

Vindicating universalism: Pragmatic genealogy and moral progress

Charlie Blunden¹  | Benedict Lane² 

¹Ethics Institute, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

²Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

Correspondence

Charlie Blunden, Ethics Institute, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13, Utrecht 3512, The Netherlands.

Email: c.t.blunden@uu.nl

Benedict Lane, Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK.

Email: bbhl201@exeter.ac.uk

Funding information

H2020 European Research Council, Grant/Award Number: 851043; Arts and Humanities Research Council, Grant/Award Number: 2406794

Abstract

How do we justify the normative standards to which we appeal in support of our moral progress judgments, given their historical and cultural contingency? To answer this question in a noncircular way, Elizabeth Anderson and Philip Kitcher appeal exclusively to *formal* features of the methodology by which a moral change was brought about; some moral methodologies are systematically less prone to bias than others and are therefore less vulnerable to error. However, we argue that the methodologies espoused by Anderson and Kitcher implicitly appeal to the *substantive* principle of “moral universalism.” This sets up the positive project of the paper: an attempt to vindicate moral universalism with a pragmatic genealogy. Using resources from cultural evolutionary theory and the history of ideas we argue that the universalistic norms widely committed to in many societies today have the function of maintaining cooperation in large anonymous groups. Furthermore, while universalistic norms play this instrumental role, their functional benefits are best secured when people following such norms do so for intrinsic rather than instrumental reasons. Finally, having elaborated our pragmatic genealogy, we close by considering how this genealogy should affect our commitment to moral universalism and how it can complement the methods of Anderson and Kitcher.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Author(s). *European Journal of Philosophy* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How does one justify a belief that progress has taken place without circularity? Consider the case of progress in medicine. We could attempt to justify our belief that medicines have improved simply by pointing at better patient outcomes. But this assumes several things. It assumes that our sample of patients is a representative one—that we haven't been selective in our choice of case studies to demonstrate a conclusion we already believe anyway. It assumes that the correlation, if any, between an innovation in medicine and patient outcomes is caused by the medicine, and not some third factor—which is just to assume exactly what we are trying to prove. It also assumes that the outcomes we happen to be tracking exhaust the relevant information—that there aren't any negative side effects omitted from the patient data.

A belief that a particular medicine is effective is much more secure if we appeal to the *methodology* by which medical scientists came to that conclusion. For instance, double-blind clinical trials mitigate confirmation bias and the placebo effect, and thereby establish more firmly that the connection between medicine and patient outcomes is a genuine one. Longitudinal trials track patient outcomes in the much longer term and can establish potential negative side-effects that might outweigh whatever short-term benefits we initially hoped our medicine would bring.

Pragmatist philosophers of moral progress, most notably Elizabeth Anderson and Philip Kitcher, take precisely this approach when it comes to justifying our beliefs about the progressive status of certain social and moral changes. Assessing social changes or changes in moral norms and values as progress always comes with the risk of circularity. Discussing the progressive status of abolition, Anderson asks:

How do we know that this transformation amounts to a case of moral progress? Of course, when we judge matters by the lights of our current moral beliefs it appears to be so. I am interested in how we can know we have improved our morals in a non-question-begging way.

(Anderson, 2014, p. 2)

Moral standards and values have changed across time. To borrow Bernard Williams' phrase, when we assume that our current moral values and standards are superior to those of past societies, and then use these moral values and standards to normatively assess social changes in the past, we need a “theory of error” which can represent (some of) our current moral views as a “cognitive advance” on previous views (Williams, 2005a, p. 11; see also Williams, 2005b, pp. 66–67).

To answer this problem of circularity, Anderson and Kitcher each introduce a methodological account of what justifies a belief that certain social changes and changes in moral norms and views count as moral progress. They claim that by implementing more epistemically virtuous moral methodologies our moral inquiries are more likely to lead to genuine moral learning, and that the outcomes of these moral learning processes are therefore likely to amount to genuine moral progress. A purported advantage of these accounts is that, because of their procedural nature, they do not rely upon the assumed truth of any of our current substantive moral views (Lane, 2023). This methodological mode of justification seems to give us the theory of error we need to have confidence in our moral progress judgments.

In our paper, we first analyze Kitcher's and Anderson's methodological justifications of our judgments of moral progress. We find that, in contrast to their stated aims, their methodology relies on a substantive assumption of “moral universalism.” When we use this term, we refer to a moral view according to which all human beings possess an equal moral status in virtue of their humanity, not dependent on their particular relationship to another individual or group. Moral universalism, so described, is a substantive moral view which has only recently become widely accepted (Stuurman, 2017). As such, the assumption of moral universalism in Kitcher's and Anderson's theories undermine their claim to be noncircular justifications of moral progress judgments. Our aim in the rest of the paper is to see if this problem can be resolved by the use of a different kind of philosophical methodology: pragmatic genealogy. We present a pragmatic genealogy of the kind of moral universalism implicit in Anderson and Kitcher's accounts,

which draws on cultural evolutionary theory and the history of ideas to argue that more universalistic norms play a functional role in promoting cooperation between large groups of strangers. This genealogy aims to vindicate, rather than justify, a commitment to moral universalism based on the functionality of universalistic norms, while also showing that this functionality is best achieved when people are committed to such norms intrinsically, and not only instrumentally. Our genealogy is vindicatory, rather than justificatory, because it aims to demonstrate the pointfulness of universalism as part of the framework within which moral justification takes place. It attempts to inspire confidence in a commitment to universalism rather than attempting to morally justify universalism from within the framework of moral justification. After presenting our pragmatic genealogy, we then reflect, in our final section, on the upshots for our commitment to moral universalism if this genealogical story, or something like it, is an accurate account of the emergence and function of universalistic norms.

2 | MORAL PROGRESS AND METHODOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION

2.1 | Anderson and Kitcher: Methodological justification

In their respective discussions of pre-abolition inquiry into the permissibility of slavery, Anderson and Kitcher both identify the defect of epistemic inequality, a form of epistemic injustice in which epistemic authority is unequally distributed between individuals and groups. For Anderson, epistemic inequality manifests itself in what she calls “authoritarian moral inquiry”—inquiry that is conducted exclusively or predominantly by members of a powerful group, and in which members of less powerful groups are prevented or discouraged from participating (Anderson, 2016, p. 78). For Kitcher, epistemic inequality manifests itself in what he calls the Discovery View of moral inquiry, in which moral facts are “discoverable” only by elite individuals with special access to moral reality (Kitcher, 2021, pp. 15–16; 55–57).

Obviously, these two defective forms of inquiry resemble each other quite a bit. For both authors, epistemic inequality makes moral inquiry prone to the kinds of biases that one might be worried about in medical research, such as selective sample taking and confirmation bias. The epistemic elite have the power to exclude perspectives they do not find convenient, or at least to force those perspectives to be packaged and delivered in ways that make them sound unreasonable or bizarre and sap them of their moral urgency (Anderson, 2014, pp. 7–8; Kitcher, 2021, pp. 58–59). Moreover, they have the power to impose their views onto their societies and therefore are liable to confuse their private views with what is natural or morally obvious (Anderson, 2014, p. 15; Kitcher, 2021, p. 29). The remedy prescribed by both authors is to make moral inquiry more “democratic”—to give equal weight to the moral perspectives of all affected individuals, and to engage in inquiry on terms of mutual sympathy (Anderson, 2016, pp. 93–94; Kitcher, 2021, p. 37).

Just as longitudinal studies seek to account for relevant longer term side effects in assessing a medicine, Anderson and Kitcher both invoke “experiments in living” to account for longer term side effects bearing on the assessment of a moral change. Kitcher deploys experiments in living to demonstrate the kinds of lives certain kinds of people are inherently capable of profitably pursuing (2021, p. 68). For Kitcher, if there is to be any difference between the opportunities available to different subgroups, it cannot be for any reason other than an experimentally demonstrable difference in their capacities to profitably pursue those opportunities. The simple fact of subgroup membership is never enough to justify differences in available opportunities. The only way to gauge members' capabilities is to empower a group to try the available options out in practice and to experience the results of them doing so. Anderson deploys experiments in living as demonstrative of the liveability of alternative moral practices (Anderson, 1991, pp. 21–24; Anderson, 2014, pp. 15–24; Anderson, 2016, pp. 87–92). For Anderson, to accurately assess the results of an experiment in living, we must consider the costs and benefits experienced by all affected individuals (2014, p. 19).

2.2 | Moral universalism

This methodological mode of justifying progress judgments seems to give us the theory of error we need. Previous societies went wrong in their moral progress judgments because their moral methodologies were systematically more likely to lead to mistakes than ours. We are very sympathetic to this view. However, a hitherto-unappreciated problem with this approach is that it legitimizes an appeal to a substantive moral principle by relabeling it as an appeal to an epistemically virtuous methodological maxim. Specifically, we worry that Anderson and Kitcher smuggle in an implicit appeal to the substantive principle of *moral universalism*.

This manoeuvre is captured in a pithy phrase of Anderson's: "the key to moral insight is receptiveness to others in their full humanity" (2016, p. 94). When one attempts to flesh out Anderson's picture of moral insight, it becomes clear that it depends on recognizing, in some sense, the full and equal moral status of all human beings *qua* human beings. The problem is that this recognition is itself a relatively recent moral insight that looks very much like a case of successful moral learning. But if moral universalism belongs to the methodology by which a belief in moral progress is justified, what justifies our belief that the recent emergence of moral universalism is itself an instance of moral progress? The question arises again: where exactly did those who weren't receptive to others in their full humanity go wrong? Do Anderson and Kitcher beg the question after all?

Before we can say anything about the justificatory status of the innovation of moral universalism, we need to get clear about what exactly we mean by it.¹ We propose a (bifurcated) conception of moral universalism as follows:

Negative formulation of moral universalism: The moral standing of an individual human being is not conditional on our relationship with that individual, nor on any beliefs or feelings that we share with that individual, nor on any project in which we and the individual might be mutually engaged.

Positive formulation of moral universalism: Individual human beings possess moral standing by virtue of a characteristic or characteristics internal to, essential to, or constitutive of them as human beings (for example: consciousness, a capacity for pleasure and pain, rationality, or agency, etc.). Furthermore, moral standing is possessed equally by all individuals who possess this internal, essential, or constitutive characteristic.

The positive formulation of moral universalism might be thought to be problematic. As Williams pointed out, it is very difficult to say anything specific about the characteristic underpinning moral universalism that isn't either false or platitudinous (Williams, 2005c, p. 82).² This might appear to present something of a difficulty for us, since "[v]irtually all discourses of common humanity include the assumption or the conclusion that all human beings share one or more attributes, origins, obligations, faculties, or potentialities" (Stuurman, 2017, p. 7). However, we can exempt ourselves from this difficulty by noting that it makes no difference to our vindicatory project which *specific* characteristic underpins moral universalism; in fact, it works *better* if the specific characteristic is left ambiguous. It works better because whichever candidate category is best suited to underpinning cooperation in any particular situation is likely to be context-sensitive—undue specificity about the relevant characteristics would tailor universalism to some practical contexts but not to others, whereas some strategic ambiguity allows universalism to underpin cooperation in a variety of contexts. For our purposes, a "picture" of moral universalism that isn't sharp is exactly what we need (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953, §71).

It is also important to differentiate moral universalism, as characterized above, from a superficially similar idea: moral impartialism. Moral impartialism is the view that morality requires us to be wholly impartial in our treatment of others. It rules out the possibility of any special obligations we might have toward specific others with whom we have a special relationship, for example, friends and family members. Moral universalism, on the other hand, is the view that the source of moral standing is an internal, essential, or constitutive feature of human beings as such. While one's acceptance of moral universalism *will* exert an impartialist pressure on the moral norms one is inclined to

accept—for example, if full moral standing implies possession of certain important rights (Buchanan & Powell, 2018, pp. 13–14), or if it implies a baseline level of trustworthiness (Singh & Hoffman, 2022), then my acceptance of moral universalism will put pressure on me to impartially respect those rights and exhibit more impartial trusting behavior—moral universalism does *not* rule out the possibility of special obligations to specific others with whom we have a special relationship. For example, it is coherent with moral universalism that every individual—by virtue of their humanity—has a moral right, indeed, a moral duty, to preferentially protect and care for their own family to some extent (what could be more human than this?).³ Moral universalism is therefore not synonymous with moral impartialism.

Despite Anderson and Kitcher appealing to moral universalism as a neutral methodological virtue capable of justifying judgments of moral progress, moral universalism is itself subject to substantial diachronic and synchronic disagreement. Siep Stuurman observes that, while this idea “may appear self-evident” today, “[o]ver the long run of history [...] equality and common humanity were far from self-evident.” Rather, “the inferiority of the stranger was self-evident” (Stuurman, 2017, p. 2). Indeed, it is not clear that Stuurman is correct that the idea of universal equal moral standing is self-evident today. In their recent investigation of global differences in universalism (defined as displaying equal trust and altruism to in-group members and strangers),⁴ Cappelen et al. found widespread variation in the level of support for moral universalism (2022, p. 2). What is clear is that human beings have got by and continue to get by *without* the assumption of moral universalism. What is lacking from Anderson's and Kitcher's methodologies is an account of why we ought to regard the emergence of universalism as *progress*—especially given their opposition to assuming the truth of any substantive moral view that has not resulted from their preferred methodology. In Anderson's own words, “[b]y envisioning alternatives, we convert dogmas into *tools*: ideas that we can *choose* to use or not, depending on how well the use of these ideas suits our investigative purposes” (2001, p. 22). In what follows, we will attempt to demonstrate that moral universalism is a tool that best suits our purposes and is therefore preferable to the alternatives.

3 | A PRAGMATIC GENEALOGY OF MORAL UNIVERSALISM

3.1 | Pragmatic genealogy

In this section, we will offer our genealogy of moral universalism. We will not attempt to offer a genealogy which portrays increased commitment to universalism as being driven by improvements in the moral epistemic status of our beliefs,⁵ but instead will present a *pragmatic* genealogy. In the remainder of this subsection, we will describe pragmatic genealogy as a method and give an overview of the genealogy of moral universalism that we will offer.

Pragmatic genealogy is a genealogical method which attempts to show how concepts (broadly understood as “thinking techniques: as the norm-governed patterns according to which we move from perception to thought, from thought to thought, and from thought to action” [Queloz, 2021a, p. 23]) can serve a pragmatic function of fulfilling human needs, where the needs in question may be more or less socio-historically local (Queloz, 2021a, p. 37; Queloz & Cueni, 2021, pp. 762–764). The aim of such genealogies is not to show that the concept in question is true, or that is epistemically justified in some sense, but rather to provide or restore confidence in the use of that concept. Following Matthieu Queloz, we understand “confidence” as follows:

[C]onfidence is what binds us to conceptual practices where the chains of reasons they articulate come to an end; it is the sense of indubitability with which we engage in conceptual practices, putting concepts to work and accepting the considerations that guide and flow from their application.

(Queloz, 2021a, pp. 38–39, italics his)

When pragmatic genealogies vindicate a concept, they provide confidence in engaged concept-use. When we use a concept in an engaged way, “our thoughts and actions” are “guided by the reasons provided by the application of those concepts—reasons which appear, from this engaged perspective, to be simply there” (Queloz & Cueni, 2021, pp. 758–759). Pragmatic genealogies show the connection between such concept use and the fulfillment of the needs of concept users. Showing this connection is also sometimes referred to as showing that such concept-use has a point for concept-users, and we will also adopt this terminology of concepts having a point (Queloz, 2021a, p. 38; Queloz & Cueni, 2021, pp. 765–766).

If this is what pragmatic genealogy accomplishes, then does it reduce the intrinsic value of moral concepts and practices to their instrumental value in fulfilling human needs? Is pragmatic genealogy a form of indirect utilitarianism? We believe the answer is no. This is because pragmatic genealogies often show that the concept under discussion possesses *self-effacing functionality*. A concept is self-effacingly functional when being an engaged user of that concept, or living in a society of engaged concept-users, is functional for fulfilling important needs, but where this functionality is only obtained *insofar as* and *because* the concepts are intrinsically, rather than instrumentally, committed to. In such a case, the concept is functional from a social point of view in the sense that when a sufficient number of people in a community are intrinsically committed to the concept this is instrumental to the satisfaction of individual and collective needs, *but* this functionality does not feature in the motivations of those who are committed to the concept. Furthermore, *if* people's motivations in using the concept *were* primarily instrumental, then the instrumental benefits of the concept for fulfilling human needs would not be obtained (Queloz, 2021a, pp. 11–12, 54–59, 178–187; Queloz, 2021b).

Describing the self-effacing functionality of a concept is intended to restore the confidence of people who *have been* engaged concept-users, but who have run into doubts about their concept-use. It does so by showing both that the relevant conceptual practices deliver important functional benefits, and that these benefits are secured only by treating the reasons arising from the application of the concept as simply there, and not as reducible to some lower level of more fundamental reasons. When a pragmatic genealogy shows that a concept possesses self-effacing functionality, it therefore resolutely does not recommend that we treat this concept as only having instrumental value. Instead, it shows that intrinsic *commitment* to the concept in question has a point *because* it is instrumental to fulfilling important human needs (Queloz, 2021a, pp. 183–185). This is a subtle but important distinction. Showing that the intrinsic commitment has this point aims to move doubters who are considering disengaging from concept-use back toward intrinsic commitment to engaged concept-use: this is what we refer to as vindication. However, when confidently engaging in concept-use, concept-users should be intrinsically rather than instrumentally motivated, and arguments *within* the engaged perspective will make use of justifications that draw on the reasons that are simply there from that perspective.

Pragmatic genealogy typically combines two genealogical methods. First, state-of-nature genealogies which provide idealized simple models of how concepts could have emerged in communities of humans with certain recognizably basic human needs. A state-of-nature genealogy provides an account of how a proto-concept (related to a concept on which we currently rely) would emerge in response to these basic human needs, thus providing a functional account of that proto-concept. Second, historiographical genealogies which provide historically informed accounts of how our particular concepts came to form. When combined with a state-of-nature genealogy, a historiographical genealogy can be used to explain how our current historically specific concept emerged from and is related to the functional proto-concept (Queloz, 2021a; for examples of these two methods at work together, see Lawlor, 2023; Williams, 2002). A pragmatic genealogy is vindicating if, through the process of genealogical reflection, we come to gain or retain confidence in the concept in question because it is shown to serve certain needs which we have and which we may not be able to escape (Queloz, 2021a, p. 40).

Accordingly, the audience for our genealogy are people who depend on cooperation in large anonymous groups to meet many of their needs (both basic and more local) and who have a commitment to moral universalism but are wavering in their confidence in this commitment. Our audience undoubtedly includes pragmatist philosophers of moral progress such as Kitcher and Anderson, who, as we have argued in the previous section, have adopted a

methodology for justifying substantive moral claims which both relies on an assumption of moral universalism and makes that assumption unwarranted—it cannot, in a noncircular way, be justified by their methodology. However, cognizance of this philosophical bind is not the only way that one's confidence in moral universalism could be shaken. An awareness of the cultural and historical contingency of being committed to moral universalism (Stuurman, 2017) could also threaten one's confidence, for instance. For the purposes of delimiting the audience for our genealogy, exactly why one's confidence in moral universalism is shaken is not important.

In our pragmatic genealogy, we will argue that universalistic norms play a functional role in facilitating cooperation in large anonymous groups. This is not a universal human need across all socio-historical contexts, but it is a need which most human societies now have and which they seem unlikely to lose in the near future. We will further argue that the functional role of universalistic norms displays a self-effacing functionality. While universalistic norms deliver functional benefits, they deliver these benefits only if our commitment to them is motivated by something *other* than the benefits they deliver: an intrinsic commitment to the norm itself (Queloz, 2021a, pp. 54–59; Queloz, 2021b, pp. 1366–1376).

We are interested in vindicating the concept of moral universalism, since it is this concept (in the broad sense of a thinking technique) which is at work in Kitcher's and Anderson's methodologies. However, this concept by itself does not enable cooperation in large groups. For this, universalistic norms are required which prescribe universalistic behavior. Universalistic norms can then be regulated or challenged in ways permitted by the concept of moral universalism, which is why this concept is important. Naturally, universalistic norms will never produce universalistic behavior in the full-blooded sense of universalism given by the concept. All norms are violated often, in the sense that people flout them or only partially conform to them. However, as Williams observed in his genealogy of truthfulness, the fact that people often lie does not mean that there is no such thing as practices of sincerity, or that such practices don't have pragmatic benefits. What matters is rather that these deviations from the norm do not reach such a level that the entire norm-governed practice breaks down (Williams, 2002, pp. 85–86). The same can be said about universalism. Imperfect universalistic behavior elicited by universalistic norms still has pragmatic benefits despite being imperfect, at least until violations are so widespread that the norms prescribing the behavior are themselves abandoned. While the concept of universalism itself does not come in degrees, the extent to which universalistic norms are put into practice and the extent to which they deliver pragmatic benefits does.

While we are inspired by Queloz's account of pragmatic genealogy, our account will not stick rigidly to the two different steps of pragmatic genealogy (first a state-of-nature story and then a historical story) described above. Instead, we'll begin with an account of the functional role of universalistic norms, drawing on empirical and theoretical research in evolutionary game theory and cultural anthropology. This first step involves some abstract theoretical descriptions of the pressures on human groups to cooperate in new ways as they increase in scale, and in this sense it resembles the kind of descriptions often found in a state-of-nature story. However, we quickly come back down to earth, combining this theoretical account of the advantages and difficulties of cooperation in large groups with more empirically realistic and historically detailed accounts of the particular ways in which human groups have scaled up in the past. From this point on, our account of the functional role of universalistic norms and behavior is resolutely empirical and historical. We are interested in giving an account of the functional role that universalism has *actually* played, and an account of the conditions under which it plays this role, as we believe that only this account can show the point of our existing practices of universalism.

With a sketch of the functional role of universalism on the table, we'll then turn to the history of internal understandings of universalism, drawing on resources in the history of ideas and cultural history. We will argue that shifts in the internal understanding of moral universalism can be understood as increasingly fitting the functional role of universalistic norms in large anonymous groups. The understanding of universalism that we'll end up with is one which argues that there is some internal feature of human beings (left deliberately ambiguous) which is equal among them and which they possess independently from their social role and relational status. But, historically, this understanding of universalism emerged along with a set of powerful quasi-empirical justifications for acknowledging moral universalism but departing from substantive equal treatment. These justifications can be, and have been, undermined

by contentious political movements and forms of ideology critique and “possibilising” genealogy. Thus, our pragmatic genealogy of universalism is vindicatory but not Panglossian—it explains the role of critique in developing substantively universalist practices.

3.2 | The functional role of universalism

3.2.1 | Existing accounts of the function of universalism

Some philosophers of moral progress have already offered functionalist theories for why universalistic norms would proliferate over time. According to these philosophers, the function of universalistic norms is to enable cooperation in large groups. For instance, Andrés Luco gives a cultural evolutionary account of the rise of “extended benevolence” in terms of its ability to scaffold cooperation in large groups. Extended benevolence is “a human sympathetic capacity that extends to all nations, races, and even to all sentient beings” (Luco, 2021, p. 154) and extendedly benevolent behaviors and institutions are those which “treat the good of all human beings, or even all sentient beings, as having some degree of moral significance”—examples include equal legal human rights and democratic institutions (Luco, 2021, p. 157). One can see here the connection with moral universalism in terms of treating people as moral equals and considering their interests to have equal moral weight. Luco argues that the proliferation of extended benevolence was facilitated by people constructing symbols and rituals which could unify large numbers of people into a single in-group, and that this process both made it possible to extend benevolence to wider and wider groups of people and facilitated larger and larger scale forms of cooperation. Furthermore, as people had increasing connections with more diverse individuals within larger societies, sympathy tended to extend attitudes of extended benevolence (Luco, 2021, pp. 170–175).

In another example, Jeroen Hopster gives an account of how “liberal values” have become increasingly widespread. By “liberal values,” Hopster means an ethical orientation which has three interrelated components: (1) recognition of the moral equality of persons; (2) respect for the dignity of the individual; (3) opposition to gratuitous coercion and violence (Hopster, 2020, p. 1258). For the purposes of exploring universalism, (1) is of most interest here. One of the considerations which Hopster puts forward for why liberal values have become increasingly widespread around the globe in recent history is that they are functional for enabling and stabilising cooperation in societies characterized by increasing size, increasing division of labor, and increasing connection to the global economy (Hopster, 2020, p. 1265).

There is something plausible about these stories. Universalistic norms and institutions do seem to have become more common at the same time as the scale of human cooperation has increased. In addition, the general idea that norms are tools for cooperating is shared by researchers in the social sciences. For instance, Oliver Scott Curry and his colleagues have pioneered a model called “morality as cooperation” which holds that moral norms have the function of enabling mutually beneficial cooperation and avoiding collective action problems. This model has been very successful in explaining empirical patterns in the diversity of moral norms and judgments in cross-cultural samples (Curry, 2016; Curry et al., 2019, 2022). However, as they stand, accounts of the kind offered by Luco and Hopster have significant weaknesses. For one thing, increasing the size of groups (and thus the scale of cooperation) does not have a general tendency to lead to more universalistic norms, as we will discuss below. For another, existing accounts fail to take into account the distinction between the function of more universalistic norms and the internal understandings of universalism which motivate people to follow universalistic norms. We will argue that universalistic norms are functional, but that they have a *self-effacing functionality*, such that they function best when their cooperation-enhancing effects are not what directly motivates people to follow these norms (Queloz, 2021a, pp. 54–59).

3.2.2 | Universalism and cooperation in a world of strangers

Here, we will try to strengthen our case that universalistic norms have the function of enabling cooperation in large anonymous groups. Before we continue, let's get some clarity on what we mean by cooperation. As we're using the term, cooperation is when individuals restrain their narrowly self-interested behavior in order to avoid conflict and engage in mutually beneficial interaction with others, including securing collective action to achieve collective benefits (Curry et al., 2019, p. 107; Heath, 2006; Henrich & Henrich, 2007, pp. 37–39). Cooperation, so understood, is vital for human beings: we cannot meet our basic needs, or many of our nonbasic needs, without systems of cooperation.

Cultural evolutionary theorists have argued that increases in group size create pressures to adopt norms which can enable cooperation at this scale. Groups which increase in size but which do not develop such norms are at risk of fissioning or of being outcompeted in intergroup competition via a number of different mechanisms: including direct violent conflict, prestige-based group transmission, differential reproduction, differential migration, and differential group survival without conflict (Henrich, 2016, pp. 167–169). Norms which are better able to maintain and promote cooperation in larger groups are more likely to stick around during this evolutionary process. So far, this is positive news for the accounts reviewed above. If large groups need cooperative norms in order to stick around, and if universalistic norms promote large-scale cooperation, then there does seem to be a case to be made that universalistic norms proliferate because they promote cooperation in large groups.

However, this is moving too quickly. The problem is that far from always being facilitated by universalistic norms, cooperation within larger groups is often facilitated by powerful kin-based norms and institutions. These are sets of norms which tie “people together in tight interdependent webs supporting high-levels of parochial cooperation and solidarity toward one's kin group—toward one's clan, kindred, or tribe” (Henrich & Muthukrishna, 2021, p. 229; also Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024, p. 1). These norms are successful at enabling large-scale cooperation, but they are groupish rather than universalist: they prescribe cooperation with kin and non-strangers, but noncooperation or even hostility to non-kin and strangers (Enke, 2019, pp. 986–988; Everett et al., 2015; Heath, 2022, p. 41). Indeed, the largest existing global survey of moral universalism⁶ finds that average country-level universalism is strongly negatively correlated with historical and contemporary data on the intensity and tightness of kinship networks (Cappelen et al., 2022).

If cooperation in large groups can be promoted by tight kin-based institutions, then why would there be a pressure for more universalistic norms (which refer less to people's social role or relational position) to emerge? Increases in group size by themselves are unlikely to explain this. Instead, this pressure is most likely to have emerged in the unusual historical context of Western Europe under the influence of the Catholic Church. Beginning in the 5th century CE, the Church introduced a series of marriage restrictions on cousin and affine marriage which severely weakened the kin-based institutions which had previously been widespread (Henrich, 2020; Schulz et al., 2019). In the absence of strong kin-based institutions, new norms and institutions emerged which were more universalistic because they had to support mutually beneficial cooperation among individuals who were strangers to one another. As we will explain below, this cooperation required relationships of trust between strangers.

This link between weakened kinship institutions and more universalistic norms has been developed most fully by Manvir Singh and Moshe Hoffman. Building on the work of Joseph Henrich and his colleagues, they present evidence that mediaeval Europe had a more individualistic and fluid social ecology than many other contemporaneous societies: there was more migration of nuclear families between cities, greater numbers of people living with non-kin, and participation in urban governments was less limited by clan-membership. In this fluid ecology where people were much more likely to interact with strangers, more universalistic norms which hold that people are moral equals regardless of their social role were more functional for enabling mutually beneficial cooperation between strangers and for enabling coalition building in order to achieve collective action. Specifically, *appearing* to follow universalistic norms made one seem like a trustworthy cooperative partner, and when these norms were followed reciprocally

they built social trust between strangers: this social trust then enabled mutually beneficial cooperation (Singh & Hoffman, 2022, p. 6).

Here, we have a historically and empirically informed story about the conditions under which universalistic norms might proliferate. But in order to claim that their cooperation-enhancing effects explain their proliferation, we need evidence that more universalistic norms in fact promote cooperation in large groups. Do we have such evidence? Yes we do. Empirical research into the determinants of economic development suggests that low levels of in-group bias and weaker kinship institutions within groups are predictive of economic development (Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024; Flitton & Currie, 2022). In-group bias here is a composite of a measure of compatriotism, or favoring of co-nationals, a measure of nepotism in private and nonprivate institution hiring and promotion, and a measure of familism, or level of preference for family members—all three of which are highly correlated with one another (Flitton & Currie, 2022, p. 79; Van de Vliert, 2011). To the extent that these instances of in-group bias involve acting in ways that do not take into account what is owed to people with whom one doesn't have a relationship by virtue of their equal moral status, these features are opposed to moral universalism as we've described it. Lower levels of in-group bias were found to be the strongest predictors of institutional quality,⁷ which in turn was the strongest and only statistically significant predictor of modern-day economic productivity. Lower levels of kinship intensity,⁸ which we have already seen are associated with higher average levels of universalism within countries, were found to be tightly and robustly negatively associated⁹ with two different measures of economic prosperity (Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024, p. 2). This negative relationship remained when controlling for a wide range of geographical, cultural, and ecological variables, and was robust to alternative ways of matching the datasets considered in the analysis and to the potential confounders of Christianity and European ancestry (Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024, pp. 21–38).¹⁰ This is suggestive, but it's the mechanisms explaining these correlations which are of most interest. The authors argue that lower levels of in-group bias and kinship intensity facilitate cooperative interactions with strangers, which in turn leads to a greater division of labor and economic specialization (Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024, pp. 43–48; Flitton & Currie, 2022, p. 78).

So we have evidence that, in a social environment with low kinship intensity, more universalistic norms can facilitate cooperation within the group. But if this causal story explains the rise of more universalistic norms, then why would these norms tend toward valuing even people with whom one does not expect to cooperate and who are not part of the group of people following these norms? What explains, and could potentially vindicate, an intrinsic commitment to universalism?

Singh and Hoffman argue that if people espouse universalistic principles to gain trust among potential cooperative partners, then it is severely damaging to their credibility if they are seen to be acting in ways that are inconsistent with those principles. Accusations of inconsistency damage the reputation of people who are claiming to act in principled ways: it not only reduces people's trust in them, but that trust is then very difficult to repair because the violation of principled behavior is diagnostic evidence that that person is not really committed to whatever principles they might espouse. Singh and Hoffman offer evidence that perceived principled behavior does attract trust, that perceived violations of principles lead to large losses of reputation and trust, and that people offer justifications tailored to explain away apparent transgressions (2022, pp. 11–17). The nature of these justifications for departing from substantively universalistic behavior is something that we will discuss in more depth in the next subsection, where we will consider four distinct discourses of inequality which emerged in Early Modern Europe to justify departures from treating people as though they have equal basic moral status. For now, our focus is on how instrumentally useful universalistic norms come to be intrinsically committed to. In the face of the reputational dangers of being found to be a hypocrite, Singh and Hoffman expect that people will either engage in strategic impression management to appear committed to moral universalism, or that they will “internalize and genuinely feel committed to universalistic principles” as long as this is functional for securing trust with potential cooperators (2022, p. 25). It is this latter path that we think provides the route from recognizing the instrumental benefits of universalistic norms in terms of their ability to maintain cooperation among large groups of strangers with weak kinship norms to understanding and vindicating the intrinsic commitment to universalism. For the universalistic norms to have their

cooperation-promoting effects, it is highly effective for individuals to be committed to them and to try to avoid accusations of inconsistency engendered by perceived violations of those norms (Singh & Hoffman, 2022, pp. 11, 23–24). Thus, while these norms might have the function of enabling cooperation with other strangers who follow those norms, this function is self-effacing: one must not appear to be committed to universalistic norms conditional on them enabling cooperation, but must value them intrinsically and be ready to justify apparent deviations.

How this intrinsic understanding of moral universalism has changed over time, and how these changes can be understood relative to the functional understanding outlined here, is the topic of our next subsection.

3.3 | A practical history of Western moral universalism

To tell this story, we will attempt to synthesize and summarize various strands of the narratives presented in three main sources: Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), Siep Stuurman's *The Invention of Humanity* (2017), and Joseph Henrich's *The WEIRDest People in the World* (2020). The overall arc is as follows: if we take the moral worldview of classical antiquity as a starting point, and the post-Enlightenment, secular moral worldview as a vague end-point, there has been a transformation in the way we understand the source of fundamental moral status.¹¹ Very roughly, where once the source of an individual's moral status was their place in or the relationship in which they stood with an external order of things, the source of moral status is now internal to and equally shared by all individuals, an essential or constitutive feature of them as human beings. This transition has been impossibly messy, and any attempt to narrativize it will inevitably be incomplete and distortive. Furthermore, the sources on which we have to draw to reconstruct this imperfect narrative are unrepresentatively explicit, systematized reflections of implicit and unsystematic changes occurring in collective understandings of social practices. Nevertheless, we believe that certain crucial moments in this transformation can be explained—and vindicated—in terms of their contribution to the stable growth of beneficial cooperative networks between strangers.

Our jumping on point will be the understanding of the good life as that lived in harmony with an overarching external normative order, which is common to both Platonic and Stoic thought. This external understanding of the source of moral worth was well-suited to the rigidly hierarchical, circumscribed, and insular polis-centered world of classical Greece. In this environment, the notion of the basic moral equality of human beings is largely absent—what mattered was one's place in the order in which one found oneself, whether conceived of materially (the Stoics) or immaterially (Plato). Fulfilling one's role within these structures seemed far less arbitrary, perhaps even inevitable, when conceived of as the outworking of a profound cosmological or transcendental normative order (Stuurman, 2017, pp. 51–54).

As city states became increasingly embedded in wider imperial structures, the polis-oriented ethical worldview of Plato fell out of favor. More suited to imperial life was the philosophy of the Stoics. As Stuurman puts it, the Stoic “focus on the pursuit of a good and reasonable individual life in a fast-changing and dangerous world” and its more inclusive understanding of humanity and the moral community “that could readily accommodate imperial cosmopolitanism” (Stuurman, 2017, p. 91) were appealing to educated imperial subjects, a way of making sense of life under imperial rule. For the ruling classes, the Stoic picture of wisdom as a choice to assent to an external order provided a model for stable imperial expansion that had no precedent. If an empire could operate as an order to which its subjects willingly assented, as opposed to an order that must be imposed onto its resisting subjects, it could be run far more stably and efficiently, and gainful cooperation achieved much more securely. This is what the Romans did, by granting Roman citizenship to the elites of conquered groups who lay down their arms of their own accord. This worked out beneficially—at least for the elites—and can take part of the credit for an unprecedented period of stability and prosperity during the Pax Romana. This incremental expansion of the moral circle in a universalistic direction enhanced opportunities for beneficial cooperation between imperial subjects in the context of the emerging Roman empire. However, moral status remained something that one possessed by virtue of one's place in an overarching normative order—the order just got a bit bigger.

A further appeal of Stoicism—one which lays the foundations for Stuurman's four discourses of inequality that will later emerge from the Enlightenment—was its suitedness to justifying the imposition of imperial hierarchies of legal and moral standing. This may seem paradoxical. In Stoic thought, it is a constitutive feature of all human beings that they possess the capacities both to see the good and to commit themselves to it. However, it was thought that some are inherently more able to exercise this capacity than others; humanity was divided into “a minority of the wise and the majority of the fools” (Stuurman, 2017, p. 92). Consequently, “natural equality coexists with significant inequalities according to rank, status, gender, power, reputation, and ethnicity” (p. 95). Those lacking the inherent “wisdom” to rejoice in their participation in the cosmic logos “have to be educated by the wise and, failing that, disciplined by the law” (p. 92). Thus, Stoic ideas could simultaneously ground “a cosmopolitan community of potential equals,” the citizen-elites, while also grounding the unavoidable imposition of imperial hierarchies in “the differential rationality of an imperial commonwealth legitimized by a civilizing mission” (p. 96).

Limited cosmopolitanism between Roman citizen-elites also coexisted alongside a contrasting parochialism within the Roman family. Roman social life was structured into rigidly hierarchical family units over which the oldest living male had almost complete authority. One's legal and social status was largely determined by one's location in the family unit, and only heads of families enjoyed full legal rights. Henrich points out some important features of Roman family life in this period that severely limited the prospects of more radical universalism, and thus more expansive forms of cooperation (Henrich, 2020, pp. 162–163). Patriarchal control was upheld by conventions of automatic patrilineal inheritance of familial wealth, marriages arranged by the family patriarch, and frequent marrying of cousins or other close relatives within larger overarching kin-groups. Such conventions “promote a sense of trust that depends on interconnectedness through a web of personal relationships and strong feelings of in-group loyalty toward one's network” and therefore engenders “a sharper distinction between in-groups and out-groups, along with a general distrust of strangers” (2020, p. 205). While these norms stabilized much cooperative activity *within* groups and were a source of social and material security for group members, their inherent in-group bias made it very difficult to capitalize on opportunities for beneficial cooperation *beyond* one's kin network, and therefore imposed a ceiling on achievable cooperative benefits.

The dominance of Stoicism in the Roman Empire ended with the ascendancy of Christianity as the Roman state religion, but Stoic ideas had a lasting influence on Christian doctrine and policy, an influence especially prominent in Augustine. To simplify enormously, Augustine largely took over the Platonic conception of the Good as manifest in an immaterial ontic logos, which he interpreted as the thoughts of God. Augustine adds to the Platonic picture the idea that our capacity to know the thoughts of God is itself enabled through God's grace operating *within us*, enabling our knowledge of God's goodness; as well as being the normative order that structures the cosmos, “God is also and for us primarily the basic support and underlying principle of the knowing activity” (Taylor, 1989, p. 129). Approximately, our personal capacity to know God's goodness is itself enabled by God, who gives shape and sense to our internal, reflective life. Thus, the human capacity for knowledge and understanding—a capacity that is ours and which goes on inside of ourselves—is imbued with the transcendent dignity of the divine. This is the first major philosophical expression of the idea that moral dignity—at least partially and indirectly—resides *inside* the individual, as opposed to residing wholly in *the relationship* in which an individual stands with an external order of things. The Stoic notion of freedom to reject or rejoice in the order of things informs Augustine's understanding of the Christian notion of sin. Like the Stoics, Augustine grants human beings the freedom to accept or refuse their own internal capacity to know and love God—this is a free choice of the individual. In Augustine's writing on sin, the moral significance of inner characteristics, such as one's capacity for knowledge and understanding and the quality of one's will, receives an influential early expression. As we'll see, Augustine's emphasis on inner characteristics reflects a concurrent rapid and radical shift in moral understandings across mediaeval Europe brought about by a fundamental transformation of its social environment.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Western Roman empire, Christianity stuck around. Augustinian ideas gave shape to the doctrine and policy of the mediaeval Catholic church. Internalizing the source of one's access to knowledge of God's goodness transformed every human being into a potential convert, accelerating the spread of

Christianity, creating religiously-mediated opportunities for beneficial cooperation on an unprecedented scale—this was universal equality of human moral *potential*, if not of moral *actuality*, cohering nicely with the Pauline vision of the Church's saving mission. However, as noted by Henrich, the outward universalistic pressure exerted by Augustinian-Christian ideas about the equal possession of morally relevant inner characteristics was constrained by powerful kin-based networks and institutions that were characteristic of the pre-Christian Roman Empire and mediaeval Europe in general (2020, pp. 161–163). In such kin-dominated social worlds, individual behavior was so structured by social sanction that knowledge of an agent's location in a social order is a far more reliable determinant of behavior than is knowledge of their personal beliefs or intentions (pp. 219–220). In such a world, the Augustinian-Christian emphasis on inner characteristics in evaluating moral standing had very little practical benefit to offer. To catch on, existing kin-based social structures had to be disrupted.

The mediaeval Church set out to pull the rug out from under Europe's long-standing kin-based institutions, in the form of what Henrich calls the Church's "Marriage and Family Programme" (MFP). As noted, the kin-centric social world of mediaeval Europe was supported by groupish conventions of marriage and inheritance. The MFP took aim at both. Against the former the MFP introduced prohibitions on marrying blood relatives (cousins, etc.), affinal kin (in-laws), spiritual kin (Godparents), and non-Christians. Against the latter, it introduced the notion of "illegitimate heirs" (offspring born outside of monogamous, Christian marriage), encouraged individual ownership of property, and established the practice of testament-based inheritance. The MFP did much to improve the fortunes of moral universalism. For one thing, it massively devalued the evaluative significance of group membership

by (1) establishing a pan-tribal social identity (Christian), (2) compelling individuals to look far and wide to find unrelated Christian spouses, and (3) providing a new set of norms about marriage, inheritance, and residence that would have set a foundation on which diverse tribal communities could begin to interact, marry, and coordinate.

(Henrich, 2020, p. 186)

For another thing, by cutting individuals loose from the kin-based hierarchies that had been largely determinate of their moral and legal standing, the MFP "bolstered people's use of mental states in making both moral and legal judgments of others" (2020, p. 221). In this utterly transformed social environment, inner capacities, potentialities, and dispositions came to occupy the foreground of people's evaluative consciousness while overarching familial or social structures were relegated to the background. Over the several centuries across which it was implemented, the MFP dismantled the primary obstacle to the spread of the Church's particular strain of moral universalism (while simultaneously consolidating the Church's power and wealth [185]). Augustinian-Christian ideas about moral character were an essential interpretative and predictive tool in this radically different social environment. Inner characteristics became the name of the cooperative game.

By the second millennium CE, the MFP had thoroughly transformed the social world of Western Europe. The momentum of the scientific revolution, and the influence of its greatest champions, Galileo and Bacon, had an undermining effect on the Platonic- and Stoic-inspired understandings of the material world and our knowledge of it. Within the new scientific worldview, "the order of ideas ceases to be something we find and becomes something we build" (Taylor, 1989, p. 144). Rationality becomes an *activity*, not an *orientation*, as it was for Plato, the Stoics, and for Augustine. The idea of an external normative order therefore became redundant and was summarily abandoned. This abandonment was most notable and influential in Descartes. While Descartes did not reject the existence of God, he did reject the idea that there was a divine order to the cosmos, and that our capacity to know it was empowered by God's grace operating within us, like Augustine did. Instead, the human capacity for knowledge and understanding came to compete with Godliness as a fundamental source of moral worth in its own right.

It was the context of the broader social environment in which Cartesian thought was embedded and which it reflected—that of early modern Western Europe in the wake of the MFP—in which it became thinkable that rational agency all by itself could compete with Godliness as a fundamental source of moral worth. The rational agent "stands

in a place already hollowed out for God; he takes a stance to the world that befits an image of the Deity” (Taylor, 1989, p. 315). Eventually, the moral dignity of the human being—understood as rational agent—came to be seen by many as real and genuine only if the source of that dignity was the human being itself, not God.

The secularization of moral dignity, and the expansion of moral universalism it engendered, can be explained (and vindicated) by drawing attention to its role in overcoming obstacles to beneficial cooperation in the context of 17th and 18th century Western Europe. Religiously neutral arguments came to serve as an Archimedean point from which to mediate persistent and deleterious religious disputes between Catholics and Protestants that led to intractable division and violent conflict, both of which held back beneficial cooperation. Furthermore, the influence of the church on society underwent significant decline in this period. Early modern Europe witnessed the emergence of alternative media and accessible intellectual spaces beyond the control of the church, among which Stuurman lists “academies, colleges, salons, learned journals, popular magazines, reading clubs, coffee houses, encyclopedias, dictionaries, observatories, and laboratories” (Stuurman, 2017, p. 272). The demonopolization of church influence over public life and thought was mirrored by the demonopolization of theism as the only intelligible source of fundamental moral status. The public no longer relied on the church to the same extent to make sense of their lives; an outworking of this was that God was no longer needed to make sense of the moral dignity of the human being. It made sense, for the first time, to think that human beings had moral worth *qua human beings*.

Unlike Plato and the Stoics, Descartes did not divide humanity up into those who inherently have wisdom and those who lack it. Descartes' explanation for differential rational acuity among human beings, writes Stuurman, was that certain individuals “use their reason with more application and method. Method is not naturally given, but it can be learned, in principle by everyone” (2017, pp. 272–273); “Every human person is capable of sifting the evidence and distinguishing truth from error” (p. 273). This degree of epistemic egalitarianism was unprecedented, and became possible only once rationality had ceased to be conceived of as an orientation toward an overarching order and had come to be seen as a skill, the necessary tools for which are possessed, so Descartes asserted, naturally and equally by all. And because the capacity for reason is now a free-floating source of moral dignity, Descartes' epistemic egalitarianism was accompanied by a radically new kind of moral universalism—the kind captured by our definition given above.

The Cartesian demand for application and method in one's reasoning reflected a new social pressure toward consistency that arose in the aftermath of the MFP—including consistency in the way one exercised one's commitment to moral universalism. The practical demand for nonstrategic goodwill toward potential cooperation partners that arose in the wake of the MFP became bound up with perceived compliance with universalistic moral values. Perceived consistency mattered practically; a reputation for exercising one's commitment to the equal moral status of strangers only when it was strategic for one to do so would make one an unattractive cooperative partner. To be an attractive cooperation partner therefore meant demonstrating genuine commitment to the moral equality of all human beings. This new social pressure shaped discourse on permissible unequal treatment. For instance, Poulain de la Barre set out to extend the Cartesian demand to theories of natural law (Stuurman, 2017, pp. 273–279). Natural law theories sought “to remove the religious dynamite from the body politic and to redefine the legitimacy of the political regime in secular terms” (2017, p. 270), appealing to “natural differences” between groups to justify unequal treatment. Poulain accused philosophers of natural law who appealed to the “naturalness” of male supremacy of having “unthinkingly attributed to nature a distinction that is merely grounded in custom” (p. 274). If deviations from basic moral equality were to be tolerated in practice, one must now have clearly articulable reasons for doing so.

Cartesianism and the MFP thereby created a dialectical environment in which “equality received the benefit of the doubt while inequality had to be justified by rational argument” (Stuurman, 2017, p. 259). However, this did not remove people's incentives to dominate and exploit others, and, consequently, the Enlightenment also witnessed demand for and the emergence of new discourses of inequality to rationalize the pursuit of these interests and deflect charges of hypocrisy (Williams, 2023). These discourses aimed to explain, to the requisite standards of application and method of reasoning, how inequality in practice could be justified given the shared premise of equality of fundamental moral status. Stuurman divides these discourses into four categories (2017, pp. 259–260):

1. *Political economy*—justifications of social inequality in terms of the utility and productivity of unequal institutions.
2. *Biopsychological theories of gender*—justifications of differentiated roles for men and women based on the “natural” differences between the sexes.
3. *Racial classification*—justifications of racial hierarchy on “scientific racist” grounds of the essential differences between populations.
4. *Philosophical history*—developmental theories of human history which arrayed different human groups on a temporal scale of advancement, with groups being more or less advanced in their stage of human development.

It is through the post-Enlightenment lens that the moral universalism built into Anderson's and Kitcher's vindicating methodologies appears self-evident, and it is precisely these “discourses of inequality” that Anderson and Kitcher—in the vein of Poulain de la Barre—seek to dispel, by showing that they fail to meet the requisite standards of application and method of reasoning. But in the context of the genealogical story we have presented, it becomes apparent that the heart of Anderson's and Kitcher's methodological mode of vindication—the idea that “the key to moral insight is the recognition of others in their full humanity”—was made thinkable, never mind self-evident, by a long sequence of cooperation-enhancing but contingent transformations in social understandings of the source of fundamental moral status, from outside the agent to within them.

4 | WHAT'S THE POINT OF MORAL UNIVERSALISM?

We have ended up with an understanding of moral universalism which appeals to vaguely specified internal characteristics of human beings as grounds for their equal moral status, independently of our social relationship to them. We've also presented some theory and empirical evidence in favor of the view that commitment to this kind of universalism plays a functional role in enabling mutually beneficial cooperation among large anonymous groups characterized by weak kinship institutions.

Does reflection on this functional role of universalistic norms inspire confidence in moral universalism? To a large extent, we think the answer is yes. We do in fact live in such large anonymous societies, and their existence seems unlikely to change in the near future. The ability of such societies to serve our basic needs, and our more historically local needs as well, is dependent on cooperation being secured at a number of levels. One such level is the functioning of market economies, which requires vast networks of cooperation among strangers (Enke, 2023; Seabright, 2010). Another is the organization of the welfare state, which again requires cooperation among many strangers and which has been shown to be politically supported by people with strong support for moral universalism (Enke et al., 2023; Heath, 2022, Chap. 1). To the extent that universalistic norms are functional for securing this cooperation, it seems that this functionality should inspire confidence in these norms. That our example institutions functionally rely on moral universalism is not to say that these institutions are beyond criticism—naturally, both market economies and welfare states have many critics. Our point is only that, as a matter of fact, these institutions both serve our existing needs and rely on universalistic norms to function, which does not imply that they could not be replaced by superior institutions.

To be clear, our genealogy cannot be said to provide a *moral* justification for moral universalism. Rather, it provides only a *pragmatic vindication* of our practices of moral justification as they currently stand, in which moral universalism functions as a constitutive rule. Moral universalism is therefore not itself morally justified (nor is it unjustified); rather, it belongs to the framework within which inquiry into the justificatory status of moral beliefs makes sense for us. As Wittgenstein put it, “the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn” (1969, §341). In a modern world of large anonymous societies, moral universalism is one of these hinges.¹² We sought to generate confidence in the use of this hinge in our genealogy, but most of the time moral universalism is something we assume for the

sake of conducting moral inquiry. To paraphrase Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, the same moral proposition is treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing (1969, §198).

The argument we've offered is that *genuine intrinsic commitment* to universalistic norms is required for their cooperation-enhancing function in large anonymous societies to be secured. If people are seen to be espousing and behaving in accordance with such norms only opportunistically, or strategically, then their function of securing trust among anonymous potential cooperators is vitiated. But perceptions of inconsistency can be evaded if one's *prima facie* deviations from universalism can be dressed up to appear consistent with genuine commitment to universalism. As Stuurman notes, a modern understanding of moral universalism emerged alongside forms of discourse which sought to accept universalism in theory while justifying departures from universalism in practice. Our genealogy therefore describes the painful emergence of *new rules for the game of moral justification*, in which persuasive positive reasons are needed to justify the imperfect implementation in practice of moral equality among human beings, an equality *on which the game was premised*. These justificatory discourses of inequality are the targets of Anderson's and Kitcher's methodological critiques: the discourses underpinning these justifications are afflicted by the forms of bias that they identify.

To conclude, the point of our genealogy is to restore confidence in, or alleviate anxiety about, our commitment to moral universalism. Looked at in this way, our genealogy leaves everything as it is, from the engaged perspective (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953, §124). Reassured, we can get on with the important business of critiquing and debating purported justifications for treating people in unequal ways. From within the perspective afforded by moral universalism, we can understand successful critiques of purported justifications for inequality as cases of genuine epistemic progress, and therefore as cases of successful moral learning. Furthermore, the goal of making such epistemic progress is well-served by the democratic procedures that Anderson and Kitcher argue for. Including multiple and diverse viewpoints, under certain idealizing assumptions, would (other things being equal) make it more likely that the aforementioned kind of epistemic progress occurs. What our genealogy shows is that the universalistic moral worldview that makes this kind of moral-epistemic progress possible, while contingent, is preferable to alternatives. It serves basic and local needs that are likely to persist into any imaginable future. We can therefore move past our doubts and get on with it.

CREDIT STATEMENT

Charlie Blunden: conceptualisation (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review and editing (equal). Benedict Lane: conceptualisation (equal), writing - original draft (equal), writing - review and editing (equal).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank participants and organisers at the 2023 MANCEPT workshop 'Causal Histories: The Role of Genealogical inquiry in Moral, Social and Political Philosophy' at Manchester University and at a 2024 Ethics Institute Colloquium at Utrecht University. We would also like to thank Jan Pieter Beetz, Nigel Pleasants, Matthieu Queloz, and Hanno Sauer for their constructive comments and guidance which greatly enhanced the quality of this article. Finally, we would like to thank our two anonymous reviewers for their useful criticisms and comments.

ORCID

Charlie Blunden  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7027-2269>

Benedict Lane  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4764-8598>

ENDNOTES

¹ We aspire to ground our vindicatory genealogy of moral universalism in the best current social scientific data on the subject. Our conception of moral universalism therefore needs to be appropriately continuous with the relevant conceptions of moral universalism operative in that literature. Some social scientists define moral universalism as the view that "there is a single true morality" (Rose & Nichols, 2019, p. 61). We eschew this definition for several reasons. For one thing, this would rule out Anderson and Kitcher as moral universalists by virtue of their pragmatic openness to pluralism

(e.g., Kitcher, 2011, pp. 210, 249). For another, it is not unthinkable that the “single true morality” might grant full moral status only to a particular group of beings by virtue of their belonging to that group and nothing else—for instance, as “God’s chosen people.” Other social scientists distinguish between universalist and group-based values. Universalist values are said to include “concepts such as ‘justice’, ‘fairness’, ‘equality’ and ‘tolerance’, among others” as opposed to group-based values which “include ‘family’, ‘home-land’, ‘obedience’ and ‘cohesion’, among others” (Enke, 2023, p. 135). While it seems right that values such as “family” and “homeland” are necessarily parochial, we are also reluctant to characterize “justice,” “fairness,” “equality,” and “tolerance” as necessarily universalist values. It is not nonsense to speak of such values as being truncated to in-group members: “What have they ever done for the group?” is an intelligible question about fairness. It also would not be a conceptual mistake to care deeply about inequality within one’s group, while being ambivalent about inequality beyond the group. Rawls was not making a *conceptual* mistake about justice, fairness, and equality when he advocated justice as fairness within nations but not between nations (1993). Rather, as our definition makes clear, we take universalism to be about the *scope* of applicability of these values: justice, fairness, equality, and tolerance *among whom*? Our conception allies with alternative social scientific definitions of moral universalism, as the view that “moral codes” are “universally applicable to all peoples” (Henrich, 2020, p. 146), or as the practice according to which “one’s neighbor, friend, or cousin is treated in the same way (and trusted by the same amount) as a random stranger” (Enke et al., 2022, p. 3590).

² See also other entries in the ongoing basic equality debate about how universal moral equality is to be understood, for example, Steinhoff (2015), Phillips (2021), Killmister (2023), Thakkar (2023).

³ Where does one draw the line between legitimate preferential care for and protection of one’s own family and illegitimate nepotism? From the perspective of moral universalism, the answer to this question depends on whether the preferential treatment of one’s own family involves violating or not respecting one’s obligations that one has toward nonrelated people by virtue of their equal moral status. We think this question is an interesting open moral problem, made tractable by a shared commitment to moral universalism. This is coherent with the conclusions for which we argue below.

⁴ The global universalism survey contains nationally representative samples from 60 countries (10 countries from Western Europe, 8 from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 7 from the Middle East and North Africa, 11 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 11 from the Americas, 4 from South Asia and 9 from Southeast Asia and the Pacific), representing 85% of the global population and 90% of the global economy. $n \approx 64,000$ (Cappelen et al., 2022, pp. 2, 8).

⁵ Such as the genealogy for emancipative values offered by Smyth (2020).

⁶ Defined, in this survey, as the degree to which people think that their moral obligations extend equally to everyone, and, in behavioral terms, to what degree people’s decisions reflect that they give the same weight to the interests of strangers as to those of in-group members (Cappelen et al., 2022, p. 1).

⁷ The institutional quality variable is based on the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators database and uses the composite variable “rule of law.” This composite variable is a measure of individuals’ confidence in the rules of their society and the extent to which they abide by those rules, with a particular focus on the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts (Kaufmann et al., 2009, see especially pp. 77–78 for the sources of the rule of law data).

⁸ The authors measure kinship intensity by constructing a Kinship Intensity Index (KII). The KII combines data from the Ethnographic Atlas (containing coded variables for over 1200 pre-industrial societies—see Bahrami-Rad et al., 2021 for evidence of the validity of this dataset) and global language phylogenies for over 5000 languages, to aggregate “measures of societies’ intensive kinship practices across five dimensions that capture preferences or norms related to cousin marriage, polygamy, co-residence of extended families, lineage organization, and community organization.” As an alternative measure of kinship intensity, they also used genetic data from the Human Origins dataset to estimate the average inbreeding coefficient for diverse contemporary populations. This is a useful measure of kinship intensity because it is an indirect measure of the prevalence of cousin marriage within a population, and this is a practice associated with high levels of kinship intensity (Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024, p. 3).

⁹ Spearman’s $\rho = -0.37$, $p = 0.001$, $n = 74$ countries.

¹⁰ They also investigate the possibility of reverse causality: that economic prosperity causes kinship intensity to decrease. They run four tests to assess whether reverse causality is present in this case, concluding that it is unlikely to be (Bahrami-Rad et al., 2024, pp. 41–43).

¹¹ Regrettably and with some hesitation, we will make the choice to focus our narrative on the emergence of these ideas in the specifically Western philosophical and religious tradition. This, of course, leaves out plenty of interesting and relevant details in the story of moral universalism worldwide. We make this choice because our interest is moral universalism as it is put to work by Anderson and Kitcher in their pragmatic moral methodologies, and we believe it is the Western strand of universalistic moral thought that has influenced these authors to the greatest extent.

¹² By invoking the language of hinges, we by no means want to imply that our confidence in moral universalism arises solely from its “hinge status” in our methodology of moral justification; this would be a misreading of the argument and an oversimplification of the conclusion of this paper. As Wittgenstein makes clear throughout *On Certainty*, confidence can come in many forms. Beyond the confidence bestowed upon a commitment to moral universalism by its status as a hinge in our moral methodology, Michael Williams lists three other factors that can place a commitment beyond reasonable doubt in a particular context: economic, dialectical, and semantic (2007, 100f). To different degrees, our arguments in this paper put moral universalism beyond reasonable doubt in each of these three additional ways. First, and perhaps most significantly, given that our continued flourishing as a species depends on the kind of cooperation that moral universalism now makes possible, we simply cannot afford to question it. This view is supported by the discussion of subsections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2. Second, given the arc of the narrative presented in subsection 3.3, the equal moral status of others is simply no longer an open question. The “conversational score,” in Lewis’s (1979) sense, has developed in such a way that moral universalism now belongs to the background of settled issues. Third, the fact that human beings have moral worth qua human beings has come to be regarded as if it were an analytic fact. Someone who flat-out denies that to be human is to have intrinsic moral value sounds either insincere or crazy. While this quasi-semantic form of commitment has not played a large role in the story we have told in this paper, it can perhaps be viewed as a consequence of that story. The philosophical history of human moral equality is also the etymological history of the word “human.” Thus, we endorse a pluralistic understanding of the ways in which the commitment to moral universalism has come to be regarded as beyond reasonable doubt. Nevertheless, that commitment functions as a hinge on which moral inquiry now turns.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, E. (1991). John Stuart mill and experiments in living. *Ethics*, 101(1), 4–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381719>
- Anderson, E. (2001). Symposium on Amartya Sen’s philosophy: 2 unstrapping the straitjacket of ‘preference’: A comment on Amartya Sen’s contributions to philosophy and economics. *Economics and Philosophy*, 17(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0266267101000128>
- Anderson, E. (2014). *Social movements, experiments in living, and moral progress: Case studies from Britain’s abolition of slavery*. The University of Kansas.
- Anderson, E. (2016). The social epistemology of morality. In M. S. Brady & M. Fricker (Eds.), *The epistemic lives of groups: Essays in the epistemology of collectives* (pp. 75–94). Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198759645.003.0005>
- Bahrami-Rad, D., Beauchamp, J., Henrich, J., & Schulz, J. F. (2024). Kin-based institutions and economic development. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4200629>
- Bahrami-Rad, D., Becker, A., & Henrich, J. (2021). Tabulated nonsense? Testing the validity of the ethnographic atlas. *Economics Letters*, 204, 109880. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2021.109880>
- Buchanan, A., & Powell, R. (2018). *The evolution of moral progress: A biocultural theory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Cappelen, A. W., Enke, B., & Tungodden, B. (2022). *Moral universalism: Global evidence*. CESifo Working Paper Series. https://ideas.repec.org/p/ces/ceswps/_10110.html
- Curry, O. S. (2016). Morality as cooperation: A problem-centered approach. In T. K. Shackelford & R. D. Hansen (Eds.), *The evolution of morality* (pp. 27–51). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-19671-8>
- Curry, O. S., Alfano, M., Brandt, M. J., & Pelican, C. (2022). Moral molecules: Morality as a combinatorial system. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 13, 1039–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-021-00540-x>
- Curry, O. S., Chesters, M. J., & van Lissa, C. J. (2019). Mapping morality with a compass: Testing the theory of ‘morality-as-cooperation’ with a new questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 78, 106–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2018.10.008>
- Enke, B. (2019). Kinship, cooperation, and the evolution of moral systems. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(2), 953–1019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz001>
- Enke, B. (2023). Market exposure and human morality. *Nature Human Behavior*, 7, 134–141. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01480-x>
- Enke, B., Rodríguez-Padilla, R., & Zimmermann, F. (2022). Moral universalism: Measurement and economic relevance. *Management Science*, 68(5), 3590–3603. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2021.4086>
- Enke, B., Rodríguez-Padilla, R., & Zimmermann, F. (2023). Moral universalism and the structure of ideology. *Review of Economic Studies*, 90(4), 1934–1962. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdac066>
- Everett, J. A. C., Faber, N. S., & Crockett, M. (2015). Preferences and beliefs in ingroup favoritism. *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 9(15), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2015.00015>
- Flitton, A., & Currie, T. E. (2022). Assessing different historical pathways in the cultural evolution of economic development. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 43(1), 71–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2021.11.001>

- Heath, J. (2006). The benefits of cooperation. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 34(4), 313–351. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2006.00073.x>
- Heath, J. (2022). *Cooperation and social justice*. University of Toronto Press.
- Henrich, J. (2016). *The secret of our success: How culture is driving human evolution, domesticating our species, and making us smarter*. Princeton University Press.
- Henrich, J. (2020). *The WEIRDest people in the world: How the west became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Henrich, J., & Muthukrishna, M. (2021). The origins and psychology of human cooperation. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72, 207–240. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-081920-042106>
- Henrich, N., & Henrich, J. (2007). *Why humans cooperate: A cultural and evolutionary explanation*. Oxford University Press.
- Hopster, J. (2020). Explaining historical moral convergence: The empirical case against realist intuitionism. *Philosophical Studies*, 177(5), 1255–1273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-019-01251-x>
- Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., & Mastruzzi, M. (2009). *Governance matters VII: Aggregate and individual governance indicators 1996–2008*. World Bank Policy Research Working Papers. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/ar/598851468149673121/pdf/WPS4978.pdf>
- Killmister, S. (2023). Constructing moral equality. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 9(4), 636–654. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.24>
- Kitcher, P. (2011). *The ethical project*. Harvard University Press.
- Kitcher, P. (2021). In J.-C. Heilinger (Ed.), *Moral progress*. Oxford University Press.
- Lane, B. (2023). Prospects for pure procedural moral progress. *Inquiry*, 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174x.2023.2220753>
- Lawlor, K. (2023). A genealogy of reasonableness. *Mind*, 132(525), 113–135. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzac036>
- Lewis, D. (1979). Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8, 339–359. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00258436>
- Luco, A. (2021). The cultural evolution of extended benevolence. In J. de Smedt & H. de Cruz (Eds.), *Empirically engaged evolutionary ethics* (pp. 153–177). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68802-8_8
- Phillips, A. (2021). *Unconditional equals*. Princeton University Press.
- Qeloz, M. (2021a). *The practical origins of ideas: Genealogy as conceptual reverse-engineering*. Oxford University Press.
- Qeloz, M. (2021b). The self-effacing functionality of blame. *Philosophical Studies*, 178(4), 1361–1379. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-020-01479-y>
- Qeloz, M., & Cueni, D. (2021). Left Wittgensteinianism. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 29(4), 758–777. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12603>
- Rawls, J. (1993). The law of peoples. *Critical Inquiry*, 20(1), 36–68. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448700>
- Rose, D., & Nichols, S. (2019). From punishment to universalism. *Mind & Language*, 34(1), 59–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12191>
- Schulz, J. F., Bahrami-Rad, D., Beauchamp, J. P., & Henrich, J. (2019). The church, intensive kinship, and global psychological variation. *Science*, 366(6466), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau5141>
- Seabright, P. (2010). *The company of strangers: A natural history of economic life*. Princeton University Press.
- Singh, M., & Hoffman, M. (2022). *Individualist moral principles and the expansion of the moral circle*. SocArXiv Papers. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/pqem7>
- Smyth, N. (2020). A genealogy of emancipatory values. *Inquiry*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174x.2020.1758766>
- Steinbock, U. (Ed.). (2015). *Do all persons have equal moral worth: On 'basic equality' and equal respect and concern*. Oxford University Press.
- Stuurman, S. (2017). *The invention of humanity: Equality and cultural difference in world history*. Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self*. Harvard University Press.
- Thakkar, J. (2023). Basic equality: A Hegelian resolution. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12878>
- Van de Vliert, E. (2011). Climato-economic origins of variation in ingroup favoritism. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(3), 494–515. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022110381120>
- Williams, B. (2002). *Truth and truthfulness: An essay in genealogy*. Princeton University Press.
- Williams, B. (2005a). Realism and moralism in political theory. In G. Hawthorn (Ed.), *In the beginning was the deed: Realism and moralism in political argument* (pp. 1–17). Princeton University Press.
- Williams, B. (2005b). Human rights and relativism. In G. Hawthorne (Ed.), *In the beginning was the deed: Realism and moralism in political argument* (pp. 62–74). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, B. (2005c). From freedom to liberty: The construction of a political value. In G. Hawthorne (Ed.), *In the beginning was the deed: Realism and moralism in political argument* (pp. 75–96). Princeton University Press.

- Williams, D. (2023). The marketplace of rationalizations. *Economics & Philosophy*, 39(1), 99–123. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267121000389>
- Williams, M. (2007). Why (Wittgensteinian) contextualism is not relativism. *Episteme*, 4(1), 93–114. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.1.93>
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). In P. M. S. Hacker & J. Schulte (Eds.), G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, & J. Schulte (Trans.) *Philosophical investigations*. Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). In G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright (Eds.), D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe (Trans.) *On certainty (über Gewissheit)*. Blackwell.

How to cite this article: Blunden, C., & Lane, B. (2024). Vindicating universalism: Pragmatic genealogy and moral progress. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12975>