Value Generalization[*]

Limitations and Possibilities of a Communication about Values

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Wertegeneralisierung – Grenzen und Möglichkeiten der Kommunikation über Werte

This contribution is an attempt to demonstrate that the concept of 'value generalization' is of considerable importance for moral philosophy and therefore hopefully also for those interested in business and economic ethics. The importance of this concept lies in its relevance for what one could call 'the logic of a communication about values'. This logic is different from the structure of rational-argumentative discourse in a strict sense, but also far from a mere clash of values or identities or civilizations or any form of irrationalist decisionism as if ultimate values could only be chosen in an existential way without any reasoning and intersubjective plausibility.

Keywords: Value Generalization, Rational-argumentative Discourse, Communication about Values

This article is an attempt to demonstrate that the concept of 'value generalization' – a concept that has been developed in one of the most ambitious sociological theories of social change – is of considerable importance for moral philosophy and therefore hopefully also for those interested in business and economic ethics. The importance of this concept lies in its relevance for what one could call 'the logic of a communication about values'. My claim is that this logic is different from the structure of rational-argumentative discourse in a strict sense, but also far from a mere clash of values or identities or civilizations or any form of irrationalist decisionism as if ultimate values could only be chosen in an existential way without any reasoning and intersubjective plausibility. I will proceed in four steps: After a reflection on the limitations of rational discourse (1) and a typology of the alternatives to the idea of an inevitable clash of values and identities (2) I will present the concept of 'value generalization' in some detail (3) and then illustrate it a little bit (4) by mentioning at least certain empirical processes in the field of value change and value innovation to which it can be applied.

(1) Why do we need a specific theory of the communication about values? Why can't we be satisfied given the elaboration of an extremely sophisticated version of discourse ethics in the works of the German philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Karl-

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Otto Apel? Inspired by the path-breaking work of Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of American pragmatism, but also taking up suggestions from analytical philosophers and linguists and above all from Stephen Toulmin's (1958) work *The Uses of Argument*, these two thinkers have elaborated a comprehensive model of rational-argumentative discourse about cognitive, normative and other validity claims. This model can certainly be considered the most consistent such theory that is currently available. The basic idea here is that all rational discourse has its point of departure in speech acts in which a speaker pursues the illocutionary goal to convince the listener that his or her implicit or explicit validity claims are justified. The listener is then expected not simply to listen, but to accept the validity claim – or otherwise to give better reasons why he or she cannot or can only partially agree. In this case the speaker is confronted with an alternative validity claim which implies that he is now expected to accept the views of his partner on this matter or again to give reasons why he cannot do so. The ensuing process is considered a process of the mutual modification of the original validity claims so that, if there are no time constraints or other external restrictions on the forces of argumentation, this discourse will reach an 'organic' end-state in which the participants will have reached an unenforced consensus. Habermas and Apel are both well aware that this model is an idealization of empirical processes of argumentation, but they consider the idealization not a worthless abstraction, but a regulatory idea(l) that guides us in our empirical world. All objections directed against the alleged naïveté of this model are therefore misplaced. But this does not mean that it is the last word about discourse or about ethics. In my writings[1] I have brought up a long list of critical reservations with regard to this model, mostly concerning the motivation to enter into such a discourse or to act in accordance with the results of such argumentation, the relationship between discursive 'justification' and practical 'application' and the problems that are related to the distinction between different types of validity claims. All this has to be left aside here. The exclusive focus of the following remarks is on the question as to whether we can imagine having such a purely rational discourse about values and, if not, whether the only alternative – if we cannot – is the nihilism of pure confrontation or decision.

I assume that many of us share the intuition that there is a third way between rational discourse and the conflict of competing values or value systems; just think of interreligious dialogues, for example between Christians and Jews in postwar Germany or between Christians and Buddhists in contemporary East Asia. Jürgen Habermas (1992: 202) himself readily admits that in the case of values no clear separation of questions of validity from questions of genesis is possible and that values therefore cannot be submitted to the same argumentative procedure as cognitive and normative validity claims. But this does not lead him to specify what the logic of a communication about values would look like; for him the main consequence from this insight is that values are inherently particular and do not allow for universalization in the same sense in which cognitive and normative propositions do. What is more, for Habermas to be 'particular' means to be 'particularist'; i.e. for him there can be no such thing as a universalist value orientation which means that all hope for universalization lies in the

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[1]   See above all Joas (2000: Ch. 10).

spheres of law and morality in a normative sense. This is inappropriate not only with regard to post-axial religious world-views and ethics[2], but also with regard to the specific structures of our communication about values.

I see at least three differences between a rational-argumentative discourse and our communication about values:

(A) When we talk about values, a strongly affectual dimension comes in. Although all values can be reformulated in propositional form as statements like "It is good to do X" or "It is evil to do Y" and although all religious and secular encompassing world-views contain factual statements like "Jesus has risen from the dead" or "Muhammad is the prophet", our commitment to these is different from our commitment to purely cognitive validity claims. We have to take seriously the fact that we cannot simply 'have' values as we may have opinions, but that we have to feel strongly committed to them if the word 'value commitment' is to make any sense. William James (1902/1982), on whose thinking I rely in this respect (Joas 2000: Ch. 3), emphasized that there are parallels between our commitment to values and our commitment to persons, for example between religious faith and love – and this not so much in the sense of a religion and an ethics of love, but mostly in the sense that our commitment to particular values is similar to our commitment to particular persons in our life. When we are asked why we love a certain person, let's say why I love my wife, my son, my closest friends, we realize that it may be inappropriate to derive our feelings of love from a list of specific attributes, talents, or achievements of the beloved person. Even personal relations do have a cognitive side; they are based on certain assumptions about the character and behavior of the beloved person in the past, present and the future. In that sense we can certainly make plausible where our commitment to that person comes from, but our expectations with regard to the listener are very different from rational discourse. It is neither our expectation nor our intention that those to whom we speak share our feelings and instantly fall in love with the same person. As compared to a discourse about norms, the goal of plausibility may look more modest than the goal of consensus. On the other hand, the fact that we cannot talk about values without referring to feelings and experiences makes a communication about values also much richer than purely rational discourse.

(B) The second difference to be mentioned here is a difference with regard to the negation of validity claims. It has often been recognized that the falsification of a cognitive proposition in a religious worldview in most cases does not weaken the commitment of believers to this faith. In their perspective the factual statements of their faith can be rather flexible. Their basic feeling of certainty is neither grounded in quasi-empirical statements nor shattered by their falsification. From a strictly empiricist standpoint, this, of course, makes believers look like narrow-minded dogmatists who are not willing to adjust their convictions to scientific progress and enlightened insight. But, since the publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections *On Certainty* in 1969 at the latest, it has become clear in the Anglosaxon philosophical tradition that

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[2]   Following Karl Jaspers, sociologists and historians of religion speak of an axial age (800-200 before Christ) as the time in which the idea of "transcendence emerged". For a good summary see Bellah (2005).

all cognitive frameworks are based on 'certainties' that are constitutive even for the procedures of falsification. These certainties themselves are not fallible in the same sense in which all individual propositions in the constituted framework are. When our basic values are affected, our reaction with regard to doubt or the person articulating this doubt will often not be the modification of our conviction, but a devaluation or derogation of that person. Let me quote from Bernard Williams' magisterial book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* a short passage that seems particularly pertinent to us:

> "One does not feel easy with the man who in the course of a discussion of how to deal with political or business rivals says, 'of course, we could have them killed, but we should lay that aside right from the beginning.' It is characteristic of morality that it tends to overlook the possibility that some concerns are best embodied in this way, in deliberative silence." (Williams 1985: 185)

Some of you might say that this second difference between a communication about values and the rational-argumentative discourse is an implication of the first insofar as our unwillingness to submit to falsification is a consequence of our affectual commitment to values. But I think this second difference has more to do with the constitutive role of evaluations for the basic structures of our cognitive frameworks.

(C) The third difference I would call the necessary narrativity of a communication about values. Hilary Putnam (1981) in his book *Reason, Truth, and History* claims in the context of a thought experiment about the question as to whether we submit mere preferences to acts of moral judgment that value judgments are not isolated judgments, but form groups or clusters, and that we find only those preferences morally indifferent which are not in a closer connection with other preferences that are for us morally relevant. I fully agree, but I would go a step further and extend this idea of groups of value judgments so that it includes the temporal dimension. We cannot make plausible and defend our value commitments without telling stories – stories about the experiences from which our commitments arose, stories about other people's experiences or about the consequences a violation of our values had in the past. Biographical, historical, and mythological narration in this sense are not just a matter of illustration for didactic purposes, but a necessary part of our self-understanding and of our communication about values. The insight that in the case of the communication about values a strict separation of genesis and validity is impossible should not lead to an exaggerated understanding of their separability in the case of cognitive and normative validity claims, but instead inspire us to take seriously the connection between narration and argumentation in all attempts to justify values. What we need is a structure of argumentation that is 'genealogical' because of the contingency of the genesis of values, but not 'destructive' in the way Nietzsche and Foucault thought it to be.

(2) If my ideas about the specificities of our value commitments are convincing, one might now assume that they will intensify the fear of those who think that power struggle is the only alternative to rational discourse here. If strong emotions, an unwillingness to draw conclusions from empirical falsification, and an entanglement with history and mythology are unavoidable in the case of values, doesn't that entail that values should be excluded from the public sphere so that the public sphere can remain an arena of rational discourse? Does my whole line of argumentation not support a strictly liberal view according to which all citizens with strong convictions have to

leave their particular worldviews about which no rational consensus is possible behind them when they enter the public sphere? I obviously cannot discuss all aspects of this fundamental question here, but I would like to mention that this fear is an overgeneralization of important negative experiences and based on a reification of the concept of values. Values and value systems are treated as entities that exclude one another and can even get into conflict with one another. But from a strictly action-oriented perspective, be it pragmatist or Weberian, it is only human beings, their organizations and institutions that can act, not values or value systems. There can be logical inconsistencies between cognitive propositions and between values, but the human beings who believe in them, feel committed to them or act on their basis have to detect these inconsistencies and to cope with them. The strictly liberal position is one possibility for human beings to act together, a possibility that is based on a bracketing of value commitments. Whether liberal or not, we all constantly interact and cooperate with others without paying attention to our value-related differences. But there are several other possibilities for dealing with such differences. We can, for example, take elements from other cultural traditions and fit them into our original framework in creative ways. Traditions are not hermetically closed, self-referential frameworks. They have to be actively perpetuated, and this happens under specific circumstances and in risky ways. Since values, value systems, and traditions are not entities, but articulations of experience, it can also happen that we share experiences without sharing values. Experiences are articulated in different, maybe opposite ways, and we can feel committed to people without sharing their values and committed to shared values without really feeling committed to certain people with whom we share these values. In the public discussion about German and European values we can often find a conflation of all these dimensions so that it looks as if states have one unitary and homogeneous culture. And in addition to the 'bracketing' of value commitments, creative incorporation of other components, and differentiation between experiences and values, we can also enter into a process of value generalization.

(3) As I said in the introduction, this concept stems from the theory of social change as it has been developed by the most influential American sociologist of the 1950s and 1960s, Talcott Parsons. In reaction to the many criticisms of his work that had blamed his so-called structural-functionalism for being unable to deal with social change, he applied his theory of the four basic functions each system has to fulfill to the area of social dynamics. The four functions had been called adaptation to the environment, goal-attainment, integration, and maintenance of the value patterns characteristic for a social pattern. In a dynamic perspective this means that all social change has to have four dimensions as well, namely adaptive upgrading, social differentiation, inclusion of more and more members of society in the status of full citizenship, and, lastly, value generalization. The fullest exposition of Parsons' ideas on value generalization can be found in his essay *Comparative Studies and Evolutionary Change*, published in a volume on comparative methods in sociology in 1971.[3] Parsons, in whose theory the concept of 'value' was absolutely crucial, had for a long time "treated institutionalized value-patterns as a primary, indeed in one special respect the most important single struc-

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[3] Parsons (1971: 97-139); reprinted in: Parsons (1977: 279-320), cf. above all pp. 307ff.

tural component of social systems" (Parsons 1971: 307). For him such value systems have "considerable stability transcending the shorter-run change in the structure of particular societies – meaning time periods up to several centuries" (Parsons 1971: 307). But now it had become more and more clear to him that social differentiation cannot progress without affecting the dimension of institutionalized values in very important ways. This led him to the following basic proposition:

> "The more differentiated the system, the higher the level of generality at which the value-pattern must be 'couched' if it is to legitimate the more specified values of all of the differentiated parts of the social system." (Parsons 1971: 307)

It is evident that the concrete example Parsons has in mind here is the differentiation of church and state and the institutionalization of a "moral community" within a society "which both cuts across 'denominational' lines – in the more narrowly religious sense – and those of ethnic culture" (Parsons 1971: 308). "Cutting across" here means – and this can be taken as a definition of value generalization – "the inclusion, *under* a single legitimizing value-pattern, of components which are not only diverse and differentiated from each other, but many of which have, historically, claimed some sort of an 'absolutistic' monopoly of moral legitimacy" (Parsons 1971: 308).

Parsons is fully aware that value generalization can only be conceived of as a *process*, and he has interesting things to say about the stages and the character of this process. He follows Karl Mannheim and sees 'utopias' – such as the liberal-democratic and the socialist-communist utopias – as helpful for a process of value generalization. Pluralism for him is an early stage in this process; growing moral autonomy of the individual a later stage. Values have to be specified to be relevant in concrete action-situations; the more differentiated a society is, the more different these specifications will be. To bring them together, a redefinition of what holds them together has to happen. This process of value-generalization "is very often fraught with conflict in concrete situations" (Parsons 1971: 311). Some groups will protest against "*any* alteration of their concrete commitments" and see this as "a surrender of integrity to illegitimate interests" (Parsons 1971: 312). Parsons calls this the 'fundamentalist' reaction. Others will be motivated to discredit the fundamentalists and to hinder or reverse differentiation in their plea for radical innovation.

Parsons himself certainly considered his ideas about value generalization a contribution to an empirical theory of social change. But if you listen carefully to the way he phrased his claim, you realize that there is a certain ambiguity in his thinking at that point. In an autobiographical statement (*On Building Social System Theory*) he qualifies his understanding of value generalization "as the mode of change required to complete such a phase for the system, if *it is to have the prospect of future viability*" (Parsons 1977: 22-76, here 51; emphasis added). Value generalization for him has been 'necessitated' by the industrial, the democratic, and the educational revolutions. But what exactly does it mean to call a process 'required' or 'necessary'? It is one of the crucial weaknesses of a functionalist approach to deduce a process from a functional requirement. Why should it be that what is necessary does indeed happen? One of the points where contemporary neo-Parsonians like Jeffrey Alexander differ from Parsons is exactly here. They realize that Parsons fells a prey to a kind of evolutionary optimism that is not really supported by the historical realities of the 20th century. If we

want to make the concept of value generalization fruitful today, we certainly have to liberate it from Parsons' functionalist assumptions.

In his interpretation of Parsons in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas realized this and radicalized it beyond a mere antifunctionalist statement to a critique of an understanding of modernization in which tensions between the different dimensions of social change have been excluded from the outset. Not only does value generalization not simply follow from functional differentiation, it could even be that there are systematic tensions between ongoing differentiation and a specific process of value generalization. But Habermas' intention at this point is almost the opposite of what I am pursuing here. For Habermas (1981: Vol. 2, 268) value generalization leads to an uncoupling of communicative action from *all* concrete normatively binding behavioral patterns. Social integration for him is more and more achieved through rational discourse and no longer based on any religiously anchored agreement. This is what he called the 'linguistification of the sacred' – one of the most radical versions of the secularization thesis we have! What Parsons had in mind when he developed the idea of 'value generalization' ran completely counter to such an idea. For him the crux of the matter was that different value traditions can indeed produce a more general, mostly also more abstract understanding of their common features *without* losing their roots in the specific traditions and experiences to which actors feel affectually committed. In its current articulation a value maybe the result of a particular cultural tradition – human rights, for example, are claimed to be a result of the Judaeco-Christian tradition or of the Enlightenment – but this does not mean that other cultural and religious traditions cannot be reinterpreted, or rather, cannot reinterpret themselves in view of this articulation of a value so that their own potential to articulate this same value comes to light. Such a reinterpretation must not be an intellectualization. Disconnected from the affectual side of a tradition, it would remain ineffective. Value generalization as one possible result of a communication about values would then be neither a consensus about a universalistic principle which everybody has to accept as valid nor a mere decision to live in peaceful coexistence despite value disagreement. Again the result of the communication about values can at once be more and less than the result of rational discourse: not a full consensus, but a dynamic mutual modification and stimulation toward renewal of one's own tradition.

While the concept of value generalization obviously has its pitfalls in the study of social change, it seems to me a highly valuable concept for the study of communication about values. It certainly has its predecessors and companions in the philosophical, theological, and juridical literature. I have the impression that Ernst Troeltsch, for example, argued in a similar way against a strong tendency in religious studies in the 19th century (Troeltsch 1895/96); John Rawls after his *Theory of Justice* revised his position and allowed for a plurality of so-called comprehensive doctrines and what he called an "overlapping consensus" (Rawls 1996: 133ff.). This idea is similar in some aspects to Parsons' 'value generalization', but Parsons' concept is superior because it does not describe a static constellation of the coexistence of doctrines, but a dynamic process of their mutual modification, and it is not restricted to a communication about constitutional or political principles that leaves the deeper layers of these value systems or traditions unaffected. In legal theory – for example in the work of German

theorist Winfried Brugger – we can find a distinction between different levels of generality in the articulation of values that is also intended to describe processes of value generalization that are not disconnected from the experiential level (Brugger 1999). Perhaps one could say all theoretical attempts that deny both indisputable ethical foundations in the sense of natural law doctrines and the impossibility of any reasonable foundation in a Rortyan sense have to have some equivalent to Parsons' idea of value generalization. But in my eyes none of these 'equivalents' is as inspiring as the concept of value generalization.

(4) At this point one would have to demonstrate the fruitfulness of this concept in specific applications to concrete cases of a communication about values and mutual modification. One can mention the studies on the drafting of the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 published by Mary Ann Glendon (2001) and Johannes Morsink (2000) as cases in point.[4] They do not use this concept, but what they describe is one of the most consequential processes of value generalization in modern history. Proponents of the most diverse value traditions came together, united in their rejection of Nazism and Fascism, and formulated a declaration that does not have one rationalist justification but presents itself as the shared articulation of all the value traditions that had been part of the process. As I mentioned before, interreligious dialogues, but also religious-secular dialogues, if successful, are illuminating examples of value generalization (Joas 2007: 19-32). In her dissertation, Hella Dietz (2007) studied the process in which anti-Stalinist Marxists and progressive 'personalist' Catholics in Poland gradually learned to redefine their self-images and the images of the other and began to define human rights as the common denominator of their originally extremely different value systems – and she found out that there is no better term for an analysis of this process than the term 'value generalization'.[5] And, obviously, the debate about European values is such a process of value generalization as well. There is no better way to exemplify how my views on this process could be translated into a concrete statement about European values, the plurality of traditions, the positive and negative experiences connected with them than to quote the proposed preamble for a European constitution written by the Polish journalist Stefan Wilkanowicz (2003):

We, Europeans:

- aware of the richness of our heritage, drawing from the wealth of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Greek philosophy, Roman law, and humanism with both religious and non-religious roots;
- aware of the values of Christian civilization, which is the basic source of our identity;
- aware of the frequent betrayals of these values by both Christians and non-Christians;

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4   Glendon (2001); Morsink (2000).

5   Hella Dietz, Von der Opposition der Werte zu den Werten der Opposition – Eine pragmatistische Rekonstruktion der zivilgesellschaftlichen Opposition in Polen, Dissertation at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies – University of Erfurt, 2007.

- aware of the good and the evil that we have spread to the inhabitants of other continents;

- bemoaning the social catastrophe caused by the totalitarian systems that have originated within our civilization,

would like to build our common future on the basis of profound respect for every man and recognition of his or her inalienable dignity (…).

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