Linda Hogan


In her book *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, Linda Hogan—professor of Ecumenics and Vice-Provost at Trinity College Dublin—reflects on the history, development, and current state of both the politics and discourse of human rights. She offers a substantive re-interpretation of the field of human rights in order to preserve their justification and relevance in the 21st century. Through post-colonial, feminist, communitarian, and post-modern critiques, Hogan draws "on the constructivist strand in political philosophy" (3) to reformulate human rights, and recalibrate their impact within ethical discourse. Ultimately, she argues, "human rights must be radically rethought as ethical assertions about the critical importance of certain values for human flourishing, as an emerging consensus generated by situated communities who are open to internally and externally generated social criticisms, and as emancipatory politics whose modus operandi is ultimately that of persuasion." (208–209) Before evaluating the success of Hogan’s argument, let us explore the trajectory of thought that brought her to this conclusion.

One of the indisputable benefits of Hogan’s analysis is her deep commitment to presenting the plurality of voices at play in contemporary human rights discourse. From the beginning, Hogan aims to relocate the conversation on human rights within a fundamentally pluralistic, discursive space. This space is constituted by Hogan’s three pillars of human rights—personhood, universality, and community—and it is her engagement with these pillars that structures the argument of her text. After identifying the impetus behind this investigation (Introduction), she begins her analysis by revisiting the philosophical (Chapter 1) and theological (Chapter 2) foundations from which human rights have emerged. Following from her discussion of the crises of legitimacy and meaning in human rights, Hogan addresses, and re-interprets, the nature of the person (Chapter 3), the universality of truth claims (Chapter 4), and the role of community (Chapter 5). Following from this, Hogan—in one of the most interesting and unique contributions of her text—explores the possibility of rethinking the politics and discourse of human rights through an encounter with the arts and literature (Chapter 6). Hogan concludes her analysis by summarizing her findings (Conclusion) and re-emphasizing the importance of keeping faith with human rights, once they are reconceived and rearticulated in light of her analysis. Thus, the structure of her analysis follows a clearly stated trajectory of argumentation—with each chapter building off
the one before it—and serves the reader well for conceptualizing and following her argument and analysis.

In light of this, one can say that the methodological approach of Hogan's analysis is historical, bordering on genealogical. Hogan, herself, recognizes this when she identifies the affinities between her approach in this text and the approach of Hans Joas in his *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*. Nevertheless, while Joas’s analysis is clearly a genealogy, Hogan’s is not as clearly so. Her analysis is more sweeping than Joas’s because the task she has set herself is ultimately different from his. Thus, her methodological approach is more accurately conceived of as historical, but, nevertheless, a historical method that takes seriously both the interruptions and, at times, the disruptions posed by the pluralist, post-colonial, feminist, communitarian, and post-modern critiques at the heart of her approach. Another unique feature of Hogan’s analysis, on this point, is the incorporation of philosophical, theological, and ethical voices from outside the dominant, western tradition. Given the sources she draws from, one can easily imagine an ethics syllabus which attends not only to the western impact on human rights, but also to the deeply pluralistic history of this discourse—a pluralism that, more often than not, has gone unheard and unrecognized in the dominant, western narrative.

While Hogan’s command of the literature in this field is comprehensive, and her critical analysis is strong, there remains a question, at the end, as to where we finally finds ourselves in relation to the discourse and politics of contemporary human rights. Through Hogan’s critical hermeneutic, the reader is, in the end, well convinced of (1) the impossibility of grounding human rights in a static concept of human nature and (2) the central roles contested cultures, porous communities, and constructed traditions play within this tradition. What remains ambiguous is her critique of the universal dimension of human rights. Hogan wants to maintain a concept of universality for human rights, but resists its articulation in terms of rationality, modernity, and the enlightenment tradition. Thus, her solution is a form of “embedded universalism,” where “human rights norms are better understood in terms of being particular or local expressions of universalist claims that over time and as a result of the persuasiveness of their appeal have evolved into a global moral language.” (108–109) The reader is sympathetic to this reformulation of the universal dimension of human rights, yet the argument does not escape a familiar challenge—namely, the challenge of relativism. Hogan believes that her analysis corrects for this by an appeal to the ‘persuasiveness’ of embedded universalism, but given the immense and potentially debilitating impact relativism poses for both the politics and discourse of human rights, one must wonder