

The Universal as Ongoing Achievement: How our Multilayered Society Generates Value Knowledge⁽¹⁾

by

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It is a pleasure to be here. Today, I'd like to reflect on the universal as an ongoing achievement—as the form of universalizing. Among other things, this continues an ongoing conversation with Takahiro Nakajima. My aim today is to argue that universalism is a result, not a given. This does not mean it is false. Very often, people assume that viewing the universal as an achievement somehow denies its universality. I reject that. Instead, I will argue that universalism is indeed a result, not a given, an idea which is entirely compatible with the right kind of moral realism.

In that sense, I will connect themes from value theory and metaethics to the ontology of value. This is part of an attempt to bridge Eastern and Western conceptions of the universal—where, broadly, the East emphasizes epistemology or rather the way to achieve the universal and the West emphasizes ontology, value's objective being. That is the general framing of my claim.

The universal, I will argue, arises from an activity—the act of universalizing—rather than from the notion that something universally shared already exists. There is something we share, but as we shall see, it is merely formal. That is not the universal we strive for in a meaningful way as universalists.

I

First, I distinguish between the general and the universal. When thinking about

universalism—which I have not yet fully defined—as something general, one expects overarching ethical principles, such as the categorical imperative, the Golden Rule, or some utilitarian calculus. This is the standard view: general principles determine ethical value. Here, I narrow the notion of universalism to ethical value, which is my focus.

A generalist believes there is a deductive, applicative, or specifying relation—depending on the theory of generality—whereby every specific action or thought has ethical value because it falls under a general concept.

The pandemic was an illuminating test case showing this does not work. Determining specific duties—whether to close schools or borders—through the categorical imperative leads nowhere. For example, asking how long schools should remain closed yields no answer. You might say, “One must not use humans merely as means,” leading some Kantians to argue no health measures should be taken. By that logic, Donald Trump would be the most consistent Kantian, which undermines the approach. The categorical imperative offers no guidance here. Try the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Should we close schools? Again, no clear answer. It is meaningless in this context.

Consider the utilitarian calculus. Some prominent utilitarians applied it early in the pandemic but later retracted their conclusions. Counting old versus young lives violates other moral principles. Even where utilitarian logic might apply, it was not followed. No country, not even North Korea or Russia, sacrificed the elderly merely because the virus targeted the young less.

This demonstrates why generalism fails historically. In moral dilemmas, do you consult the categorical imperative? I will show why doing so is not just useless but harmful. It is not only ineffective—it is deeply problematic.

Thus, particular moral facts cannot be seen as instances of general principles. Ethics is not algorithmic. Whether something is algorithmic is separate from being general or particular, but since ethics is not algorithmic, generalism in the form of a procedure that moves from the general to the particular must be rejected. This has consequences: ethical agents cannot derive duties from a known rational procedure. There might still something all agents accept, but it cannot be reduced to maxim-testing.

The idea of maxim-testing historically failed. Libraries abound with attempts to argue for the categorical imperative as a test, but spoiler alert—it does not

work. Nor do the categorical imperative or Kant's twelve categories so much as exist, as is often assumed. These tests fail entirely due both to their epistemology and their ontology.

Here is another reason why generalism is harmful. Suppose generalism were true. Imagine the utilitarian calculus, the Ten Commandments, or Seven Virtues. Replace them with any general principle. Agents would not be autonomous if they were subject to such anonymous rules.

Here's why. Such principles would *predetermine* duties. Agents would merely map reasons onto pre-existing logical spaces. All values and duties would be fixed. Practical reason would involve only aligning oneself with this framework. Moral freedom would then require surrendering responsibility to an external structure. This undermines autonomy.

Within Kant's framework, he should never have believed in the general. Searching for the categorical imperative contradicts freedom in the desired sense of autonomy. Kant failed here—badly. This was clear before 1817—long before bicycles. Yet people forgot.

Now, I turn to Yasuo Deguchi's insight, which I encountered some weeks ago in New York City and which we discussed here in detail. If generalism were true, moral agents would resemble vending machines. Insert a coin, get water. But a moral vending machine, as he nicely puts it, lacks autonomy.

Another problem that Kant never solved is that you cannot truly violate the categorical imperative. If you do, you are acting on inclination and are thus unfree. Kant never overcame this—he pushed it onto metaphysics and left it for God. The problem remains unresolved.

These types of objection—which are all directed against algorithmic ethics—applies to all generalist theories. They fail to ground universalism.

To summarize: autonomy is not automation. Ethics resists automation. Freedom is a precondition for normativity.

Consider moral values—or aesthetic, legal, or other kinds. Fundamental distinctions like true/false, legal/illegal, or right/wrong depend on the possibility of rule violation. Approval implies breakability. Otherwise, it is not a rule. Responsibility entails judging whether rules were broken.

Only non-automated systems can violate moral rules. Rules must be self-given. This applies to legal systems too.

Japan exemplifies this. Rules are made explicit in the forms of signs which

you see in almost all public places. Foreigners quickly notice detailed instructions—on the Shinkansen, with ANA flights, everywhere. Rules are clear. This is also reflected in Japanese grammar which is very detailed and differentiated when it comes to the articulation of dos and don'ts. Normative vocabulary is thus a central topic in any Japanese grammar book for foreigners.

This reflects autonomy. Not mere transcultural communication, but a deeper sense. Maybe surprisingly, Japanese rule-following is more autonomous than Western rule-following precisely because rules are objectified and only then internalized. That is the first key point. They come from the outside and are then interpreted depending on the specific context or situation, as I like to put it.

II

So far, I have argued that generalism is false. Freedom is essential for normativity. But norms are not generated by action alone. If so, morality could be anything we do. Thus, realism is necessary in order to draw a distinction between *mere* action and *right* action. This distinction cannot be the result of a given action, it has to flow from a standard that in part is outside of the reach of the agent. I call such standards, “moral facts”.

What is a moral fact? Something you ought to do or avoid by virtue of our shared humanity. “Human”, of course, comes with various ontologies—Aristotelian essences of rational animals, or Marxian *Gattungswesen*, for example.

Example: A child is drowning. On a hot day at a German pool, I must choose—save the child or keep my beer cold.

What ought I to do? Clearly, save the child. That is a moral fact. Here, universality emerges, an idea which, by the way, you also find in Mengzi (the case of the drowning child that everybody ought to save simply because they are human). This idea of humanism is in no way ‘Eurocentric’, it can be found in all traditions.

Anyone similarly situated ought to save the child. Who the child is does not matter. Putin should save Zelensky's child, and vice versa. Netanyahu should save a child from Gaza. Universalism applies wherever roles are interchangeable.

However, obligations differ. Someone unable to act—blind or injured—has no

duty here. Obligations depend on capacity. Still, universalism holds.

Thus, moral facts exist. If asked, “ought I to save the child?” the answer is yes. That defines a moral fact.

III

Now, to my final part. Ethical universality is grounded in human life, but not limited to humans.

Take another case: I ought to save a lion cub, puppy, or harmless snake. Even saving an insect feels right.

Objects, too—like an iPhone—often prompt moral responses.

Yasuo Deguchi and Takahiro Nakajima offer key insights here. Moral stability involves open systems. Completion is impossible. Hence, we must not limit ourselves to animate entities when it comes to defining our duties.

The universal is an ongoing achievement. Universalizing has no endpoint. Harmony and eternal peace remain an abstraction.

I call this *moral situationism*—not relativism or contextualism. Moral situations carry moral facts, yet no “master situation” unites them all. Ontology does not support totalizing views, as I have argued extensively in my work on ontology.

Moral facts do not form one chain. Pratītyasamutpāda allows for mutual becoming, but no singular, overarching set of becomings. Morality is site-specific.

Reality itself is a network of networks.

I argued elsewhere: the world does not exist as a unified whole. Think of KIP’s logo—circles within circles, interconnected, varied. This corresponds nicely to my take on reality.

Reality is hunky: no lowest point (gunk), no highest point (junk). There is no central authority, nor base unit. Ethics mirrors this decentralized reality in value space.

Given universalism as ongoing achievement, obligations still exist. Normative “oughts” endure, but no final goal is necessary.

Turning to our times, we face nested crises—one inside another. Empty-centered systems form spirals. This defines today’s geopolitical and economic realities.

Can universal ethics help? Yes—if we adopt a radical division of labor. Yasuo

Deguchi expands on this in his contributions.

Each agent, in crisis, occupies moral situations. Duties and rights form a distributed network. At each node, specific duties arise. For example, now I must avoid speaking for four hours. Perhaps I can stretch to two minutes, but not forty.

Division of labor shapes ethics here. Understanding, objecting, integrating—all occur now. This generalizes. Reality's division of labor creates varied obligations.

Right now, humanity is in bad shape. Why? February 2020 marked a new era: the grand synchronization. For the first time, all rational agents responded to the same event—a pandemic. Over 8 billion humans reacted.

But unity faded quickly. Legal, moral, and economic systems fragmented. War often follows pandemics. This reveals our nature. We are eco-social beings. The human body hosts a microbial zoo. Over-sanitizing harms us. Excessive cleaning weakens immunity. Pandemic insights confirmed this. The right measure is not a priori, it can only be found by universalizing on insights from given situations.

Conclusion

To conclude, the universal is an achievement. How do we universalize amid conflict? I call this politics of the radical middle—rooted in Chinese and Japanese thought, not in dialectics. When polarities emerge, a middle path universalizes. Yet, the middle path cannot be calculated, deduced or logically necessitated. It is free emergence and, thus, the emergence of norms that can again be violated. Opposites resist universalizing. Compromise and negotiation are essential.

Yet today, universalism is attacked—by left and right alike. Critics conflate universalism with generalism.

Generalism is false. Universalism remains true. Critics rightly reject generalism but should not discard universalism. Kant's racism and misogyny were integral to his generalism. This had nothing to do with an alleged dialectics of the universal.

We must preserve the radical middle. As I argued, we can have our cake and eat it. The cake is universalism. The eating is universalizing—negotiating and

becoming. As Yasuo Deguchi and Takahiro Nakajima put it, we ought to speak of well-becoming (not well-being) here. My approach is about ongoing achievement.

I will stop here and look forward to our discussion. Thank you.

Notes

- (1) This is a mildly revised version of the transcription of my lecture notes. The lecture was given in Kyoto on November 2, 2024. I thank the organizers for transcribing the lecture. The moral theory sketched in the lecture is fully presented in my forthcoming book *Moralische Tatsachen. Warum sie existieren und wie wir sie erkennen können* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2025).

不断の達成としての普遍性 —価値知の生成と普遍化の実践—

マルクス・ガブリエル

(Abstract written by Taro Okamura)

本講演は、「普遍的なるもの (the universal)」をあらかじめ与えられた原理ではなく、具体的状況における行為主体の実践を通じて不断に生成される達成として捉える立場から、倫理的普遍主義の再検討を行うものである。カント倫理学や功利主義に代表される「一般主義 (generalism)」は、一般原理から個別の義務を演繹するが、パンデミック下の政策判断などが示すように、そうした枠組みは実践的に有効とは言えない。講演者は、倫理的判断は固定的原理によらず、状況ごとに構築される「普遍化」の営為に基づくべきだと主張する。その上で、「道徳的事実」が存在しうることを認めつつも、それは単一の体系に還元されることなく、相互依存的かつネットワーク的な現実の中で不断に更新される。こうした見解は、東アジア思想に見られる「中道」や「共なる生成」の視座と接続しながら、普遍性を「不断の達成」として捉える新たな倫理的枠組みを提示するものである。