

KAI NIELSEN ON CULTURAL IDENTITY, SELF DEFINITION AND PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

The defence of Universalism or Universalistic ideals and perspectives has increasingly become vehement and unrelentingly vocal since, perhaps, the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*.¹ Rorty's thesis opened a floodgate of critical reviews, rejoinders and commentaries. One (in)direct consequence or fallout of these efforts is, may be, the first international symposium on Universalism held in Poland in 1989, ten years after Rorty raised considerable intellectual dust with his publication. I have, elsewhere, dealt with some of the criticisms against Rorty by Putnam, Jackson and Others.² My principal interest and concern for now is with Kai Nielsen's interesting articles published in *Metaphilosophy*³ and *Human Studies*⁴.

Summary of Kai Nielsen's Arguments

According to Nielsen there have been two dominant contending poles: "the ideals of Universality of the Enlightenment, and the claims of particularism of the counter Enlightenment."⁵ Particularism does not entail ethnocentrism but recognises the importance and primacy of "local attachments: a self-identity as a particular kind of cultural identity".⁶ For Nielsen, we can have it both ways, that is, keep universalistic ideals and at the same time recognise "ourselves as particular sorts of persons, the bearers of a particular culture and tradition."⁷ Quoting Herder but largely disagreeing with Herder's main thrusts, Nielsen concedes that :

1. tradition and local attachments fetter us;
2. local attachments enable us find signification in our lives and help sustain that sense of significance;

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3. there is extreme diversity and different forms of life, but denies that
4. these diverse and different forms of life are "equally valid, equally worth living and incommensurable";
5. there is no genuine Achimedean point to make any evaluative comparisons;
6. there are no universalistic legitimating standards, values and norms;
7. there is no *supra* community such as humanity itself with which we can identify.

To escape from our cultural imprisonment occasioned by the facts of our own socialization, Nielsen endorses the proposals of Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's proposals amount to this: we reject some of our inherited belief systems which are mere "Cultural prejudices unsustainable in the light of a cool and informed investigation",⁸ and accept only those "legitimizing beliefs which would have to be accepted by any rational person in an ideal speech situation".⁹ Filtered thus, our "local attachments would still remain attachments, but would be genuine legitimate beliefs."¹⁰

Against this background, Nielsen suggests that "we may continue to have ethnic loyalties but our self-definitions will no longer be in purely ethnic terms. Since they must be sustainable under ideal speech situations, they will be beliefs that all *rational agents* will find reasonable to hold under such conditions",¹¹ (my emphasis). Nielsen concludes that only this will prevent us from lapsing into crude, bare faced, self-defeating cultural relativism. The merit here, according to him, is that in his proposals are embedded "elements of what are in both relativistic views and more universalistic views: we start with considered convictions but they also must be considered convictions which stand up to critical probing from a universalistic standpoint."¹²

Simply put, cultural identity and self-definition are meaningless, perhaps, senseless without due cognizance of both the particular and universal aspects. In other words, particularism is perfectly compatible with universalism¹³ because "genuine self-definition is rooted in some distinctive cultural identity but does not imply relativism or the rejection of universalism."¹⁴ What Nielsen has

succeeded in doing is to draw attention to the need for proper accounting of both views, two views that are ineluctably interlocked in the phenomenal drama of life. It is perhaps only this recognition that can sustain both sides and ensure a credible balance without doing violence to either side. Yet this quest for balance, substantially in Aristotelian mould, is suspect. I return to this theme later.

In another highly engaging paper: "Can there be progress in Philosophy",¹⁵ Nielsen makes the following points:

1. "that there are varying social practices; and
2. because they vary, not infrequently, they do conflict;
3. it is the task of philosophy to help in providing answers to these problems by showing which social practices ought to endure, which should be reconstructed, and which should be abandoned."¹⁶
4. Philosophy's task here in terms of providing answers to these problems is eminently required because "the issues raised by the problems of men cannot be resolved simply by appealing to existing social practices, context dependent though justification may be, for the heart of the controversy is the genuine and serious conflict of competing social practices."¹⁷
5. Only "Philosophy - as - critical theory" can accomplish this task of resolving the problems arising from conflicting social practices;
6. Such a critical theory will "share the fallibilist attitude of the sciences, such a comprehensive holistic theory will provide a comprehensive critique of culture and society and of ideology."¹⁸
7. "Such a theory is not just a dramatic narrative or a word-picture, but a genuinely empirical-cum-theoretical theory, a descriptive- explanatory theory showing us the structure of society, the range of its feasible transformations and the mechanics of its transformation. It will provide a rational justification, for saying, of its possible transformations, that one transformation is a better transformation than the others. It would consider the comparative adequacy of ways of life that might claim our allegiance."¹⁹

Against this background and quite in substantial agreement with Habermas, Nielsen insists that there is need for:

1. "a rational consensus as distinct from a purely historically and culturally fortuitous consensus;
2. a standard to carry out progressive social criticism and make a critique of institutions and ideology;
3. otherwise we are mired in a relativistic morass in which only negative criticism is possible."²⁰

Nielsen, therefore, carpets Rorty, Foucault, Lyotard and other antifoundationalists for insisting that :

1. "we have no need for such an Achimedean point or indeed any Achimedean point;
2. the search for a standard, for a holistic critical theory is a search for a grand metanarrative which is nothing but a nostalgia for the absolute;
3. the criteria for validity and rationality are first order discourse of our distinct language-games which in turn are embedded in our (distinct) forms of life;
4. what is given there are a complex cluster of social practices"²¹ each validated by its own internal standards;
5. there are no context independent criteria of rationality and validity. A search for a more profound legitimacy is a search for the colour of heat;²²
6. a search for an Achimedean point is grossly irrelevant because "rational argumentation can only be conducted in accordance with the most reflective and knowledgeable application of the social practices of a given community at a given time;²³
7. there is, therefore, no determining what is rational by some extra-historical, universalistic set of criteria. There is and can be no such historical legitimation.²⁴

Nielsen is uncomfortable with these explicitly antifoundationalistic views essentially because he believes that:

1. universalistic ideals are much more encompassing than local attachments;

2. the human family is one and the same irrespective of language, conflicting life styles, social practices, etc;
3. the criteria for validity, rationally and legitimation must necessarily be one irrespective of the varying systems of convention, life styles, social practices and local attachments;
4. there will surely be no credible solutions to the problems of men and of life if we do not have universal rational standards of criticism, validation, and legitimation; and hence
5. a social practice is justifiable and complete "if we can tie whatever particular phenomena to some transcontextual general consideration;"²⁵
6. for self-definition to be a credible human exercise, which it surely is, it cannot be entirely and absolutely culture dependent. To be worth it and credible, self-definition must necessarily exhibit the ineluctible matrix of particularism and universalism;
7. because underlying "the social and historically conditioned knowledge that structures the social world is a foundation of universal truth, and it is the sole business of philosophy to uncover the absolute foundation that undergirds this knowledge."²⁶

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to present the salient points in Nielsen's two articles under reference. I do not pretend to have done a good job in this summary or to have done justice to his views therein. What I have attempted doing is simply to extract what I consider germane in them in terms of my present, and immediate purposes.

The Issue at Stake

The significance of the interdependence of Nations, National Economies, peoples and World Systems has refocussed attention on universalistic ideals. It is as if we have gradually exhumed the old metaphysical controversy concerning the status, role and place of universals. Particularism, it would, thus, appear, is in retreat from the barrage of attacks against its ideals and practices. Yet particularism rather than eclipse under this sustained, unrelenting attack continues to attract more and more followerships. What then

is responsible for its survivalist trait against the background of the ever growing, and still forceful influence of Universalism? But first what is universalism?

Dictionary definitions derive it from the Latin word - *Universalis*, which means : common, general, belong to, done by all, affecting all. It is everything that exists everywhere. Janusz Kuczynski has defined universalism as "not a dogma but a process of thinking on a global scale that takes mankind as its group subject. It replaces power and subjection with the dialectics of partnership and communication. It rejects both nihilism and authoritarianism; it recognizes that nothing human is alien to one without surrendering to relativism, to the view that everything is good and true for its time and its proponent".²⁷

Conflating both definitions the following accounts are suggestive:

Definition 1 : Universalism means something that is common to all, done by all and affects all.

Definition 2 : Universalism means everything that exists everywhere.

Definition 3 : Universalism means thinking on a global scale that takes mankind as its group subject. All three definitions allude to the same thing in varying degrees.

In other words, the definitions are not substantially different from each other.

What is particularism? The Dictionary meaning suffices for present purposes and needs. It means "relating to one as distinct from others".²⁸ The only way of distinguishing one thing from the other is through the examination and analysis of quiddity, that is, the analysis of their essence. In other words, a painstaking analysis of genus and species. For examples, under the genus Tree, there are different species: iroko, obeche, mango, etc. Under the genus Fruit, there are different species : tomatoes, apples, pawpaw, etc. By the same token under the genus Man, there are different species of mankind: German, French, Chinese, Polish, English, Irish, Spanish, Nigerian, Indian, Jew, Arab, etc. Ethnographically, this has been reduced to the three main groups of mankind: Europoid, Mongoloid and Negroid. The subdivision, though merely ethnographic, is significant because it is not arbitrarily determined. Rather the subdivision is culture dependent.

Culture is, thus, the boundary marker differentiating one humankind from another. "Culture is a normative frame or script in which expectations concerning appropriate behaviour are defined consensually in a given community. Distinctive human behaviours such as language, art, religion, philosophy, ethical practices, mythology, what people feel angry or sad about, etc. are learned and thus vary across cultures".²⁹ Above all, culture gives us, individually, a credible frame of reference, that is, a system of standards and values usually merely implicit, underlying and to some extent controlling action or the expression of attitudes, beliefs and ideas. And contrary to "the explicit part of a culture (fine art, music, literature, etc) implicit values, attitudes and beliefs are experienced as a part of one's self, as something granted. This deeply ingrained part of the culture influences all our experiences, feelings and behaviour".³⁰ Surely, there are cross-cultural differences, emotional expression, moral behaviour, stereotypes, eating habits, dressing habits, problem solving mechanisms, etc. The implicit culturally determined values, conjunctively, validate acceptable and unacceptable patterns of behaviour, patterns of superior or subordinate relations, definitions of the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the right and wrong, the truth, and false, the objective and knowledge. Hekman has suggested that "in the broadest sense what some philosophers are arguing is that the basis of human knowledge lies in the social, cultural and historical conditions of human life rather than in transcendent, absolute, or universal truth. In other words, they are claiming that what we call knowledge (truth, objectivity, good, right, wrong etc.) is a product of the particular social and historical situation in which particular humanbeings (humankinds) find themselves".³¹ To this extent, these implicit values are essentially like cognitive maps automatically activated. Their activation does not result from any desired intentional effort or ratiocinative process, but is triggered by familiar stimuli usually radically associated within the past. Nielsen has not decidedly discounted these issues, but reading him suggests that he takes them as unproblematic in terms of his compatibility thesis.

Identity and Difference

I Concede the following grounds to Nielsen :

- 1 There is only one known human race or family;

2. what binds us together in terms of biology is significant;
3. the human predicament as evidenced in birth, suffering, torture, hunger, disease, loneliness, death, etc., are not radically dissimilar;
4. the problems of men as everything that exists everywhere is not radically disparate;
5. whatever tends to separate us, and keep us apart from one another is artificial because these are man-made, and to a large extent ideological.

Yet, I differ and very significantly from Nielsen's position because I am of the opinion that:

Although there is only one known human race or family, this family is predicated on one surname but with different first names. Individual identity is lost without the first name. Group identity is lost without it. The surname implies identity while the first names imply diversity. The family is primordially one, yet the diversity in its membership does no violence to it. It in fact enhances the identity epitomised by the surname. In other words, variation and diversity are characteristics of particularism and universalism.

Our common biological determination is essentially important, yet history and context are far more significant and important in terms of determining and defining what we are, who we are, and why we are the way we are. It is essentially important that the individual is understood as a crossingpoint of socio-cultural and historical influence. In other words, the socially and culturally aroused self is the only authentic self, and the demand to realise or actualize one's self is a constant. The essential link between human thought and human social existence cannot easily be wished away. In the words of Malholtra, "the social situatedness of the self and the interconnection between language, communication, and awareness of self"³² is beyond doubt.

The problems of men are indeed the same everywhere but the answers and solutions differ "over cultural space and over historical time." These answers and solutions are not the same, have never

been the same and may never be the same. Rothbaum has, for example, suggested that there are two kinds of environmental control. "In primary control, people try to influence the existing reality by changing other people, circumstance or events. In secondary control, people try to accommodate themselves to external reality by changing their own attitudes, perceptions, goals and desires. The Western approach aims for primary control, if one does not like something, change it. The Eastern approach recommends secondary control, if one has a problem, learn to live with it".³³ According to Iga, "the point is not that one form of environmental control is better than the other, but rather that each has its place. Emphasis on primary control encourages self-expression, independent thinking, change and competition, while secondary control leads to continuity, attachment and serenity".³⁴ The specific human problem here is environmental control which is universal but the responses, the answers and solutions are dissimilar, as indeed they should be. Since each aspect has its place, role and function it is needless to "consider the comparative adequacy of ways of life that might claim our allegiance". It does not even make sense to talk of this comparative adequacy because the Western approach is adequate to its ways of life, the Eastern to its ways of life, the African to its ways of life, etc. There is, thus, no neutral way of deciding which of these ways of life is better than the others. There are no cultural achievements common to humankind.

It is as a result of the ideological mask, consciously put on, that has accounted for our inability to see others as one of our own kind. It is these ideological positions bordering on self interest and prejudice that has, for examples, stultified efforts to find solutions to the South African tragedy and the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was what justified the Atlantic slave trade, and much earlier Aristotle's robust justification of slavery. These are obviously concrete exemplifications of the problems of men which are not soluble, if at all, by the employment of "a rational consensus as distinct from a historically and culturally fortuitous consensus".

The important but unanswered question is this: How can two unidentical things be at the same time identical? How can two black things become one white thing? Nielsen's thesis of compatibilism between particulars and the universal offers no explanation. In the

absence of such an explanation I can only say that his thesis of compatibilism is a veiled attempt at reductionism. Yet, an individual in a mob has no identity.

Self-discovery, self-knowledge, self-fulfilment are man's true destiny. To be profoundly human is a cultural imperative. The cultural process enables man to know himself. Indeed know Thyself is, still remains, the way to wisdom, the wisdom that is predicated on culture which moulds an individual into a significant being. Nielsen thinks, perhaps not, that it is better for our common humanity that we *forget* the significant differences that are intrinsically part of our humanness and our one human family. How possible is it for example to convince an Indian or an African; Ah! we were once Indians or Africans, but now let's forget all that because we are now universal men. This is impossible for now because there is nothing like a universal man, universal language, religion, ethical codes and social practices to which the entire human family is subject. I think, therefore, that it is far more fruitful and rewarding that we acknowledge the primacy of these differences and *understand* them for what they are. Their understanding can lead to better appreciation of the nuances of particular cultures. Rather than impede universalism, such an understanding could make for better awareness, the enlargement of perspectives, the mutuality of conceptions, the reciprocity of perspectives and indeed make us less slavish to our narrow visions. To reduce, abandon or minimize the place of particularism is to become centreless, is to become centreless subjects.

To avoid being centreless what is required is not a cultural shift of emphasis towards the Western version, vision and definition of reality, religion, ethics, philosophy, truth, objectivity and social practices. It is equally not the wide scale embrace of universalism or the adoption of Nielsen's compatibility thesis. What is required and urgently needed is the emphasis on integral living, empathy, dialogue, and tolerance. UNESCO launched the World decade for Cultural Development on January 21st, 1988. It drew up a comprehensive global agenda for the rectification of socio-cultural imbalances, achieving a sustainable ecologically orientated development, and providing better opportunities for access to cultural participation for the neglected segments of the human family. The agenda focussed on the following objectives:

- (a) acknowledgement of cultural dimensions of development;
- (b) affirmation and enrichment of cultural identities;
- (c) broader participation in cultural life;
- (d) promotion of international cultural cooperation.

A properly organised implementation of these objectives could give us a better insight into the existing cross-cultural similarities and differences whose content should teach (assuming we are ready to learn) us to grant other cultures the same significance which we recognize for our own values.

Self-Definition or Self-Abnegation

On self-definition Nielsen had this to say. "It remains the case that genuine self definition must be a cultural identification and a cultural identification cannot but be a distinct cultural identification in terms of some particular culture. What makes us something, what gives our lives meaning, are our distinctive cultural identities. If we lose them we lose ourselves".³⁵ "It may be that all genuine self definition is rooted in some distinctive cultural identity".³⁶

Furthermore, "in acquiring a language we acquire a distinctive view of the world and a distinctive culture. The language and with it the conceptual scheme we acquire and the way we acquire it differs radically over cultural space and over historical time".³⁷ Nielsen concludes that all these are perfectly compatible with universalistic ideals. I have alluded to the fact that Nielsen is in quest of balance, harmony or concord between particularism and universalism and concluded that this balance, if it is feasible and achievable, is suspect. Nielsen's compatibility thesis, if it is to achieve its intended goal (whatever this goal might be) needs a foundation. I am not persuaded that there is a place where this foundation can be firmly grounded. To say that A and B are compatible is to say that A and B are suited to each other; are in accord with each other; are able to exist together with each other. Now, how compatible are Otakpor an Igbo, and Nielsen a Canadian, in terms of individual goals, aspirations, definitions of self and reality, etc.? How compatible are a colonized subject

and the colonizing masters? On another level, how compatible is my society burdened with unverified foreign debt with Nielsen's which is debt free to a certain degree? If they are, in what terms? If there is no compatibility at the level of identity, does it make any sense to suppose its existence at a higher, abstract level? I think not.

I am not, in the least, optimistic about the kind of rapprochement that Nielsen seems to favour. To get the particular and universal views to live together, along side each other in accord, to reduce the internal and external tension that is part and parcel of the drama of life, is more than formidable considering how right boundary lines of universalism has been drawn. In an intellectual climate where any talk of the particular tends to be regarded as contributing very little or nothing towards the understanding of ourselves and the way we are, the pursuit of the ideals of universalism has come to mean the derogation of particulars. Yet, we cannot look at the world in an undetached way, because there is nothing like uncontaminated truth. We look at the world from a vantage point that is somewhere in particular, because each of us is a particular person with a personal view of our own. We cannot overnight become centreless persons without radically breaching the ontologically privileged position of our personhood.

It is plain, perhaps not, that Nielsen does not want to minimize the achievements of culture in terms of enabling us to define ourselves, to find and locate ourselves and give concrete expression to our personhood. Yet, the move towards a scientific image of culture which Nielsen favours is lucid exemplification of an image steeped deep in an overly ambitious analytic tradition. As a conceptual tool, this tradition, powerful though, has not succeeded in explaining the subpersonal systems that mediate our behaviour and that which makes ratiocination and performance possible, because performance, ratiocination, rationality, justification and standardization are context bound. All justification, according to Dewey, is context bound and inescapably involves reference to existing social practices. Outside this framework, we lose our cultural identity, our self definition and affirmation. We lose ourselves in the ultimate. Otakpor has suggested that "to lose pride in one's culture is a loss of pride in one's self. And for any man, this is moral and cultural death".³⁸

In other words, any attempt to subject the particularity of our experiences to universalistic ideals will only succeed in relinquishing this particularity. The overwhelming consequence is self-abnegation not self-definition as Nielsen has vigorously contended and defended. Abnegation and alienation are the results (or should I say the benefits) of disownedness.

What is the self-definition of a Canadian who is rational enough to find reasonable beliefs to hold under an ideal Igbo speech situation? None. The speech we share defines the world common to us. As Wordsworth puts it:

"the very world which is the world of all of us - the place where, in the end, we find hapiness, or not at all"

The Igbo world is not common to everyone, it is not a world where in the end we all find hapiness or meaning, therefore no one, Canadian or not, who is not an Igbo can authentically define and locate self in such a situation. And no matter whatever the degree of considered convictions entertained under such a situation, universalistic claims come to nought. The self makes no sense outside context and history, the claims of universalism notwithstanding. Outside this framework what only remains or counts is Nietzsche's "creative mistrust" or Foucault's "anonymous thinking, knowledge without subject, theory without identity".

It is ideological not theoretical to suggest the use of philosophy - as - critical theory by other cultures; or to suggest that there are necessarily no solutions to the problems of men if there are no universal standards of criticism and validation; or that there is need for a universal standard with which to carry out progressive social criticisms and to make a critique of institutions and ideology; or that there is an Achimedean point at which comparisons can be fruitfully made.

What is critical about critical theory ? Perhaps nothing, except an ideology. How do we determine a universal standard? Which institutions are under reference? Critical theory is nothing other than a new euphemism for mental recolonization and the subjection of other humankind not regarded as one of us. It is the latest

in the transformational process of colonial trinity of the Queen, the Bible and the Gun. In its place what is being suggested by Nielsen and others, in a subtle manner, is a new trinity of universal standard, validation and legitimation. But, then, we exclude ourselves from the canons and demands of this new trinity (just as in the earlier one) which we nonetheless impose on other humankind not regarded as one of us. Afterwards, we are the first world from whom all other worlds should borrow.

It is grossly unethical to exclude ourselves from the demands we impose on others, especially those others who are disadvantaged, one way or the other. Against this background the carefully defined talk of universal standard, of legitimation, of justification, and of validation is not rationally warranted, because there is no neutral way of establishing the priority of the principles of legitimation, justification, validation, standard and even of rationality.

The Political Question

I am a Nigerian and therefore a Negro and an African. The socio-economic, political, constitutional, judicial and cultural history of my country in the last century and a half is a history predicated on colonialism, the struggle for liberation and political independence. I was born into colonialism, was nurtured by it, matured in it and attained adulthood during the period. I was therefore formally socialized and schooled by its dominant ethos, norms and social practices. Its overwhelming effects have been radically and absolutely totalizing (need I say universalizing). After thirty two years of political independence (1960), I am still wholly subject to the after effects of colonial rule and subjugation. Igbo is the language natural to me. I write and speak English as a second language. I grew up with the conceptual apparatus and scheme inherent in my natural language. I think and see the world like a typical Igbo adult. My reading, speaking and understanding of the English Language, arguably, affords me that much.

Now, in the name of universalism, a completely abstract entity, Nielsen is suggesting that all these be put behind me, because these peculiar aspects of ME are compatible with universalism. In other words, he is suggesting that I should forget who I am

and what I am. I should forget the *why* of who I am. This means that I should stand outside the social practices that are part of ME; that I should stand outside those culturally determined implicit values that are intrinsically, ontologically, ontically and avowedly significant in terms of my personhood, my self-definition and cultural identity. This means that I should have no goals and no aspirations. I should not be goal orientated, all in the pursuit of the fleeting, the totalizing and the centreless. Surely, this will result in a one dimensional milieu where I and my kins would have no history (even colonial history) and would be reduced to playing the role of part-man or, worse, no-man.

The justification of my actions according to Ross "takes the form of unpacking or articulating the particular commitments and attachments that characterize my situation, the way of life to which I am inextricably bound. We do not ascend from our situation to an increasingly impersonal consideration in order to generate a *bona fide* justification."³⁹ Such justification based on impersonal consideration, to a large extent, is holistic. And to avoid the dilemma of embarrassments I need, as Hampshire suggests, to "either abandon the way of life to which I am now, whether by choice or circumstance, committed, or I would find that many of the other activities and practices, to which I am at present committed, have lost their significance, have become confused and incoherent"⁴⁰ Baselessness, homelessness and centrelessness are the cumulative results of such an endeavour. It amounts to cultural suicide. In such a climate of baselessness, homelessness, centrelessness and ahistoricity, where the base, home, centre cannot hold because there isn't anymore any base, home or centre, everything conspires towards a philosophy of the meaningless and the absurd. Nobody associates a life of value with such a scheme.

The most deadly sin is the mutilation of my consciousness, of my sense of self, of my personal worth, of my self-definition and cultural identity by colonialism. Universalistic ideals can do nothing useful other than exacerbate and reinforce this mutilation which is already very visible in every aspect of my life. I am neither any more perfectly Igbo nor English, neither existentially Igbo nor English. Nobody will take me as an English gentleman because culturally I am supposed to be Igbo. Yet, I am not a

universal man because there is no universal man, only a cultural man exists. Feeling does not, never, discover the absolute or the universal. If the enormity of this neither-here-not-there is to be avoided we must strike out for an authentic, integral and cultural humanism in which the what, how and who I am is predominantly dominant. Paroding W. B. Yeats, I can say this :

Reason guard me from those thoughts man think.
In the mind alone,
He that sings a universal, absolute song,
Thinks in a marrow bone.

Over two centuries of cultural contact (remember this is not focal in the contact, the economic is) between the West and the rest of the human family, what is the picture like? What is the result of this contact? Which culture has gained or lost ever since this contact? Which culture is still gaining? The answers to these questions and more are plain, and indeed obvious. The West gained enormously and lost nothing, and the West is still gaining and increasingly tightening its stranglehold on other cultures. In addition to these gains, what the West has done flawlessly is to distance itself from the rest of us. For examples:

Western mode of dressing has spread throughout the world but the West has adopted nothing in this respect from other parts of the world. The colonizing zeal did not include the adoption of whatever is good from the cultures of the so-called savage and primitive peoples outside Europe and North America. No English man dresses like a Nigerian or Indian, and No French man dresses like an Algerian or a Togolese. No American dresses like a Phillipino.

Western food items are served in Nigerian Hotels, but Hotels in London or Paris have no Nigerian - African or Indian food on their menu list.

Africans listen quite often to Western classical music (Mozart, Benthoven, etc) but only a few Westerners or none, listen to Igbo music, Akan music or buy these records. Perhaps only the West makes music, others make noise; yet this noise has meaning and relevance.

Western Languages (English, French, Portuguese, German, Spanish, Italian, etc.) are spoken outside the West by many non-Westerners, yet only a hand full of Westerners can communicate effectively in any African or Indian language.

Western religion and philosophy has spread to all nooks and corners of the World; yet only a handful of Westerners can discuss the world view of the Igbo or Ashanti, assuming that there is recognition that these people have world views, at all.

The West has vehemently opposed the New World Communication and Information Order mainly because it is not in its calculated self interest that such a new scheme for world information and communication should exist.

It has equally opposed the formation of a new economic world order because, again, it is not in its interests that such an order should exist.

Against this background, Zimmerman has suggested that "Western man now understands himself as a self-willed subject who regards everything as an object for economic exploitation (and cultural subjugation). Western society is egoism on a planetary scale".⁴¹ This egoism ensured security through the manipulation of things and peoples that are not regarded as one of their kind.

Consequently, it is difficult to accept the thesis, goals and ideals of universalism as something that is common to all of us, or as something that is everything that exist everywhere. Colonialism is not universal. Victims of Apartheid and Colonialism are not likely to forget (they can forgive) too easily the mindlessness that attended the rape of their culture and civilization. There is no denying the fact that culture is dynamic, or that no culture exists - develops in isolation, but Western culture vis-a-vis other cultures has not exhibited this dynamism. Cultural dynamism in Western terms is a euphemism for cultural imperialism. It is another name for insisting on the superiority of one culture over all others. How can there be something that is common to all of us, something that affects all of us when one of us, because of the accidents of history, embraces cultural insularity and only espouses mutuality,

universalism, interdependence and co-existence at his own convenience?

Universalism has suddenly become a catch-phrase and indeed fashionable because it is evident that the West is gradually losing out in terms of power shifts in World politics and economy. Yet:

When the Roman Empire was at its glorious apogee nobody talked about the world embracing universalistic ideals. Roman culture, language, law and civilization was, then, the in-thing. Many of the ancients, either by force or circumstance, aspired to become cultured Roman citizens, not universal citizens.

When Spain and Portugal received the Papal Bull of Demarcation, dividing the World between them, in 1492, they did not preach universalism. The Papal Bull did not include universalistic ideals because the Spaniards and Portuguese were slave dealers. Or is slave trade and universalism compatible?

When Britain and France gradually took over from Spain and Portugal, and became militarily, economically, politically and diplomatically dominant in the World, the world did not collapse under the barrage of universalistic ideals. Both countries did not espouse universalism while perfecting and refining the mechanisms of the Atlantic slave trade. The slave trade across the Atlantic was not abolished because of its universalistic disflavour. It was purely on the basis of economic considerations. It should be noted also that the French assimilation policy in Africa was intended to make French gentlemen and ladies out of Africans, not to make them universal individuals.

Since the end of the second world war when the USA became the foremost military, industrial, economic, political, and diplomatic gaint in the world, no one has bothered us with universalistic ideals. Like the Romans in the earlier period, the "Yankees" bestride the World with their flamboyant life styles, social practices and slangs. It has long been fashionable to identify with anything American, in many parts of the world.

So, what is the rationale for the renewed interest in universalistic ideals? It is simply that a power shift is occurring as we move

towards the edge of the 21st century. According to Spengler, "one fact above all stands out, that Europe (the West) no longer possesses its former monopoly of military power which enabled it to force the other continents to submission-- by contrast to their position in the last century, the European (Western) powers are no longer amongst themselves. The coloured world itself has become a great power, in Africa, in East Asia, amongst the Islamic peoples and in Central America."⁴² It is not just military power that is slipping away, the west is gradually losing in terms of industrial, economic, political and importantly cultural power. The co-called third world peoples are gradually rediscovering and regaining their identities, earlier mutilated, and in the process have increasingly become culturally assertive.⁴³ Western power base is, surely, scientific and technological, but technology is not easy to control, albeit, unsuccessfully. Mumford has made the interesting observation "that technology is like water turned on by the sorcerer's apprentice; we can start it, but we do not know how to stop it"⁴⁴ from overflowing or flooding the landscape. What is happening now is entirely novel: it is Western defined experiment to live without a culture and to subtly subject other humankind to this experiment, subjection not by gun boat diplomacy but *via* the use of standards of measurement, justification, validation, legitimation and objectivity which is alien to the others. As Spengler suggests, "when the freezing point of a culture is reached, it expands and breaks whatever may try to contain it. Then with its spiritual substance exhausted, outward expansion is the only gesture of life that is left."⁴⁵ This outward expansion of the Western defined experiment, as this point in time, will fail, and *ab initio* has failed. The Western defined ideal of a universal humankind is a myth, fashioned to cushion western nostalgia concerning matters that are gradually slipping out of hand. As Senghor puts it, "we still disagree with the West: not with its values any longer but with its theory of the civilization of the universal..... In the eyes of Westerners the exotic civilizations are static in character, being content to live by means of archetypal images, which they respect indefinitely".⁴⁶

Conclusion

Universalistic ideals are an epitome of the Enlightenment theory of knowledge predicated on a single criterion of justification.

Its claim to absoluteness is not immune from challenge. Particularism constitutes the most effective challenge. Its supposition and avowal of an Achimedean point of objectivity, truth, knowledge and comparison is pretentious because Gadamer has shown that all understanding is governed by prejudice. The single criterion and single aim theories, as Hampshire puts it, "discard the peculiar interest of the species, and the interest of its future, as perpetually open to unforeseen alternatives. The single criterion arrests development both historical and personal...."⁴⁷ To arrest development both historically and contextually, and thus remain perpetually open to unforeseen alternatives that are alien is to self abnegate just for the fun of it. Yet, we can still remain open in another sense to the extent that "each tradition or culture reminds us from remote regions humans derive. Each is a bright thread layed through the corridors of labyrinth to help us find a way into the open".⁴⁸ The only thing that counts in this "open" is the acknowledgement, recognition and celebration of presence, of each others' presence. The issue of acknowledging each other's presence is neotically related to the dialectical tension between particularism and universalism, and noematically intrinsic to the essence of particularism *per se*. The Igbo, according to Achebe, "insist that any presence which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement and celebration can become a focus for anxiety and disruption. To them celebration is the acknowledgement of a presence, giving to everybody his due".⁴⁹ Presence is, thus, the critical issue, not universalistic ideals. Of what use are these ideals when we make no efforts to acknowledge the presence of the other, or when we are unable to step out in pure disinterestedness from the totalizing self-centredness towards our otherness? These are of little or no use at all. Presence is, thus, "the critical question, the critical word. Its denial is the keynote of colonial ideology. Were there people there? Well..... not really, you know... people of sorts, you understand."⁵⁰

The new philosophy is not philosophy-as-critical theory because such a philosophy is "insensitive to the human need, to inhabit a world that makes (cultural) sense"⁵¹, and also because such a philosophy would have necessarily "hoisted itself on its own petard"⁵². A philosophy-as-critical theory hoisted on its own petard mainly because of its insensitivity to our otherness cannot ensure progress in philosophy. This cannot make for progress in philosophy. Against

this background, progress in philosophy is neither feasible nor achievable as per Nielsen's account. Surely, there can be progress in philosophy, if and only if, such a philosophy critically reckons with the issue of presence, of each other's presence. The new philosophy, then, is the one that rejects cultural imperialism and emphasises mutuality, pluralism, cultural identity and the celebration of each other's presence. It is a philosophy that rejects exploitation and domination and emphasises the dialectics of partnership, empathy, dialogue and tolerance. It is a philosophy that is aware of the possibilities available to it for the celebration of our otherness; is aware of the plurality of worlds, laws, standards, justifications, validations, legitimations, truths and cultures. In the ultimate, it is a philosophy that reckons with the fact that our own world necessarily interlocks more and more with the world of others. As Hamidou Kane puts it "we have not had the same past you and ourselves, but we shall have, strictly, the same future. The era of separate destinies has run its course".⁵³ This is only a possibility for now, but its concrete actualization should reveal the fundamental equality of all people. In one of his most important poems, *Prayer to Masks*, Leopold Sedar Senghor offered this prayer:

"That we may answer *present* at the rebirth of the world like the yeast which white flour needs"⁵⁴ (my emphasis).

Kai Nielsen's theory is a good one and I believe that a good theory should, at the least, attempt to explain the greatest possible range of facts and behaviour and that a good explanatory model, like his, facilitate understanding. I am appreciative of his efforts in this regards, and of the fact that he alerts us to the abuses of an overly relativistic standpoint. Yet, I remain unpersuaded that his arguments offer us a good enough explanation to take us some where from where we are at the moment. What, who, How, and Where we are at the moment is overly important, if we are ever going to be in a better position to pinpoint our next starting point. We can never start from NO WHERE culturally.

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