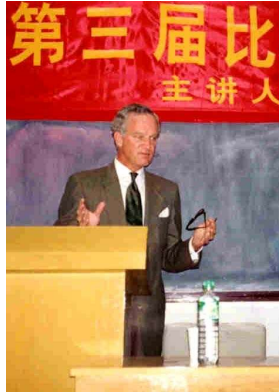


Unity Through Diversity: Humanity's Higher Ground

NHI Chairman Claes Ryn Delivers 'Distinguished Foreign Scholar' Lecture Series at Beijing University



Can conflict between China and the West be avoided? Claes Ryn, Chairman of the National Humanities Institute, acts on the assumption that it can be avoided, but a great deal needs to happen to avert growing tension.

Ryn has delivered a series of lectures on ethics, culture, and politics (including constitutionalism) at China's leading institution of higher learning, Beijing University. The lectures will be published in the university's book series "Distinguished Foreign Scholars." The comprehensive title of Ryn's lectures is "Unity Through Diversity: Humanity's Higher Ground."

In the lectures, delivered May 15, 17, and 19, 2000, Ryn, who is professor of politics at The Catholic University of America, made a case for humanism and for unity through diversity. He addressed the need to avert major conflict by having different cultures cultivate their highest common ground.

From Lecture One: Humanism as the Cultivation of Mankind's Highest Ground

- There is an urgent need to explore in depth possibilities for minimizing tensions and to undertake efforts to reduce them. . . . Many in the West and elsewhere trust in scientific progress and general enlightenment to reduce the danger of conflict, but we need only look to the century preceding this one—the most murderous and inhumane in the history of mankind—to recognize that the spread of science and allegedly sophisticated modern ideas does not reduce the self-absorption or belligerence of human beings. It only provides them with new means of asserting their will. Others in the West trust in political and economic schemes to alleviate tensions, "democracy" and "free markets" being the two most popular at the moment. These prescriptions for how to promote good relations between peoples give short shrift to a subject that may in fact be far more important . . . : the moral and cultural preconditions of peace. . . . [A]ttempts to avoid conflict among peoples and individuals are not likely to be successful without a certain quality of human will and imagination. That this subject is receiving so much less attention than proposals for introducing technology and manipulating political and economic institutions is a sign that our societies are not now well-equipped to deal with the most pressing problem of the new century.
- No serious examination of the question of peace can avoid its moral dimension. The fact that political, economic and other social circumstances strongly influence human behavior does not excuse us from considering the character of individuals as a source of conduct. Only by examining man's basic moral predicament is it possible fully to understand the origins of conduct that reduces rather than increases the danger of conflict or how society might assist in fostering such behavior. Our frame of reference in trying to determine the terms of moral existence will be the evidence offered by our own selves, as augmented and elucidated by the historical experience of mankind. . . .

Nationalistic arrogance and economic ruthlessness endanger international harmony in a direct, palpable manner. But these are only particularly troublesome instances of a more general threat to good relations among cultures, namely that, instead of interacting on the level of what is morally, aesthetically and intellectually noblest in each, cultures encounter each other on the level of the mercenary, the grasping, the crude, the vulgar, and the shoddy. Whatever the momentary benefits to be derived from such interaction, it does not form a basis for peace. Much of the popular Western culture that is absorbed by non-Western societies today creates a superficial commonality across borders, but it does not elicit among discerning elites the respect that might forge ties of lasting friendship. Cultures coming into closer contact while displaying their least admirable traits may in time recoil from each other, a reaction that is bound to be exploited by opportunists on all sides looking for excuses to exercise their will to power.

Here we must face the central problem that all societies and all persons are torn within between their own higher and lower potentialities. The obstacles to realizing the values of goodness, truth and beauty and to achieving peaceful relations among individuals and groups are ubiquitous. Historical and social circumstances may aggravate the problem, but its most fundamental cause is that human beings tend to shrink from the necessary effort, prone as they are to less commendable desires. Progress requires protracted exertions. To the extent that a people falls short of what is best in its own culture, its members will exhibit such examples of self-indulgence as greed and intolerance. This will threaten its own social cohesion, but it will inevitably undermine international harmony also.

The view of human nature and society alluded to was until the last century or two wholly dominant in the Western world. It is similar to beliefs long influential in the East. A central feature of the traditional Western understanding of the human condition is the just-mentioned belief that human nature is in tension between desires that will enhance and complete existence and ones that, though they may bring short-term satisfaction, are destructive of a deeper harmony of life. To realize the higher meaning of life—what the Greeks call *eudaimonia*, happiness—the individual needs to discipline his appetites of the moment, try to extinguish some of them, with a view to his own enduring good. By happiness was meant not a collection of pleasures, but a special sense of well-being and

self-respect that comes from living responsibly and nobly, as befits a truly human being. The person aspiring to that kind of life must frequently say no to pleasures and advantages of the moment, namely those that are inimical to a more deeply satisfying existence.



Yue Daiyun (right), Professor of Chinese and Director of the Institute of Comparative Literature and Culture at Beijing University and President of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association, opens the floor to questions for National Humanities Institute Chairman Claes Ryn.

- The good life has many aspects and prerequisites—economic, political, intellectual, aesthetical, and moral—but there was widespread agreement in the old Western society, whether predominantly Greek, Roman or Christian, that the orientation of character, specifically, the quality of a person's will, is crucial to realizing life's higher potential. A person who lacks the moral strength required for right conduct could not secure happiness by dint of intellectual brilliance, imaginative power or economic productivity. Christianity has regarded man's cleft will, his often desiring what is contrary to his own higher good, as the crux of human life. Though the individual should always strive to contain his selfish and shortsighted inclinations and try to act responsibly, his human weakness makes him heavily dependent on God. Protestant Christianity has been especially concerned to emphasize that not even the best of men are able to overcome their sinful inclinations on their own, but need to have their higher will reinforced by divine grace.

The Western tradition, then, has for the most part regarded moral character and the performance of good actions as the primary measure of human goodness. The moral and religious wisdom of the West has explained and encouraged the kind of working on self that in time will build real meaning and worth into human existence. Whether the aim has been achieving the happiness and nobility of a worldly, civilized life of the type that Aristotle advocates, or achieving the special peace of otherworldliness and saintliness that Christianity regards as the very culmination of the religious life, there is no substitute for protracted, sometimes difficult moral striving. "I am the way and the life and the truth," proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity has assumed that the validity of this claim could be confirmed only by one willing to undertake the kind of actions entailed by that statement. The East offers many examples of a very similar outlook. In Buddhism, the right Way is the diligent working on self to extinguish needless worldly desire. In *The Dhammapada*, the holy text attributed, at least in its general spirit, to the Buddha, we find these words about the path to Nirvana: "You yourself must make an effort."

- In the West, perhaps the most radical and influential challenge to this view of human nature has been that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau was, for example, the main intellectual inspiration for the French Jacobins, who spearheaded the French Revolution of 1789. For Rousseau, the view of human nature just described is profoundly mistaken. There are in man no lower inclinations, no original sin, as Christianity believes. Man is born good, and his nature remains good. Man as he once existed in his primitive state, before the appearance of society, was a pure, simple, peaceful and happy creature. Such evil as exists in the world is due not to some perversity in man, but to wrongly constructed social norms and institutions. Destroy the bad society, Rousseau contends, and man's goodness will flow.

The view of Rousseau and related thinkers represents nothing less than a revolution in the understanding of morality and social existence. To summarize the change, virtue ceases to be an attribute of character and right willing and becomes instead an attribute of feeling and imagination, a matter of the "heart." The old measure of goodness was responsible individual action. The new measure of goodness is tearful empathy, "pity." No longer is moral virtue thought to result from sometimes discomforting self-scrutiny and a diligent working on self. Since man is by nature good, there is no need for man to guard against his own lower impulses of the moment or to undertake a difficult disciplining of self. Neither is there any need for civilized norms or for social groups and institutions to buttress morality. Liberate man from traditional constraints, and goodness will flow spontaneously from human nature.

...

Man being good, Rousseau and his followers transfer the most significant struggle of human existence from the inner life of the person to society, where evil forces must be defeated by the virtuous to make a good society possible. Rousseau's redefinition of morality has had a profound influence in the modern Western world, where it soon began to invade even the Christian churches. . . .

- But the traditional view of human nature and society has been undermined also by another powerful force, the kind of rationalism that seized the initiative in the West with the Enlightenment. Representatives of that broad intellectual movement have rejected the older view of man as unscientific. Their conception of reason is heavily slanted in the direction of natural science methodology and has little room for what might be called humane wisdom. A better life, they argue, depends on man's applying science and rationality, as they define them, to the problems of life. Improving human existence is a matter of restructuring society in accordance with scientific insights. The issue of moral character as traditionally defined seems to the Enlightenment rationalists marginal or irrelevant.

Rousseauistic sentimental virtue and Enlightenment rationalism might seem to represent entirely different approaches to life, but they share elements that have made them frequent allies Both movements abandon the idea of the morally divided self and belittle the need for moral self-discipline. Selfishness, ruthlessness, avarice and conflict are not due to any chronic weakness of humanity to be moderated by self-restraint, but can be overcome by intelligently remaking the social and political exterior.

- To be conducive to good relations in the long run, political, economic, scientific and other contacts need to be informed and shaped by a morality of self-control and by corresponding cultural discipline and sensibility. . . . What the world most seems to need is for a cosmopolitanism to develop that simultaneously affirms cultural uniqueness and pancultural unity and that does so on the basis of complete moral realism. The needed ethos would be much different from the kind of ecumenism that seeks to promote harmony by having different societies erase whatever is distinctive in favor of an abstract homogeneity. A humanistic cosmopolitanism would, on the contrary, encourage particular peoples to be themselves in the sense of living up to their own highest standards.
- It must be noted here that all of human life is for good or ill and that often cultural diversity is not a power for good. It can manifest narrow-minded provincialism, egotistical partisanship, decadence, recklessness and brutality and thus be a cause of conflict. Variety that is not humanized by concern for the higher life but that expresses mere arbitrary willfulness or eccentricity can give rise to great volatility and worse. Nationalistic self-absorption and arrogance has been a great and frequent source of trouble for mankind in the last two centuries. The great trouble with what is ordinarily called multiculturalism today is that it is quite unable to distinguish between diversity that ennobles and diversity that degrades human life. Postmodernists reject the distinction between good and evil. Many of them advocate a merely "playful" approach to life. They might consider that children are taught not to play with matches.

It is for the sake of peace but also for the sake of a more rewarding life for all that the elites of different societies need to cultivate a common ground in regard to what is most humane in each culture. It should be clear from the argument presented here that the proposed humanizing discipline is very different from trying to replace particularity with an amorphous abstract or sentimental universalism. Cosmopolitan humanism recognizes that distinctive, historically formed cultural identities can manifest one and the same effort—more or less successful in particular cases—to achieve a truly satisfying existence. Representatives of different cultures can reach each other as fellow human beings through their cultural individuality, as shaped by the shared higher striving.

- Humanism simultaneously and indistinguishably cherishes the unity of purpose associated with life's highest potential and the diversity that must of necessity characterize particular attempts to realize it. At their best, moral and cultural creativity affirm the unity by ordering and dignifying the diversity and affirm the diversity by varying and enriching the unity.

From Lecture Two: Preconditions for Transcultural Conciliation

• The past as a living force

There can be no question of societies giving up their distinctiveness. The history of a people profoundly affects its demeanor and its potential, shaping it in countless ways, most of which are not even visible to the superficial eye. A people's past is a source of social cohesion, strength and creativity, a heritage whose greatest achievements need to be understood by each new generation and to be made relevant to new circumstances. . . .

Each people has less than admirable traits and inheritances of which it would do well to try to divest itself, but it also cannot give its best without being itself, without its present efforts somehow expressing, or being genuinely adapted to, its historically evolved cultural identity. Every other kind of effort would be mechanical imitation of alien patterns, an artificial appendage possibly destructive of that identity.

• A complication

Those who would like to foster a spirit of humanism today must face a special complication within and among cultures in the modern world—a tension between traditional ways of living and thinking associated with a religious and moral heritage and anti-traditional ways of living and thinking associated with modern scientific and technological civilization. In the Western world especially, it has long been widely assumed that a culture of enlightenment of the sort that took hold in the West in the eighteenth century will eventually reconstitute all societies on an allegedly rational basis. . . .

The Enlightenment mind underestimates the depth of the moral and cultural problems of civilized life, specifically, the difficulty of achieving self-restraint and order. Though they are in some ways parasitic on an older moral and religious heritage, enlightenment

progressives do not accept what it assumes about man's moral condition. According to that view, what is necessary for the individual and society to become more harmonious and civilized is for individuals to resist the self-indulgence that puts them at odds with other human beings and to make the best of their own gifts. . . . According to the traditional understanding, the moral struggle with self, the slow development of character, is only a part of the protracted work of humanizing existence, but it is the part on which all the others— intellectual, aesthetical, political and economic—ultimately depend for their health. Sociopolitical arrangements can aid but not take the place of the inner moral striving.

•A common ethical center

Though cultures are bound to differ in how they approach and express goodness, truth and beauty, there is among them, as previously discussed, also an historical confluence of moral and cultural sensibility of great potential significance for the future. The ancient civilizations of the world have been in far-reaching agreement about what constitutes admirable human traits. Of particular relevance in a discussion of prospects for peace is the widely shared belief that self-restraint and humility are defining attributes of the exemplary person. That theme was long pervasive in the West. The ancient Greeks warned against the arrogance of *hybris*, against believing yourself the equal of a god. . . . The danger of pride has been stressed even more in Christianity, which has also emphasized that our primary moral obligation is not pointing out weaknesses in others and asking them to change, but diligently to attend to our own weaknesses. Christianity roundly condemns the conceit and moral evasiveness of finding fault in others. In the words of Jesus of Nazareth,

Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will be able to see and take the speck out of your brother's eye.

From Lecture Three: The Union of Universality and Particularity

- It has been suggested in these lectures that life contains intrinsically valuable potentialities that can be realized through effort. The notion of universality associated with this view contains no implication that all individuals and societies ought to conform to a single model of life or that universality can be imposed from without through political engineering. To explain further the conception of universality that is being advanced, it may be helpful to contrast that conception with a universalist ideology that assumes precisely what is here rejected. The ideology in question is influential in the West, perhaps especially in the United States. Its representatives believe that a single political system is appropriate for all societies, and they are prone to advocating intervention in societies that do not conform to their preference. . . .

It is important to understand that this form of triumphalist universalism, though influential in the West, especially in America, is not without its critics and that it is in essential respects alien to the older Western tradition. Specifically, the new Jacobinism is hard to reconcile with the view of life and politics held by the Framers of the U.S. Constitution, men who are widely revered still, even as the older American political tradition erodes. Although proximate in time, the ideas behind the U.S. Constitution adopted in 1789 and those behind the French Revolution of the same year are widely divergent. The U.S. Framers had a view of human nature and society radically different from that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

- Philosophical wisdom is for Plato not a product of Jacobin-type rationality but is indistinguishable from a soundness of moral character built up over many years through a subduing and ordering of the passions. Jacobin reason and virtue, by contrast, are blatantly political. They provide a justification for giving power to persons who claim to want to act for the good of mankind. Reason and virtue of this kind do not mainly manifest a desire to control and improve self but a desire to control and improve others. Jacobin universalism, wherever it occurs, does not have the effect of curbing the will to power but of stimulating it.
- It is important to understand that the Neojacobin interpretation of America's "founding principles" is willfully misleading. Unlike the leaders of the French Revolution of 1789, America's leaders at the time of the war of independence from England in 1776 and the adoption of the Constitution in 1789 were not interested in ideological crusading. Americans hoped to set a good example for others, not impose their will on other peoples. A central purpose of the U.S. Constitution is to restrain power, both that of the people and that of their representatives. . . .

The Neojacobin fondness for abstract homogeneity and deprecation of historical particularity in fact runs counter to old American attitudes and actual American history. . . . The Federal system set up by the Constitution granted the central government only limited and shared sovereignty, leaving power for the most part where it had previously resided, in State and local institutions and, above all, with the people themselves in their private capacities. The aim of the new constitutional arrangement was unity in diversity or, as it might be even better phrased, unity through diversity. The union of States would help harmonize diversity and draw strength from diversity, not abolish it.

- Peaceful relations among individuals, groups and peoples require a robust and resilient check on human arrogance and self-absorption. Besides humility and moderation, genuine mutual respect among cultures presupposes a sense of shared higher humanity and a recognition that this higher humanity can manifest itself in diverse ways. . . .

Abstract universalism means, in practice, a lack of respect for individual human beings and groups in their distinctiveness and for their special needs and opportunities. It does not follow that postmodern "historicism" offers a humane alternative. True, we must recognize the inevitable historicity of human existence, its contextual and contingent character, but postmodernism turns even history into a meaningless notion by its frantic and therefore disingenuous denial of universality. Without some unity or "oneness" of human experience, no consciousness could exist, and without a continuity of human consciousness there could be no history, only disjointed, meaningless fragments.

• Synthesis of universality and particularity

The postmodernists share with the anti-historicist universalists the assumption that universality and particularity are incongruous. The new Jacobins attack historically evolved cultural identities in the name of abstract universality. The postmodernists attack universality in the name of radical historicity. Neither side is able or willing to consider the possibility of synthesis of the universal and the particular. . . .

The dialectical and synthetical relationship between universality and particularity may be explained in the most general terms. The good, the true and the beautiful do in a sense not exist; they are always unfinished. They are qualities that an infinite number of not yet completed acts, thoughts, and works of art may have. But the good, the true and the beautiful do at the same time already exist, as values that spur human beings. Goodness, truth and beauty also have already been created in countless acts, thoughts and works of art—in loving, morally responsible behavior, wise books and lectures, outstanding poems and compositions. These creations are among the influences that now inspire individuals to new creativity.



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