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From Reason to Common Sense

Towards a Critique of Universalism

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It is a well-known passage. The first-person narrator, Socrates, reports on a conversation about *justice* that he has had with some men at a party. With great indignation, a certain Thrasymachos from Chalcedon soon cuts in on the conversation and reproaches Socrates, saying it is yet another typical example of pointless chatter, nothing but foolish talk. After some banter, the Chalcedonian man finally sums it all up: "I proclaim that justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger."[1] Undisturbed by this definition, Socrates pursues his famously notorious midwifery skills "to help the truth to be born". The rest is philosophical history – the report bore the title *Politeia* and its author's name was Plato.

Is Thrasymachos indulging in cynical opportunism? Or does he intend, as Nietzsche later does, to elevate *strength* to an ethical constant, where – according to how it is unanimously received at any rate – it is understood not only as a structuring principle, but also as an intrinsically moral value? I think not. He is referring,

rather, to the relationship that exists between morality – indeed that goes beyond it: *ethics as discourse* – and the power relationships in society*, power* or *might*. It concerns a relationship that ethical speech very effectively conceals, since ethics supposedly seeks ways to resolve retributively the conflicts that arise from the power relationships. "Moral values are what those in power consider to be good because they have good use for them; this they then laud as being good for everyone": this is what the sophist from Chalcedon means, albeit using a different wording.

The dialogue on justice in the first book of the *Politeia* marks a decisive historical turning point and the "will to truth", to use Foucault's words, stands at its point of departure: "The sophist is banished."2 Transferred from the ethical to the epistemological level, we are dealing with a philosopher in search of truth, and a sophist who postulates that truth is that which *gains general acceptance*. Had he only known how tradition would treat his own fate, the sophist, for his part, would have had a strong argument in his favour. For a good two centuries Plato, the faithful recorder of Socratic dialogue, has been considered the gatekeeper of academic philosophy and (what is almost same thing) of its history. Thrasymachos, on the other hand, is completely unknown today; it is only thanks to Plato's good grace that we recognize his name as the one who responds negatively to Socrates. And this is by no means an accident.

Here, we see the truth, once it is found, claiming to be valid for all, at all times. There, we see an attempt to expose such a search for truth as a covert operation in favour of those in power. The philosopher versus the sophist is an earlier case in which *universalism* plays a key role.

Almost two and a half thousand years and a few antitheses later, we come across the concept of universalism once again. In the following essay, I will try to interpret this encounter. In the analysis, I will be asking the following three questions. In which contexts does/did the concept of universalism appear and in what forms? Where does its increasing relevance stem from? What are the contexts and drivers for its emergence today? Finally, I will formulate a thesis that takes those recent propositions as its starting point and target too, which aim to resuscitate the much-weakened concept of universalism with the help of new conceptions.

The Universalism of Reason

Universalism is the regime of the general. It has many forms, shaped each time by the common reference known as *reason* and, correspondingly, it has many reflections. In the history of western philosophy, we encounter universalism, broadly speaking, in three contrasting propositions and these may be assigned to three branches of academic philosophy.[3]

The general versus the particular: In *ontological universalism*, the question is whether a pre-linguistic, general being underlies the concepts of individual (hence particular) life forms and objects, or whether concepts are no more than arbitrary – albeit conventional – designations. This question, visibly influenced by Plato's theory of ideas, was at the core of the famous *problem of universals.* The Baroque period brought with it the consensual view that in nature there were only individuals, and that generality was purely an imputation, constructed (in the form of categories) in our knowledge. A distinction was made, therefore, between the order of things and the order of knowledge.[4] The *anthropological* variant

of universalism, however, was obtained in such a way that knowledge was again coextensive with nature in that very question: what is the human being?

In western philosophy, the particular separate [being] gradually came to serve as a model of the human being, of *general human existence*, with a counterpart. Thus, Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* could write: "The Negro (...) exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character."[5]

Ontological universalism is alive today – quite apart from metaphysical systems of thought – in racist and culturalist concepts and in the abstract painting of the "autonomous subject", which is already showing cracks in several places.[6]

Universal validity versus cultural relativity: *Epistemological universalism* is sparked by the questions of where truth comes from and how it acquires validity. The empiricist-rationalist controversy or the constructivist-realist debate represent secondary areas of conflict by comparison. In the recent dispute between (de)constructivist and essentialist positions, it may, in turn, be argued epistemologically, but the subject of debate forms the ontological question about the essence of *difference* – a question that converges with the one about the subject. Are differential categories such as gender or ethnicity a matter of (linguistic) constructs or one of anthropological/biological constants?

On the other hand, we find "authentic" epistemological universalism in the assertion that there are true statements, which

are valid because they are "context-transcending" (culturally neutral, for example), and this is the case in three respects:

1. The contextual conditions of their "discovery" and formulation are external to the true statements; their truth is unbiased by such conditions.

2. They are absolutely universally applicable: everywhere and always, as long as they have not been falsified.

3. The fact that this validity has not (yet) been acknowledged by all does not alter the truth of true statements in any way: they are *valid for all* regardless.

Scientifically true propositions, therefore, are as much a part of the above as philosophical proof, which has been produced by means of a scientific method (rational argument, logical consistency, methodological comprehensibility etc).

This assertion is diametrically opposed to the "culturalistic"[7] and culturally relative thesis, which posits that there can be no true statement that is not culturally determined. Whatever relates to truth has a cultural context and can only be grasped within that context: from the conditions in which it has its origins and is verbalized via its range of validity right through to its verifiability and persuasiveness.

Human Rights versus the Right to Culture: *Ethical universalism* can be traced back to classical antiquity, although its three most explosive phases took place in the sixteenth century (during the colonization of America), after the Second World War and in the "humanitarian interventions" of the present day, as Immanuel Wallerstein portrays in his most recent publication.[8]

The fact that ideas on morality – understood as morals – exhibit cultural characteristics is inherent even in Hegel's philosophical system. Nietzsche's genealogical return of a Christian concept of goodness to a warlike nature shaped by the aristocracy is an unmasking variation on this view, linked to status. On the other hand, ethical universalism sits quite comfortably – even today – in Kant's "cosmopolitan intent". Kant's own anthropological nomenclature shows the degree to which ethical and the ontologico-anthropological universalism of his day were interconnected: "Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples." 9

Here, from a contemporary standpoint at least, the particularistic basis of universalism, which supposedly embraces the entire universe, appears in all its clarity. When it comes to the nature of the "others", nature and right are mutually exclusive. Then comes a fallacy. Whoever does not share my ideas on morality is still in a state of nature and unworthy of the title of "human being"; from this, I conclude that he/she *cannot* have any sense of morals. The "natural being" *(Naturmensch)* is the exception to which my morality no longer applies: "(...) for it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere Thing - an object of no value. Among the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent." 10

Ethical universalism owes its aura of inviolability to the concept that we know as *human rights* since the eighteenth century; that since the Second World War has became a body of rules agreed under international law together with a network of international institutions; and in whose name wars are being fought for the past

decade and a half. Wallerstein sees a continuity in terms of argumentation between the colonialist-missionary expansion of the sixteenth century and present-day “humanitarian interventions”. According to Wallerstein, four arguments have served as universalistic legitimation for the systematic use of force since the theological dispute over the “Indian question” between the Spaniards Juan Ginés Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas around 1550: 1. Barbarism of others; 2. Abolition of practices that violate universal values; 3. Defence of the innocent; 4. Facilitating the spread of universal values (natural law or, more precisely, democracy, human rights...).11 The fact that particularistic justifications of local power relationships stand directly opposed to the universal concept of ethics in many parts of the world clearly makes such arguments more difficult to refute. Violations of human rights that go by the name of religious commandments, cultural peculiarity or “Asian values” and derive from a “right to one’s own culture”, all are grist to the mill of ethical universalism.

The Universalism of Common Sense

Ontological, epistemological and ethical universalism: transcultural conceptions of subject, truth and action. A multitude of scattered objections stand in direct opposition to this trio of general principles related to reason. They insist on the priority status of the particular, demand a right to culture and postulate the contextuality of subject, truth and action. That this combative rhetoric, which bolsters power, however, in large parts of the world, recalls “the discourse of race struggle" (Foucault)12 is by no means a coincidence. Through this genealogical description, Foucault wanted to draw attention to contemporary successors of this discourse. We are dealing, now as then, with universalistic, ruling, equalizing rhetorics of winners on the one hand, and with

particularistic, colonized, protesting discourses of losers on the other. What Foucault calls "Roman history" is, here, western rationality, flanked by human rights; what was conceived as "race war" (and, later, class war) there, that driving, smouldering, subterranean force behind the peace achieved through treaties, is here the hegemonic struggle that subalterns and minorities lead against the might of Eurocentrism, the new empire or against the majority. Motivated by difference and identity politics, the "rehistoricization of the forgotten ones" today takes the place that "Jewish history" – according to Foucault – had once claimed for itself.

Yet, currently, *neither* of the two positions, whether the universalism of the west or particularism in all its diversity, is in demand in its previous form. We are witnessing a dissolution: not so much the dissolution of universalism (something we had already seen during the second half of the twentieth century), but that of its adversary – cultural relativism, particularism and the minoritarian. The crisis of "new social movements" and "postmodern moralities" is bringing a *return of universalism* in its wake, this time as a conciliatory *middle ground*. It is no longer the autonomous subject, with its universally valid truth and its moral values that transcend culture that utters the universalistic magic formula. Paradoxically, it is now the subject, decentred, embedded, contextualized in multiple ways, with its fragmented knowledge and scepticism towards morality, who does so. Equipped not so much with the western conception of reason, but with *common sense* instead, this subject tells us that *we* ourselves now need universalism. Weary from the strains of a gruelling particularism, it cautions *us* against indifference towards the suffering in the globalized world as much as against the appropriation through neoliberalism. People in many places do indeed experience

oppression characterized by arbitrary state power, religious violence and discrimination. And in the market for moralities and identities as much as for goods, everything "ethnic" is indeed in vogue.

There are also eminently theoretical grounds for the search for a *new* universalism, since both poles in this conflict, pursued to their logical outcomes, at best lead us down the wrong tracks. The relativist-particularist proposition, for example, that *everything* is relative is, paradoxically enough, a statement with a claim to universality – a well-known fact since classical antiquity. Yet it is a paradox too that the assertion that truth and human rights are universally valid is itself neither *verifiable* nor *falsifiable*, and thus remains an assertion – and this apart from the fact that every form of universalism comes, if not from particular interests, then at least from culturally formed ideas.

The list of the new universalisms, which common sense proposes as conciliatory, mediatory ways out of philosophical impasses, political appropriations, identitarian politics that segment and erode solidarity, and ethical indifference, is a relatively long one. In it we find a "reiterative universalism" (Walzer), a "universalism as a horizon" (Laclau), a "strategic universalism" (Gilroy), a "Restaging the Universal" (Butler), a "singular universality" (Badiou) or a "universal universalism" (Wallerstein).13

A Critique of Universalism

The situation brings to mind Marx's famous statement that all great world-historical facts and personages appear twice, perhaps even in the Hegelian sense: but the first time as tragedy, and the second time as farce.14 The new universalism of common sense,

which critical minds are proposing, has something of the farcical about it.

In any case, a binary structure cannot be overcome like this. What is "disposed of" in this way, i.e. particularism, recalls the "abolition" of the bipolar world – with the result that we are now dealing with an all-powerful universal might that wages wars in the name of freedom, democracy and human rights. What has been abolished has survived the abolition; universalism, in all its might, is back. What is proposed here as a solution once again raises the issue it was originally supposed to resolve.

What are we to do when particularism as a position is truly untenable and the *new* universalism seems in the end to be *the* universalism *dressed up as new*? Let us go back to the beginning, to the sophists and the philosophers. Trasymachos referred to the universalism of particular interests, to a moral hypocrisy, to the will to truth, which played into the hands of the powerful. He did not, however, set up a particularistic canon of values in opposition to this ethics. He did not seek to justify any *other* power; he was neither a particularist nor a relativist; for him, it wasn't even a question of the specific. He was a diagnostician and a critic. In his attempt at exposure, we recognize the gestures of the modern intellectuals: universalism has disputed their right to this in recent times (by defaming critical activity as "useful idiocy in the service of the dictators").

It is not a question of defending any kind of particularism or speaking out in favour of cultural relativism. Nor is it about using cunning strategies to exorcize universalism of its power-hungry spirit, or to prepare the way for a "true" universalism that may yet come. The sophist's gesture is simple: it is about *criticizing universalism*, regardless of whether this appears as the rhetoric of

those in power or as the will to power in the rhetoric of those in rebellion. The difficulty, which demands intellectual competence, lies *in developing or defining the current method of such a critique of universalism*, in pursuing the available critical paths or in clearing the way for new ones. Thus, the object of criticism will not become a particularism, as so often happens. For that is ultimately the starting point for any subsequent universalism.

I would be happier for us to celebrate the return of sophism rather than that of universalism. Even as farce.

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1 Plato, The Republic, Book I, online available at: http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Plato/republic_book_one.pdf (20 June 2007).

2 Foucault, Michel, The Order of Discourse, in: Young, Robert (ed.), *Untying*

the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader (pp. 48-78). Boston: Routledge & Kegan

Paul 1981, p. 54.

3 The concept of universalism appears both in philosophical traditions beyond the European one and in other spheres of knowledge – though not always explicitly and often under other names. For obvious reasons, I am confining myself here to western philosophy only.

4 Cf Hakan Gürses, *Libri catenati. Eine historisch-philosophische Untersuchung der Sekundärdiskurse*, Vienna: WUV 1996.

5 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. by J. Sibree, Batoche Books, Onatrio: Kitchener 2001, p. 111 (http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hegel/history.pdf).

6 Stuart Hall's "five forms of decentring the subject" gives a very good account of this process: cf *Modernity and its futures* ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held, Tony McGrew, Cambridge/Polity/OU 1992, pp. 281-91.

7 Cf Dirk Hartmann/Peter Janich (eds.), *Die Kulturalistische Wende. Zur Orientierung des philosophischen Selbstverständnisses*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1998.

8 Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New Press 2006.

9 Immanuel Kant, Physical Geography, quoted from Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, Blackwell, 1997, pp.58-64.

10 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. by J. Sibree, Batoche Books, Onatrio: Kitchener 2001, pp. 113-114 (http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hegel/history.pdf).

11 Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New Press 2006.

12 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*, transl. by David Macey, New York: Picador 2003, pp. 61. In two lectures dating from 1976, Foucault describes a discourse, which emerged in the early 16th century, that noted an antagonistic "race war" between rulers and ruled, which was partly taken over by the declining aristocracy. From this historical discourse, according to Foucault, two further discourses

occurred in the course of time, which took completely opposite directions: the theory of class struggle and racial theory.

13 Cf Michael Walzer, *Nation and Universe. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values,* Tanner
Lectures Corporation 1990; Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London/New York: Verso 1996; Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2000; Judith Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism", in: *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, London: Verso 2000; Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2003 and Immanuel Wallerstein, op. cit. In the meantime, intercultural philosophical discussion provides more complex and subtle answers to the universalism question; Franz M. Wimmer's polylog concept is particularly relevant here, cf Franz M. Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie*, Vienna: WUV 2004. We see another confrontation within the context of the human rights debate between morality and politics. Cf on this topic Mathias Thaler, *Gründen, Fundieren, Rechtfertigen. Eine Untersuchung moralischer Argumente im Feld des Politischen*, unpublished dissertation, Vienna 2006.

14 Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm