

Philosophy of Education and the Gigantic Affront of Universalism

A paper by PENNY ENSLIN AND MARY TJIATTAS with a response by SHARON TODD and a rejoinder by ENSLIN and TJIATTAS

Universalism in philosophy, argue Penny Enslin and Mary Tjiattas, tends to be regarded as an affront to particular affiliations, an act of injustice by misrecognition. While agreeing with criticisms of some expressions of universalism, they take the view that anti-universalism has become an orthodoxy that deflects attention from pressing issues of global injustice in education. In different ways, recent reformulations of universalism accommodate particularity and claims for recognition. Defending a qualified universalism, they argue, through a discussion of the Education for All campaign, that the present focus on recognition should be widened to address redistribution and representation as elements of global justice in education.

In her response to Enslin and Tjiattas, Sharon Todd expresses sympathy for their aspiration towards a 'qualified universalism', but she seeks to go beyond the dichotomy of universalism versus anti-universalism by way of a discussion of aspects of the work of Judith Butler. Butler's emphasis on cultural translation offers a way, it is claimed, to think about the universal that transcends the oppositional relation between culture and commitment to universals. In the light of this she advocates an approach that involves neither universalism nor anti-universalism but 'critique of universality'. Thus, the task of translation, on Butler's account, prevents universality from being a standard or home-base from which we can judge the world and turns it instead into an ongoing struggle for intelligibility.

In their rejoinder, Enslin and Tjiattas reject any charge that their own account has fallen into a simple dichotomisation of universalism and anti-universalism, and reaffirm their commitment to a form of universalism in which (a) partial or contextual considerations count in ethical deliberations, and (b) values and principles are subject to reflexive renegotiation in democratic deliberations, which provides the means of their justification and the source of their legitimacy. This yields, they claim, a non-standard form of contractualism that is both

culturally sensitive and open-ended. They suggest in conclusion that the debate between themselves and Todd raises questions about whether the analytical and continental traditions can concede one another's place in the philosophy of education.

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1 INTRODUCTION: RECONSIDERING UNIVERSALISM

In recent years anti-universalism has become a *sine qua non* for respectability in philosophy of education, along with several other disciplines. The standard philosophical view that morality involves universal values has been heavily attacked by proponents of 'cultural relativism', who dispute the claim that there are values or norms independent of cultural contexts and practices, insisting that all values and norms are culturally variable and diverse. Their arguments have cast doubt on universal categories of moral and political judgement as analytical tools and have promoted the idea that they are invariably 'a cover for particularistic hegemony' (Beiner, 2006, p. 33).

This view has been advanced under the influence of a set of related trends: identity politics, the politics of difference and the politics of recognition as well as the broad trends of postmodernism, post-colonialism and, from a different quarter, communitarianism. Expressions of anti-universalism have reflected a preoccupation with cultural differences, though they have also sometimes been associated with feminism and anti-racism.

In philosophy of education anti-universalism has been sharply critical of what is seen as a tendency to foist Western schooling practices on minority communities in Western democracies and on indigenous people in former colonies. According to this view, the universalist wishes to export unchanged European conceptions of education, attempting to re-create a bygone English grammar school ethos (competitive and individualist); a curriculum premised on the Western canon, including Eurocentric history; moral education that denigrates local custom and is premised on Western-enlightenment or Christian codes of conduct, and individualistic learning styles that discourage collaboration and despise indigenous knowledge. For feminist anti-universalists, such universalism is likely to assume a male, disembodied learner, favouring reason above emotion and using supposedly gender-neutral language that conceals a male bias.

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