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Worldliness: how do we live with others?

Universality-as-multiplicity

L.H.M. Ling

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The ifa conference “*Cultures of We*” held on 13 September 2017 in Berlin cut to the core of world politics today. It asked: How can we stay true to the principle of equality, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), when “othering” has resurged in identity and politics validated by a newly-vocal narrative of “us versus them?” Populist movements formalized by Brexit in the United Kingdom in June 2016 and the election of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency five months later march in lock-step with other racist-nationalist regimes in the Philippines, Turkey, Austria, and so on. Many pockets of Scandinavia, previously models of liberal tolerance, also exhibit similar sympathies. Renewed commitment to the UDHR will not suffice, I’m afraid. Its insistence on singularity to convey universality sinks the proposition.

The problem

The UDHR – and the liberal world order behind it – presumes that one set of ideas, norms, institutions, and practices can rescue all peoples regardless of ideology, history, culture, religion, and worldview (Ikenberry 2011).

Therein lies the historic appeal of liberalism, in general, and the UDHR, specifically. But in interpreting universality-as-singularity, both reinscribe five centuries of Eurocentric violence (Spivak 1988, Sousa Santos 2014). Many date this to 1520 when Cortés executed Montezuma for the Catholic Empire (Quijano 2007).

Archives from the United Nations may affirm that non-Western actors contributed to the UDHR but a Eurocentric logic of argumentation prevails, nonetheless: that is, universality-as-singularity. This mode of discourse, I argue, invariably devolves into an ultimatum: either conform (“be like us”) or suffer the consequences (“see what we can do to you”). The “international

community” thus undermines the inclusive intention of the UDHR by exiling those who cannot fulfil the former or choose the latter. They become branded as “authoritarian” (e.g., China) or “rogue” (e.g., Iran) or “failed” (e.g., Ethiopia, Libya) states. Nor do I favour a retreat into cultural relativism or postmodern *savoir-faire*: “to each one’s own.” Both amount to indifference.

I believe in universality. We need it; otherwise, we cannot talk to each other, not to mention embark upon mutual cooperation, learning, and/or transformation. Indeed, not believing in universality would deny what humanity has accomplished since families and communities first populated the globe. So what to do?

One answer: universality-as-multiplicity

One answer, I propose, lies in redefining universality as multiplicity. I elaborate on how below. Here, let me explain what this means. Universality-as-multiplicity translates “equality” into “on-

tological parity.” It refers to an *a priori* integrity and agency for all things regardless of asymmetrical power positions. Accordingly, slaves can revolt and masters can feel remorse. Ontological parity makes two, simultaneous conceptual departures:

- (1) it recognizes that five centuries of Eurocentric colonialism and imperialism structurally favor the (Western-white) Self over the (subaltern-of-color) Other but ontological parity gives each being an inherent capability to think and act, be and relate in its own context and on its own terms. In other words, the Other wields as much agency as the Self;
- (2) accordingly, ontological parity removes the imposition of hegemony from global interactions. No longer stuck to one standard, universality-as-multiplicity accepts as premise that “abundance” and “richness” fill our world-of-worlds (Feyerabend 1999). This refers to a global world that emanates from the interactions and hybrid legacies of multiple worlds (Ling 2014).

Self and Other thus co-produce our lived realities. One beneficiary includes the old order: universality-as-multiplicity necessarily engages with, not replaces, universality-as-singularity. In this way, we may restore balance to a system thrown desperately askew since the 16th century.

Some may protest: did humanity not experience injustice, exploitation, war, slavery, and other types of violence before Europe’s royal houses stumbled upon the “New World”? Certainly. But the difference lies in a remarkable lack of singularity in outlook when encountering others. Indeed, a survey of philosophies and worldviews across the globe, including Europe, reveals a common recognition: that is, entwine-

ments, complementarities, reciprocities, and negotiations with difference account for understanding-insight-wisdom, if not “truth.” Note, for example: Buddhism’s *pratītyasamutpāda* (“co-dependent arising”); Hinduism’s *darśana* (“auspicious sight”); Confucianism’s *ren* (“mutual sociality”); ancient Greece’s *poiesis* (“poetic inspiration”); Nguni Bantu’s *ubuntu* (“human kindness”); the Lakota’s cosmology of “hoop” or circle (“all is related”); Andeanism’s *pachamama* (“earth/time mother”); even Hegelian dialectics, just to name a few.

One substantive example comes from a Buddhist icon, Guanyin. Disciples believe that this female *bodhisattva* dispenses mercy to the world’s needy with “a thousand arms and a thousand eyes.” Not separate attachments to one body, these constitute, instead, the totality of her being.

Let me demonstrate this proposition analytically. I integrate two philosophical traditions rarely introduced: East Asia’s Daoism and South Asia’s Jainism. Doing so shows how we can cross epistemic borders to discover commonalities previously not known or expected, thereby leading to a hybrid, third possibility. I call this process epistemic compassion: it helps us achieve universality-as-multiplicity. I summarize Daoist *yin/yang* theory and Jainist *anekāntavāda* below.

Daoist *yin/yang* theory

Daoism entwines opposites. *Yin* represents the female principle of softness, darkness, and nurture, among others; *yang*, the male principle of hardness, brightness, and discipline, among others. They entwine into a dynamic totality that is the Way (*dao*). Because nothing stays fixed or the same in *yin/yang* relations, Daoism does not discriminate between them. Circumstance decides when *yin* overrides *yang* or the reverse. Ontological parity between the two enables an internal

penetration such that every *yang* retains an element of *yin* and *vice versa*. No less a master strategist like Sunzi (544-496 BCE), author of “The Art of War,” applies these abstractions to the practicalities of war. The “superior general,” he instructs, can snatch victory (*yang*) from the jaws of defeat (*yin*) – or the opposite – for each inhabits the other (*yang*-within-*yin*, *yin*-within-*yang*). In brief, the “superior general” must not – should not – take anything for granted.

Daoism thus instructs balance since nothing and no one can exist outside a context. Opposing forces must pay attention.

Jainist *anekāntavāda*

Jainism’s *anekāntavāda* articulates a comparable philosophy. It proceeds from a premise that reality has many sides, leading to epistemological commitments of “plurality, the multiplicity of viewpoints, and an ethics of toleration” (Brincat forthcoming). In argumentation, *anekāntavāda* specifies seven categories of contingency – *syādvāda* – to attain knowledge despite life’s multiplicities. Here’s how and why: “...’*Syād*’ – loosely translated as ‘from some viewpoint’ or ‘may be’ – is affixed to every statement to demonstrate its conditional or partial aspect, and, thereby every such statement is able to retain its relative truth. When expressed as a whole, these perspectives can cover all claims to knowledge of a thing/phenomena. The *Syādvāda* are: (1) May be, it is; (2) may be, it is not; (3) may be, it is and it is not; (4) may be, it is indescribable; (5) may be, it is and yet is indescribable; (6) may be, it is not and it is also indescribable; (7) may be, it is and it is not and it is also indescribable” (Brincat forthcoming).

Application to world politics

We reconfigure *yin/yang* into Self/Other for world politics. *Syādvāda*’s seven categories produce the following process of contingent knowing and argumentation:

- Category 1: May be, it is ⇔ *yang*: Self.
- Category 2: May be, it is not ⇔ *yin*: Other.
- Category 3: May be, it is and it is not ⇔ *yin* and *yang*. Self and Other co-exist in the world. By extension, they co-produce the world.
- Category 4: May be, it is indescribable ⇔ *yin/yang* entwinements. Their co-production comes from internal entwinements that I call “intimacy.” Nothing approximates intimacy in world politics like dealing with the Self/Other within.
- Category 5: May be, it is and yet indescribable ⇔ *yang* and entwinements. This category asks: how does the Self deal with intimacy?
- Category 6: May be, it is not and it is also indescribable ⇔ *yin* and entwinements. The same question applies to the Other and intimacy.
- Category 7: May be, it is and it is not and it is also indescribable ⇔ *yin* and *yang* and their entwinements.

In bringing together all the previous categories, this last one gives us a sense of what I call a “worldly world order”: that is, the multiple intimacies of selves and others that compel epistemic compassion, thereby making our world-of-worlds what it is.

Forging “We”

The *syādvāda* of *yin/yang* above shows epistemic compassion in action. Its premise – the “many sidedness” of life – renders knowledge contingent; accordingly, argumentation must proceed with humility and attention to Others.

A definitive “Self” or “Other” thus cannot hold. What is a Christian or Muslim or Buddhist, for that matter? Such assertions of certainty seek to hide but cannot sustain the intimacies that make “Self” and “Other” what they are. Note, for example, the exchanges between Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists along the ancient Silk Roads (Gordon 2009; Elverskog 2013). In realizing the existence of each within the other, neither can claim solely/only victimization since each is complicit in the making of the other. Given their entwined intimacies, “Self” and “Other” invariably produce a hybrid, third possibility (e. g., “Houses of Wisdom” in ancient Alexandria, Baghdad, Cordoba, Dunhuang) (Ling and Perrigou 2018). Here is where a forging of “we” can take place because it already exists. From this basis, I propose, we may build a worldly world order.

Worldly world politics

A substantive commitment to equality or human rights need not require an analytical commitment to singularity. Indeed, as I have sketched all-too-briefly in this essay, singularity tends to reinforce inequality and violence, especially for Others who resist becoming a “junior partner” to the liberal (Western) Self. This does not mean that we should excise universality. Instead, I propose a different kind of universality. As demonstrated by my integration of Daoism-Jainism, epistemic compassion as method can help us approximate universality-as-multiplicity – knowing, all the

while, that everything and everyone remain contingent.

We realize, then, that our identities and subjectivities emanate from co-productions of “multiple worlds” at various levels: regional, local, and personal. World politics in this “worldly” framework becomes a cache of ever-evolving, ever-creative potential. New worlds can always emerge. Let’s make the most of it.

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