There is no cosmopolitanism without universalism

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The cosmopolitan turn in the social sciences over the past twenty years has been an exciting and welcome move. Exciting, because it was able within a reasonably short period of time to bring together a variety of scholarly traditions and focus them on the conceptual and normative challenges of our current global modernity. Welcome, because some despite excesses and shortcomings, it has decidedly contributed to the critique of different essentialist, chauvinist and indeed nationalistic ways of thinking that have been present throughout the history of the social sciences (Chernilo 2007; Delanty 2009; Fine 2007; Turner 2006). Cosmopolitanism is now a common term within a number of different scholarly communities and intellectual traditions – look no further than this very compendium that now celebrates the publication of a second edition. One note of caution is needed, however. Recent sociopolitical events – Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the so-called ‘alt-right’, etc. – offer a clear warning that this is no time for complacency. The last thing we want is a repetition of ‘the rise and fall’ of globalisation theories of the turn of the century; that the excitement and critical spirit of cosmopolitanism fades well before it was able to ascertain more fully its intellectual agenda.

My goal in this paper is to offer a reassessment of what I consider is cosmopolitanism’s most vexing issue: its interconnections with the question of universalism. Its key argument is that the core of the cosmopolitanism project lies in its claim to universalism. Whether we understand cosmopolitan developments as constitutive elements of our contemporary sociohistorical landscape, or we see them more as regulative ideas that are needed in order to defend certain principles that by definition will never be fully actualised, it is my contention that thinking in cosmopolitan terms compels us to favour a universalistic orientation. In doing this, we will have to criticise the ways in which previous universalistic arguments have been deployed and justified. But these criticisms shall ultimately turn into forms of self-criticism at the core of cosmopolitanism as an intellectual project lies in the redefinition and refinement, rather than the abandonment, of its universalistic orientation: there is no genuine cosmopolitan position without a universalistic orientation that upholds an all-encompassing idea of humanity (Archer 2000; Arendt 1998; Chernilo 2017).

In what follows, I will discuss four of the most common charges against cosmopolitan universalism: the problem of its ‘original locale’, of ‘stability’, of ‘reification’ and of ‘idealism’. After exploring this ‘problematic centrality’ of universalism in cosmopolitan thinking in the opening section of the paper, the second section, ‘Early cosmopolitan thinking: the problems of particular
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origins and stability’, deals with the first two of these charges. The argument there is that, right from their inception, universalistic arguments had to engage with questions about their own origins as well as their ability to account for sociohistorical variation and normative disagreement. The next section, ‘The rise of modern cosmopolitanism: Immanuel Kant and the charges of reification and idealism’, then deals with the questions of reification and idealism and addresses them by looking at Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan and moral thinking. It is in Kant’s decided proceduralisation of universalism, on the one hand, and his view of how moral universalism is compatible with the all too real egotistic motivations of individuals, on the other, that a universalistic orientation renews itself and remains a fundamental resource for contemporary cosmopolitan thinking.

The problematic centrality of universalism in cosmopolitan thinking

The claim that universalism has been a central tenet of the contemporary social sciences is most commonly used as an indictment on their current shortcomings and the lessons they have missed. Take, for instance, Richard Rorty’s (2009: 97) view that, through its commitment to universalism, the ‘Plato–Kant canon’ that lies at the centre of modern thought has been hugely damaging both intellectually and politically. More closely related to the specific concerns of this article, Raewyn Connell identified universalism as one of the major shortcomings of ‘grand social theory’ that has led to an absolute neglect of colonialism in mainstream sociology. More poignantly, and in startling reversal of Kant’s ideas of universal hospitality to be discussed below, she argues that the idea of terra nullius [a land belonging to nobody], which stood at the centre of ‘the coloniser’s dream, is a sinister presupposition for social science’ (Connell 2007: 47). In postmodernism and postcolonialism alike, then, universalism is seen as wholly problematic (it can never be adequately justified), mistaken (it is to be rejected everywhere and in any shape or form) and pernicious (it is a wolf dressed up as a sheep from which nothing good comes out).²

Philosopher Leo Strauss, a critic of developments in American social science during the twentieth century, offers what is perhaps a more insightful comment on the question of universalism. His argument is that a fundamental aporia inheres in American social science because whereas on the one hand the problem of universalism is indeed central to it, on the other hand a positivistic self-conception distorts what is genuinely at stake. Strauss (2004: 111) put the question thus:

However much the science of all cultures may protest its innocence of all preferences or evaluations, it fosters a specific moral posture. Since it requires openness to all cultures, it fosters universal tolerance and the exhilaration deriving from the beholding of diversity; it necessarily affects all cultures that it can still affect by contributing to their transformation in one and the same direction; it willy-nilly brings about a shift of emphasis from the particular to the universal: by asserting, if only implicitly, the rightness of pluralism, it asserts that pluralism is the right way; it asserts the monism of universal tolerance and respect for diversity; for by virtue of being an ism, pluralism is a monism.

Strauss wrote this commentary as an indictment on the social sciences’ recent developments. For him, it constitutes a definitive demonstration of the futility of the modern and empirical study of social life because of its restrictive views of what constitutes genuine knowledge of human affairs (Strauss 1974). Strauss’s regressive solution of seeking to go back to the ancient texts of philosophy (Western and non-Western) as the repository of true knowledge is not the path I should like to follow; but I do think that we need to take seriously his twofold insight: (a) that a universalistic orientation is built into the ways in which our social scientific concepts actually
operate and (b) that the justification of universalistic arguments shall remain tentative and problematic (Chernilo 2013).

As soon as we suspend the inevitability Strauss attaches to his critique of twentieth-century social science, his reflections become more instructive with regards to the significance of universalism in contemporary cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan approaches require a strongly universalistic conception of humanity that cannot be justified in terms that are acceptable for conventional scientific claims: they must bring together scientific and philosophical knowledge claims (Chernilo 2014, 2017). If that is the case, therefore, the problem faced by cosmopolitan thinking is that its very universalism challenges some of the shortcomings that are constitutive of the same social scientific programme it now seeks to embrace. If I am correct in this assessment, then these are the four main arguments that are raised against a universalistic orientation:

• **Argument 1: The question of its original locale.** The historical roots of universalistic ideas lie in the particular geographical and sociocultural context of Ancient Greece and this ‘Western’ origin can never be transcended.

• **Argument 2: The question of stability.** Universalistic ideas emphasise unity, homogeneity and necessity over difference, heterogeneity and contingency; therefore, they are fundamentally unable to account for historical change and sociocultural variation.

• **Argument 3: The question of reification.** Universalism is always the generalisation of a Western particular. Rather than being neutral, it systematically reifies those values, institutions and forms of life that are closer to its original experiences.

• **Argument 4: The question of idealism.** Universalism is a lofty ideal nowhere to be found in empirical reality. It is therefore unable to account for such hard facts of life as people’s egoistic motivations, their individual preferences or even the power politics of states.

I argue that these four criticisms do not capture what universalism is, and the role it plays in current understandings of cosmopolitanism. But they are surely worth revisiting. In what follows, I address each one of them by sketching a different trajectory of the relationships between universalism and cosmopolitanism.

**Early cosmopolitan thinking: the problems of particular origins and stability**

The standard narrative has it that cosmopolitanism is a long-standing intellectual tradition that, from the time of Stoic philosophy, has defended ideas of universal belonging. At the centre of cosmopolitanism’s belief is the notion that our human membership takes precedence over the more particular aspect of our identities and/or sociopolitical affiliations. Argument 1 above, the question of the ‘Western’ roots of cosmopolitanism, is then a good starting point. A first argument that I should like to make, however, is to question whether, and to what extent, is this labelling of ancient philosophy as ‘Western’ adequate: the Stoic philosophical tradition we are talking about here predates the rise of the West itself. Although some of the texts that lie at its centre – Diogenes’s and Cicero’s works – have taken a relevant role in what later became the Western philosophical canon, we still seem to be imposing retrospectively a sense of cultural mission that the texts themselves did not have. A politics of canon making, rather than of intellectual history, seems to be at stake here – and for that it matters little whether the putative link between Greek philosophy, cosmopolitanism and ‘the West’ is made in celebratory or denunciative mode.

But the issue goes beyond the underlying logic of cosmopolitanism’s putative origins; the actual implications of this standard view can also be questioned. We now know that whatever
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that can be termed as particularly ‘Western’ in early cosmopolitan thinking, its universalistic orien-
tation was not one of such elements. A full account of this trajectory is beyond what I can offer, but historian of political ideas Eric Voegelin has systematically argued that a strong universalistic orientation was in fact central to all known world religions. Building on Karl Jaspers’s idea of an Axial Age ‘from c. 800 to 200 B.C., with a concentration about 500 when Confucius, the Bud-

da, and Heraclitus were contemporaries’, ideas of universal humanity developed independently and were already in place in different cultural settings (Voegelin 2000a: 382). The core of Voege-

lin’s argument is that a universalistic orientation was already being imported to ‘the West’: ‘the

idea of a universal God, for instance, achieved its specific purity through the mystic philosophers,

but its existence, imbedded in a compact cosmological myth, is attested by Egyptian inscriptions

for about 3000B.C.’ (Voegelin 2000b: 215). Quite crucially, as this is something that will reappear below in my argument, Voegelin suggests that a universalistic orientation has always been difficult to separate from imperial aspirations:

All the early empires, near Eastern as well as Far Eastern, understood themselves as represen-
tatives of a transcendent order, of the order of the cosmos; and some of them even under-
stood this order as a ‘truth’. . . . The empire is a cosmic analogue, a little world reflecting the

order of the great, comprehensive world.

(Voegelin 2000b: 130–1)

The validity of argument 1 depends, therefore, on an anachronistic, self-conscious and endog-

enous idea of ‘Western philosophy’ that had to be in place before the rise of the very idea of the

West. Rather the opposite, the uniqueness and originality of what has later become ‘Greek

philosophy’ needs to be explained in the context of the various intellectual and religious influ-

ces it received. The alleged validity of argument 1 becomes turns out to be the combination

between a ‘certain fallacy of origins’ (universalism’s origins accounts for its inability to deal with

non-Western phenomena) and a ‘methodological territorialism’ in the sense that intellectual

influences can be adequately delimited as uniquely belonging to self-contained geographical

areas or sociopolitical units. But neither proposition really holds.

Argument 2 focuses on the accusation that a universalistic orientation exaggerates notions of

social stability. Crucially, the validity of this critique remains even if argument 1 on its origins

proves to be less ethnocentric than previously assumed. If universalism requires ideas of unity

and homogeneity, then this raises legitimate doubts over its potential for understanding current

social processes. Unpacking argument 2 requires us to interrogate whether, and how, a univer-

salistic orientation is able to handle such issues as historical change, sociocultural variation and

normative disagreement. The counterargument that I should like to make here is that, however

dogmatic an early universalistic orientation may have been, it was still based on the empirical rec-

ognition that human life is only lived through its multiple variations and particularities. This is how

German sociologist and theologian Ernst Troeltsch put it at the beginning of the twentieth century:

The Stoic legal and social philosophy is, like the entire Stoic ethic, a product of the disintegration

of the ancient polis and the world-kingdom of a created cosmopolitan horizon. In place of positive

law and morality emerges the ethic derived from a universal, law-abiding reason. In place of

the national interests of his native country (Heimat), the individual is fulfilled by God’s

reason; in place of the single political connection is the idea of humanity that lacks differ-

entiation in terms of state and place, race and colour. From this human ideal comes a fully

free Gemeinschaft or community.

(Troeltsch 2005: 118, my italics)
Troeltsch’s argument is twofold here. On the one side, he emphasises that a sense of universality in early cosmopolitan thinking was made possible because of the acute sense of diversity, change and disagreement that came as a result of the actual ‘disintegration of the ancient polis’. On the other side, he asserts that this new way of looking at human affairs has a certain self-propelling capacity: the more it recognised difference the more it sought to foster a new sense of unity. The key point seems to be that there is a real gap between the actual historical conditions of crises that made the appearance of universalism possible and the explicit admission that universalistic ideas must work at the level of ideal projections. In terms of rejecting argument 2 on stability, then, it is my contention that rather than stability, universalistic ideas emerge out an acute awareness of diversity and conflict. The significance of a universalistic orientation may be assessed differently in normative terms, but its relevance lies neither in some ideal conception of ‘human nature’ nor in that actual sociohistorical conditions correspond with a somehow definitive sense of cultural unity. Universalism is a way of ‘imagining’ a strong sense of unity because current conditions precisely emphasise, on the contrary, difference, conflict and change (Arendt 1978).

Reinhart Koselleck has also reflected on relationships between universalistic ideas and the problem of stability. As he looked into the historical experiences of ancient Greece, Koselleck noted the gap between newly born universalistic ideals and the clear consciousness that these ideals are impossible to realise in the actual organisation of sociopolitical life. Koselleck argues that the central innovation of Stoic philosophy was that of universalism taking a sharper conceptual character. The early cosmopolitan programme did not focus on an idea of a world state or single political community; rather, at stake was a philosophical principle that sought to rearrange theoretically our understanding of who we are as human beings – the idea of a singular human species that is constituted through its diversity. Such a rearrangement, moreover, was still wholly embedded in a strict separation between ambiits of human action that were susceptible of human intervention and design (not least among them political life itself) and those that are organised on transcendental or natural conditions:

The Stoics considered the cosmos, governed by logos, as their home in which all humankind – freeman and slave, Hellene and Oriental, just as much as the gods and the stars – had a part. Political agencies were built into the cosmopolis, although the Stoics could never have identified the supervening with the empirical order. . . . We do not have here mutually exclusive concepts but rather supplementary concepts of varying magnitude, which are intended to mediate between the political tasks of the day and the general philosophical apprehension of the world.

(Koselleck 2004: 167, my italics)

Against the idea of stability that underpins argument 2, a universalistic orientation emerged whilst seeking to understand particular crises. This early universalism emerged with a sense of mission that surely favoured the rearrangement and overcoming of differences among social groupings at a ‘higher level’ – i.e. not in actual political life but in the realm of thinking. As particularities were up to that point being conceived of as naturally or divinely construed, the connections between universalism and particularism still remained unmediated: First, because the particular belonged in actual sociopolitical life while the universal only inhabited in the realm of ideals; second, because proposals for making particularities compatible with a sense of universal human belonging could only be justified in hierarchical (i.e. in natural or divine) terms. To that extent, therefore, it has been suggested that when writers like Cicero
talked about ‘the common society of the human race’, he may have meant little more than this: that there is a kind of mutual recognition between men which differs from the relationship between men and the rest of the natural world.

(Tuck 1999: 38)

Equally importantly, although this ‘thin’ universalism distinguished between a human and a natural world, it nonetheless seems to have tentatively associated the notion of human society with that of natural slavery . . . writers of the Hellenistic and Roman period were unhappy with the fully fledged Aristotelian account of the natural slave, but they were quite prepared to argue for the forcible enslavement of those who ‘violated the common code of mankind’.

(Tuck 1999: 40)

The argument is illustrative of the ambivalent yet persistent connection between philosophical arguments about universalism and their political implications in terms of slavery and empires. These linkages are of course central to postcolonial criticisms; they have remained a recurring problem, but they need not be seen as a necessary condition for cosmopolitan universalism. If anything, what transpires here is that a universalistic orientation goes against any axiomatic limitation of general ideas of human nature (i.e. everyone is a human being) even if such limitations can then be reintroduced for political gain (i.e. the punishment of certain actions places some groups outside the human family). In other words, a key modernising move of this early cosmopolitan tradition is accomplished when universalism is no longer able to uphold transcendental or naturalistic hierarchies between individuals and groups of peoples. Particular forms of life and identities, indeed all kinds of differences, need now to be seen as the result of human action and human action alone: from this time on, universalism becomes as a fully immanent frame of reference. It is treated as a social fact rather than as the result of natural differences or divine indictments. Koselleck shows that it was Diogenes, rather early on, who ‘coined the universalistic “cosmopolite” with the object of transcending the usual dualism’ between Hellenes and Barbarians. Yet things are never simple and also within this new unity this dualism was then recast, without relinquishing the continued division of all humanity into Hellenes and Barbarians . . . The distinction that had formerly been made spatially came to be deployed horizontally as a universal criterion of differentiation: ‘Hellene’ was a person with sufficient education, whether Greek or non-Greek, who merely had to be able to speak proper Greek; the remainder were Barbarian. Thus, this new antithesis, which was organized around education, no longer derived from natural qualities: to this extent, the counterconcepts were denaturalized and stripped of all spatial connections.

(2004: 165)

The boundaries between those who qualify and those who do not qualify as humans being is now re-attempted horizontally; that is, they are drawn through human means and human means alone. In turn, this means that new exclusions can only be created and overcome by the same route; politics and education being the two most relevant vehicles for reshaping the cultural status of particular groups. Conversely, cosmological justifications no longer do, as the distinction between who is and who isn’t a human being can no longer be based on an individual’s natural features, and the question of peoples’ geographical location also becomes increasingly superfluous.
The critical threshold that has been overcome, and the key argument to reject argument 2, is that while emphasising particularities remains central to the construction of universalistic arguments, there is now a clear awareness that they both are actually grounded on social relations themselves. To that extent, they may still be able to provide justification for unfair institutions such as slavery or imperialism, but the threshold itself of universal human belonging is now fully social and historical. Equally crucially, universalism now integrates a principle of inclusivity that depends on education, values and institutions that are themselves made by human beings. The critique of argument 3 on reification remains (why does it have to be Greek education and language?), and in order to address this we still have to consider Kant’s procedural turn. But universalism’s self-propelling openness has been firmly established: the human species can now genuinely commence to conceive itself as one.

Let me recapitulate my arguments so far. Against argument 1, I questioned that Greek classical philosophy is regarded as unproblematically Western and also that the rise of universalism be explicated as an endogenous ‘Western’ development. Against argument 2, moreover, I showed that early concerns with universalism were not dismissive or antithetical to sociohistorical transformations; instead, they actually emerged from the recognition of the difficulties that develop over sustained periods of crisis. The universalistic orientation of early cosmopolitanism was built on the notion that conflicts and disagreements were ubiquitous in actual political life and that differences among groups were naturally rather than socioculturally construed. Eventually, however, universalism becomes more and more immanent as it begins to understand the particularities of human beings, they themselves being human-made. These universalistic ideas are attempts to think of the solutions to social crises by redefining the terms within which we are able to think our common membership to the human species: how humans are able to imagine an increasingly wider, and potentially universal, sense of belonging.

In terms of the four arguments I am interesting in criticising, then, we have seen that neither an original locale (argument 1) nor the problem of stability (argument 2) constitutes a necessary element of cosmopolitanism’s universalism. Both can be overcome even within a relatively conventional narrative of what are the main features of a cosmopolitan outlook. But argument 3 on reification has not been addressed yet because, although universalism is now fully immanent, its contents are fixated on particular kinds of education (e.g. the ability to speak a particular language or master a particular intellectual canon). A fundamental tension is set thus: there are some socially and culturally specific features that reinforce the discrimination against those who do not possess the right credentials but, because they are defined in social and cultural terms (rather than in natural ones), these hierarchies can now potentially be overcome even from within. In the next section, then, I discuss how Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan approach redefines this universalistic orientation as he sought to deal with the challenges that remain.

**The rise of modern cosmopolitanism: Immanuel Kant and the charges of reification and idealism**

The significance of Kant for this exploration lies in that his work is explicitly concerned with the interconnections between universalism and cosmopolitanism. My goal in this brief piece cannot be to offer an exhaustive account of Kant’s arguments on these issues; rather, I should like to use his writings in order to reconsider the two charges of reification and idealism.

Kant’s (1991: 45–6) idea of cosmopolitanism centres on the idea of ‘a civil society which can administer justice universally’, and he treats this challenge as ‘the most difficult and the last’ question to be solved by human beings. Following a long-standing tradition of political thinking that thought that domestic and international levels are mutually and fundamentally interrelated
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(Tuck 1999), Kant’s notion of universal justice applies to increasingly global developments that he thought would favour *peaceful* and *lawful* relations at the domestic, inter-state and global or cosmopolitan levels (Bottici 2003; Fine 2007).

Contrary to Connell’s crude argument I mentioned in the openings, and in direct connection to the questions of imperialism and slavery, Kant (1991: 105) locates hospitality at the centre of its cosmopolitan programme. He defines hospitality as ‘the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory’. Crucially, this is a principle of hospitality that establishes limits to what people can and cannot do as they arrive in a foreign land: they ought to be treated peacefully by the locals, but visitors have no right to stay indefinitely nor are they allowed to pillage or force the country into submission. Rather the opposite, Kant’s commitment to a principle of hospitality is a way of making *all* individuals the fundamental bearer of rights irrespective of their nationality within as much as beyond Europe. He justifies the universal application of these principles also on *empirical* grounds because ‘since the earth is a globe’ human beings ‘cannot disperse over an infinite area, but must necessarily tolerate one another’s company. And no-one originally has any greater right than anyone else to occupy any particular portion of the earth’ (Kant 1991: 106). Kant’s cosmopolitan programme offers an *explicit criticism to the behaviour of European colonisers at the time* (Muthu 2003).

Kant then brings his idea of universal justice down to earth, as it were, through the notion of perpetual peace. He offers the following provisional articles (Kant 1991: 93–6): peace treaties shall not include secret clauses that may lead to future wars (article 1); states cannot be purchased, inherited or exchanged by other states (article 2); standing armies are to be gradually abolished (article 3); states shall not incur into debts to fund wars (article 4); states should not intervene in the constitution of other states (article 5); and actions during wartime should not prevent trust to re-emerge in future times of peace (article 6). To these, Kant adds three definitive articles that interrelate closely to the domestic, international and cosmopolitan levels. These articles seek to secure, *first*, the rational organisation of states at the domestic level; *second*, that international alliances be voluntary and will not lead to the rise of a despotic world state; *third*, that there are some human rights to be upheld and respected by all states and irrespective of the individuals’ nationality. Much has been said about Kant’s cosmopolitan writings, but this much is now clear: in relation to the questions of empire and slavery, he makes a cosmopolitan outlook a key element of their critique. The universalistic orientation of Kant’s thought makes individuals bearers of rights irrespective of their state affiliation, and claims to occupy lands or to enslave peoples become morally unjustifiable. As I shall seek to demonstrate below, moreover, it is the procedural logic of Kant’s categorical imperative, in the sense of treating human beings as ends rather than means, that is crucial for this transformation. There is a self-propelling logic of inclusivity that underwrites Kant’s universalistic orientation.

Kant’s idea of universal justice finds an additional expression in his attempt at the radical reformulation of philosophy as being based exclusively on immanent grounds: an idea of justice that is the human-made recognition of rights that humans grant to each other as *humans*. Universal justice has now to do with the rules through which we decide about the morality of laws and actions so that they are based on rational grounds. What Kant has made here, then, is to focus on how this universalistic orientation reinforces a fully immanent account of human knowledge and morality. But it is also worth mentioning that Kant’s views on the need for a universalistic orientation was *already unpopular* among his contemporaries. He was well aware of that that fact: ‘if votes were collected as to which is to be preferred – pure rational cognition separated from anything empirical, hence metaphysics of morals, or popular practical philosophy – one can guess at once on which side the preponderance would fall’ (Kant 1997: 21). The reasons behind this lack of sympathy towards universalism have less to do with its non-religious connotations and more with arguments 3 (on reification) and 4 (on idealism). And we need to address these directly now.
Being formulated at the dawn of modernity, the categorical imperative of morality is central to Kant’s explicit engagement with universalism: it already reflects an enhanced sense of historical, religious and sociocultural diversity. Kant was aware that attempts to determine positively the definitive or substantive contents of the good life were hugely problematic – if not outright impossible. The epoch-making importance of the categorical imperative, therefore, lies precisely in the fact that it is a decisive innovation towards the radical proceduralisation of previous universalistic arguments; namely, the idea that morality cannot and will not be defined through positive commands to act in a particular way but through the justifications of certain maxims or actions as valid for everyone. A general procedure that allows us to reflect on how we arrive at specific moral or even legal justifications, the categorical imperative replaces the use of specific concerns with the reasons and rules that allow us to arrive at particular moral decisions.

In its classical formulation, then, the categorical imperative states: ‘act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law’ (Kant 1991: 31). As he expands on it, Kant adds two further dimensions to it: the regulative role of the idea of humanity and the notion that human beings be treated always as ends in themselves and never as means. Kant (1997: 38) then reformulates the categorical imperative thus: ‘act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means’. The universalistic standpoint of Kant’s moral philosophy becomes fully apparent when, in this rejection of the idea of standing armies, his views went beyond the fact more professional soldiers made wars more likely. The most crucial factor for Kant is instead the fundamentally dehumanising, indeed immoral, rationale for the creation of professional armies:

the hiring of men to kill or to be killed seems to mean using them as mere machines and instruments in the hand of someone else (the state) which cannot be easily be reconciled with the right of man in one’s own person.

(Kant 1991: 95)

Kant’s proposals are not free of problems. The charge of formalism is possibly the most notable one, as it concentrates on the fact that its a priori foundation, and somewhat solipsistic formulation, obtain in a restrictive view of what constitutes adequate moral reasons (Hegel 1975). But its long-lasting contribution lies in that its procedural dimension allows for its dialogic underpinnings to be unpacked from within, as it were: the very possibility of thinking about the generalisation of moral maxims implies that different individual views and social positions have to be taken into account. Furthermore, the categorical imperative offers a way of thinking about moral issues that accepts the universalistic potential of particular cultural contents always provisionally. In other words, it is the open-ended nature of the procedure that may require us to revise the grounds on which we justify some cultural contents as potentially valid for humanity as a whole: freedom of association is universally valid whilst discrimination on religious grounds is not. Crucially, criticisms of specific institutions or practices are not raised on behalf of abstract principles; much more often, they emerge from very concrete concerns: the end of slavery, equal pay for men and women, the widening of the political franchise, asylum laws, etc. In so doing, the categorical imperative connects our individual concerns with the widest possible sense of human belonging. In relation to argument 3, therefore, Kant has found in the proceduralisation of universalism the key with which to unlock the problem of reification. It is this universalistic orientation that favours an ever-wider sense of inclusion for all human beings.

In relation to argument 4 on idealism, finally, we can see how Kant addressed it through his discussion of current ideas of human nature. He was unmoved by projects that sought to
positively define human nature as the necessary step for understanding morality. Too much had already been said about human nature and too little had been agreed on what it actually was:

One will find now the special determination of human nature . . ., now perfection, now happiness, here moral feeling, there fear of God, a bit of this and also a bit of that in a marvellous mixture, without its occurring to them to ask whether the principles of morality are to be sought at all in acquaintance with human nature.

(Kant 1997: 22)

In fact, Kant thought that the project of positively determining the content of universal human nature was systematically flawed. It was just foolish to look for definite conceptions of human nature with a view to univocally deriving moral commands from it. Kant saw two different problems here. On the one hand, such attempts would reintroduce the kind of substantive considerations that the categorical imperative sought to undermine. The idea that there is such a thing as a definitive notion of human nature still has not quite understood that the categorical imperative ‘has to do not with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows’ (Kant 1997: 27, my italics). On the other hand, he argued that we should never take people’s views about the morality of their own actions as the real measure of their motivations. Human beings are neither angels nor purely rational beings. Ironically, he contends that

we like to flatter ourselves by falsely attributing to ourselves a nobler motive, whereas in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives, since, when moral worth is at issue, what counts is not actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see.

(Kant 1997: 19–20)

In relation to argument 4 on idealism, therefore, this contradicts the view that there is no room in moral universalism for the real passions, minutiae or ugliness of everyday life: the fact that moral universalism remains distinct from empirical motivations and urges does not make it any less real. Kant’s (1991: 44) idea of human beings ‘unsocial sociability’, is in fact an attempt to acknowledge both the selfish and individualistic side of our life alongside its co-operative and collaborative one: they pull our actions in different directions but are equally real. It is just not the case that, in order to work, universalism needs a wholly unrealistic or essentialist conception of human nature; one that sees human beings as fully devoid of conflicting needs and motivational complications. Nor does a notion of ‘abstract morality’ underpin the psychological motivations that are needed for moral actions to take place. Rather the opposite, Kant’s argument is that a universalistic orientation is built into the very possibility of moral thinking as it actually happens among real people: we are not purely moral beings but our moral sensibility and imagination is a fundamental aspect of our life as a human species. Universalism lies at the centre of our real ability to think of ourselves beyond ourselves and as members of a single humanity; it combines rather than opposes people’s sense of duty with the motivations that come from their particular needs and interests and, last but not least, it puts forward a conception of justice in which human beings are bearer of inalienable rights and ought to be treated with dignity irrespective of their national or other particular affiliations. The world can of course work and be experienced beyond such moral grounds, but our understanding of it is incomplete if we lack the universalistic sense that is offered by a cosmopolitan orientation.
Closing remarks

In the little space I have left, I should like to spell out some of the main implications of my argument.

(1) Contemporary cosmopolitanism has no ritual debt to pay to its predecessors, nor does it necessarily have to engage with its long and far from unproblematic history. But if we miss some of their more important insights we end up arguing from below the critical standards that have actually been achieved in terms of understanding the ways in which human beings have become able to see each other as bearers of inalienable rights (Fine 2011). There is still much to learn on past understandings of cosmopolitanism and universalism remains its most fundamental insight.

(2) Favouring a universalistic orientation has never been the people’s choice. Serious difficulties are to be confronted when seeking to deploy universalistic arguments, and here I identified four of them: original locale, stability, reification and idealism. They pose a real challenge, there is no definitive way of overcoming them and yet they are best confronted from within. Stating that universalism is intrinsically Western is both anachronistic and inaccurate; that it is essentially homogenising denies its internal connection with experiences of crises and social change; that it is bound to favour certain cultural contents obviates the radical implications of Kant’s procedural turn; and that it is idealistic negates the reality of moral intuitions in the very definition of what we are as human beings.

(3) The solutions we find to these challenges are not static and new questions constantly emerge. It is inscribed in the self-propelling dynamic of universalism that, as better justifications and arguments are found, new questions, problems and exclusions make themselves visible. Universalism remains a key intellectual resource which, far from being opposed to the identification of specificities and particularities, it creates the very framework within which recognition and acceptance becomes possible. Like it or not, there is just no cosmopolitanism without universalism.

Notes

* My thanks to Robert Fine and Aldo Mascareño for extremely useful comments to earlier versions of this article.

1 A cosmopolitan project is not best served by those who speak explicitly in its favour but by those who are actually committed to a universalistic conception of humanity. This is what to my mind makes Ulrich Beck’s (2006) cosmopolitan project a contradiction in terms: the disassociation of cosmopolitanism from universalism ends up reproducing precisely the Eurocentrism it criticises (Chernilo 2011).

2 See Braidotti, Hanafin and Blaagaard (2012) for a critique of cosmopolitanism along these lines.

3 ‘The civil constitution of every state shall be republican’ (Kant 1991: 99).

4 ‘The right of nations shall be based on a federation of free states’ (Kant 1991: 102).

5 ‘Cosmopolitan right shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality’ (Kant 1991: 105).

6 I have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of these criticisms in Chernilo (2013: 121–45).

7 This proceduralism is what marks the ‘neo–Kantian’ outlook of such contemporary philosophers as Jürgen Habermas (1990) and John Rawls (1999).

References


No cosmopolitanism without universalism


