Charles Ess's Pros Hen Ethical Pluralism: An Interpretation

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This paper proposes an interpretation of Charles Ess's pros hen pluralism, especially concerning what constitutes the single end point (hen) toward which the pluralistic viewpoints converge (pros). The single end point, I argue, is constituted by an empirical social reality that obtains in the world at a particular period. In other words, it is the fact that we happen to agree largely and broadly on several ethical issues that serves as the end point in Ess's theory. The reason is that humans happen largely to share the same goals and values qua human beings, such as the desire for communication and cooperation with one another. It is not their rationality, or any other permanent and ideal characteristic, that serves as the source of normativity for human beings, but rather the contingent facts that obtain at a particular place and time, facts that humans happen to agree on. This raises an obvious objection of what to do with those who might cherish a very different set of values. The answer is that the globalized nature of the world today, especially deepened by information technology, makes it increasingly difficult for any groups to remain isolated. This does not imply, however, that disagreements are not possible. On the contrary, disagreements are a part of the whole process from the beginning. At the theoretical level, there is always a need for those who disagree on the theoretical issues rationally to persuade one another. This is also part of the empirical reality referred to earlier.

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1. Introduction

There is an ancient Indian parable of the elephant and the blind men. Several blind men, none of whom had known anything about an elephant before, were invited to touch a real elephant at different parts and disagree vehemently about what the animal is like. One blind man, touching the elephant's leg, believed that the elephant is like a tree. Another touched its ear and argued that the elephant was like a giant fan instead. A third felt its trunk and declared that it was like a snake. And so on.

The point of the parable is that none of us possesses a means of knowing that exceeds that of others; we are all similar to the blind men in the story who can grasp only a partial aspect of the truth. This crucial point leads to pluralism, and when the subject matter concerns moral truths, the pluralism becomes an ethical kind. According to Charles Ess (2006; 2008; 2020), the multiple viewpoints that comprise ethical pluralism should normatively converge toward one single point, what he calls "*pros hen* ethical pluralism." In this paper, I would like to argue that Ess's version of ethical pluralism, where the pluralism is constrained by the fact that the different viewpoints should ultimately point toward the same end, should be supported by an argument that it is the grounding of ethical judgments on the empirical reality that serves as the end which the differing views point toward. In other words, it is the elephant itself, the materially existing bulky animal that stands to be touched by the blind men, that serves as the bedrock, so to speak, of the one end that Ess's *pros hen* pluralism points to. None of us mortals may be able to comprehend what the elephant is like in total, but we can learn from one another, and there is no need to quarrel among ourselves in the same way as the blind men in the parable did.

This way of thinking, I submit, is particularly suited to information ethics because here we are discussing a*pplied* ethics rather than engaging in a deeply theoretical discussion on meta-ethical theory. The fact that we are discussing information ethics means that when I argue that the elephant is the *one* end that all diverging, pluralistic viewpoints move toward, what constitutes the elephant are not some conceptual norms that everyone is supposed to agree on rationally, but some concrete entities that are shared by all, even though there are divergences on how to achieve it.

More specifically, I would like in this paper to interpret what Ess's *pros hen* pluralism really *should* be taken to mean and how the theory should be substantiated. Basically, I argue that the *hen* (Greek for 'one') in *pros hen* ('toward one') pluralism is constituted by the social and cultural reality that exists at a particular time and place. Since we are now living in a global society founded largely upon the norms of the modern world, it is these norms that constitute the single end in Ess's theory. Furthermore, these norms are justified through their role in bringing about the desired goals and values that members of the modern society largely cherish. This way of justifying the norms resonates with most of the ancient ethical theories, and I propose that looking at how to interpret Ess's pluralism this way offers more benefits and is more tenable than the standard liberal theory.

That we are living in such a society should not be in doubt. A superficial look at what appears outwardly in the world's societies should suffice to substantiate the claim that we share at least outwardly appearances together. Many Americans love to go to Chinese or Japanese restaurants; Chinese, Japanese or Thais cherish their KFC outlets; these are only some of the appearances of the globalized world with which we are very familiar. Furthermore, this global reality is also grounded upon large shared norms in the sense that many cultures share information and trade with one another, presupposing a set of shared norms that make such trade and communication possible. The norms are expressed largely in the shared international agreements that practically every country in the world subscribe to. (Practically every country in the world, including Russia and China, is a member of the United Nations and pays allegiance to its founding principles, for example.) It is certainly the case that these norms do not exhaust all the sets of norms that a culture follows, and in many cases, there are deeper norms that a culture follows which are in conflict with the internationally agreed norms. Nonetheless, for the purpose of the global trade and communication, a culture both agrees upon the globally shared norms and their own traditional ones, as long as the conflict is not as strong as to occasion a rethink or readjustment of that culture's norm preferences. I have discussed this issue more than twenty years ago in Hongladarom (1999), where I referred to Michael Walzer's view on thick and thin cultures.

A series of questions, then, emerge; namely, what is the constraint that guides these multiple viewpoints so that they, more or less, belong together? Would it be possible for there to be multiple convergences whereby the viewpoints converge together, but in different clumps and not under a single umbrella? How can we find a metatheoretical ideal that is philosophically viable and is effective in guiding the multiple viewpoints so that they become actually *pros hen*? In the context of information ethics, what does all this mean? I will provide an answer to these questions toward the end of the paper.

2. Charles Ess' *Pros Hen* Pluralism

Basically, Ess's idea of *pros hen* pluralism is an attempt to reconcile two opposing conceptual directions. On the one hand, he wants a kind of ethical pluralism that does justice to the intercultural deliberations on matters in information ethics (Ess 2006; 2008; 2020; see also, 2003; 2005, 2007a; 2007b; 2013). On the other hand, he does not want his view to turn into a relativism where no validly normative guideline can be found. The solution is that the pluralistic and intercultural normative judgments are constrained by the fact that they serve to bring forward the set of values that are already agreed upon by various cultures. One is reminded of Michael Walzer's view on the thick and the thin in morality, where the latter refers to the more abstract concepts that are agreed upon by various cultures, concepts such as 'freedom' and 'justice' and the former to the more concrete and specific working out of these concepts at the local level (Walzer, 1994), an idea that I picked up and presented as a contribution to the intercultural problem in information ethics more than twenty years ago (Hongladarom, 1999). Various cultures have different judgments, such as different conceptions of how privacy should be evaluated. But in the end, they cannot diverge too much from the same set of norms that apply globally because the fact of the world is that cultures must live with one another, sharing most of their values with one

another inevitably. This has led to cultures adjusting their normative beliefs, and what emerges, ideally speaking, is a kind of an equilibrium where the cultures agree to work together on its basis. The equilibrium is represented by Walzer's thin culture, and the details of how these abstract concepts are laid out are represented by the thick one.

It is not difficult to see how this attempt to resolve the tension turns into Ess's more refined theoretical work of *pros hen* pluralism. The phrase *'pros hen'* is Greek for 'toward one,' and comes from Aristotle's *Metaphysics.* Speaking of the term 'being,' Aristotle says that "it is said in many ways," but the many ways here do not lead to ambiguity because they refer to one general sense (Ess, 2008, p. 198). This appears to fit with the attempt to solve the tension alluded to earlier. The various ways in which cultures have their normative beliefs are analogous to the "various ways" in which a term like 'being' can be interpreted; however, in the end, the various interpretations of 'being' all point toward the same general sense, i.e., that they are all related in one way or another. And it is this one way that represents the thread that connects the various senses together.

In terms of information ethics, this means that the different ways in which cultures express their normative beliefs about a situation, such as how a culture views privacy, can differ at one level, but in the end they, normatively, should come up with the same general sense, the same end that they, at the more abstract level, conceptualize to be the same together. More specifically, Thai culture traditionally has a specific sense of privacy, namely that the more power a person enjoys, the more privacy is accorded to that person (Ess, 2005; Floridi, 2006; Kitiyadisai, 2005;; Ramasoota, 2001). Thus, those with high status can do whatever they please without the details of what they do being released to the public. On the contrary, ordinary persons do not enjoy the same level of respect for their privacy. In other words, privacy in Thai culture is very much connected with social status. This is in contrast with the belief in privacy in the West, where everyone has the same right to privacy regardless of their social status.

Thus, it appears that the Thai conception of privacy and that of the West are so divergent that it is impossible to reconcile. However, as Thai culture has become enmeshed in globalization, the beliefs of Thai people themselves also change. The change is due to various factors, and not merely through imposition or cultural imperialism. The ongoing youth protests in the country in 2020 and very possibly beyond attest to the desire on the part of the younger generation for a deep transformation of Thai society toward a more egalitarian and less traditional one (Chachavalpongpun, 2020). This means that the ethical norms that are part of พ culture can change too. Hence, instead of believing, for example, that privacy is a privilege enjoyed only by those of higher social status, Thai culture is apparently changing toward one that accepts that privacy is a right to be enjoyed by everyone. The ethical intuition of the members of the culture itself is changing. This does not imply that the norms of the West are more superior; it only means that, due to the current historical situation at this moment, the belief that privacy is a right to be enjoyed by everyone is now the norm.

Here we have an example of two diverging moral views. Is privacy a privilege for the few, or a right for everyone? How can we conceive of a scenario where the two views here move toward one common end in Ess's theory? In order to answer this question satisfactorily, we need to consider the milieux in which the two conceptions take place. In the hierarchical society, privacy is a privilege for the few, but as the Thailand example shows, this kind of society, especially in Thailand, is fast changing. More and more people have come to accept the liberal conception of privacy as a right for everyone. In either case, it is a social reality that provides a basis for the single endpoint. As countries such as Thailand are adopting the liberal conception, the social reality informed by it constitutes the endpoint in Ess's theory.

However, what would happen if there were today a hierarchical society whose norms are strongly supported by the people? For one thing, it would be difficult to see how such a society could become enmeshed with the current global community. What happens here is that there are two worlds informed by different sets of values, so can these two worlds converge in the sense proposed by Ess? This is possible only if we can posit a common, larger, world serving as the endpoint toward which the two opposing conceptions move. However, such a common world would be hard to find because the differences are too deep to find a common ground. Believing that privacy is a privilege for a few presupposes the notion that people are not equal. Some deserve the privilege of privacy because of their wealth, social status, noble rank, and so on; on the contrary, others don't have the same privilege because they lack these qualifications. Furthermore, proponents of the hierarchical world might argue that the privilege of privacy can be acquired by merit. Those who have worked their way to the top, or have demonstrated their superior abilities in one way or another, or simply have ancestors who have done heroic deeds in the past, should deserve the privilege of privacy as a reward for their or their ancestors' effort. This kind of society could be deemed to be egalitarian only in the sense that it is assumed that everyone started out as equals a long time ago. However, even if these points are granted, it remains to be seen how privacy itself could be regarded as a privilege for the few. This is because privacy acts as a shield against the use of excessive power by those who have it. In a world where privacy is a privilege, it is assumed that the unprivileged should not have it. Perhaps the reason is that they do not deserve it, or they have not earned it yet, or for other reasons. In such a society, there is then no guarantee against the use of surveillance power by the authorities, and they are therefore unrestrained in how they use their power. Only those with the privilege of privacy have a defense against such use. Society, then, is deeply inegalitarian. Moreover, it is difficult to see how democracy can be sustained in such a society because effective democracy requires that each citizen have some protection against the excessive use of power by political authorities (Hongladarom, 2008).

Consequently, the endpoint that Ess talks about does not seem to be available in the case of deep disagreements on the role of privacy between the liberal and the hierarchical societies. It is therefore possible for there to be two different endpoints, one for the egalitarian society (where privacy is a right) and the other for the hierarchical one (where privacy is a privilege). As for the liberal society, the endpoint could accommodate different conceptions of privacy, but all must fall within its broad purview, and the same goes for the hierarchical society. What happens here is that there are two very different societies, or in other words two different social realities.

According to John Searle, social reality is constituted by the set of institutions and beliefs that make it possible in the first place (Searle, 1997). A 100-baht Thai banknote, to adapt Searle's example, has the value of one hundred baht by virtue of the guarantee given to it by the Bank of Thailand. As for its material reality, it is only a piece of paper.

Nonetheless, I believe that the two sets of norms that define the two societies here can be put together under an overarching set of higher-level norms. For example, the members of both societies might share the same belief that killing or cheating is wrong. Hence, it is possible that members of these two different societies differ in the role of privacy, but they could agree on broader issues, such as killing or cheating. Materially speaking, this can only happen when the two societies find themselves to be in touch with each other in one way or another.

In short, what has emerged from our discussion of Ess's theory of *pros hen* pluralism is that it should be based on a kind of reality—either material reality or Searlean social reality. The reality in question grounds the single endpoint *(hen)* toward which *(pros)* the multiple ethical viewpoints (all falling with the broad purview of the basic norms of their society) converge. However, we have also seen that there can be more than one endpoint, as the example of the liberal and the hierarchical views on privacy has shown. As for the question of choosing between these different social realities, it is only possible when the two social realities are put together under a more inclusive space focusing only on what is already shared between them.

3. Where, Then, Is the Elephant?

If each of the two main rival societies has its own Essian *hen* toward which divergent viewpoints *within* it converge, then how are we to reconcile them? Is there another level of endpoint where each of the first-order endpoints converges? The questions seem to stem from a fear that if there is no overarching end point, then everything would collapse into relativism. However, this is unfounded because normative judgments, as I argue, are based not on a purely logical basis, but on the actual situations that obtain at specific times and places. At an abstract conceptual level, there may be such different layers of convergences, similar to Plato's Third Man Argument; however, at the practical, concrete level, this is very rare, because in actual situations a society that subscribes to such radically divergent views would find itself isolated and hard to live with others in the global community.

Thus, the elephant—the bedrock reality to which divergent moral viewpoints converge— is made up of the set of beliefs and values that together make up the dominant globalized social reality at a specific period. Universalists, I presume, do not like the idea, because it is not universal enough. For them, it is not enough to posit a bedrock reality on which normative judgments are based that is contingent upon time and place (see also Ess, 2008; Habermas, 1984; Postow, 2007; Rawls, 1971; Stahl, 2004a; 2004b; 2006). To use Kant's words, it is not *apodictic.* Ess himself may agree or disagree with my interpretation of his ethical pluralism here. But the point I would like to make is that apodicticity is not relevant here. Ethics should be based on actual situations. This does not imply, as universalists such as Kant would never fail immediately

to point out, that objectivity of norms is impossible. But it implies that objectivity can only be found within the concrete, empirical situations that make up the tangible world.

Of course, I am not the first one to make this pronouncement, and this paper is hardly a place to argue for this important point in any detail. What I would like to propose is only that, in terms of applied ethics such as information ethics, basing ethical judgments on actual situations is more advantageous than basing them on supposedly apodictic Kantian arguments. One reason is that doing so opens ethics more to intercultural reception. If ethics is based more on empirical reality than logical concepts, then culture might find it easier to accept a moral view that is carried over from another as the technological tools and practices are imported from outside. This proposal also agrees with Pak-hang Wong's argument (Wong, 2020) that discussion on the role of human rights in information ethics (ethics of AI in his case) should pay more attention to the intercultural problem, not in the way of arguing for the primacy of cultural differences, but in the way of looking at how thinking seriously about culture should inform the emphasis on universal human rights as grounding judgments in information ethics (Wong, 2020).

Wong's argument, therefore, chimes in quite nicely with Ess's theory of *pros hen* pluralism. What they have in common is the desire that cultural values be seriously discussed, and at the same time, the discussion does not fall into the trap of those who want to justify repression through the discourse on the importance of cultural differences. Those who want to justify repression through talks about respecting irresolvable, rigid cultural differences just miss the mark, like those who miss the whole elephant entirely. In Ess's term, the moral view that justifies repression would not be a member of those views that converge toward the single endpoint *(hen)*. It is outside of the scope of *ethical* pluralism. This, however, should not be taken to undercut the *pluralistic* intent in Ess's pluralism. The diverse views should ultimately converge on a single end point – Ess's is a *pros hen* pluralism, after all. Thus, in a sense these diverse but converging views do bear a certain family resemblance to one another in the Wittgensteinian sense (Wittgenstein, 1958). But that does not imply that all the converging views are one and the same or are so similar to one another that their differences among one another are reduced to insignificance. As Wong's argument shows, those in Hong Kong share many values with the Chinese in the mainland – they belong to exactly same cultural tradition after all. Nonetheless, most people in Hong Kong, due to different historical trajectories, bristle at the thought of Hong Kong being entirely absorbed into the Chinese political sphere. On the one hand, the people in Hong Kong share the same historical and cultural root, but on the other hand, there are differences that are irreconcilable regarding their normative values. These differences show that there can be diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, what has been rather overlooked in a discussion of modern Chinese values is how much they resemble that of the rest of the world. China must continue to communicate and trade with the rest of the world, so it makes sense that they subscribe to the largely the same set of norms that are shared globally. These shared aspects represent the single end point, the *hen*, in Ess's theory.

Before we go on, however, there is an important point that I must clarify. I have said earlier that the blind men basically agree that there is an elephant that they are touching, and they only disagree on what it is like. This is analogous to ethical pluralism in that the different moral

views all converge toward a single endpoint, as we have seen. Here we must accept that none of us has any God's eye view on the matter. The blind men cannot see the elephant in its entirety; that would be analogous to one who can comprehend the whole moral reality and know exactly and absolutely what is the right thing to do in all times and places. Unfortunately, humans are not equipped with that kind of epistemic power. So, we do what we can do. Moreover, if the elephant is the source of the endpoint toward the pluralistic viewpoints converge, then what about those divergent viewpoints, such as one claiming that privacy is reserved only for the privileged few? I have said earlier that in this case, those who claim this miss the elephant altogether. However, they could still share other moral beliefs, such as the belief that killing or cheating is wrong. Would that imply that we must have different layers of elephants, one for each layer of shared moral belief? At the level of information ethics, one group share the belief that privacy is a right for everyone. Another group shares the belief that privacy is reserved for the few. These two groups are likely to share the same moral beliefs at another level that is more general than information ethics, such as the belief that killing is wrong. Thus, pluralism comes in different layers (Capurro, 2008; 2009; Hiruta, 2006).

Back to the main thread of the discussion. The question now is how to theorize about the single endpoint that pluralistic views converge upon. Philosophers will immediately see that the elephant is a metaphor for objective moral truth, and the blind men groping it philosophers who propose pluralistic views regarding it. However, there is a deep problem. How do we know that the elephant is the objective moral truth? And how do we draw a line between the elephant and those, like the ones who purport to justify the view that privacy is only for the privileged or those who sought to justify repression through reliance on cultural differences, who, presumably, miss out on it altogether? I have so far tried to argue that the actual situation that obtains at the present time and place provides at least a beginning of an answer. But then there is a deep problem of how I could identify an actual situation with objective moral truth. That would be a gross fallacy, and thus calls for a response.

4. How Can the Elephant Become a Source of Normativity?

We can understand how the elephant—objective moral truth obtainable empirically—can become a source of normativity if we understand what normativity itself actually is. The Kantian tradition has so entrenched the view that normative statements are justifiable only through logical deduction that it is hard for philosophers, especially those in the West, to get rid of the idea. However, there is an alternative, a more natural one. In this tradition, the normative is justifiable through its role in bringing about desired goals, and that these goals are identifiable empirically. This is obviously an ancient tradition that is found both in the East and in the West that focuses on living well and how to achieve the true end for all beings, the good life. The task of ethics is to lay out guidelines that one can follow to achieve the true end. Followers of this tradition, both in the West and East, disagree vehemently among themselves as to what the good life consists in and how to achieve it. But they all agree that the task of ethics is to enable the practitioner to achieve the good life (whatever it is) and, more importantly, that the good life is

objectively good for everyone, even though some might not believe it. It is the quintessential objective moral truth, the ultimate elephant.

We can certainly bring this ancient tradition up to date and use it as a theory in information ethics (e.g., Hongladarom, 2016; 2020). What is of interest in this paper is that I would like to argue that the *one* in Ess's *pros hen* pluralism is in fact this objective moral truth. When normativity is justified through referring to its role in bringing about the desired goals, the objective moral truth—the elephant—is understood as the ultimate end toward which all action converges. Aristotle says that all action aims ultimately at happiness. Thus, happiness, or the good life, acts as the magnet that draws all action together, the ultimate good. We do not have enough space in this paper to argue for any particular conception of the good life. What I am trying to get at here is only that a way to link up the elephant with the normative judgments that we make is to conceptualize the former as the supreme end toward which all action converges. In this sense, Hume's criticism of deriving the 'ought' from the 'is' (as well as Moore's naturalistic fallacy) breaks down because the 'ought,' e.g., I ought to respect the privacy of others, is derived from the 'is,' namely the fact of the matter regarding the practices of information ethics at a particular time and place. The actual situation in my country, to be more specific, is such that I ought to respect the privacy of others. The very nature of the social reality in which I live, a modern one imbued with the sense of egalitarianism and autonomy of individuals, makes it almost inconceivable that I could believe otherwise as regards privacy. I cannot justifiably bring myself to believe that I do not have to respect the privacy of others while others must respect my own, because believing so and acting out of that belief would result in so much conflict and tension between me and others that I find it unbearable to continue.

Here the normative merges with the actual, a situation not unlike what Hegel has proposed in his conception of *Sittlichkeit.* However, we don't have to follow Hegel in believing that there is one single end toward which all social arrangements internally are transformed. We do not need to subscribe to Hegel's brand of metaphysics. What I propose here is much more modest. It is the actual situation that obtains at a particular time and place that serves as the source of the objective moral truth, the *hen* in *pros hen* pluralism. The actual situation is subject to change back and forth. Unlike what Hegel believed, we have no evidence for his conviction that all the social movements have a definite end clearly defined in history. Only what is happening at a particular time and place suffices to fix the objective moral truth, the elephant, for a time being. And that is enough. Since the world today is such that the value of what Wong calls 'the Human Rights Approach' (i.e., the liberal worldview predicated upon the belief that all humans are equal in rights and dignity) prevails (as can be seen in numerous international ethics guidelines and intergovernmental declarations) and since according to the approach, the right thing to do is to believe that humans are equal and are equally entitled to the right of privacy, then this *is* the right thing to do.

An objection to my argument is that it is too contingent on the changing empirical circumstances. What if the world changes again and comes to adopt the opposite view, such as the view that privacy only belongs to the privileged few? Furthermore, the fact of the matter in the world today is that there are still groups who want to argue against the liberal ideal. For these

groups, privacy should indeed be the preserve of the privileged. As for the first point, it is of course true that the world is changing rapidly, but it is hard to imagine that the clock will be turned back, and we are all carried back to pre-modern times. Once people enjoy the benefits that come with the social and economic infrastructures based on the idea that all human beings have the same rights, it is hard to imagine that they will give it all up and return to the state where their rights are limited, and where they are subordinate to the upper classes. However, suppose that there is a time machine that, if activated, would change the very fabric of the society so that they return to what they were before the advent of modernity. Thus, if the machine is activated in Europe, it will take the continent back to the middle ages, where privacy was not much of a concern. My point is that if such a scenario were possible, then the view that privacy is a right belonging to everyone is indeed contingent. This is so because when the machine is activated, all those who believe in the liberal ideals will change; their beliefs in the liberal ideals and in the practices associated with them will be gone, and replaced by the beliefs in the Great Chain of Being and feudalism instead.

I concede that such a scenario is logically possible, but that does not imply that my argument thereby becomes invalid. The argument will become invalid only if the contingency of the actual empirical situation logically implies that it is invalid, but that is not the case. The fact that the world nowadays appears to be dominated by the liberal standpoint (what Wong calls the Human Rights Approach), as well as the contingency of this fact, means that the liberal standpoint is right because following the guidelines supported by the standpoint serves the purposes for which the guidelines were created in the first place (and the guidelines were created to maintain a kind of society which the members of that society cherish). Recall that I have tried to show that normativity is a matter of doing whatever it takes to achieve the desired goal. In this case, the desired goal obviously is whatever goal that is envisioned by the drafters of the ethics guidelines (for example, one of the goals is that the privacy of individual persons must be respected because that accords with their dignity). Here is, then, the link between the actual situation and the normative pronouncement.

Another objection is that there are still groups who argue that privacy should not be a universal right belonging to everybody. China's Social Credit System, where each individual Chinese citizen is assigned a score based on their behavior online, is a clear example. It is noted that the system only seems to be applicable only to normal Chinese citizens, while the upper echelons of the ruling Communist Party are exempted, or the system can be used as a tool for power struggles among the elites themselves (Haciyakupoglu & Wu, 2019). This, together with the traditional Thai mindset that privacy is only a privilege reserved for the powerful few, represents a social fact that appears to belie my claim that the world today is dominated by the liberal standpoint. However, the world today is indeed dominated by the liberal standpoint, and it is this very standpoint that allows room for debates on the value and function of privacy as well as on the very tenability of liberalism itself. We must keep in mind that the whole world has changed. We are not living in a pre-modern world governed by strict hierarchies and limited horizons of knowledge anymore. Even those who claim to profess the anti-liberal ideas, such as those who advocate the Social Credit System or the traditional Thai conception of privacy, do

that *within the context* of the modern world. The Chinese Communist Party is not advocating that the country return to the Imperial Age governed by emperors and their retinue of eunuchs and concubines. Nonetheless, vestiges of the old times still remain, and they have been used as a cover for the hidden agenda of those in power. It is the overall context of the modern, technologically sophisticated world, together with its necessary accompaniments of underlying theories and sets of values, that governs both sides of the liberalism and anti-liberalism debate.

Seen in this light, then, the social reality that prevails in the world today, strictly speaking, is not identical to the content of the liberal viewpoint (as seen in the call for the right to privacy for everyone, for example) alone, but it is also identical also to the content of the views that criticize it. In other words, both sides of the debate together constitute an aspect of the social reality that we are talking about here. This is only possible because liberalism allows for a space wherein differing viewpoints can operate. The objection is that my conception is misleading because it seems to presuppose that only liberalism alone prevails in the world today, which, allegedly, is contrary to the fact. My reply, in short, is that it is indeed the case that there are competing viewpoints (such as the views of those who try to justify privacy-as-privilege or the Social Credit System), but they only operate within the larger historical context of the modern world already governed by ideas that constitute modernity.

However, my proposal differs from standard (Kantian and utilitarian) liberalism in a significant way. While standard liberalism tries to find the source of normativity in the rational capabilities of beings or their capabilities of having pleasure and pain, I believe that the source should better be found in the *actual* conditions of the society in which it is embedded. Since the world today is governed by the belief in the formal equality of all human beings, this belief can also be justified by a theory that grounds normative judgments on considerations of empirical conditions. Complex historical, economic, and political conditions have led the world, both East and West, to the condition where it is today, and it is undeniable that these conditions include the sets of belief in the equality of human beings in terms of their rights and dignity. Following Hegel, I argue that it is these complex historical conditions that also give rise to normative justifications of moral judgments. The purpose of ethics—living well—is to find out how an individual can find a harmony with his or her social and physical surroundings. True happiness can only be found in such a harmonious relation. In social settings, the same thing also applies. Living well in a society, or for a society to "live well," requires that the society as a whole find a harmonious relationship with nature. Since the world today is constituted by the specific kind of social and technological reality with which we are all familiar, it is this specific kind that grounds normative judgments in and for this world. Here, then, is where the elephant can become a source of normativity.

I have to note here, however, that the view I am presenting here has deep affinities with, but is not identical to, either Terrell Bynum's flourishing ethics (Bynum, 2006; 2021) or Luciano Floridi's ontocentric ethics (Floridi, 2002a; 2002b; 2007). In "Flourishing Ethics" (Bynum, 2006; 2021), Bynum proposes a theory of information ethics that is based on the Aristotelian tradition and which is focused on how humans and other beings could prosper and flourish as a result of their congruence with nature. Thus, Bynum shares with the view presented here a debt

to the ancient ethical traditions, which he rightly views as also including those of the East, such as Buddhism and Taoism (Bynum, 2006, p. 158). Bynum's view is also like that of Floridi. The latter's ontocentric ethics is predicated on the view that the amount of information that is available in what Floridi calls the "infosphere" is such that, all things being equal, it is good if there is a large amount of information flowing freely in the infosphere, and bad otherwise (Floridi, 2002). Floridi's and Bynum's theories are thus similar in the sense that they both share the same deep connection between normative judgments and metaphysics. In this sense, their ethical theories share the same core idea as what I am proposing here. However, my view differs from Bynum's and Floridi's in that the view I am developing here is designed to interpret the *hen* in Ess's *pros hen* theory: It aims at answering the very specific question of what it is that functions as the single endpoint in Ess's theory toward which competing moral views (within a certain boundary), rather than providing an answer to question what a viable ethical theory, in general, is like. Furthermore, the explanation of what the single endpoint is like is also different in my view compared to either Bynum or Floridi. For me, it is the actual conditions that obtain in a particular frame of space and time, conditions that constitute a social reality at a time. In Bynum, on the contrary, the focus is on the Aristotelian notion of human rationality and purposes, or, in the case of his Wienerian ethics for machines and cyborgs, the idea that information is physical (Bynum, 2006, p. 167; see also Bynum, 2021). In Floridi, the focus is on the infosphere, as we have seen. In both cases, the norms are derived from these metaphysical realities, as well as their roles in bringing about human flourishing or the flourishing of information entities. In my case, however, the norms are derived from their roles in realizing the desired goals and values that members of a *particular* society cherish.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to argue that Ess's *pros hen* pluralism could be interpreted in a way that accords with the actual situation in information ethics today. The primary motivation for this interpretation is thus a desire to see ethics as being grounded on concrete and tangible reality. This does not imply that we cannot hope for a better world; on the contrary, disagreements, negotiations, and criticisms are also a part of reality in the first place. We only need to persuade our fellow humans, and we must also be open when they try to persuade us too.

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