

## ACADEMIC COUNCIL ON THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

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A principal goal is to strengthen the study of international organizations as they increase in number, activity, complexity, and importance in international relations. The program developed by the Council is designed to promote research, prepare new teaching materials, prepare the specialists of the future, and create strong ties between officials in international organizations and scholars in colleges and universities.

Individual and institutional membership are open to applicants from all countries.

## The Ethics of Globalism

by

Donald J. Puchala

The 1995 John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture

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## ACUNS

Brown University, Box 1983  
Providence, RI 02912-1983

Telephone: 401/863-1274

Fax: 401/863-3808

E-Mail: ACUNS@brown.edu

Thomas G. Weiss, Ph.D., Executive Director

Melissa Phillips, Program Coordinator

Kevin Von See Dahl, Staff Assistant

Yaw Asamoah-Duodu, Student Staff Assistant

Marlene Torres, Student Staff Assistant

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>About the John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series</i>	i
<i>About the Author</i>	ii
<i>The Ethics of Globalism</i>	
Introduction	1
The Problem of Ethical Relativism and the Contemporary Debate	1
The Current Debate	2
The Aim of this Exercise	3
Some Terminological Preliminaries	4
Not Much Help in the Documents and Declarations	5
The Failure of Our Absolutes	6
The Relativist Position	8
The Reassertion of Moral Universalism	11
The Aristotelian Turn	13
The Ethics of Globalism	16
Select Bibliography	19
<i>Recent Publications</i>	inside back cover

## ABOUT THE JOHN W. HOLMES MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

The Academic Council on the United Nations System inaugurated the John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series in 1989 in honor of a founding member of ACUNS. Mr. Holmes had served on the planning committee for the founding conference of ACUNS and the provisional committee in 1987-88. The talk he prepared for the first ACUNS annual meeting in 1988, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*, was the first publication in the Council's series of Reports and Papers.

John W. Holmes joined the Canadian Department of External Affairs in 1943 and participated in the planning of the United Nations. He attended the preparatory commission in 1945 and the first session of the General Assembly, and later served as head of UN Affairs in Ottawa and as Under-Secretary of the Department of External Affairs. In 1960, he left public service for a second career in teaching and scholarship, basing himself at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the University of Toronto.



Mr. Holmes brought to the Academic Council a lifetime of experience and reflection on international politics and the role of the United Nations. He also brought a marvelous mix of idealism and realism, a mix that showed up clearly in the report, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*. In the conclusion, he spoke of the need for reexamining the role of the UN in a way that captures the basic purposes of the Academic Council. "It is an ideal time," he said, "to launch in all our countries that renewed examination of past experience of the UN, to discover on what we can build and where not to venture, how we can use the growing threat to the globe itself to create the will for international self-discipline which is what international institutions are all about."



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**D**onald J. Puchala is director of the Institute of International Studies and professor of public affairs at the University of South Carolina. He has held teaching positions at Yale University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and Columbia University. He served as Chair of the Academic Council from 1992 to 1994 and is the co-author (with Roger A. Coate) of *The Challenge of Relevance: The United Nations in a Changing World Environment* and *Fiscal Harmonization in the European Communities*.

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## THE ETHICS OF GLOBALISM

by

Donald J. Puchala  
University of South Carolina

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series is to honor the memory of one of Canada's great statespersons, who was also a thoughtful scholar, friend of the United Nations, charter member of the Academic Council on the United Nations System, and magnificent human being. John Holmes was also a champion of human rights, and human rights are the subject of this presentation.

## THE PROBLEM OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Let us begin not with the United Nations at the end of the twentieth century, but aboard the Star Ship Enterprise sometime in the twenty-fourth century. Many of you, it would be assumed, are familiar with the science fiction adventures of the characters of Star Trek. These future space explorers are ethically bound by a "prime directive" that affirms a cosmic cultural and moral relativism. According to this prime directive, whatever is in distant worlds *is right* for these worlds, and these societies must not be judged or disturbed by

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intervening aliens. But, of course, the space explorers do judge, they do intervene, and they do disturb by promoting values that we in our century would readily recognize as Western.

To someone sensitized by reading moral philosophy and its history, it is rather interesting to observe that the debate between moral relativists and moral universalists, which may have begun centuries ago in Ancient Greece, seems still to be raging in the Star Trek scripts centuries from now at the frontiers of the Milky Way.

## THE CURRENT DEBATE

A current version of the contest between moral relativism and moral universalism is being played out in the human rights forums of the United Nations. It generated great heat at the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993, where representatives of a number of African, Asian, and some Middle Eastern governments directly challenged the universality of the tenets of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These dissenters argued that the world organization's human rights regime is not universal because moral universality is impossible in a culturally diverse world. The Declaration, they claimed, is Western in philosophical content, and enforcing it in their countries constitutes outside interference. For their part, Western governments stood steadfastly behind moral universalism. They attributed unsavory political motives to their non-Western detractors and argued that what was true and universal when the Declaration was signed in 1948 remained true and universal in 1993. U.S. Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, told

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delegates at the Vienna Conference that "we cannot let cultural relativism become the last refuge of repression."

It should be noted that the contest between moral relativism and moral universalism is also being engaged in a somewhat modified form within many societies over questions of "diversity," "otherness," and "political correctness." The debate raises the question of who has the right to judge lifestyles and by what standards are these to be judged. In the literature of international relations, similar issues are being discussed under the rubric of "clashing civilizations." The issue of cultural relativism versus cultural universalism is also dividing the discipline of anthropology and this debate has similarly become a leitmotif of twentieth century philosophy.

## THE AIM OF THIS EXERCISE

This essay begins by examining and evaluating the philosophical foundations of the debate over the cultural relativism of human rights. This examination will be admittedly superficial because the arguments are complex and time here is limited. It should be emphasized that this essay aims to address issues other than "academic questions" because there are political implications in the philosophical positions. The arguments being offered today by Western governments and others attempting to uphold the universality of human rights are philosophically rather weak, and this detracts from the political force of their positions in the human rights debate. However, there is a much stronger philosophical justification for the position than the one



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now being offered, and this work concludes by encouraging defenders of the universality of human rights to incorporate the stronger justification into their debating stances. The ideas and theories put forth herein will not end the debate, but they might at least fortify the West against losing it.

It should also be stated at the outset that the author endorses moral universalism on questions of human rights, and part of the aim of this exercise is to affirm this position. This position should not be viewed as a Western one, so much as it is a correct one.

## SOME TERMINOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

### 1. Rights

It is most useful to think of *rights* as *entitlements*. Human rights are our entitlements as human beings. We may demand these from one another, and we may demand these from our societies. The philosophical issue at hand concerns the nature of our entitlements and why we are justified in demanding them. The specific issue at hand is whether there are entitlements that are universal to—and therefore claimable by—all human beings.

### 2. Morality

Morality concerns those principles and practices that are either good or evil. It is assumed that the granting and securing of human entitlements is good. Denying these entitlements is evil.

### 3. Ethics

Ethics concerns moral behavior, or behaving in such a manner as to contribute to the furtherance of good and the avoidance of evil.

### 4. Moral/Ethical Relativism/Universalism

The terms *moral relativism* and *ethical relativism* as well as *moral universalism* and *ethical universalism* are used interchangeably by most commentators. They are also used interchangeably in this essay.

### 5. Absolutism

Universalism is sometimes called *absolutism*.

## NOT MUCH HELP IN THE DOCUMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

Unfortunately, there is very little moral philosophy written into the documents that constitute the framework for the United Nations human rights regime, namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two international covenants respectively pertaining to civil and political rights and economic, social, and cultural rights. Through phrases such as “inalienable rights,” the texts of these documents reflect a smattering of natural law thinking carried over from medieval Thomism or from 18th century enlightenment rationalism. There is also a dash of 19th century utilitarian utterance in cautionings that to ignore human rights is to invite either barbarism or social upheaval. Or perhaps this is the influence of 20th century

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pragmatism? Underlying these UN documents is an ethos of moral universalism, which peeks out in references to the "common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations," and to the "highest aspiration of common people." But nowhere in any of the documents does one find any explanation of why the human rights discussed are, in fact, human rights; and, more to the point, why they should be accepted as universal.

Of course in the philosophical—or more importantly, the political—context in which the UN human rights regime was constituted, no great need emerged to justify the embodied assertions about rights and their universality. According to British political theorist A.J.M. Milne, "their authors assumed that the idea was straightforward." But, he adds, "this assumption was mistaken."

## THE FAILURE OF OUR ABSOLUTES

Philosophically speaking, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations human rights regime that it constitutes are largely creatures of the 18th century British and French Enlightenment. They are built from the same moral stuff as the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence. Their tenets are taken as universal truths because universal truths constituted the Enlightenment weltanschauung. To confirm their truths, Enlightenment thinkers, unlike their medieval predecessors, ceased to rely upon supernatural authority—in the form of the Judeo-Christian God or any other. Instead, *nature* became the validator, and

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nature in the 18th century and for some time thereafter, was Sir Isaac Newton's nature.

Just as natural laws determined the structure and functioning of Newton's cosmos, so too did natural laws determine the good and the moral in relations among human beings. These laws, both physical and moral, were self-evident. In 18th century discourse, this meant that they became apparent to all educated, *reasoning* human beings. Natural laws defined the true and the good; the laws were immutable, and by the 18th century it was no longer important whether they were ordained by a deity. Human reason revealed these laws; behaving in accord with them was ethical. Remarkably, natural law, accessed via human reasoning, turned out to dignify individuals, sanctify property, endorse liberty, prescribe democracy, condemn tyranny, enshrine justice, and extol peace.

The time constraints of this essay will not allow for elaboration on the 20th century fate of Enlightenment thinking much beyond the obvious acknowledgment that it has been thoroughly undermined. There have been the onslaughts of *modernism*, which besmirched the model of man as a rational being, and *postmodernism*, which has eliminated the notion of truth and deconstructed the Enlightenment into an ideological campaign to institutionalize bourgeois values. Enlightenment affirmations have also been assaulted by Nietzschean claims that morality is but a hypocritical covering over of a will-to-power that is really at the basis of human motivation. Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School, in its pre- as well as post-World War II incarnation, weighed in with the observation that applications of reason in 20th century human affairs



have as often perpetrated evil as they have promoted good. Meanwhile, the immutable Newtonian universe was confused by Einstein's relativity and then replaced by Heisenberg's indeterminate and infinitely mutable quantum cosmos. Cultural anthropology during the early decades of our century also served up much to show that truths were anything but self-evident to non-Westerners.

The critical questioning of Enlightenment thinking has been tantamount to removing the philosophical foundations from natural law doctrines and removing too the justifications for claims about the truth, immutability, and universality of rationally accessed moral dictums. This has greatly weakened the positions of those individuals—and particularly Westerners—who are today striving to preserve the UN human rights regime as enshrined in the Universal Declaration. In point of fact, the position has been pushed back to what Alasdair MacIntyre calls "emotivism," where moral argument can no longer appeal to universal principles. Instead, it reduces to attempts to win opponents who are also without universal principles, over to accepting one's own preferences and abandoning theirs. Otherwise, the position in contemporary debates about human rights assumes a rather naive kind of contractualism: "We all signed on to the current regime; it is not fair at this point to question it; so let us stop bickering about it and get on with implementing it!"

## THE RELATIVIST POSITION

By implication, the weakening of moral universalism derived from natural law and right reason

has strengthened the moral relativist position. *Relativism* is, in fact, the prevailing philosophical standpoint of our century. Moral relativism has powerful appeal because it has a substantial empirical underpinning. Twentieth-century cultural anthropologists reacted forcefully to the conclusions of their 19th-century predecessors who believed that humanity was set upon a course of linear evolution that would eventually have all men and women the world over living and thinking like Europeans.

Assuming such linear evolution opened the way in the 19th century to evaluate peoples as superior and inferior, more or less civilized, more or less advanced, and of course, more or less eligible to govern themselves. Twentieth-century anthropology corrected all of this by showing that different peoples lived in different ways according to different standards, and cultural evolution yielded countless variations, most of which were well adapted to the environments within which they flourished. Passing judgment in terms of assumed advancement or retardation was, therefore, invidious. Cultures should be compared, the anthropologists said. They should not be evaluated according to outside standards.

Few relativists, however, espouse the extreme position that whatever is, is right. Nor do they reduce relativism to subjectivism where, in the absence of grounded criteria, every individual may determine what is right or wrong, good or bad, for him or herself. The most readily defensible moral relativist position is the one written into the Bangkok Declaration of April 1993, where governments from Asia and the Pacific agreed that human rights need to be considered in a context



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that takes account of "the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds." This is a pluralistic position whose adherents contend that there is not only one moral code for humanity, but instead that there are many moral codes that apply in diverse cultural communities. Moral truth is never singular in a culturally diverse world. Indeed, there must be different codes because these codes serve as integrators and stabilizers of community life within very different cultural settings. Morality, including dictums about entitlements owed to individuals, originates in community standards and not in universal or metaphysical realms.

Among contemporary philosophers, including well-known figures like Oxford's Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams of Cambridge, and Michigan's Jack Meiland, the moral relativist position has been eloquently asserted with considerable force. Yet, this position invariably turns out to be unsustainable:

- First, relativism tends to confuse empirical facts of differences in moral codes with philosophical justification for differences. Simply because there are differences does not mean that all the alternatives are right or acceptable;
- Second, the justification for relativism itself has to be philosophically located beyond relativism. That is, moral relativism can only be right if we all accept the *universality* of dictums such as mutual tolerance and noninterference in one another's affairs;

- Third and at a more practical level, even the relativists balk in the face of the morally atrocious—human sacrifice, ritualistic mutilation, slavery, genocide, apartheid, concentration camps, gulags, and gas chambers. To explain why such atrocious behavior is immoral invariably requires reaching for universals, and when presented with such behavior most relativists accordingly reach out; and

- Finally, there also exists the damning assertion that relativism is itself immoral because, in the name of community standards, noninterference, political correctness, or the like, it leads to the condoning of principles and practices that are widely distasteful.

#### THE REASSERTION OF MORAL UNIVERSALISM

If moral universalism is unjustifiable and moral relativism is unsustainable, it would appear that the contemporary debate about the universality of human rights, if actually engaged philosophically, would result in a stalemate. And if this were the case, the issue of whether the UN human rights regime is to remain in place or be overthrown would become a question of politics, power, and money *only*. This could well suit Western countries today. They possess most of the power and control most of the money in the world. But what about tomorrow?

In actuality, the case for moral universalism is really a good deal stronger than has thus far been revealed. There are, in fact, several pathways to moral

universalism that do not depend for their justification upon either the will of God or the immutability of natural law.

In contemporary cultural anthropology, for example, there has been a turn back toward moral universalism, as recorded in the work of David Bidney, Clyde Kluckhohn, Richard Beis, and many others writing today. The argument of these anthropologists is that scholars usually find what they seek, and those who sought out differences among cultures certainly found them. However, in more recent work, those who have sought similarities among cultures have also found many, especially in realms of morality. Beis, for example, identified twenty-two moral dictums that appear empirically to be transcultural, and which include: the prohibition of murder or maiming without justification; economic justice; reciprocity and restitution; provision for the poor and unfortunate; the right to own property; and priority for immaterial goods. We might call this last value *freedom*. Anthropologists are also reexamining questions of moral evolution, and some have postulated a longstanding, though erratic, human trend away from barbarism and toward heightened civility.

In contemporary psychology, considerable attention has been attracted to the work of Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg, whose cross-cultural work since the 1960s has fortified the proposition that human beings are genetically wired and cognitively equipped to behave morally. All human beings, Kohlberg and his colleagues conclude, are similarly constituted with regard to moral capacities—differences among them have only to do with different attainments of moral maturity. Therefore,

human beings at similar stages of moral maturity, regardless of culture or community, have similar conceptions about the bases of right and wrong.

From another perspective, sociologists of religion point out that when metaphysics are set aside, the ethical contents of the world's major religions are remarkably similar in their emphases upon charity, civility, humility, piety, and nonviolence. All the prophets, perhaps, read from the same script about human nature and community.

A number of other scholars, with Durham's A.J.M. Milne prominent among them, have striven to render moral relativism irrelevant by arguing for the existence of global community or international society. If morality is founded in community standards as the relativists believe, then Milne and his colleagues argue that the appropriate moral standards for humankind are those that abet the integrity and development of the global community as a human collectivity. Beneficence, justice, civility, and social responsibility are among the norms that weld all communities, including the global community.

#### THE ARISTOTELIAN TURN

By far the most forceful contemporary arguments in support of moral universalism are being articulated by philosophers, whose discipline today is vibrant, innovative, and illuminated by some truly outstanding thinkers.



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I have been particularly impressed by the writings of Brown University's Martha Nussbaum, whose thinking on universalistic ethics was inspired by her association with the UN-affiliated World Institute for Development Economics Research in Helsinki.

Nussbaum variously labels her position neo-Aristotelian or neo-essentialist, which signals, in philosopher's code, that she builds her argument not from

metaphysical assumptions about God or physical ones about nature, but rather from considerations concerning the essence of human beings. Because we are human beings, because in Ludwig Wittgenstein's terms we have a distinctive "way of life as human beings"—or a *Lebensform*—we are entitled to be allowed to flourish in our human way of life. Our entitlement is not a claim on God or nature, but a claim on one another. The basis of our morality is in our obligation as human beings—as individuals and in our societies—to allow and help one another to flourish as human beings. *And since the human essence is universal, requirements for human flourishing are universal, obligations to promote such flourishing are universal, and therefore, so is human morality.*

Central to Nussbaum's philosophy is her inventory of human entitlements. To what are we entitled by virtue of our humanity? What, if denied to us, will constrain our flourishing? What, therefore, are we as human beings obligated to promote and protect in our dealings with one another? Nussbaum lists ten "basic human functional capabilities," and states that "a life that lacks any one of these, no matter what else it has, will be lacking in humanness." These include being able to:

- live, as far as is possible, to the end of complete human life, not dying prematurely, or before one's life is reduced as to be not worth living;
- have good health, be adequately nourished, have adequate shelter, have opportunities for sexual satisfaction, and move from place to place;
- avoid unnecessary and nonbeneficial pain and have pleasurable experiences;
- use the five senses, imagine, think, and reason;
- have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves, love those who love and care for us, grieve at their absence—in general, to love, grieve, feel longing, and gratitude;
- form a conception of the good and engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life;
- live for and with others, recognize and show concern for other human beings, and engage in various forms of familial and social interaction;
- live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature;
- laugh, play, and enjoy recreational activities; and
- live one's own life and nobody else's, and live that life in one's very own surroundings and context.

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Not surprisingly perhaps, Nussbaum's list of requirements for human flourishing, and hence of our entitlements as human beings, closely approximates the contents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, not only with respect to civil and political rights, but also with respect to economic, social, and cultural rights. And again not surprisingly, Nussbaum's definition of human flourishing closely approximates the United Nations Development Programme's definition of "human security." We are entitled as human beings to live in environments unthreatening to our humanity, and we are obligated as human beings to foster such environments.

## THE ETHICS OF GLOBALISM

An interest in propping up the Western position in the ongoing debate about the universality of human rights was affirmed at the outset of this essay, and it has been shown that the position in support of moral universality can be philosophically strengthened. But while philosophers seem to delight in scoring points in debate, largely for the sake of doing so, this is not what was intended here. It is important to justify moral universalism and affirm the rectitude of the United Nations human rights regime because doing so constitutes an invitation to governments to behave nobly in their dealings with their own citizens and in their dealings with each other. Too much of the history of politics has been a narrative of the perpetration of evil. Too much of human history has been a narrative of the victimization of people by governments.

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One important step along the way toward building a future world politics that can be more noble than the world politics of the past is to build a consensus among peoples concerning what is noble, right, and good. A further step is to prompt governments to act accordingly. With regard to human rights, the peoples of the world have been ever so slowly approaching consensus in a dialogue that began in the preludes to the French Revolution. It would be a terrible pity if all of this were to unravel in our time because some individuals have come to believe that our cultural differences should outweigh our common humanity.



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The writings listed below have been of great use to me in writing this essay. This bibliography is in no way intended to be a complete record, but is meant to serve as a useful guide for those interested in pursuing further the subject matter.

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