
Further information on publisher website:
http://www.c-s-p.org/

Publisher’s copyright statement:
© Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010
‘Published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing’

The definitive version of this book chapter is available at:

Always use the definitive version when citing.

Use Policy:
The full-text may be used and/or reproduced and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not for profit purposes provided that:

- A full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- A link is made to the metadata record in Newcastle E-prints
- The full text is not changed in any way.

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.
Hermeneutics and the rational resolution of conflict

David Edward Rose
Lecturer in Philosophy

Philosophical Studies
Newcastle University
6th Floor, Herschel Bldg
Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU
United Kingdom

Tel.: 0044 191 222 3864
http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/d.e.rose/
Email: d.e.rose@ncl.ac.uk
§1 | Introduction

In the first few weeks of March 2001 officials from the Taliban’s Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue successfully fulfilled the task of destroying two giant, ancient statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan, 90 miles west of Kabul in Afghanistan. Understandably, a sense of disbelief and horror swept the world, not only the West and not only Buddhist countries; horror and disbelief which turned inevitably to anger and the demand for justification. Justification had, however, already been given, before the act was carried out. In the reported words of Mullah Mohammad Omar we were told: “Because God is one God and these statues are there to be worshipped and that is wrong. They should be destroyed so that they are not worshipped now or in the future.” (McCarthy, 2001)

Omar's religious prescription perfectly embodies a problem which has haunted moral philosophy from its inception, that of relativism. Relativism is supposedly opposed to philosophy for the simple reason that philosophy has always sought universal principles on which all men can agree. If no man is of the contrary opinion, then it must be true. Such a principle is still in operation today, we need only think of approaches to applied philosophy in general and euthanasia in particular. Whether we wish to justify or argue against euthanasia, two forms of argument are at hand: religious or secular. Secular arguments are preferable to religious ones simply due to the fact that they appeal to the largest set of possible reasoners and are based on principles which, it is supposed, all men share. On the other hand, religious arguments take the form: if x is taken to be true, then y follows. However, the subordinate clause is, as it were, all to play for. The participants in the discussion suspend their disbelief on certain fundamental principles which have to be taken for granted. If the argument is in accordance with these fundamental principles, then the statement or prescription is true only if x is true and to argue for x (my personal god(s) with all his, her or their prescriptions exist(s)) is a far from easy task.
Good moral philosophy ought, therefore, to be akin to good science: truth is that on which all rational beings can agree no matter what their background, tradition or contingent, cultural beliefs. The question should be approached as a rational debate guided by the logical rules of reasoning.

First, as participants in discourse, we must assume that there exists only one possible answer to the question whether or not the statues should be destroyed. The answer is either yes or no, if it is yes-for-them and no-for-us, then we have not overcome relativism. If there is more than one answer, then the question needs to be recast, it may be either badly framed or confused. Secondly, the principles which lead to the correct answer shall be shared and agreed upon, they should be modelled as closely as possible on those sciences which yield unambiguous, unitary answers to questions. This will generally entail that all contingent factors – such as culture, identity claims and traditions – will have to be bracketed off and pushed to one side. The question is not dealt with from the point of view of a particular identity, but from the view with which all men can agree no matter what their origins. Finally, this answer will be universal since it will be true for everyone in all places and at all times rather than just for members of a certain group or individuals who possess certain beliefs.¹ Universality can subsequently be understood as the view which is free of cultural prejudice and superstition based upon principles with which all rational beings can agree.

Does this aspiration to universality resolve the problem? I certainly do not wish to dismiss the worth of the statues as a non-question, or even as a question not properly framed and, as such, I must firstly assume that there is a single answer to the problem which can be proven by a process of reason acceptable to all participants in the debate. On the one hand, the reason is offered that the destruction of false idols is in accordance with God’s will.² The reason, though, is dependent on the presupposition of certain religious principles and a way of life, or those categories, concepts, values and norms which pre-exist the subject, deriving from his role in and his membership of a particular society, religion or culture, and which govern the subject’s practical reasoning. It would seem that
Mullah Omar has already committed himself to a relative argument, in the sense that he expects his listener to embrace the fundamental presuppositions of his way of thinking, viz. strict, orthodox Islam. Surely, if I can find a universal, secular argument for the preservation of the statues, Omar’s prescription will be trumped and negated.

Are universal principles available in the matter at hand? Why was there this almost universal horror at the wanton destruction of these idols? The reason is not as easy to uncover as may have been thought. Obvious contenders include: the statues are historically important; or nice; or beautiful. (Yet, this in itself is far from easy to determine given the differences in the interpretation of the historically significant, the beautiful, the nice, from one person to the next.) I, for one, would not like to weigh the universal claim of “Don’t destroy them because they are beautiful” with “It is God’s will”. There must be something more to the argument for it to bite: a substantial principle of the significance and worth of cultural artefacts; the importance of restoring and maintaining the past. Yet, if we were to claim some moral principle of restoration, or some principle of the cultural significance of ancient artefacts, then we have invoked an if-clause just as contentious as the religious one: “If it is the case that cultural artefacts are socially significant, then we should not destroy them,” truly demands more justification. We are guilty of reflecting those values taken to be self-evident to oneself which may be ultimately groundless. Each story is equally contentious and, as such, if they are both held to be true, how are we to order the claims to obligation? There is no universal – in the sense of free from a way of thinking and acceptable to all – principle which can trump the two contesting claims.

It seems that universal principles, in this case, do not help the situation, or – worse – are just not available. The choice just cannot be rational because the reasons which motivate the action are incommensurable, they just cannot be compared, systematized and ordered in any meaningful way. Without a move towards mutual comprehension, the two sides of the debate are shouting across a
void. Again, if we are to stick rigorously to the demands of philosophy, we shrug our shoulders and push the question under the carpet. Are we forced to admit that this just is not a philosophical matter and what effect will this admission have on the nature of moral philosophy as a whole?

The central claim of any universal ethics is that, when two participants prescribe contradictory rules of conduct, then either one or both of them is in error. Behind this commitment is the putative assumption – borrowed from the natural sciences – that there can be but one answer to a moral question. In response to the question whether the Buddha statues should be destroyed, the answer is either “yes” or “no”. Hermeneutics differs from this approach in that the answer will always be conditional and cannot be otherwise, so it is possible that it will be “yes, given x” and “no, given y”, where x and y represent foundational concepts and values of different ways of life. However, even though the answer may be conditional, especially in our example, the two prescriptions cannot co-exist due to the restrictions of social and moral space and so tolerance is out of the question. Simply put, the statues cannot be destroyed for one group and not for the other, neither can we just put a sheet over them and ignore their existence unless we want to see them.

§2] A quick characterisation of hermeneutical thinking

Hermeneutical understanding requires that an agent is capable of distancing him or herself from a internal understanding of his or her way of life and adopting an external stance. Internally, the concepts, rules and values of the way of life are unreflective guides to conduct shared by a peer group. The foundational presuppositions of a way of life appear self-evident to the agent because they are immediate and ground all other claims. An example of this in contemporary applied philosophy would be the universal appropriation of the principle of sanctity of human life notwithstanding the theoretical difficulties in justifying such a principle. It is assumed to be self-
evidently true and, hence, grounds much of our moral thinking on more particular subjects such as abortion, euthanasia and war.

However, it is also possible for the agent to be an observer who does not himself accept the rules, and he would therefore understand the rules and conditions of a community only externally. Those self-evident principles move from transparency to opacity; they come to light. The external point of view is that of the social scientist or cultural critic: the horror which people of our culture express in the face of killing and the general acceptance that other moral principles can be trumped when life is at stake (one need only think of forgiveness granted through sympathy to the mother who steals in order to feed her starving child) both serve to reveal the centrality of the sanctity of life principle within our culture and such phenomena can only be intelligible if it is true that, for an agent of such and such a way of life, human life is valued as a central moral concern.

The external position can be either extreme or moderate. An extremely external observer merely records the regularities exhibited by agents within this particular way of life. Thus, the observer is able to fairly successfully predict which responses to certain situations will be greeted with admiration, which with punishment and which with acceptance on the basis of probability. For example, a red light is a sign that people will stop their cars. However, such an observer may be able to explain the actions (the behaviour most likely to occur near a red light is stopping of cars), but he is unable to comprehend the truth of the obligation. (Hart, 1994, 89-90) He or she perceives agents as objects obeying certain statistical laws: a red traffic light generates ninety percent probability of an agent stopping. For such an observer, a red light is a sign that people will stop in the same sense that clouds are a sign that it will rain.

However, such a point of view cannot discriminate between coercion and rule following. In the case of a bank robbery, the extremely external observer would say that there is a ninety percent
probability that the teller will hand over the money. It would be to miscomprehend the situation to
describe this as a rule of conduct. The teller may be obliged to hand over the money, but it would
be wrong to say he has an obligation to do so. Moral behaviour is not adequately characterized
from this extremely external point of view, rather the agent is motivated by an internal rather than
an external factor: the belief that obeying the law is the right thing to do. There is a difference
between “to feel obliged” and “to be obliged”; the former is a psychological endorsement of an
objective law, whereas the second is a recognition of the consequences of obeying or disobeying a
law. It is only in the former case that an observer can describe a duty or an obligation. The
extremely external point of view can only describe probabilities and regularities.

A more moderate externality will hold that the red light is a reason for the people to stop in the
same way that clouds are a reason to carry an umbrella. It is to describe the appropriate behaviour
in a certain situation given the agent’s specific way of life. This is to describe the behaviour of
agents as if from the internal point of view on rules or, to put it another way, as moral beings. The
observer would feel the obligation because he is aware that the social pressure of admiration,
respect or condemnation are not just consequential considerations; that is, he recognizes the
appropriate behaviour in a certain situation is judged by knowing what is expected of the agent by
his community. It is possible for the moderately external observer to say, given this way of life it is
appropriate to act in such and such a manner. It is to understand the obligation without necessarily
endorsing it. Whereas an extremely external observer will treat agents as ruled by descriptive laws,
the moderate external observer will treat them as ruled by prescriptive laws.

Hermeneutical understanding takes this moderately external form; in reflecting on his way of life,
the observer, in a sense, puts himself both inside and outside of it. The observer asks himself, “If I
were a member of this group, what would my obligation be?”. Yet, because he is not taking the
internal point of view, the obligation is not immediately binding and is open to reflective
questioning: he can ask himself the reciprocal question, what does this obligation reveal about the conditions which make this perception of moral situations possible? In reflecting on his own reasons for action, the observer is able to disclose the conditions that generate his response (that is, to reveal his way of life). It is to suspend the immediately binding nature of his social existence and to embrace the assumption that moral knowledge and motivations are, in some sense, always governed by an if-clause or way of life. If I ask myself why I can forgive the mother who steals to feed her child, why I find the practice of ritual human sacrifice abhorrent and why I am troubled by seemingly logical assertions of the utilitarian “many lives must outweigh the few”, it is because the moral value of human life grounds and systematizes all my moral judgements and evaluations. And such grounding concepts and values are intimately bound to both my historical and geographical origin (and would be fully comprehended by the narration of an historical tradition with which I identify myself). In other words, human artefacts cannot be divorced from their situation and context. The hermeneutic circle of interpretation, in which one’s moral experience (as a cultural phenomenon) is interrogated in order to reveal those underlying principles which make it possible, serves to bring to light hidden and unconscious conditions of moral knowledge. Through an interpretation of the way in which we experience the world, we can reveal those categories and concepts which inform our judgements. Hermeneutics is the interpretative method which discloses those principles which determine the moral judgements of the agent.

Given the broad flavour of the above illustration of hermeneutics as a theory of, ostensibly, cultural and social interpretation, it would be worthwhile to narrow the concern of the present argument to the matter at hand, that is the rational resolution of inter-cultural conflicts. There are three essential features of basic hermeneutic theory which bear upon this problem: one, it is form of idealism; two, categories of understanding are culturally and historically determined; and, three, evaluative statements play a role in rational discourse.
§2.1 | Idealism

Hermeneutics, in the first instance, is a form of minimal idealism which is to merely say that it takes seriously the Copernican revolution introduced into philosophy by Kant: an object of knowledge must be experienced via the employment of categories which belong to the subject's own mode of knowing rather than the object itself. (Kant, 1993, Preface) Any attempt to surmount these categories which determine possible objects of knowledge are doomed to failure since the subject's experience must be structured by them. For the human being to be a knower, he has to meet certain a priori conditions (not derived from experience but derived from the subject himself) which make experience possible. As such, reality is always filtered through such conditions and can never be grasped in-itself: objects are always for-us as rational beings.

Truth, then, is not to be found in the correspondence of the subject’s representation with a state of affairs, rather true statements are those which are consistent with the proper use of the categories when applied to intuitions given to the subject. Therefore, one can say an object is empirically real when it corresponds to the human point of view. Transcendently (that is, independent of human thought) objects do not exist, their constitution depends on a subject actively structuring their form. Thus, for Kant, causality is objective from the human point of view (it belongs to us all), but subjective from a transcendental standpoint. Objects of cognition are, then, transcendentally ideal (cannot be accorded reality independently of the structure of experience) but also empirically real (that is, they are constituted by the structure of experience).

The idealism implicit in hermeneutical theory explains why our initial characterisation was in terms of rule-following and obligations: knowledge is not the correspondence of a representation with a state of affairs, but the consistent and correct application of those principles and concepts which
make experience possible for the subject. So, I am right to be appalled by ritual human sacrifice because the value of human life prescribes the correct response to the object of evaluation. However, Kant kept a robust sense of objectivity because he held that the ideas, categories and concepts of reason were universal, as were the regulations. Any derivation from these would result in poor reasoning and insubstantial claims. Kant’s aim was simple and it was the overriding concern of the Enlightenment: to rid reason of its obstructions whether they be superstition, prejudice or the irrational. (Kant, 1996)

§2.2| Cultural basis for moral categories of understanding

Secondly, and in contradiction of Kant, the categories which determine our moral ways of knowing are not universal but culturally acquired or given. They do not belong to the subject as rational knower, but as member of a particular historical group. This, in fact, may not be the whole truth, there may be universal structures of human experience: Kant’s space and time, Heidegger’s temporality or, even, a materialist naturalism, but none of these will be able to rise to the level of everyday knowledge and understanding without incorporating ways of thinking, linguistic baggage and socially relative concepts. It may be possible to universally agree that respect is a good, but it depends on our ability to internally interpret a way of life to say whether such and such an action is an expression of respect. Respect, like sympathy, is a morally praiseworthy attitude but unless we know how or when to be respectful, we are incapable of fulfilling such obligations. Substantial obligations which determine how and in which situations these are to be expressed can only be derived from a way of life with its practices and mores, not from universal principles.

§2.3| The rationality of evaluative statements
Finally, hermeneutics recognizes the rationality of evaluative claims. Evaluative statements – such as expressions of horror and sympathy – are a way in which the human subject participates in the world. In many respects, primitive evaluation (“killing disgusts me”) grounds more reified ways of knowing (“abortion is immoral”) and evaluative statements are at least minimally rational. One need only think here of Heidegger’s (1962) persistent early consideration of concern, solicitude and care as ways of knowing; or, even, Sartre’s (1991) exposition of shame. Such knowing reveals the way in which we comprehend the world: horror and sympathy are an evaluative response to situations and these responses, when interrogated (via the reflective process of the hermeneutic circle), reveal certain principles which inform the agent’s moral experience.

It may be objected that evaluative statements are not true or false but either appropriate or inappropriate. However, it is equally the case that we chastise and condemn inappropriate evaluative statements and this chastisement rests upon the intuition that the agent in question has misunderstood the situation in hand; whether such an error is due to the concepts he or she brings to bear on the problem or the incorrect application of the rules of reason. That his or her reaction is inappropriate is due to his or her understanding of the world and we would attempt to bring that very understanding into line with ours (even if we would perhaps be less rigorous with the child incapable of experiencing Picasso’s genius than in the case when she holds that two plus two are five). We would try and make them see the situation in such a way that his or her evaluation is appropriate. Evaluative statements reveal the agent’s fundamental way of understanding the world and, as such, have as much to do with truth as do the concepts which make possible our experience of the world.⁶

§3| The tendency to relativism and subjectivism
It is the second feature of hermeneutic theory which underlies its implicit tendency to relativism; that is, it seems impossible to escape relativism if the theory itself accepts contingent, cultural factors in the subjective constitution of experience. And from relativism, we are but one easy step to subjectivism as concerns inter-cultural conflict. For me, as member of a specific group, the statement “abortion is wrong” is rational (whether it be true or not) because it can stand in logical relation to other statements; “killing is wrong”, “the taking of life is killing”, “an embryo is (not) a life” and so on, such that an argument can be had between my peers and myself. Yet, all this is possible because we share the same cultural a priori structure of experience grounded in the utmost significance and value of human life. And that is beyond reproach for us. Yet, when I come into contact with an alien culture which practices ritual human sacrifice, or prizes the collective over individuals, or is prepared to risk death for glory, and so on, then this statement is seemingly revealed to be nothing more than a contingent cultural prejudice or ungrounded commitment in order to make sense of moral experience which is not universally shared. And it could have been different.

So, how can we respond to a conflict between prescriptions originating from different (and not the same) ways of life? First, we may state that difference is wonderful and become tolerant (for them it is wrong, yet for us it is right). Certain mores and practices can be tolerated within the moral space of society: dietary requirements, dress codes, the upbringing of children and education. Yet, certain other issues are not culturally bound in the same way: the problem of human sacrifice, the problem of female circumcision and, of course, whether we should or should not blow Buddha up. It is not, in these cases, a matter of simply letting-be because there is not always enough social space for the practices or actions to exist side-by-side. Second, we may decide that ours is the correct world-view, but without rational argument we are violating the very principles of hermeneutics. When the bank teller does not wish to give into my demand for some cash because he does not agree that mine is a worthwhile reason for him even if he recognizes that it is for me (“I
need the money to make me happy”), then I violate his will by showing him my gun. I resort to violence and seemingly assert that might is right since I force him to do something against his own better judgement. My action is nothing more than the expression of attitudes akin to stating that “You may not like cheese, but I do and my will is mightier than yours, so you are wrong.” The grounding principles of our moral experience must also be justified in order for rational agreement to be reached. The problem is that if we hold that the categories of understanding are cultural, truth amounts to, at best, a truth for us and conflict resolution becomes nothing more than a game of power between groups and individuals.

Hermeneutics allows us to interrogate a way of life from the inside, to grasp in an imaginative leap how others might see the world and even come to a better understanding of how the observer himself structures his own experience, but the very affirmation of cultural categories which determine knowledge coupled with the recognition of the rationality of evaluative statements means that hermeneutics implicitly tends to relativism and, although in some cases this is of no importance, it is crucial in others. It matters when the possible answers to a moral question cannot exist harmoniously side-by-side; that is, when the answers come into conflict. For this reason, we either reject hermeneutics or we offer an account whereby the claim to universality can be upheld and be made consistent with a hermeneutical approach. Otherwise, the theory's normative credentials are dead in the water.

§4 | Conflict and resolution

Let us return to the problem in hand: should the statues have been destroyed? Let us also assume that all participants in the dialogue are sincere. Both can build, I believe, rational arguments: the
blasphemous nature of the statues is consistent with passages and interpretations of the Koran and certain grounding moral principles held by orthodox Muslims. Similarly, the defence of statues is, I believe, best mounted from a secular, liberal rationality grounded in the tolerance and agnosticism of the modern subject. In dialogue, these foundations are brought to the fore and a prescription needs to be made which is acceptable and rational to both participants. The aim is to find a resolution that is consistent with the three features of hermeneutics (otherwise there is no need to consider this approach) and that either rules out one of the prescriptions as invalid or offers a new prescription acceptable to all parties.

There are, it intuitively seems, several rival models of resolution consistent with the central tenets of hermeneutics (in order that it may keep its normative credentials in place): (4.1) an Enlightenment commitment to a philosophy of history and progress; (4.2) a universal fundamental structure of human moral experience that will yield a cosmopolitan point of view; (4.3) political liberalism and the separation of ethical and political principles; and, finally, (4.4) the recognition of reasonable limitations (generated by the nature of hermeneutics itself) on sincere participants in dialogue.

§4.1| The philosophy of history

Conflicts arise when ways of life offer contradictory answers to the same problem and will normally be resolved when one of them demonstrates it is better. A way of life, for example, whose moral culture grounded in animism and prescribes practices such as ritual sacrifice is, intuitively, less advanced and less sophisticated, that is more primitive and barbaric, than our own. However, in order to be consistent with the outlined features of hermeneutics, being “better” cannot refer to how accurately it corresponds to an external, independent of subjects, state of affairs. The
Enlightenment idea of progress assumes that time flows in one direction and there is a simple historical imperative that rules ways of life: a way of life is more advanced if the tradition is older than its rival. Time is the process which replaces superstition with science; as medicine improves with the ages, so too do moral concepts. Such a position is grounded in several contentious assumptions which, for economic reasons, I shall do no more than list here. One, progress occurs when internal or external inconsistencies are revealed by novel moral problems. Two, a subject can assert that his present way of life is better than earlier one simply because history sorts the wheat from the chaff, although any attempt to comprehend the process of history is beyond his capacity. So, when ways of life “a” and “b” conflict over a matter, it must be possible to resolve the conflict due to the emergence of a new way of life “c”. (“C” it might be added can be the negation of either “a” or “b”, but a concession has to made to understanding – to avoid violence – and, for that very fact, it must involve some redefinition of the successful way of life.) That position “c” is offered as a resolution explicable and acceptable to both “a” and “b”, implies that it is a better way of life because it explains all that “a” and “b” used to explain, but can also resolve the conflict in acceptable terms which accord with the previous beliefs of both “a” and “b”. The perspectives of “a” and “b” were unable to disclose the “truth” because their categories of understanding corrupted their perception of the matter in hand. The better perspective “c” was able to reveal the nature of the conflict in a way which accorded with both “a” and “b”, thus simultaneously overcoming and preserving their accounts of the matter. “C” is better because of consistency (it is more consistent with other beliefs) and scope (it is better able to make sense of other phenomena). Categories which corrupt understanding are purged in favour of categories which are more consistent with other ways of thinking (science replaces superstition).

There are three principal problems with this solution. One, how is one to justify the claim of progress in the moral sphere? Empirically we might point to natural or medical science, but to
apply this to political and moral systems is far from convincing (we cannot, without reservation, state that a duty based morality is better than a virtue based one). Two, from whose viewpoint is history to be structured and progress measured? If we respond from the most advanced, then there already exist criteria by which we can choose one way of life over another that are independent of the human perspective since the more advanced is more advanced because it has truer or better moral concepts. Three, and most damagingly, if history resolves conflicts, then this commits the subject to quietism: if our tradition or another tradition appears unjust, it may always be defended as a necessary step forward. Thus, the blowing up of the Buddhas was a “good” because it has lead to a re-evaluation of central moral concepts even though these re-evaluated concepts will tell us it was “wrong” to blow the statues up. This negates the thinking subject’s role in rationally interrogating, rejecting and ordering ways of life: he must wait for history to decide and concede the rational right to reflection and protest. If this is the case, then hermeneutics may be a way to understand more primitive ways of thinking but it is unable to resolve conflicts, that remains the prerogative of history. In other words, if a philosophy of progress is to be the normative basis for hermeneutical theory, then it is just not normative at all since the subject is unable to say “we ought to change this”.

With the example in hand (putting aside the nature of the Taliban themselves), the choice is between liberalism and Islam and if we side with the former we are assuming that the history of Islam will eventually become a new liberalism. Such a claim is empirically contentious, patronizing and will result in the violation of wills which are seen as more primitive without a firm grounding.

§4.2| Cosmopolitanism
One can hold on to the features of hermeneutics (culturally contingent, rational moral idealism) and yet still find space for a universal approach: cultures may differ in detail, but at some, deep level there are universal values or principles (Kantianism) or desires and needs (rational naturalism, utilitarianism), that all rational or human beings share (the community of human beings). By identifying those values or interests we all share, we can come to agreement on principles of action. So, we all recognize the value of respecting others or the need for self-preservation and avoidance of harm and these points of shared interest can be used to build consensual prescriptions between participants.

The universality of such principles as “Do right” or “Be good”, however, amounts to vacuity. The choice in moral discourse is between formal, empty universals such as “respect others” or “sympathize with those who suffer,” or substantial, but relative statements which may be wholly contradictory. For example, two cultures will probably agree that respect is a good, but whereas one holds respect can only be granted by monogamy, the other may see polygamy as the only proper expression of respect. Even if it is the case that all men ought to be good, the substantial content of goodness is dependent on a shared moral fabric. Within a community, there are set rules, responses and desires which derive from the moral fabric and make moral experience possible. With the example in hand, it is difficult to see what shared, substantial value could resolve the question of the statues’ existence.

§4.3 | Political liberalism

Certain ethical matters may well be irresolvable due to either the limitations of practical reason or, more strongly, due to the inherent partiality of moral judgement given the combination of the idealistic and cultural features of the hermeneutical position. So, we may want to recognize the
question as ethical, but realize there will be no resolution without coercion. However, if reasons had been offered, then violence and coercion are seemingly the last resort since the goal of reasons are to engage and not negate the will. If the only way to offer an ethical resolution is to affirm one or other participant as true and certain and to negate his opponent, then we should consider it a practical problem of avoiding violence within a space and hence a political problem. Political liberalism affirms the distinction between comprehensive and political values such that the latter are limited in scope (applying to only basic questions of justice), are independent of any comprehensive doctrine and are justified with reference to a shared public culture. Political liberalism, like the cosmopolitan approach, seeks to identify a shared set of values with which the participants can agree. Unlike the cosmopolitan approach, it assumes that these values will be different in kind from ethical values. (Rawls, 1999) So, I would recognize the earnest application of Muslim principles in the prescription of the destruction of the idols, but since such principles can only be derived from a comprehensively religious system, they are the wrong kind of reasons to justify a policy or action. And vice versa: the worth of the idols to me is derived from certain secular, liberal metaphysical presuppositions concerning equality and respect.

So, in this case, we must identify firstly a basic issue of justice that is at the bottom of the disagreement between those who would destroy the statues and those who oppose their destruction. Let us allow the advocate of political liberalism an unfair head start and assume that the conflict concerns the rights of freedom of conscience and free expression of belief. Should a society prohibit certain religions from freedom of expression? The answer must surely be no, for the simple reason that it may frustrate the aims and projects of certain individuals and, hence, not respect the equality of individuals.

It is clear, however, that political liberalism of this sort is ill suited to resolving the conflict since there exists no mutual public reason from which to derive principles that are equally applicable.
The resolution requires a shared, homogeneous political tradition that is just not available here. For political liberalism to work, we must be able to identify values which will be able to supply the foundations for an overlapping consensus (here, the central one is of persons as free and equal members of a society), but between cultures such an idea may not be applicable.

Critics of this simplistic rebuttal of the politically liberal agenda may wish to remonstrate that a proper interpretation of Muslim principles may well be consistent with an idea of persons as free and equal citizens and so, in the same way a comprehensive utilitarian, Kantian, Christian and humanistic atheist can politically agree, so too can a Muslim. Although I do agree with such a postulation, it is not enough to salvage political liberalism. There is, firstly, the motivationary problem: as a Muslim, I am committed to obeying the word of God and destroying false idols, but as a citizen, I am committed to the respectful tolerance of religious expression. It would be hard to comprehend why the second motivation is more powerful or would take priority over the former one. And such a privilege is, of course, only intelligible to a person who is already committed to a liberal form of life that not only recognizes the rights of equality and liberty but also the good of the society which embodies these rights. That is, someone who is a product of a liberal way of life and, hence, we seem to return to the arbitrary affirmation of foundational values and the coercion of individuals who do not share such values. The very distinction between political and comprehensive is a reflection of our way of life (secular modernity) that an Orthodox Muslim may not accept.

§4.4| Hermeneutics and mature traditions

As participants in the dialogue, there is an undecided possibility before us: we shall either agree to destroy the statues or we shall agree to not destroy the statues. If we do not agree and an action (including defending the statues from destruction) is taken, then the will of (at least) one of the participants has been coerced, overridden or violated. In entering a dialogue, in offering reasons,
the agent is affirming his or her rationality and, as such, must be implicitly committed to the worth of his or her reason. Violence and the use of might will, then, be an instance of either the refusal of the Other to accept certain reasons which the agent is loathe to concede, or the coercion and violation of the will of other participants. Sincere participants in dialogue will see the use of might and violence as the very failure of dialogue and as the absolute last resort.

The first objection is obvious and powerful, very persuasive and simple: fundamentalists (of all ilk), since they are convinced of the absolute truth of their metaphysical positions, will not feel the need to offer reasons or enter into dialogue. They have their reasons and they are in the right. Anyone who is unable to accept the reasons is in error and, therefore, should not be heeded. We ought, though, to be careful to separate two positions here: one, the agent who offers no reason for his or her actions; and, two, the agent who offers reasons which are directed to an exclusive subset of specific human beings and not to all human beings. The former is, surely, an absurd characterisation of any action. In action, as in speech, a human being is implicitly committed to intelligibility and a rational enterprise (the end must always be a “good” for him or her in a very minimal sense), otherwise actions are mere events and cannot be evaluated at all. The destruction of the idols by human hand is different in kind from the tragic destruction of Giotto's Assisi frescoes by an earthquake. Action is, by virtue of being action, already rational.

The significant distinction is between those agents who have an exclusive as opposed to an inclusive view of public reason (that is the size of the members of the set of possible participants). Imagine it as an inclusive versus an exclusive debating club: in the former anyone can sit at the table, in the latter only members of the club are invited. The exclusive view of public reason assumes that only a subset of human beings are rationally disposed to receive the right kind of reasons (or are, one should say, rational “in the right way”). The fundamentalist (as the name suggests) is an agent who will not engage with those who do not share the comprehensive
fundamentals of his or her specific way of life. Might, then, is rightly used against those who do not agree with the basic tenets of this way of life since they are in error and cannot be rational.

Yet, we might want to assert that, even if the fundamentalist offers his or her reasons to a subset of possible participants alone, there are already normative requirements in play. We might want to say, for example, that the very practice of reason-giving will lead to an immediate distinction between egoistic and objective reasons. No one is going to accept the justification of an action which is formally in the interests of one person at the expense of the interests of the acting agent (all things being equal). That is just not the sort of creatures we are. However, we would be mistaken if we were to assert this. It is not impossible to imagine that in Ancient Egypt and Asia such egoistic reasons were commonplace and part of public reason: “we need to build the pyramid for the glory of my afterlife”. In such a way of life, the reasons offered would have a very limited set of possible participants (perhaps, at times, only the king and his executive). Yet if these reasons were applicable but to one person, then they would not be reasons properly speaking. Reasons must be “objective” and appeal to a standard of rightness independent of the will of an individual agent and so, for a reason to be properly termed a reason, it requires a recognition of its “rightness” by, at least, one peer. A reason differs from a want in that the motivation of my action is a good independent of the fact it is I who want it.\(^\text{11}\) You, too, can see it as a good. And it is this feature of reasons that distinguish them from preferences and arbitrary expressions of will (mere events).\(^\text{12}\) And once that starts, then equality has a foothold. For once I am making an appeal to the subject-independent nature of my reason, I implicitly commit myself to the claim that there are other who can comprehend its rationality. Once I admit that there is at least one other rational agent, I begin to divide the world into those that have rationality and those that do not.

The distinction between exclusive and inclusive reasons coincides neatly with the distinction between the internal and moderately external stances on a way of life. Internally to a way of life,
prescriptions are to be justified with reference to a shared moral fabric of beliefs and concepts between members of that way of life. Moral problems can be rationally resolved in such a way. But when participants are from cultures with no shared moral fabric, then a different stance is required; that is, an external one. In order to come to an agreement, all participants must divorce themselves from the immediately binding nature of their ways of life and view them as “possible” understandings rather than absolute understandings of the matter in hand (if they sincerely want to avoid violence and the violation of wills). The commitment to inclusive reason is a commitment to the hermeneutical approach and formal, rational equality between participants in the dialogue. Some agents from specific traditions will be unable to take such a stance, but if this is so then they cannot be participants in dialogue since they cannot be sincere and treat all participants as equals. Therefore, we can distinguish those traditions which are able – for the duration of dialogue – take an external stance and use inclusive reason and those that cannot. Only the former are appropriate for the rational inter-cultural resolution of conflicts. The Enlightenment idea of progress was unitary and all encompassing, but here is a more humble view of progress: traditions are immature if they deny the principle of equality between reasoners (their members are only capable of exclusive reason and the internal stance) and traditions are mature when reasons are offered to justify the course of action inclusively to all human beings (their members are committed to inclusive reason and are capable of the external stance towards their own ways of life). A mature tradition’s response to inter-cultural conflict is to be already engaged in hermeneutical reasoning and such reasoning – for the duration of the conflict – is just not consistent with absolutist claims. In offering inclusive reasons, the agent is aware that he (or she) is involved in a different type of reasoning than if he were merely justifying the prescription to his cultural peers.

Islam is a mature tradition. It is, after all, a religion that seeks to convert non-believers into believers using reason or the word of God. It does not seek to forcibly convert agents under the threat of violence since such conversions would be worthless to the will of God. Hence, it must
intrinsically appeal to both believers and non-believers. Also, Omar (the representative of a group) has already offered a reason, quoted above, and the reason was not just for the ears of his peers, but delivered via the international media. Hence, his proffered reason is, at the very least, a statement of intent and a marker of those he would converse with and those he would not. As Omar states, the statues “should be destroyed so that they are not worshipped now or in the future.” By stating normative reasons, Omar has metaphorically sat himself at the dialogical table. What does sitting at the inclusive table (as opposed to the exclusive one) require?

A quick review of the argument so far may well reveal a way forward. In offering reasons, I am implicitly asserting that my reason for doing something is not just an arbitrary expression of will and this assertion requires the recognition of, at least, one other agent. Therefore, I must recognize at least one other person as a participant in my dialogue and a possible endorser of my reason. From the idea of progress we can now separate science from superstition and divide traditions into mature and immature. An immature tradition can decide internal ethical problems within itself, yet is unable to engage with other traditions since it does not recognize Others as possible participants in dialogue. The cosmopolitan approach assumed that agreement between particular individuals could be made on the basis of formal, universal principles, but these principles were unable to determine substantial resolutions to conflicts. Political liberalism separated reasons into comprehensive and political. Reasonable participants are those who have access to and are motivated by the sorts of reasons which are found in a shared public reason and can, therefore, generate principles which are acceptable to all and likely to form a stable consensus. Political liberalism has shown that certain conflicts are different in kind and political ones demand different kinds of reasons. However, political values, too, require a shared way of life between participants in order to generate a substantially efficacious agreement and in order to outweigh comprehensive motivations of an agent.
The distinction I now wish to offer is between reasons from a mature tradition and those from an immature one. The reasons from a mature tradition attempt to engage with the Other in order to convince him or her of the truth of the participant's position. The idea of mature traditions offers us a new alternative: a person is reasonable if he or she is a member of a mature tradition, that is recognizes that his or her reasons are to be offered inclusively to all reasoners. Thus, reasonable reasons are those which can possibly be endorsed by all participants in the dialogue. Unreasonable reasons are those which are applicable to a specific subset and are not expected to be endorsed by Others. Notice that this distinction is different from the comprehensive versus the political because comprehensive reasons are possibly reasonable: the dictates of Islam, since they are a rational theology, are possibly endorsible as are the dictates of a liberal tradition. Purely egoistic reasons are not. The reasons offered, then, if accepted, motivate because they are the right kind.14

What does sitting oneself at the dialogical table involve? One, it is the commitment that our reasons are available, intelligible and possibly endorsible by others. Two, it is the reciprocal respect that the participant in the dialogue sincerely believes the same. We have two initial norms: sincerity and respect. The aim of the dialogue is rational resolution between equals and so I recognize a violent solution as failure. In what way can I best respect other participants and also resolve the dialogue peaceably? It seems that to sit down at the inclusive table is to implicitly commit oneself to an hermeneutical process: in order to show that my reasons ought to be rationally preferred to your own, I must first understand your reasons as you yourself understand them and this is to begin the hermeneutical circle for myself, and so I find myself in a distancing from my own way of life and its central convictions.15 But, if a mature tradition is committed to an inclusive idea of reason, and this commitment – in times of conflict – leads to a hermeneutic appraisal, then such a participant must, for the dialogue to be a success, endorse the three features of hermeneutics (at least while he or she sits at the table or is engaged in dialogue). The hermeneutic process involves putting our immediate embedded self into question and the substitution of truth claims by
interpretative claims; I see the world thus and so only if I hold x to be the case. And that means a mature tradition is able to simultaneously holds its convictions to be absolutely true internally, but to recognize also an inclusive use of reason that requires a suspension of these beliefs for the purpose of rationality itself.

§5 | The resolution of the conflict

What then might a resolution be in our case? Both participants in the dialogue, if mature, will recognize that there positions are ruled by incommensurable provisos or if-clauses that cannot be argued away unless either participant can be shown to be either internally inconsistent or suffering from ideological bias. So, is the only solution the use of violence and might? Both participants will see that as a failure of rationality itself and so one possible compromise may well be a hesitation of all actions. The destruction of the idols is irredeemable whereas their continued presence can be ignored or corrected at a later date. The result of the dialogue that shows that no resolution acceptable to both parties is possible must commit the participants to inaction. But, note, that this is not the case of saying the statues have a right to exist. The view of Omar and his followers has been respectfully heeded and remains a possibility, but the rational process is still ongoing. If the statues were destroyed without the agreement of all participants, violence would have destroyed the rational process. Similarly, if the statues were to be determined a World Heritage Site or a military defence were to be put in place, violence will have destroyed the rational process. When resolution has not been reached, hermeneutics – given its commitment to the idealism of moral positions (and this is a position which the participants at the time of dialogue endorse) – dictates that the rational process ought to continue, otherwise we return to might.

It is a shame that this issue is now purely academic.
Bibliography


---

1 For a good characterisation of this tradition and some telling criticisms, see Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 1997), 80-110.

2 I shall assume that Omar's words and intentions are sincere and consistent. There are reasons to doubt this: “A recent rebellion in Bamiyan, whose people are Shia Muslims [not Sunni, like the Taliban] from the Hazara tribe [not Pashtoon], was viciously put down, reportedly with brutal massacres. The demolition of the Buddhas has unequivocally demonstrated the militia’s authority.” (Rory McCarthy, “Taliban order all statues destroyed,” *The Guardian Newspaper*, February 27, 2001.) One of the advantages of hermeneutics is to separate sincerely held beliefs from ideological
statements. However, the argument would be uninteresting if we could just dismiss all those who do not agree with our views as either insincere or in error, and I believe the argument offered by Omar could be sincerely and consistently held by any member of the Abrahamic religions (and possibly others).


4 Alfred Ewing lists four ways in which Kant uses the term a priori: logical necessity; not derivable form experience; what is presupposed in all our experience; and what is contributed by the subject. The usage of a priori here is consistent with the last two. See A Short Commentary on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 28-30.

5 Of course, Sartre is not a hermeneutic thinker because he holds on to Husserl’s absolute transparency of consciousness: it is free and spontaneous. Any cultural influence is bad faith.

6 There are three alternatives ways of dealing with this: if assertoric (A) and evaluative (E) statements are both instances of truth making statements, then (1) A are brought down to the level of E = nihilism; (2) E are levelled up to A (for example, Martin Heidegger's continued affirmation of poesis and praxis as ways of knowing in “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993); (3) a hierarchy still exists in which A are above E since the truth they hold is both universal and transparent, but a recognition that E are also truth bearing statements, if somewhat less strong (analytic irrealism). I do not explicitly endorse any of these alternatives in this paper. For a useful discussion of this, see Nicholas Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997).
The challenge that hermeneutics is a useful sociological method, but ultimately of no normative significance is most eloquently made by Jürgen Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).


This is G. eorg Hegel’s continued criticism of Kantian moral philosophy, see “On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, on its Place in Practical Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Right,” trans. Hugh Nisbet, in *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 102-180. I have discussed the rationalist approach to cosmopolitanism at length and so give it a rather short shrift here, see David Rose, “Imagination and Reason: An Ethics of Interpretation for a Cosmopolitan Age”, in *Cosmopolitics and the Emergence of a Future*, eds. Diane Morgan and G. ary Banham (London: Palgrave, 2007), 40-68.


These arguments are dependent on certain assumptions in the philosophy of action that I do not have time to do justice to here.
Hence, there is no necessity in progress and “time” can travel in both directions; a tradition can move from maturity to immaturity just as easily as the opposite. The distinction between mature and immature is probably influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), but I have yet to seriously think through the connections between my use here and his work. A similar account of “progress” within a tradition is discussed in that work.

Political liberalism has a different aim (a stable society rather than the resolution of a one-off conflict) so I do not wish to suggest that this is a thoroughgoing political alternative. It is applicable in specific cases of conflict between traditions that are politically independent.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, at the Heidelberg Colloquium on the 9th of July, 1989, allegedly said: “The possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics.” Reported by Jean Grondin in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Hermeneutics* (London: Yale University, 1964), 124.

See note 2 above.