, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard, whose findings are spelled out in an exhaustive study published in 2006 under the title,

~92~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

*Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong.* One experiment conducted by Hauser and his associates involved surveying 200,000 subjects from around the globe, covering a wide spectrum of creeds and cultures, age groups, and levels of educational attainment. Subjects were asked to respond to simple moral dilemmas. Hauser's findings show that 90-95% of respondents produced consistently uniform intuitive judgments concerning basic issues of right and wrong, though none of the respondents could explain how they had arrived at these conclusions. Mikhail comments: 'Just as normal persons are typically unaware of the principles guiding their linguistic intuitions, so too are they often unaware of the principles guiding their moral intuitions. The universal and invariant aspects of moral knowledge, therefore . . . suggests that, as is the case with language, these principles are not taught to successive generations explicitly . . . they are the developmental consequences of an innate, cognitive faculty.' Results from ongoing scientific research thus far, which derives not just from cognitive psychology, but from various other academic disciplines as well, including cognitive neuroscience, developmental and social psychology, animal studies, experimental philosophy, comparative linguistics, legal anthropology, deontic logic, and comparative law, among others, while still inconclusive and controversial, all seem to support the theory that there is indeed an organic, genetically endowed human capacity for distinguishing between right and wrong, one that operates consistently across all cultures, and throughout all stages of human development.

Neuroscientists have discovered that specific areas of the brain are involved in instinctive moral responses, and that reduced function or damage to these areas can create serious impairment of moral judgment. Severe damage to or even complete loss of the prefrontal cortex, for example, can result in total loss of capacity for making moral judgments, even though other areas of cognitive function might remain normal. According to John Mikhail, 'In the past few years, numerous clinical and experimental studies have confirmed that distinct cortical regions are involved in moral judgment and that damage to various areas of the brain can lead to specific deficits in moral judgment while leaving other social, linguistic, and cognitive abilities unimpaired' (20). Mikhail goes on to draw a very important conclusion, one that is especially useful for

~93~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

argumentation in support of the universal validity of the UN Declaration of Human Rights: ‘A variety of functional imaging and patient studies have led researchers to conclude that a fairly consistent network of brain regions is involved in moral judgment tasks, including those judgments that implicate human rights-related norms’ (21). We know what the drastic effects of overconsumption of alcohol as well as the influence of certain drugs can be, not only for motor reflexes, but also for ethical sensibility; in the case of highly addictive substances, for example, persons typically cast aside any and all sense of ethical — not to mention civilized, or even sane -- behavior. Addicts experience an overwhelming physical craving that produces an uncontrollable mental obsession, which in turn obliterates all distinctions between right and wrong, and wipes out all remorse of conscience. All of this suggests that moral judgment is centered in physical properties of the brain itself, and suggests that there may indeed be an organic component in humans, comparable to the organ that enables universal language acquisition, which is the source of all human beings’ genetically endowed, instinctive moral judgments — that is, the physiological foundation for a Universal Moral Grammar.

It is interesting to reflect upon the fact that the eighteenth century Enlightenment really contained two conflicting strands: one is the philosophical tradition regarding an innate moral sense espoused by Hume, Kant, and other figures; the other, I would argue, is less discussed in this context -- namely, the interests (and justifying ideologies) of the emerging merchant and industrialist classes, for whom freedom to maximize profits by means of steady economic expansion was the sole priority. The same imperial impulse that was beginning to take hold at the end of the century and drive overseas depredations such as those England was recklessly inflicting on hapless India (a cause for deep revulsion in moral philosopher Adam Smith), and which reached its horrific peak roughly a century later (though I would argue that it continues to wreak even greater havoc today in its neo-imperial, that is, neoliberal form), was having disastrous consequences for ordinary British citizens. A radical shift was occurring -- from an agricultural and cottage industry-based economy to long, exhausting hours in enormous factories where laborers endured dangerous workplace conditions, for which they

~94~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

received below-subsistence level pay; miners who spent their lives underground digging up the mountains of coal required to power these factories were perhaps even worse off because of the constant threat of tunnel collapses, gas poisoning, methane explosions, and black lung disease, all of which are documented in profoundly disturbing detail in D.H. Lawrence's classic *Sons and Lovers*.

Jeremy Bentham, along with the group of utilitarians he inspired, particularly John Stuart Mill, was one of the first major thinkers, after Hobbes, to openly question the presence of any moral nature whatsoever in humans, scornfully rejecting any notion of inalienable rights as mere fantasy; Mill, an officer for the East India Company, like his father, defended British atrocities in India (especially the savage suppression of the Mutiny of 1859) as a necessary, even if somewhat regrettable, part of Britain's sacred obligation to share the advantages of its incomparably superior civilization (far superior, in fact, to its lesser Continental counterparts) with the rest of the, by definition, 'primitive' world. Bentham seems to have been arguing in support of the industrialists of his day, perhaps motivated by concerns for personal advantage; Mill certainly stood to profit personally from the policies pursued by the giant international corporation for which he served as a high ranking officer, so once again we are faced with the problem of sorting out personal agendas from philosophical convictions (not to mention the essential coherence of the latter). We see these same patterns of conflicting economic interest and philosophical conviction conflated in the positions adopted by Herbert Spencer, Ayn Rand, and Milton Friedman.

It is important to note that other distinguished thinkers of this period did not regard the rise of industrialization in a similarly sanguine vein; instead, they (I am referring here to the principal figures among the Romantic poets, though they were hardly alone in expressing this concern) feared what they perceived to be the disproportionate advance of a degrading materialism that blithely ignored humanity's deeply rooted, innate moral nature. Wordsworth's metaphor of the shell (the symbol of art and imagination) in contrast with the stone, representing contemporary obsessions with science and industry that had sparked a dangerous arrogance in human beings who believed they could master Nature and turn her over to their own

~95~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

selfish, greedy, power-hungry ends, overriding her moral laws at will, provides one of the most compelling articulations among the Romantics' far-reaching, grave reservations:

I have recoiled  
From showing as it is the monster birth  
Engendered by these too industrious times.  
    . . . fear itself  
Natural or supernatural alike,  
Unless it leap upon him in a dream,  
Touches him not. . . .  
The Ensigns of the Empire which he holds,  
The globe and scepter of his royalties,  
Are telescopes, and crucibles, and maps.  
Ships he can guide across the pathless sea,  
And tell you all their cunning; he can read  
The inside of the earth, and spell the stars;  
    . . . he sifts, he weighs;  
Takes nothing upon trust; his Teachers stare,  
The Country People pray for God's good grace,  
And tremble at his deep experiments.  
All things are put to question; he must live  
Knowing that he grows wiser every day,  
Or else not live at all . . .  
Meanwhile old Grandame Earth is grieved to find  
The playthings, which her love designed for him,  
Unthought of; in their woodland beds the flowers  
Weep, and the river sides are all forlorn.  
Now this is hollow, 'tis a life of lies  
From the beginning, and in lies must end.  
    . . . Vanity  
That is his soul, there lives he, and there moves;  
It is the soul of every thing he seeks;  
That gone, nothing is left which he can love . . .  
These mighty workmen of our late age  
Who with broad highway have overbridged  
The forward chaos of futurity,  
Tamed to their bidding . . .

~96~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012



*V. Walsb/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

Sages, who in their prescience would control  
All accidents, and to the very road  
Which they have fashioned would confine us  
down,  
Like engines, when will they be taught  
That in the unreasoning progress of the world  
A wiser Spirit is at work for us  
A better eye than theirs, most prodigal  
Of blessings, and most studious of our good,  
Even in what seem our most unfruitful hours?  
(*The Prelude, Book V*, 2 93-94; 315-20; 328-33; 337-  
43; 346-51; 354-57; 370-73; 380-88)<sup>5</sup>

The 'wiser Spirit' Wordsworth refers to here, in my view, is the innate moral wisdom with which all human beings are naturally endowed. As we see from Wordsworth's lament, it becomes readily obvious, I think, that possessing innate moral instincts and actually acting upon them are two quite different matters; it is clear that humans' intellectual capacity is powerful enough to rationalize suppression of inherent instincts regarding what is fair and just, especially when issues of personal wealth, privilege, and power are concerned. As Noam Chomsky frequently mentions, Hitler and Mussolini justified their early aggressions (against Czechoslovakia and Ethiopia respectively) in the name of 'humanitarian intervention,' as did the Japanese fascists in Manchuria. U.S. military aggression against Vietnam was justified on the same grounds, as was Jimmy Carter's support for genocidal aggression by the Indonesian military in East Timor, Reagan's depredations in Central America, the Middle East, and southern Africa, George Bush I's Persian Gulf War, along with the genocidal U.S. sanctions that followed, with full support from liberal President Clinton. His Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, when confronted by Leslie Stahl on CBS's 'Sixty Minutes' in 1998 with reports that as many as 500,000 children had already died because of these (primarily U.S.) sanctions, calmly replied, 'We think it was worth it.' Bill Clinton's bombing of Serbia (even as U.S. sponsored terrorism in East Timor was peaking) received similar valorization, and, course, the 2003 invasion of Iraq under Bush II and Cheney was all about saving the world from 'terrorism' and

~97~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras, 2012*

*V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99*

‘promoting democracy,’ not stealing Iraq’s sizeable oil resources. Human beings rarely announce that they intend to do evil, but rather take care to provide often elaborate explanations for why their most heinous actions are indeed moral and righteous, despite appearances to the contrary; the need to do so may possibly be considered negative proof for the innate sense of right and wrong that the Universal Moral Grammar suggests -- none of us can loudly brag that we are deliberately doing evil, because we sense that such a pronouncement outrages the universal understanding of justice that is inherent in all of us. So it becomes all the more important that we interrogate official discourse, which often, it turns out, attempts to justify the unjustifiable.

Despite these vexing contradictions, and the moral relativism they edge us inexorably toward, ongoing scientific investigation in our day continues to lend strong support for earlier convictions about humans beings’ innate moral nature; according to Mikhail: ‘Surprising as it might seem, a significant body of scientific research has begun to transcend the modern denial of human nature and to return to two classical ideas about human beings that were very powerful themes in both ancient philosophy and Enlightenment rationalism: that a sense of justice and the gift of speech are two characteristics that distinguish humans from other animals (Aristotle), and that like natural language, a sense of justice is ‘something that is implanted in us, not by opinion, but by a kind of innate instinct’ (Cicero). If these developments are correct or at least on the right track, then the potential implications for the theory and practice of human rights would seem to be profound’ (27).

If indeed John Mikhail is on the right track with his hypothesis, we may soon discover firm scientific grounds for postulating universal standards of morality, confirming speculation by philosophers since the dawn of civilization that humans do indeed possess an intuitive sense of morality, one that functions as the basis for codes of law and ethical conduct in all human societies. The prospects for verifying universal standards of social justice applicable across religious, cultural, and political boundaries appear hopeful; agreement on such principles could form an ontological grounding for the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as well as a plausible, verifiable basis for realizing the dream of ‘a world made new.’

~98~

© *Sociologists Without Borders/Sociologos Sin Fronteras*, 2012

V. Walsh/Societies Without Borders 7:1 (2012) 74-99

### Endnotes

1. I am indebted for much of the general background information in this article regarding modern philosophers, social scientists, Freud, Darwin, the quote from Thomas Jefferson, and recent discoveries in various scientific disciplines, particularly animal studies and neuroscience, to John Mikhail, Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center, who has granted me permission to cite from his essay “Moral Grammar and Human Rights: Some Reflections on Cognitive Science and Enlightenment Rationalism,” soon to be published in *Understanding Social Action, Promoting Human Rights* (Ryan Goodman, Derek Jinks & Andrew Woods eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).

2. Quoted in “Language and Other Cognitive Systems: What is Special about Language?” by Noam Chomsky, Language Development Symposium, Boston University, November, 2010.

3. Chomsky, Noam. Language Development Symposium, Boston University, November, 2010, p.7.

4. Glantz, Aaron. “Richest 2 Percent Own Half the World’s Wealth.” Common Dreams. News Center, 22 Dec. 2006. Retrieved 27 Dec. 2006 (<http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/headlines06/1222-04.htm>).

5. Ed. Stephen Gill. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

**Vincent Walsh** is a Teaching Fellow currently writing a dissertation in postcolonial literature under the direction of Dr. Amardeep Singh at Lehigh University. His topic is the Trujillo dictatorship, and how two contemporary Dominican-American writers, Julia Alvarez and Junot Diaz, “write back” to the tyrant, interrogate U.S. complicity in supporting his autocratic rule, as well as the way the U.S. invasion in 1965 and neoliberal policies implemented by Washington since then have continued the previous oppression under a more liberal guise, one that has left millions of Dominicans far worse off than they were during the Trujillo Era.

~99~

© Sociologists Without Borders/Sociólogos Sin Fronteras, 2012