Universality and the Daunting Task of Cultural Translation: A Response to Penny Enslin and Mary Tjiattas

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I first want to thank Penny Enslin and Mary Tjiattas for offering a richly textured discussion to which the opportunity of crafting a response gives me great pleasure—on two counts. First, the paper addresses what I see, along with the authors, to be a pressing problem for philosophy of education and for the political orientation of education more generally, namely the question and status of the universal for addressing injustices. This problem, as Enslin and Tjiattas acknowledge, has become sharply profiled within the pervasive talk of globalisation and current turns to cosmopolitan thought, and it therefore deserves the serious thinking it has received in their paper. As for the second source of my pleasure, Enslin and Tjiattas's desire to work toward a 'qualified universalism' is one for which I have a great deal of sympathy, given that it is no longer possible to think exclusively in 'absolutist' terms as though cultural practices were irrelevant to the promotion of global justice. The paper builds rightly, in my view, toward a reflective engagement with the terms upon which justice can be reconceived.

Yet, I want to articulate here a different view of approaching recent concerns with universality and reframe our attention to it, beyond the polarising tendency of universalism versus anti-universalism. In this way, I hope to open up opportunity for conversation that exceeds the limits placed on us when we confine ourselves to dichotomous thinking. And while I think that Enslin and Tjiattas's paper does indeed invite this type of conversation about the limits and possibilities of universal claims to justice, in some measure it is also expressive of the very dichotomy that they seek to overcome. Thus my comments here focus initially on offering a critical reading of Enslin and Tjiattas's own approach to the 'great affront' of universalism and their understanding of anti-universalism. I then turn to a discussion of more nuanced critiques of universality and draw upon the work of Judith Butler (2000) whose emphasis on cultural translation offers us a ways of thinking about the universal that transcends the oppositional relation between culture, on the one hand, and commitment to universals, on the other.

Enslin and Tjiattas argue for the need to reinvigorate not simply a sense of the universal, but a form of universal*ism* if justice is to be achieved globally. The argument is initially built on a reading of the charges against universalism made by those who are identified as embracing anti-universalism and its attendant commitments to cultural relativism and identity politics. Casting these in terms of a 'new orthodoxy', Enslin and Tjiattas argue that although this position is rightly critical of the imperialist tendencies of universalism—replete with its

colonising effects on non-Western cultures—it is nonetheless insufficient for creating a new foundation of political transformation and global justice. In guiding us instead through some of the labyrinthine issues currently on the table in the new universalisms, Enslin and Tjiattas ferret out those aspects that lend themselves to a reframing of universalism in terms of both justification and scope, and they identify, in particular, the necessity for some kind of cultural recognition in any commitment to universalism. Through their reading of Nussbaum's and Benhabib's 'unsullied universalism', Appiah's 'hybrid universalism' and Gould's 'concrete universalism', Enslin and Tjiattas underscore the dangers of relying too heavily on 'culture' in such a way as might simply risk any serious cosmopolitan commitment to justice. Thus working with and yet against some aspects of these new universalisms, Enslin and Tjiattas develop a '3Rs' approach that supplements recognition with redistribution and representation. Focusing on the campaign for Education for All, they argue that claims for universal access to education (which is a question of scope) can also be enhanced by appeals to universalism to provide the ground upon which such claims can be made (which is a question of justification). Drawing on Nancy Fraser's work, Enslin and Tjiattas interweave considerations for the redistribution of resources and parity of participation in order to give a more fulsome account of what recognition entails. This move allows them to work against 'a politics of resentment that distracts from the challenge of tackling redistribution' (Enslin and Tjiattas and Tjiattas, p. 17) and to propose a 'non-toxic universalism' based on equal participation in democratic negotiation and justification of cross-cultural norms. Thus, the task for philosophy of education is, for Enslin and Tjiattas, to broaden its horizons in the interests of anchoring global justice through its own disciplinary practice; they call on us to take up a supporting role in promoting colleagues from 'poor countries' and in so doing perform the very substance of justice they call for.

Now part of my concern with Enslin and Tjiattas's argument has to do with the way the term 'anti-universalism' is deployed both as a foil to universalism and as a substitute for what have been some thoughtful critiques of modern universalism, most of which have been mounted neither by cultural relativists nor folks concerned with reducing identity to one's belonging to a nation, ethnicity, race or religion. Rather, anti-universalism is a moniker given to a wide range of philosophical positions most often by its detractors. Thus, to characterise all or even some of these positions as the antithesis of universalism risks portraying such critique as incompatible with the demands of justice itself. Indeed, Enslin and Tjiattas's discussion in the section entitled 'The Anti-Universalist Challenge' is read solely through the eyes of the new universalists, such as Nussbaum, Benhabib and Appiah, which leads them, not surprisingly, to characterise this position as not simply insufficient but deleterious to the pursuit of global justice. This presents us, then, with a somewhat slanted view of the diversity of critique that is actually available. Many critics of universalism are not simplistically derisive of universality, but point to the

ways in which claims to universality operate in and through particular logical systems, linguistic contexts, discourses and cultures. Thus whether one is discussing Hegel, Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Spivak, Derrida, Irigaray, Mouffe, Laclau, Žižek, Butler or Foucault, the critique is directed to both the form of universality and the content of the claims being made in its name. Political theorists of various stripes struggle, therefore, with the status of universality in ways that offer far more radical interventions into political projects than what is normally assumed within the frame of cultural relativism or identity politics, where 'culture' is frequently understood as being fixed, unitary and monolithic. Instead, these critics take up the question of culture itself as an exchange of practices and languages through which claims to universality are made and interpreted; thus culture, on this view, is not some simplistic ruse conjured up by relativists to frustrate universalists, but is the very cloth from which universal claims are tailored. The question is not then how to downplay 'culture' but how to face the limitations culture poses to our claims for universality and to see what political possibilities can be opened up through facing these limitations.

With this focus on 'critique of universality' as opposed to anti-universalism, we begin in a very different place from which to attend to some of the concerns raised by Enslin and Tjiattas with respect to the seeming intransigency of the either/or position. That is, admitting 'culture' into the framework of universality gives us a point of reflexivity that is fully in tune with the cosmopolitan demand for justice that, by its nature, remains committed to human and cultural diversity. Moreover, what such critiques introduce is a way of thinking about the space between the particular, lived realities of individuals and the universal calls for rights and justice *as one of negotiation*.

One of the most cogent theorists to take up this space of negotiation is Judith Butler who reclaims universality in the name of cultural translation. Butler's focus on translation begins in her critical analysis of the formal aspects of universality (and not simply the content of its claims) through a close reading of Hegel. She argues that the very structure of universality negates particularity in its adherence to abstraction: 'The positing of the universal "I" thus requires the exclusion of what is specific and living from the self for its definition. Universality in its abstract form thus requires cutting the person off from qualities which he or she may well share with others, but which do not rise to the level of abstraction required for the term "universality"' (Butler, 2000, p. 17). In the name of seeking to rise above the particular in order to name what is common to all, universality paradoxically destroys what it purports to include. Thus exclusion not only occurs on the level of universality's 'refusal to accommodate all humans within its purview' (p. 23) but also is the very logic that makes universality possible. That is, universality rests on a founding moment of negation of the concrete, and thus in a sense we could say that universality itself produces its own anti-universalist challenge.

The next step Butler takes from here is to see that all forms of universality are not only rooted in negation of the concrete but are

themselves embedded in concrete particularities. That is, Butler sees that no claim to universality can be made from outside language, which means it is necessarily situated within a set of linguistic and cultural practices that cannot be entirely divorced from the claim itself. 'The claim to universality always takes place in a given syntax, through a certain set of cultural conventions in a recognizable venue' (p. 35). This would, on the face of it, seem to be leading us down the royal road of relativism indeed; yet, Butler's point is that the cultural embeddedness of universality is reflective of the way cultures themselves are constituted. 'Cultures are not bounded entities; the mode of their exchange is, in fact, constitutive of their identity' (p. 20). In thus ceasing to talk of culture as a unified entity (a Western culture, a British culture, an Iranian culture), Butler enables us to question the ways in which universality is already part of a process of the constitution of culture itself and thus already involved in processes of cultural translation and exchange. 'No notion of universality can rest easily within the notion of a single ''culture'', since the very concept of universality compels an understanding of culture as a relation of exchange and a task of translation' (pp. 24–25). That is, there is no givenness to, or intelligibility of, universality without an on-going struggle to translate its meaning and significance into those very particular situations it claims to be accounting for. This has a significant bearing upon how we think about the work to be done on the global stage, where universal appeals to rights and justice are often assumed to be transparently applicable to local contexts. Butler writes, however, and I quote her at length:

> . . . there is no cultural consensus on an international level about what ought and ought not to be a claim to universality, who may make it, and what form it ought to take. Thus, for the claim to work, for it to compel consensus, and for the claim, performatively, to enact the very universality it enunciates, it must undergo a series of translations into the various rhetorical and cultural contexts in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made. Significantly, this means that no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation. Without translation, the very concept of universality cannot cross the linguistic borders it claims, in principle, to be able to cross. Or we might put it another way: without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through a colonial and expansionist logic (Butler, 2000, p. 35).

In obviously seeking to avoid the imperialist tendencies of universality, Butler focuses on the task of translation that is incumbent on all of us who promote universal claims to rights and justice. Introducing the importance of cultural translation into the field of our philosophical and political endeavours does not mean that we can abandon universality altogether. Indeed, universality is a necessary aspect of political life. Nor is the point simply to rid universality of its colonialist or masculinist assumptions, 'purifying' it as it were, for the very act of purification promotes an

abstraction at odds with the cultural embeddedness of our claims. No universality, by virtue of its formal qualities, can be all-encompassing. The question is, rather, to rethink universality itself as an open-ended struggle that involves a qualitatively different approach to our search—and longing—for overarching universals. The task of translation, then, on Butler's account, turns universality into a *struggle for intelligibility* as opposed to being a standard or home-base from which we can measure and justify our condition in the world. Our deployment of terms such as justice, and the commitments to recognition, redistribution and representation that this may entail, needs always to acknowledge the insufficiency of its own claims. This is, then, a universality forever dissatisfied with itself, forever restless in its search for meaning, and it lives only at the very limits of its own articulation. 'To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the "not yet" is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains "unrealized" by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal announces, as it were, its non-place' (p. 39).

I find this 'not yet' quality of the universal to be precisely what propels us forward, giving us hope to do more, to do better, to do otherwise. It has, in my view, acted as a catalyst for the position that Enslin and Tjiattas themselves develop insofar as they seek to refine, expand and reshape a universal commitment to justice. And it is this quality—far more than the quest for certainty, which presumes the perfectibility of our thought and leads to the illusion that we might someday rest on our laurels—that to my mind is crucial for developing new ways of facing the daunting task before us in combating injustices. Perhaps, in embracing this 'not yet' quality of the universal, as philosophers of education we might thereby attune ourselves to aspects of cultural translation and cease to perceive all attention to culture as a threat to the certainty we think that universalism can provide. Enslin and Tjiattas's final point about supporting colleagues from 'poor countries' is, in my view, deeply related to the very nature of translation, where recognition, redistribution and representation can potentially become something other, something different, than what we initially thought they were. For if we are going to promote trans-national exchange of this kind with other scholars (as a kind of performativity of justice), then this requires a certain capacity on our part to tolerate transforming those very universals we hold so dear through our encounters with new cultural contexts. I end here by hazarding to suggest that such an unending task of translation is the very condition of our work and not the relativist devil in disguise we so often make it out to be.

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