

BOOK REVIEWS

On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between Cultures.

By François Jullien, translated by Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski.

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How can we think of the universal again in this age of globalization? In *On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between Cultures*, François Jullien proposes that the twin forces of capitalism and globalization invite us to use “difference” and “generality” with the aim of generating ever-increasing profit. Against this, he argues for resistance, and to open a possible realm of dialogue between cultures, by introducing concepts such as divergence and the universal.

This task is marked by a strong tension between conditional particularity and unconditional universality. For it enjoins us to respect cultural uniqueness, which is always found in specific conditions and, at the same time, not to abandon the unconditional demand of the universal. Here, Jullien introduces the distinction between the universalizing and the universalizable. The universalizable belongs to the dimension of truth, legitimacy, and representation, because it touches on the problem of possibility. On the contrary, the universalizing, as its gerund form indicates, evokes a process of creation or production of the universal. In the background of this subtle distinction between the universalizable and the universalizing, we can see that Jullien refutes an attempt to find a seemingly solid, but ultimately facile ground for the universal, while he prefers what is on the march toward a regulative ideal of the universal.

As an example of this gerund process of universalizing, Jullien suggests the concept of human rights. This notion was invented at a particular moment in European history. Through the abstraction of “rights” and the “human,” it has been universalized and elaborated not only in Europe, but also in other regions of the world. Nonetheless, we can ask: who is the agent of this universalization? Jullien thinks that the abstraction of “rights” and the “human” is particularly embedded in a European way of thinking. In other words, a European way of thinking is a condition of possibility for the universality of human rights. However, on Jullien’s account, if we give serious consideration to the absolute and imperative aspect of the universality of human rights, instead of weakening it by appealing to the “relative universality of human rights” (Jack Donnelly), we have to go beyond a European way of thinking as the condition of possibility for the universality of human rights. This is the shift from universalizable to universalizing. At this point, Jullien introduces the cultural subject in transformation and dialogue in translation.

As long as we have language as a quasi-transcendental framework of thinking, we are neither pure nor abstract subjects. We are constituted as cultural subjects within each language. However, for Jullien, this cultural subject is not fixed in some essentialized understanding of culture. It is neither passive nor possessive, for it intervenes in a given culture and in this way changes it. It is, moreover, open to other cultures. The cultural subject is thus always already in transformation. If that is the case, cultural subjects in non-European regions can fully participate in the process of universalizing the regulative ideals that happened to be born in Europe, and cultural subjects in Europe likewise do not have a privileged status for the universalization.

However, can we affirm that any cultural subject is qualified in the universalization? Are there any conditions for the cultural subject to engage in universalization? Here, once again, we return to the distinction between the universalizable and the universalizing. We are asked to defend two types of unconditionality. One is that the universal is unconditional beyond any relativization. Another is that the process of universalization is unconditional. Any cultural subject can join it. However, Jullien does not consider a simple and naive subject per se as sufficient for universalization.

For example, when he refers to abstraction or isolation as a necessary condition for the possibility of human rights, he speaks about India as follows: “In India there is no *isolation* of ‘Man’” (p. 106). This is the point at which those who criticize Jullien find a sort of Eurocentrism or Orientalism in his thought. Even if Jullien admits that any cultural subject can join the universalizing process *de jure*, he seems to regard European subjects as those who are *de facto* the most suitable for it.

It is worth emphasizing that Jullien does not define a European subject as a simple and naive one. European subjectivity is an effect of a plurality of divergent languages, histories and cultures. In short, a European subject is composed through dialogue in translation. This is the sufficient condition for a cultural subject to participate in the universalizing process. We might say that the universal Jullien tries to articulate is a trans-universal, for it is supported by transformation and translation. By preserving the traditional meaning of transcendence in the notion of transcendental, this trans-universal appearing in transcendental empiricism satisfies two demands at the same time: the imperative absoluteness of the universal and the historico-cultural development of the universal.

Is this dynamic trans-universal a new development in intellectual history? It reminds me of the “Philosophy of World History” in the Kyoto school of modern Japan. Kōyama Iwao 高山 岩男, one of the representative intellectuals of this “Philosophy of World History,” wanted a “new world history” as “absolute universality” that would be a self-aware historical narrative that neither fell into relativism nor let some particular appropriate the universal. Facing modern European discourse on the universal, this Japanese philosopher opposed the reappropriation of the universal by Europe and tried to find something trans-universal from Asia. However, by proposing Japan as an ideal site of dialogue in translation, Kōyama eventually fell into Japan-centrism and supported the ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

In recent years, a similar discussion has emerged in China. Some Chinese intellectuals use the notion of “all under heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) anew as that which designates the universal in this age of globalization. This is a particularly Chinese notion, but aims to join the universal through a re-definition of “cultural nationalism” as what is non-exclusive and open to others. It will take time to discern if this is a China-centered universality or not, but we are certainly called to participate in a dialogue to think of universality through the notion of “all under heaven.”

Needless to say, Jullien is highly sophisticated in his elaboration of the universal. He will not easily fall into the traps in which modern Japanese intellectuals were captured and contemporary Chinese intellectuals may be captured. Nonetheless, there still remains something worrisome in Jullien’s thinking. Specifically, he seems indifferent to both modern and contemporary Chinese and Japanese philosophical challenges to the universal, and does not consider the possibility of thinking the trans-universal in pre-modern China and other non-European regions. If the idea of the trans-universal is thoroughly unconditional, we should be able to apply it equally in non-European cultures. In this fashion, we would be able to escape the traps of cultural-centric thought that secretly reappropriate the universal. Mutual transformation and translation are inevitably necessary for the universal to come.

For a coming unconditional trans-universal, I would like to conclude this review by citing Jullien’s text: “Far from being a handicap, as an obstacle and source of opacity – the punishment of Babel – it is the necessity to translate which puts cultures mutually to work. I consider translation to be the only possible ethic of the ‘global’ world to come” (p. 161).