Introduction

The recent exchange between Putnam and Habermas, as found in Putnam’s *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* and in Habermas’ *Truth and Justification*, has brought to light a particular concern, which is quite central to the debate over what we are to make of the current state of ethical discourse. This concern can best be expressed by the following question: “Can there be any kind of justifiable grounds upon which we could rest the possibility of there being anything like a rational method ethical deliberation?” In other words, we need to ask ourselves whether, and how, it would be possible to defend the use of some particular method of discourse, over another, as being an effectively better choice to use towards the resolution of ethical dilemmas. This is a very important concern, for, if something like this cannot be attained, we are facing the very real possibility that reaching such a kind of final consensus on ethical matters ends up ultimately supervening on highly divergent socio-cultural contexts, whose eventual incommensurability can lead to an ultimate incommunicability, amongst the bearers of such drastically divergent moral views.

In light of this concern, many of us “westernized” and “democratized” wet liberals see the first alternative as a “clearly” preferable one, over what we take to be the kind of “creeping” strong ethical relativism that the second one entails: On the one hand, we believe that many, although by no means all, of our values and practices really are in many ways better and superior to others, as compared with those, found in various cultures and societies around the globe; on the other hand, we are not equipped, to be able to defend our position so easily. The reasons for this are as follows:
Many of what I will call here the “classical approaches” to ethical deliberation (focusing principally on variations of utilitarianism and deontology), have relied on attempts to ground their normative ethical principles in some type of demonstrably absolute and fixed principle of observation and/or cognition. If this could have been shown to be the case, it would then only have become a matter of “properly pointing this out” to the parties involved, so as to effectively ground one’s reasons for showing such and such actions to be either morally right or wrong. In this respect, it is perhaps both the initial strength and the subsequent failing of Kant’s deontology and of Mill’s utilitarianism, that both relied on a system where reason was assigned to be the judge and guarantor of the right thing to do. This was because reason, following its many successes in the fields of physics and mathematics, also seemed exceptionally well-suited to the field of ethics. This belief, in turn, resulted in an effective carry-over of the faculty of reason, from one domain to another, as undertaken by the partisans of the classical approaches to ethical deliberation.

The problem, was that the very idea of reason itself as an absolute identifier of the nature of things, along with the very concept of the world that it was supposed to uncover and identify (as an absolute and final reality), were both to soon be seriously challenged: Following significant advances in the sciences, around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, an eventual effective failing of strong realism (a kind of reductive naturalism, also called “physicalism” by Putnam) and of cognitivism (epistemology and its famed “correspondence theory of truth”) came to pass. This, in turn, resulted in an effective removal of the foundations from under any kind of ethical theory, which sought to derive an ought from an is. The problem, in a nutshell, was that, if one could no longer pinpoint what the
“is”, in question, actually was, then one could no longer have a starting point, from which to derive one’s ought.

The response to this problem, given by those who still sought to retain some kind of ethical foundationalism, for justifying a certain approach over another, involved various attempts at transposing their grounds from demonstrable “physical objects” to “linguistic constructs.” Habermas attempted to ground his normative principles for discourse ethics by effectively “detranscendentalizing” Kant and grounding rationality, not in its ability at producing accurate knowledge of states of affairs, by “tracking the world” (correspondence theory of truth), but rather by being a demonstrable constitutive element of linguistic deliberation, in which all humans participate. Rorty took a more radical pragmatic stance, by arguing for “solidarity”, rather than for “rationality.” Putnam seems to gravitate between the two, holding on to the idea that a certain kind of progress (i.e. non-classical type of enlightenment) is still possible for us, but not to the idea that ethical norms can be grounded in a kind of rationality, constituted by way of human linguistic constructs.

Since I tend to agree with the claim of the “wet liberals” (who still want to be able defend their principles and practices), but am also not overly convinced by the strong contextualism advanced by Rorty, I will attempt to show how the kind of rationality, argued for by Habermas, to be present in good ethical discourse⁴, could be strengthened by an appeal and clarification of the kind of “progress by way of enlightenment”, as proposed (but underdeveloped) by Putnam. To do this, I will look at the “Aztec cosmology problem” and show how these two principles can come together to create a simultaneously non-ethnocentric and non-imperialistic, but still valid

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⁴ I mean here under “ideal deliberative conditions”, as expressed by Habermas’ three validity dimensions: normative rightness (WE), theoretical truth (IT) and expressive or subjective truthfulness (I).
justification against human sacrifice, of the kind that could be counter-factually developed, within the practice of communicative rationality.

**The Rationality of the Aztecs**

The “Aztec cosmology problem” (as proposed here), while counter-factually hypothetical and historically anachronistic, nevertheless works well, in many respects, as an example of the kind of clash and tension that can arise in an ethical discussion, between two prominent parties, wishing to resolve their divergent views, concerning an ethical dilemma. This is because this thought experiment: (1) represents a clash between two highly advanced civilizations, which has not only already happened in history, (as per the factual clash between the Aztecs and the Spanish *conquistadors*) but which is also happening today, as per the prevalence of current clashes between the secularized Western World and certain fundamentalist parts of the Middle-East and; (2) is an example where a great civilization which, despite being versed in very many of the skills and principles, we take as being necessary for “good deliberative rationality,” nevertheless engages in certain practices which we (wet liberals) see as one of the great moral aberrations against humanity.

The Aztecs were one of the largest and most advanced cultures of pre-colonial Mesoamerica. They had a complex government, an intricate social fabric, a rich culture and religion, and were highly versed in writing, the arts, astronomy, statesmanship, theology, and various other crafts and skills. Their empirical observations, concerning the movements of astral bodies, were of an exemplary precision; their overall accuracy was surpassed only by the observations made by the Mayans, whose simple but efficient numerical system allowed them to calculate the movements of astral bodies much more accurately than their contemporary

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European counterparts. Indeed, their famed calendar remains, to this day, more accurate than the
Gregorian one, widespread in the western world. This being said, it does not take much
anthropological research to realize that the Aztecs had, quite effectively, all of the various
“advanced cognitive skills,” required to participate in an ethical debate, of the calibre that
communicative rationality requires.

And yet, there is still the matter of the human sacrifices: so many human sacrifices,
performed at such a grand scale, that the Aztecs became notorious for the quantity and extent of
their sacrificial practices, even when compared to other civilizations, who didn’t shun the
practice of human sacrifice either. Moreover, this practice was not only performed as a ritualistic
act of military conquest, (with the sacrificing of captured enemy soldiers) but also involved the
use of Aztec “volunteers,” who saw it as an honour to be sacrificed to their Aztec Gods. Barring
the kinds of first impressions, which this information may engender in us, the grounds behind
this practice were not blatantly cruel or masochistic; for the role of these sacrifices played a key
role in the Aztecs’ cosmological beliefs: It was believed, by the high priests, that human
sacrifices were necessarily to be performed every 52 years, so as to effectively “postpone” the
end of the world for another 52 years. Sacrifice, for the Aztecs, was therefore a matter of global
survival.

Looking at this now, it would be all too easy to dismiss the Aztecs’ justification for
human sacrifice, from the vantage point of our current, modern, global outlook. Consequently, an
argument made against them, in this light, would be both unfair and besides the point: Not only
do we have the span of a few centuries of scientific and cultural developments and revolutions
separating us from them, but we also have the privileged reflective position of being around after

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3 Ibid, pp 253-260
4 Ibid, pp 221-227
5 Ibid, pp 204-220
these sacrifices had stopped. It requires no more than a little empirical observation to realize that the world has effectively not come to an end.

Nevertheless, the problem of “Aztec cosmology” is one which illustrates a much more serious and contemporary problem, concerning rational justification of moral and ethical norms and principles: such norms and principles are, oftentimes, guided not only by shared pragmatic considerations, revolving around mundane, common-day “perennial truths”\(^6\), but are also dependent upon many higher-order beliefs. These, in turn, can affect the moral weight of decision-making, in ways that, oftentimes, can and do override pragmatic concerns, grounded in such “purely practical” matters.

In this respect, if the problems around which our ethical and moral principles gravitate, and around which we are presently arguing, are of the lower-order belief type\(^7\), then consensus-reaching between us “wet liberals” and our Aztec counterparts becomes a matter, no more difficult than finding economic and logistic procedures for an optimized system of human and natural resources distribution and management\(^8\). If, on the other hand, the ethical debate revolves around considerations grounded on beliefs, which are readily non-verifiable or non-disprovable, in a shared empirical fashion, then the problem of how to rationally aboard this topic, becomes much more difficult.

Granted, the specific case of the Aztec cosmology (when understood in an extensive global sense and not only as limited to the lifeworld of the Aztec civilization) has been shown to be flawed, for, as mentioned already, even though the Aztec civilization itself came to an end

\(^6\) We mean here global, “non-relativistic” kinds of truths, of the order that: People are born and die; people need food, water and shelter as basic life necessities; people need socio-psychological emancipation as secondary life necessities, etc.

\(^7\) This concerns beliefs that match the perennial truths, as outlined above.

\(^8\) Granted, such procedures are, in actuality, notoriously complex and difficult to establish, but at least the variables (basic needs) upon which they are grounded are commonly agreed-upon by both the wet-liberals and the Aztecs, and this is not so when it comes to cosmological beliefs.
with Cuauhtémoc’s surrender to Hernán Cortés in 1521, and with the subsequent sack and destruction of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the rest of the world effectively continued to exist, even after the cease of the Aztec practice of human sacrifices. However, the problem, which this example illustrates, is that disputes surrounding ethical dilemmas oftentimes become bogged down when certain cosmological beliefs, which are not so easily disprovable, or even demonstrable, as being flawed, within the context of communicative rationality, come into play.

Another good example of this is when certain specific cosmological beliefs, concerning the afterlife (or the “continuation of life” after “this one”), directly affect ethical concerns, and oftentimes override, the affective weight of the lower-order beliefs. Thus, when dealing with such participants in the discussion, whose religious beliefs are not as easily disprovable as Aztec cosmology, we need to resort to some other approach, to be able to effectively retain the rational component of the discussion. And before we can see what this approach would entail, we need to look at what kind of “ideal situation” is pre-supposed in Habermas’ discursive rationality.

**Communicative Rationality**

If we want our discussion with the Aztecs to be fruitful, yielding a resolution to our ethical dilemma, certain things already need to be in place beforehand. It is not necessary, at this point, to argue for the preference of discourse itself over action (history gives us enough support and examples to justify this approach at settling conflicts), but we need to see what elements need to be present, for this discussion to actually be rational.

Habermas’ communicative rationality emphasizes the equal importance of the three validity dimensions, meaning that he sees the potential for rationality in normative rightness (WE), theoretical truth (IT) and expressive or subjective truthfulness (I). Habermas also believes that the following are a given: (a) that communication can proceed between two individuals only
on the basis of a consensus (usually implicit) regarding the validity claims raised by the speech acts they exchange; (b) that these validity claims concern at least the three dimensions of validity given above (I, truthfulness; WE, rightness; IT, truth); and (c) that a mutual understanding is maintained on the basis of the shared presupposition that any validity claim, agreed upon, could be justified, if necessary, by making recourse to good reasons.\(^9\)

This means that both we, and our Aztec counterparts, need to be ready, not only to (1) speak truthfully and honestly about what we (take) to be the case, but; (2) that we also have to be attentive to what our counterparts are saying in a “fair and impartial manner;”\(^{10}\) (3) that we have to be able to justify our grounds, by way of justificatory practices that are shared and agreed upon, by both parties; and (4) that (most importantly) both we and they have to be open to the possibility of changing, not only some of our superficial beliefs (lower-order ones) but also, potentially, some of our deeper underlying beliefs (higher-order ones), if the events unfolding, within the process of communicative rationality, so demand.

This brings us to a very interesting consideration: In light of our goals (of showing the moral wrongness of human sacrifice), the process of communicative rationality, in itself, seems to be somehow incomplete; for if we are to rely on a theory of truth, which is solely based on the concept of “Truth” as being the product of a linguistic constitutive process, based on socio-cultural inter-subjective constructs, then, assuming that partaking in the process of rational deliberation was effectively realized by the Aztecs, we would come to the (frightful) realization that ethical justifications for human sacrifice could effectively swing both ways.

And yet, on further reflection, this is not so surprising: As Rorty already pointed out, our current democratic liberal condition is historically contingent, and things could have turned out

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10 To the extent that something like that would be possible.
very differently, from the way we find them to be now. Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that many of our (socio)-liberal ideals, such as freedom, equality and the right to the attribution of the means of self-realization to all human beings, are as deeply rooted in our secularist, one-life cosmological outlook, as are those of people who believe in a continuation, if not a plurality of lives, after this one.

We seriously need to ask ourselves “what is going on?” when we think that we have additional good reasons for justifying our practices, over others, and especially when these reasons seem to be somehow external to the linguistic construct: We know that we can no longer argue for the “rightness” of our cosmological outlook, over that of the Aztecs, by basing ourselves on a correspondence theory of truth, for that is something that is no longer available to us; and yet, we want to retain our argument that there are good reasons for saying that “human sacrifice is simply morally wrong.” The question then, concerns where this extra information, or intuition, giving grounds for our position, actually comes from, if not from an inter-subjectively (and thus ultimately relativistic) socio-culturally contingent cosmological outlook?

A possible answer, in my mind, can be argued to have a lot to do with the regularities manifested by those lower-order beliefs: Such regularities are not only generally agreed-upon by all cultures and societies, but also seem to be strangely shielded from the grips of strong relativism, in a peculiarly self-justificatory and quasi-transcendental manner (to speak metaphorically). Having thus granted the existence of such regularities, as manifested by those beliefs, we now need to ask ourselves, not what those beliefs are grounded upon (for such a question would be highly redundant, in a Rortyan sense), but rather how they interact and come into play, in the development and evolution of the specific kinds of global outlooks, or
Weltanschanuungen, which, in turn, become entangled and intertwined, in the process of our discussions with the Aztecs.

More specifically, we need to look at how the interplay between lower-order and higher-order beliefs can function, together with the Habermasian principle of communicative action (outlined above), so as to produce an effective phenomenon of erudition, or enlightenment, in the participants. To develop this concept further, we now need to turn to Putnam, and to his idea of “pragmatist enlightenment”.

“Progress” as a Kind of non-Transcendental Enlightenment

Hilary Putnam makes a great case, in his book entitled Ethics without Ontology, for developing a type of “pragmatic ethics”, which would not rely on the need for having, either foundationalist metaphysics, or even a kind of specific metaphysical ontology, for justifying our moral claims. Instead, he argues that it was this very commitment to a foundationalist ontology, which has lead classical ethical theories astray. While the main front of his argument revolves around a demonstration of the major flaws with classical attempts to ground and justify various ethical principles (such as normative rules and imperatives), by way of some “queer entities”, which could be either empirically observable or, cognitively deducible by way of reason, the actual crux of his argument, is that the justificatory requirements of the classical approaches to ethical deliberation end up committing the fallacy of the false dilemma: By trying to ground ethical norms and principles by way of fixed and absolute ontological entities, the classical approach has long given the impression that said norms would either have to be justified by appeal to some sort of fixed foundations, or, if they could not be so justified, would invariably end up being relinquished to the (unenviable) realm of a strong form of ethical relativism.
Arguing against this stance, Putnam makes it clear, quite early on in his book, that there is a genuine third choice to this dilemma. This choice (which is also mirrored by Rorty, albeit in a more drastic form) rests with his concept of a *pragmatic pluralism*, as expressed by his idea of what ethics are:

“I am not going to understand “ethics” as the name of a system of principles – although principles (for example, the Golden Rule, or its sophisticated successor the Categorical Imperative) are certainly a part of ethics – but rather as a *system of interrelated concerns*; concerns which I see as *mutually supporting* but also in *partial tension.*” (2002, p. 22)

The realization that Putnam makes, and which he expresses, in his proposal for a “pragmatic ethics” is that, while moral and ethical principles may not be grounded in an “absolutist” fashion, this does not entail that they cannot find any kinds of valid (coherent, concise) grounds at all. On the contrary, they *do* actually end up finding such grounds, within “socio-cultural contextual spheres”, and these “spheres”, while sometimes at odds with each other, nevertheless can, and do, end up overlapping, quite often (in the sense of mutually supporting concerns).

Furthermore, Putnam seems to take this “overlapping of concerns” as a sufficient requirement for the presence of *coherence* in ethical discourse, and as this being the case, even amongst varying socio-cultural groups. While certainly finding this to be a necessary requirement for communicative rationality, and one which is, in fact, oftentimes met (remember our agreement with the Aztecs concerning lower-order beliefs), I am nevertheless sceptical that such an overlapping of concerns alone is sufficient for a defence of the presence of certain trends (Habermasian regulative principles of rationality), as invariably ending up in proper ethical deliberations. This is because the contextual spheres, within which this process happens, also tend to diverge quite often (especially concerning higher-order beliefs), with the end result that we often find ourselves at tight socio-cultural odds, with our interlocutors. Having said this, we
also realize that, as far as points of view alone are concerned, our perspective is as valid as theirs, for it indicates a specific perspective, having something very important to tell us about the Lebenswelt (or lifeworld) of the people from which it comes. In this sense, points of view constitute vital salient features, to be taken into account within our discussion.

While this entails that one cannot have a “false perspective” per se, (any more than one can have a “true or false mirage”: the phenomenal quality of the mirage is that it appears as if there were really something there, and is itself “true” in this sense), one can nevertheless be in error, as far as the overall coherence, congruity, and consistency of their inter-related beliefs are concerned. This brings to light the presence of certain intrinsic values\(^{11}\), proper to a good unfolding of the process of communicative rationality, which, when respected, would allow for the possibility of a movement, within communicative rationality, towards a realization of the wrongness of certain practices. Such a realization would happen by the eventual uncovering of underlying contradictions between lower-order and higher-order belief constellations, and within their inter-relational links.

Thus, the application of these values, along with the premises and processes that they entail, serve to show how the idea of the phenomenon of an enlightenment of the subject can come into play. While it is clear that any description of what such a kind of enlightenment could be, would be very hard to make, without falling back on an ethnocentric imperialist imposition of our views, I nevertheless believe that such a description can be made, by appeal to the kind of particular evolution that the Weltanschauung of such individuals would undertake, by way of the effective erudition of the subjects, of such a process:

\(^{11}\) Putnam argues in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* that such principles as coherence, congruity and consistency are values which are both present and instrumental in the formation of the principles and procedures proper to the scientific approach, thus demonstrating the phenomenon of the entanglement of facts/values, as argued in that book.
Putnam’s critique, in his *Ethics without Ontology*, focuses not only on the many flaws of attempting to ground ethical norms and principles in absolute ontological entities, but also on the core driving forces of what he calls his “three enlightenments”. In a nutshell, these three enlightenments were characterized, first by the enlightenment of the Ancient Greeks, then by the one in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as marked by the force of the new philosophies (advanced by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and the continental rationalists), the force of the new sciences, and finally by an enlightenment which is still to come: the “pragmatist enlightenment.” Putnam argues that all three of these exhibit features common to the failings of the classical approaches to ethics: They all sought to derive a realization of the absolute and final nature of things by way of a kind of *reflective transcendence*.

But he also argues, that his third kind of enlightenment bears important differences with the former two, for it is a kind of enlightenment “…whose conception of knowledge is much more fallibilistic than that of the seventeenth and eighteenth century – fallibilistic and anti-metaphysical, but without lapsing into scepticism” (p. 110). Thus, Putnam, inspired by Dewey, wants to retain the idea of the possibility of progress, not in the sense of a kind of inevitable advance in ethics or in social life, but rather in the very possibility of progress as learning processes, which can continue on into the future.

I think something needs to be said here, about his concept of the third enlightenment, before we move on: Putnam seems to hold on to the idea that his third kind of enlightenment can retain some of the transcendental qualities of the former two, without, for that matter, succumbing to the various foundationalist problems associated with the principle of transcendence, as he himself described them. This is probably linked to his concern for maintaining the possibility of progress. I, on the other hand, see little reason (or apparently
evident benefit) to maintain that such an enlightenment needs to retain a transcendental quality at all: neither as a requirement for the very possibility of progress, nor as a way to “justify” it as somehow constituting world-perspectives, which are over-and-above those of others.

Conversely, given all that has been said against foundationalist ethics (for which reflective transcendence was a justificatory “Archimedean point”), by the likes of Dewey, Rorty and Putnam himself, “transcendence” seems to be much more of a burden, at this point, than an actual help, as far as ethical matters are concerned. This is probably also the reason why Habermas has put so much effort in attempting to “detranscendentalize” Kant. Furthermore, the idea of progress, when combined with communicative rationality, can still be defended quite effectively (and less problematically), without the need to resort to “transcendental justifications,” for one’s ethical and moral principles.

Therefore, once we accept the possibility of progress as being a kind of Putnamian non-transcendental pragmatist enlightenment (rendering the possibility of further future learning processes), the big question now, rests with providing the reader with an explanation of how such a concept of erudition, by way of enlightenment, mated with the process of communicative rationality, can bring the Aztecs to realize, by themselves, that human sacrifice is wrong:

Getting back to our phenomenon of regularities, as manifested by way of the multiply-shared lower-order beliefs, we can show that, despite the absence of a “fixed way that things really are,” the “pragmatically enlightened” individual, is able to better track these said regularities and constituents, by ascribing to the values, proper to communicative rationality. The important distinction here (which I hope can also keep our heads out of the ethnocentric noose) is that the enlightened individual tracks such regularities, not amongst things, but amongst the lifeworlds of the various participants, partaking in the process of communicative rationality.
Therefore, because of this ability of “seeing clearly what’s involved,”12 such an individual is also better able to address various concerns that get brought up, and effectively participate in the discussion in a better, more effective and more accurate manner. On this account, this ability is not due to a phenomenon of transcendence, or of “seeing something subliminal, which others don’t see”, for the enlightened individual has developed the important skill of seeing things “just as others see them”13 (or proximately enough), with the important distinction that they see much more of these things at once and that they also see the various connections, between these states of affairs, much more clearly than others. Finally, the enlightened individual is also open to criticism and to constant revisions of his views (if need be), as well as to additional input, which he promptly incorporates into his worldview; thus, constantly shaping, moulding adjusting and re-adjusting his rich and complex Weltanschauung, by way of the Rawlsian process of reflective equilibrium.14

Enlightenment, of this pragmatic sort, thus pre-supposes certain realizations, themselves based on constant and meticulous refinements of the links between lower-order and higher-order beliefs, themselves leading to the creation of subsequently more and more refined beliefs. Based on what we have said above, our Aztec counterparts, if they are willing to ascribe to the principles required by Putnam’s concept of enlightenment, and by Habermas’ principle of communicative rationality (something for which they certainly had the necessary skills) could, themselves, eventually come to a realization of the wrongness of human sacrifice (In no small part thanks to continued interaction with other cultures and civilizations, and to the ongoing

12 This is an expression borrowed from Nussbaum’s specific version of virtue ethics, as outlined in her book entitled Love’s Knowledge, Essays on Philosophy and Literature.
13 This is an expression borrowed from Nussbaum’s specific version of virtue ethics, as outlined in her book entitled Love’s Knowledge, Essays on Philosophy and Literature.
14 As John Rawls writes: “Reflective equilibrium is the result of agreements freely struck between willing traders. For each person is in the best situation that he can reached by free exchange consistent with the rights and freedom of others to further their interests in the same way. It is for this reason that this state of affairs is an equilibrium, one that will persist in the absence of further changes in the circumstances.” (Rawls, 1999, 103)
process of communicative rationality). Such a realization, on their part, would come about with a normal erudition, based on an effective evolution of the inter-connective links and relationships between their constellations of lower-order and higher-order beliefs, and by an equally effective evolution of those beliefs themselves. This would involve a reshaping of beliefs about the constitution and extent of the world as over and above their original delimiting cosmological scope; beliefs about causal relationships between human and natural actions; and beliefs about the very fallibility of beliefs themselves.

For the Aztecs, human sacrifice may have been surrounded with elaborate pomp and ceremony, but it was actually rooted in a very pragmatic concern: that of their very-own survival and continuation. Once the “causal links”, upon which this concern was founded, would come to be realized as inconsistent and, thus, unrepresentative of the actual regularities of our shared lifeworlds, such a practice would itself come to abandonment.

Conclusion

Radical advances in the sciences, along with new political ideas, shaped and influenced the philosophical-political view of the world, towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. These developments have directly contributed to undermine much of the infrastructure upon which the classical ethical theories of deontology and utilitarianism were grounded. This includes an undermining of, not only their normative principles, but also of their entire justificatory scope, for their norms. What this means for us, is that the idea of justifying certain moral practices as better, or more advanced than other, can no longer be done by appealing, either to some kind of ultimate objective reality, independent of the affects of history and time, nor can it be done by appealing to the grasping of certain immaterial transcendental
truths, by way of a special faculty, called reason. A combination of the demonstration of the historicity of human beliefs and practices, as shown by such philosophers as Hegel, Nietzsche and Foucault, together with further demonstrations concerning the necessarily inter-subjective constitution of the lifeworld, as shown by such people as the early quantum-physicists, followed later on by the likes of Quine, Carnap and Kuhn, have come together to cement the present highly relativistic paradigm that any normative ethical discourse has to face.

This being said, the realization of this relativistic ethical trend does not necessarily imply strong ethical relativism, and the presence of regularities and consistencies, even across the inter-subjective, linguistically constituted lifeworlds of varying societies and cultures, has lead many to hope for the possibility of us still being able to somehow ground our justifications for the moral wrongness of particularly heinous acts. Whether it be Habermas’ idea of communicative rationality, Rorty’s idea of solidarity, or Putnam’s idea of a pragmatist enlightenment, the common force behind these impressive attempts, has been to show that even within such a relativistic lifeworld, it can still be shown, with good reason, that certain human actions simply are morally wrong, and that some practices can still be shown (at least in extreme cases) to be morally better than others.

As we have seen, while this desire may be well founded, satisfying it, within the context of the present intellectual atmosphere, remains a most difficult task to perform. Habermas’ theory of discourse ethics advances the principle of communicative rationality, which presupposes certain ideal deliberative conditions (within which reason can apply certain effective safeguards), so as to prevent the possibility of an ethical discussion from becoming another “highly rational proposal for fascism”. By doing so, however, it also effectively discludes the individuals, who have not been effectively versed and educated, in the process of communicative
rationality, from taking part in the discussion in the first place. Rorty, on the other hand, suggests that when no consensus is reached, the best that we can hope for is to try and “continue the conversation”, as long as possible. But Rorty also rejects Habermas’ idea of truth, as reached by inter-subjective rationality, in favour of truth as reached by inter-subjective solidarity and, while also supporting his particular version of utopian “hope for the future,” he does not make it exactly clear how this utopia is to come about. Putnam, on the other hand, acts as a kind of “middle-man” between Habermas and Rorty, suggesting a kind of progress by way of a “third pragmatist enlightenment”. We therefore find him borrowing certain elements from the other two.

I have attempted to show here that a good possible way to aboard this problem is to look for a combination of Habermas’ principle of communicative rationality, mated with a “Putnam-like” idea of a non-transcendental enlightenment. These two elements can work together to ensure that the formation and evolution of lower-order and higher-order beliefs be mediated by way of the principles, included in communicative rationality, and that the effective education of the subjects can also come to pass, by having them ascribe to some of the values inherent in Putnam’s pragmatist enlightenment. My strategy has been to rely on the phenomenon of regularities in beliefs, responsible for the lower-order beliefs. This phenomenon, together with Habermasian principles of communicative rationality and with the impetus for aiming towards a Putnamian pragmatist enlightenment, can serve to show how such a process could sustain the kinds of checks and balances that Habermas wished reason to operate, on the process of ethical deliberation, without, for that matter, needing to rely on anything like a correspondence theory of truth, a fixed reductive naturalism, or any of the antiquated principles, used by the classical ethical theories, which have now become inadequate for our current ethical justificatory needs.
While it is clear that such a model for ethical deliberation (as proposed here) is still in a very crude and early stage, and that it would require further extensive development before its justifications could bear any substantial weight (not to mention various hard-to-get reconciliations between Habermas, Putnam and Rorty), I believe the grounds for it have potential.

It is also interesting to point out here, that this model is not meant to produce an agent who would become an effective “model of efficiency,” at ethical deliberation, as it would not serve to flush out all of the small quirks and abnormalities, in the constellation and inter-connections, between higher-order and lower-order beliefs: Certain unobservable cosmological convictions, which would not supervene in such a direct manner on pragmatic concerns, would not be caught and examined by this system. This, however, is not a problem, as the gamble that I propose is that these quirks (and there are often many) would be small and benign, and would, therefore, not interfere with more serious matters, such as the ones concerning the rights and privileges of others. Such a model would, however, be designed to catch more serious inconsistencies amongst beliefs, akin to the ones found in the Aztec cosmology, or in various other extreme convictions, as seen nowadays in various radical groups, around the globe.

On a final note, it is no accident that the model proposed here encompasses many of the values that we “wet liberals” endorse. But I would think that, to still accuse it of preaching an ethnocentric imperialist version of rationality, after having read this paper, would nevertheless be a bit excessive. Granted, we do not have as good a justification as we would like for saying that our ideals of having a democratic, free and inclusive society are better than certain isolationist or fundamentalist counterparts, but if there is one thing that we “wet liberals” have strived very hard to realize, it’s to learn to get along in a world where there is more and more contact with the
multitude of varying nations and cultures, and to do this in a way which tries very hard to guaranteed freedom, rights, possibilities, less suffering and more happiness, for all. If a model for ethical discourse, such as the one proposed here, can bring us closer to realising such an actual state of affairs, then that gives us at least some good pragmatic reasons to support it.

**Bibliography**


