Do You See What I See? Universal Translation, the Postmodernist Lens, and Implications for Educational Policy Research

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Abstract: In this philosophical paper, I make a case for the enduring utility of postmodernism as a lens through which to critique basic assumptions about knowledge and reality. I use this lens to tackle the contradictions built into so-called universal norms and values, which I argue are necessarily local and particular. This focus on the paradoxical structure of the universal informs my exploration of two related issues—the sense of practical paralysis, or inability to act, that seems to accompany postmodernism's incredulity toward universals, and the role of the ethical educational policy researcher, paralysis notwithstanding. Accordingly, I problematize universalist claims about principles of human resilience as well as access to formal education, with an eye to the indefinite suspension of truth-claims. I contend that educational policy researchers have a responsibility to actively engage with the tensions of philosophical problems and conclude by suggesting what sorts of ethical imperatives might be cultivated by a responsible educational policy researcher in working to reconcile the so-called truths of science and the doubts of postmodern philosophy.

Keywords: Philosophy of Education, Postmodernism, Universalism, Ethics

Introduction

The central quandary that propels this paper was expressed well by Todd (2009) as "a pressing problem for philosophy of education and for the political orientation of education more generally, namely the question and status of the universal for addressing injustices" (p. 18). I concur with Todd that universalism and so-called anti-universalism tend to surface as a problematic binary in the literature, much as I see the related concepts of modernism and postmodernism often approached unhelpfully with a polarizing brush. My focus on the structure and utility of the universal informs my exploration of two related issues—the sense of practical paralysis that seems to accompany the internalization of central tenets of postmodernism, and the concomitant role of the responsible educational policy researcher. A guiding theme that I thread through my argument is that of *translation*, not so much linguistic, but cultural and material. The phenomenological fabric of translation, I argue, reveals the construct of the universal to be holographic—a compelling mirage but nonetheless merely a reflection of its own reflection—which, when adequately realized, may elicit the paralysis noted above.

Bazzul (2018) has aptly argued that "educators must take a politically critical look at what it means to be ethical in a time when there is active malice for many forms of life" (p. 470). Indeed, drawing on a clarification of the tenets of postmodernism and wrestling with the tensions woven into the paradox of universalism, I defend my view that educational policy researchers have a responsibility to actively engage with the tensions and frustrations of philosophical problems. Accordingly, I argue for the importance of the indefinite suspension of truth via constant dissensus and dialogue, and for cognizance of the inherently fictional, unrealizable structure of justice and other universal ideals. This argument is supported by a case study of the hazards of universalist claims to access to education as well as my own experience as a researcher-advocate working to improve the lives of vulnerable youth. I conclude by suggesting what sorts of ethical imperatives might be cultivated by a responsible educational researcher.

Translation

Hanson (1958) provided an extensive examination of the theory-laden nature of perception. A hypothetical problem analogous to the central one he posed would be whether you and I "see the same thing" when we watch a magic trick. This thought experiment progresses more clearly under the assumption that you know precisely how the trick is carried out, while I am completely dumbfounded (*how on Earth did she survive being cut in half?!*). Do we see the same thing? Well, we both receive the same photonic sense data, if from slightly different physical perspectives. But while you see a clever optical illusion, I see a woman being severed in two, smiling all the while. Clearly, we do not see the same thing. Here Popper's (1994) claim that "there is no such thing as an uninterpreted observation, an observation which is not theory-impregnated" (p. 58) seems to ring true.

Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) developed a complementary line of thought with his argument that perception is indeterminate by nature, that there are no objects prior to perception, and that perception instead begins in the body and ends in objects. This reversal requires a new concept, the *pre-objective*, counter to the subject-object distinction, in order to study the embodied process of perception. As Csordas (1990) wrote, elucidating Merleau-Ponty's pre-objective, "if our perception 'ends in objects', the goal ... is to capture the moment in which perception begins, and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture" (p. 9). By making an appeal to the pre-objective world, we avoid the fallacy of explaining a process (i.e., perception) by its product, pursuing instead a phenomenology of perception of the pre-objective world, a pure description of the genesis of original experience upon which our objective universe of descriptive discourse is founded (Kullman & Taylor, 1958; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002).

A pre-objective phenomenology is a noble but materially unfeasible ideal, as we cannot disentangle the object "in itself" from our messy human perception of it; we cannot "step outside" of ourselves and our subjectivities. This suggests that all observations, all perceptions, are intrinsically acts of translation. The word *translation* derives from the Latin *translatio*, or "to bring across" (Lewis & Short, 1879/1907). This fits with my interpretation of perception as the modal translation of sensory stimuli into cognitive structures, an act of translation that is theory- and culture-laden, yes, but just as importantly, as unique as the embodied mind that carries it out. As Todd (2009) has argued, "many critics of universalism are not simplistically derisive of universality, but point to the ways in which claims to universality operate in and through particular logical systems, linguistic contexts, discourses and cultures" (p. 20), to which I would add "particular minds and bodies" to bolster Todd's argument. Indeed, Bourdieu (1966/1974; 1977) has made the case that culture is a construct that is, in some sense, objectively embedded in subjective, individual bodies through *habitus*, an embodied, enduring set of dispositions (stylization, gestures, sensibilities, values, and tastes). This is an important claim that complements Todd's (2009) interpretation that culture is also an exchange of languages and practices, "not some simplistic ruse conjured up by relativists to frustrate universalists, but the very cloth from which universal claims are tailored" (p. 20).

Universality

Drawing on Butler's (in Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000) analysis of universality, itself centered on its ontological grounding in cultural translation, Todd's (2009) work sketched out the self-negating structure of universality: "In the name of seeking to rise above the particular in order to name what is common to all, universality paradoxically destroys what it purports to include" (p. 20), thus wedding universalism and anti-universalism into a nexus of contradiction. Todd has argued that all universalist claims are embedded in language and culture, and thus, as I have emphasized above, these claims entail interpretive conversions via embodied perceptions of materiality. This analysis captures the deep subjectivity inherent in all articulations of the universal, though not without adding another layer of paradoxical complexity with a totalizing statement about universals and their translational nature. Indeed, as Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) have contended, "there is no view from nowhere, no Archimedean point from which to approach research into people's practices" (p. 363). This philosophical primer, however, did not prevent them from defending a universalist conception of ethics in educational research, nor did it hinder Enslin and Tjiattas (2009b) from attempting a qualified universalism with respect to access to education.

My own doctoral study—currently in progress—is already illuminating the pitfalls of universalism, particularly when conducting research with vulnerable youth. I have taken my lead from Ungar (2004, 2007, 2011), who has studied resilience in at-risk youth for decades. Ungar (2011) has found that resilience research tends to over-rely on bipolar variables (e.g., good vs. bad; adaptive vs. maladaptive) and that this tendency makes it more difficult to accurately describe, conceptualize, and promote resilience. Accordingly, he has described atypical coping behaviours in vulnerable youth that may seem, on the surface, universally maladaptive—including drug use, suicide attempts, oppositional defiance, early school-leaving, and gang affiliation—but which may in reality translate as what he calls *hidden resilience*. His research with hundreds of at-risk young people has led him to recognize that an extreme, overtly deviant behaviour like gang membership can be perceived and experienced by youth as an indicator of social maturity, an appreciation for structure, and a system of beliefs promoting honour and duty (Ungar, 2004). My research with sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ) youth, many of whom have been thrust into homelessness after being rejected by their families for violating "universal" norms of heterosexuality, investigates sex work as an as-yet unexplored avenue of hidden resilience—for *some* youth, if not for others. Indeed, while some young men I have spoken with see their experience with sex work as nothing more than a degrading survival strategy, another

interviewee stated he took pleasure in the human connection and longed for the decriminalization of sex work in order to legitimize a trade that he sees as empowering, lucrative, and enjoyable.

Whether youth experience sex work as empowering or degrading, the notion of young people trading sex for subsistence will no doubt make some readers uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Ungar's (2004, 2007, 2011) research and my own demonstrate how the particularities of individual lived experience undermine a universalist conception of what is best for young people who are struggling to survive and thrive in a society that by and large does not accept them. My doctoral thesis, then, will not strive for the academic gold standard of generalizability, but rather to convey particular voices, however disparate, that are normally silenced in order to engender empathy and new perspectives in policy and practice. My reflexive methodology owes much to what can broadly be described as postmodernism, the central tenets of which I attempt to elucidate below.

The Postmodernist Lens

Yilmaz's (2010) noble attempt to map out the meaning of postmodernism was a task complicated not only by the challenges of universalism outlined above (postmodernism will mean something different to everyone) but also, as Yilmaz showed, by the "anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist character of postmodernism" itself (p. 780). Metatheoretical convolutions notwithstanding, Yilmaz has posited postmodernism as a loose alliance of intellectual perspectives that challenge and critique modernism's basic assumptions about knowledge and reality. I am especially compelled by Usher and Edwards' (1994) wording, whereby postmodernism "is best understood as a state of mind, a critical, self-referential posture and style, a different way of seeing and working, rather than a fixed body of ideas, a clearly worked-out position or a set of critical methods and techniques" (p. 2). Hence, I think of postmodernism as a reflective lens through which we can choose to approach ethics, methodology, analysis, and other critical tasks. Observations and interpretations made through this lens lack the apparent clarity and fidelity of those made through, say, a positivist one; with our own image (subjectivity) reflected back at us, the representation of the outside world that is translated through the semi-translucent lens becomes difficult to resolve. Moreover, this murkiness can make it difficult to respond to perceived injustices, no matter how our gut may tell us how to proceed.

Postmodernism has been characterized, in part, as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Yilmaz, 2010, p. 784) such as *progress, development,* and *truth*. As Yilmaz asserted, and as I have seen myself, this incredulity is often misinterpreted as outright denunciation or opposition, which can lead to the obstructive modernism/postmodernism binary. Yilmaz clarified that incredulity does not mean outright denial or rejection; it is instead an inability to believe. Considering its self-referential posture and incredulity toward metanarratives, then, we can see that postmodernism, as with Enslin and Tjiattas' (2009b) "anti-universalism" (which they have claimed includes postmodernism), should not be interpreted as an alternative valence but as a critical lens or self-conscious translational filter.[1] I explore the implications of this lens of incredulity in a later section, but first I explore some practical solutions to postmodern murkiness proposed by various scholars, under the broad theme of contestatory dialogue.

The Suspension Bridge of Dissensus and Dialogue

A common proposal forwarded by scholars in negotiating the tensions between the universal and particular—often under the heading of cosmopolitanism—is the continuous, conscious exercise of dialogue in order to arrive at new forms of understanding (Todd, 2010; Waghid, 2010; Waks, 2009). Todd (2010) has proposed an *agonistic cosmopolitics* as a critical framework for approaching cosmopolitanism, one that emphasizes the positive potential of constructive political conflict. This means that all participants in any policy debate, provided they come to the table with what she has called a "conflictual consensus" (p. 226) regarding the necessity of equality and freedom, should be regarded as legitimate adversaries who have the right to a political struggle to define the contents of liberty for themselves. This, of course, challenges us to pre-emptively conceptualize "equality and freedom" before engaging in debate, and this is a major hurdle indeed. I anticipate that in Todd's view these conceptualizations would evolve over time through a nascent process of the agonistic cosmopolitics that she prescribes. Todd further

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[1] Thank you to Jesse Bazzul for pointing me toward the works of Fredric Jameson, who has developed the notion of postmodernism as a cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). I do not have the space here to engage with Jameson's intriguing Marxist position, and for the purposes of my argument, postmodernism is framed as an epistemic choice. I will more carefully consider this distinction in future writing.

argued that the end goal of consensus can be counterproductive, running the risk of negating the pluralism and diversity upon which our notions of democracy are founded:

> Learning to live better together requires facing the very difficulties embedded in that living, where not everyone's voice sings to the same tune. This is definitely not to suggest that facing pluralism is *only* difficult, but merely that the contentiousness that inevitably arises out of different worldviews requires an approach that takes these views seriously. Otherwise we risk, in the name of high-handed principles, silencing those very voices that provide counterpoint and texture to the score of our interactions. (p. 227, italics in original)

Companionably, Ingram (2016) wrote that cosmopolitanism is a practical orientation for political action that necessarily proceeds from the bottom up. Otherwise, it is co-opted as an ideology through which global elites project their own interests, preferences, and prejudices as universals, supposedly in the service of the greater good. This smuggling in of specific values under the guise of the universal is to be expected, Ingram claimed, since "universals always have to be enunciated by someone, somewhere, at some particular time, rendering them to that extent particular" (p. 71). Ingram's radically democratic, contestatory approach to cosmopolitanism is not meant to offer solutions, but instead conveys the "essential lesson that, in most cases, cosmopolitanism must, however paradoxically, be local" (p. 76). Zanotti (2015) seemed to concur, claiming that the justification of ethical decisions with abstract norms diminishes the accountability of interveners, relieving them of their duty of judiciously weighing the appropriateness of abstract claims to the specifics of circumstance and of assessing the consequences of their actions. This assessment is a social process, rooted in dialogue and contestation (Zanotti, 2015).

Such a call for legitimate dialogue is taken up by Crossley's (2008) "bridging" thesis as well. Focusing on comparative education and the social sciences more generally, Crossley has argued that

> much can still be gained from a more effective bridging across paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries; and between theoretical and applied studies; policy and practice; micro, macro and other levels of analysis; specialist and mainstream research traditions; studies of the past and those of the present; the humanities and the social sciences; and research in the North and the South. (p. 325)

Crossley has worked toward a collapsing of binaries and otherwise seemingly disparate research entities, much as I have suggested in terms of (post)modernism and (anti-)universalism. Furthermore, his bridging thesis blurs paradigmatic boundaries but nevertheless resists consensus. Instead, "it prioritizes and values the ongoing creativity and originality that the juxtaposition of different world views may generate—as well as an improved awareness of the implications of cultural and contextual differences" (p. 331).

Still, while Crossley's (2008) advocacy of debate, dissensus, and context are a step in the right direction, I feel Popper's (1994) work moves us into an even more philosophically sensitive appeal to dialogue, and one that models the posture of postmodernism that I have described. Popper has bought into "the growth of knowledge" while at the same time describing himself as "an almost orthodox adherent of unorthodoxy" (p. 34). I interpret this, in light of the arguments Popper developed throughout his chapter, as a strictly qualified subscription to the metanarrative of epistemological progress, a subscription that recognizes such growth as epiphenomenal, premised on disagreement, discussion, and mutual criticism. Further, he has demonstrated a profound sensitivity to the flux and particularity of the very conceptualizations of *growth* and *knowledge*. Popper's postmodernist lens has revealed itself further in his thirst for understanding rather than agreement, as the latter is at best, he wrote, uninteresting, and at worst, fallacious and oppressive. For Popper, understanding is an ongoing process of critical dialogue (a term he has used interchangeably with rational discussion) and self-conscious reflection, whereby "truth" is held in constant suspension. Plus, his writing has been bitingly critical of Occidentalism—describing "indoctrination with Western ideas" and "training in Western verbosity and some Western ideology" as greater obstacles to critical dialogue than disparities in culture and language (p. 51). What I most admire in Popper, though, is his ability to engage with paradox and the complex, sometimes dizzying relations of concepts at various levels of abstraction. It is these sorts of intellectual headaches to which we now turn.

Irony, Aporia & Supreme Fiction

We have now explored critical dialogue, dissensus, and the bridging of paradigms as potential, if only partial, solutions to cosmopolitan conundrums. In my view, these frameworks are of limited utility, however, because they

fail to engage with the deep philosophical issues that arise in any exercise of universalism, issues that might be encapsulated by the descriptive phrase *impossible and yet necessary*. Namely, the roadmaps of others I have sketched out above tend to focus on the normative gravity, without engaging with the impossibility, of universalism—what I describe as its holographic nature. Enslin and Tjiattas (2009a) in particular have displayed a salient example of problematic philosophical agnosticism; in their rejoinder to Todd (2009), they admitted,

> much can still be gained from a more effective bridging across paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries; and between theoretical and applied studies; policy and practice; micro, macro and other levels of analysis; specialist and mainstream research traditions; studies of the past and those of the present; the humanities and the social sciences; and research in the North and the South. (p. 325)

Paraphrased: *don't tell me we can't, for we clearly must*. On the face of it, this is an admirable posture to take. And yet, I insist that to eschew the translational paradox highlighted by Todd (2009) risks putting research into the very trajectory of oppression and colonialism that Enslin and Tjiattas (and Pendlebury & Enslin, 2001) have sought to avoid. Quite simply, I contend that to take anything for granted when speaking for others is to tyrannize, no matter how benevolent one's intentions. Enslin and Tjiattas were adept to suggest that this mantra might "pose the danger of paralysis" (p. 27). To ignore the paradox, however, would not be to commit a "politically incorrect misdemeanor," as they claimed (p. 27), but a fundamental error that only serves to undermine their humanist project by infusing it with top-down privilege. Postmodern literature often seems to commit a similar error, namely emphasizing the *impossible* while ignoring the *necessity*. This is a common charge leveraged against postcolonial theorists by neo-Marxists as well (see Sankaran, 2009): there *are* widespread material inequalities and gross injustices—oppression, poverty, war, climate change—and no matter how much we are ethically or philosophically restricted in naming these conditions, no matter their material translational contingency, they are, in some deep sense, *real* and must be actively addressed in the here and now. How, then, are we to proceed in research, policy, and practice when our attempts to bring about positive change are agonizingly self-negating?

The solution for me, if you can call it that, is to live in revolt, actively holding the contradictions in my consciousness as I conduct my research and, more generally, as I engage with the world. Having lived as an isolated, ashamed, closeted gay teen in the "Bible Belt" of Southern Alberta, my translation to graduate school embraced a mentality of activism as I sought to improve the lives of sexual and gender minority youth like me by tackling systemic inequality and under-recognition. Having had my eyes opened to the (post)structural, ethical challenges and contradictions built into this sort of work has not made the marginalization and victimization of this population any less real, nor has it diminished my resolve to make these kids' lives better. What these philosophical realizations *have* done is to create a great deal more cognitive and emotional work for me as I endeavour to inform policy that speaks in generalities for an aggregate of unique individuals. Working with a postmodernist lens can be a real headache, as it brings with it a tidal wave of self-doubt, suspicion and, at times, hopelessness. This revolt is further manifest by the very act of my writing and publishing this paper, which could be criticized for its paradoxical attempt to universalize particularity while eschewing universalism. Similar critique has been leveled at one of the "fathers" of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, whose works may not have adequately accounted for his totalizing account of anti-totality (Doyle, 1992). The progenitor of revolt as I use it, existential philosopher Albert Camus, likewise had to face the contradiction of writing a "meaningful" treatise on the absurdity (meaninglessness) of the universe (Camus, 1942/1955). Revolt for him was to live in "a constant confrontation between [himself] and his own obscurity... *an insistence upon an impossible transparency* [emphasis added]" (Camus, 1942/1955, p. 52).

This insistence on the impossible, for me at least, is made more authentic—and the self-doubt more bearable—by way of embracing Derrida's notion of the *aporia* of justice, as developed by Friedrich, Jaastad and Popkewitz (2010). Derrida's conception of democracy, as Friedrich et al. have described it,

> lies in the opening of the space to experience the *aporia* of justice, of deciding on the undecidable allowing for an experience of the impossible and the attribution of responsibility in terms of an ethic of 'affirmative openness to the other prior to questioning. (p. 583, italics in original)

Thus, due to the "universality" of translation that I defended above, democracy and justice will never come, as their manifest meanings and instantiations are always in flux. Once we capture and name them, they become something else, something domineering and self-destructive. To quote Todd (2009): "This is, then, a universality forever dissatisfied with itself, forever restless in its search for meaning, and it lives only at the very limits of its own articulation" (p. 22). This notion is affirmed by Ingram (2016), who has claimed that universalism can only remain

that—*universal*—when it basks in its own impotence: "It only stops being an empty dream when a power exists to make it effective, but then the recourse to this power inevitably particularizes it and puts it at the disposal of that very power" (p. 72).

Todd (2009) has found great utility in this *aporia*: "I find this 'not yet' quality of the universal to be precisely what propels us forward, giving us hope to do more, to do better, to do otherwise" (p. 22). I agree, and I think it is helpful to further reify the notion of the "not yet" via the notion of irony, as Hacking (1999) has described it: irony is the recognition that a particular truth claim, concept, or idea is strictly contingent on—and a product of—social history and forces, and yet something we must acknowledge as part of the universe that contains ourselves, other people, and the material world. In this case, we can imagine that idea is universalism. The ironist acknowledges the radical contingency of our vocabularies, and thus, I argue, the ubiquity of translation from the seemingly most universal concept all the way down to its necessarily particular instantiations. Nonetheless, our contingent vocabularies are all we have, and so long as we consciously maintain a degree of irony while we work with them, I think we can be said to manifest authenticity. To do otherwise—to recognize only the contingency or only the reality—would render us impotent or heavy-handed, respectively.

In a similar vein, Critchley (2012) operationalized the *aporia* in a useful way, developing his formulation of *fictional force* as precisely the response (if not the solution, per se) to self-contradictory riddles of politics, which to my mind maps onto our paradox of universalism. For Critchley, due to the contradictions that comprise them, politics and law (and, by extension, universals) are all fictions, albeit necessary ones. Accordingly, he has posited a crucial distinction between fiction and *supreme fiction*, thus fighting contradiction with contradiction: "Paradoxically, a supreme fiction is a fiction that we know to be a fiction—there being nothing else—but in which we nevertheless believe. A supreme fiction is one self-conscious of its radical contingency" (p. 91). In a sense, then, if we follow these philosophical prescriptions, we are never allowed the comfort of getting off the treadmill. We know we are chasing the carrot, but what other choice do we have?

There is a further caveat to all of this, which Popper (1994) has illustrated nicely. He warned that frameworks, vocabularies, and theories can become mental prisons if we become entrenched in any one of them. The process of dialogue, of critically engaging with other ideas, is advanced as a method for avoiding incarceration in any one such prison, a method we have seen put forward by Todd, Crossley, and others. But Popper has illuminated the complexities of abstract reification/concrete abstraction built into this prescription: "It is only too obvious that this idea of self-liberation, of breaking out of one's prison of the moment, might in its turn become part of a framework or a prison—or in other words, that we can never be absolutely free" (p. 53). Indeed, the postmodernist lens for which I advocate in this essay, or even Popper's self-described orthodox adherence of unorthodoxy, might be one such prison. But as Popper has suggested, the best we can do, then, is to widen our prison and willfully strive to overcome the parochialism that we know has such potential for harm.

Epistemic Responsibility

Building on the phenomenologically foundational element of translation, I have defended a sort of perspectivism that pervades all sociological arenas of abstraction, from individual, embodied perceptions of material objects, through to ideas, all the way up to "elevator words"—like *truth*, *knowledge*, and *reality*—which are not words for things in the world, but words that describe things we say about the world and which are circularly defined and universalized (Schmaus, n.d.; Hacking, 1999). This particularism undermines the logical grounds for all universals, even those centered on basic, visceral phenomena like "suffering" and "happiness," rendering them mere holograms—flashy figures spouting platitudes from a hall of smoke and mirrors. It is not just that these words necessarily mean different things to different people; the key here, I believe, is to recognize the distinctiveness of even the most basically conceptualized experiences on an individual level, as this ensures a constant reflexivity and healthy skepticism about all claims made in the name of others. This does not mean that we should fail to intervene when obvious forms of cruelty and injustice are happening before our eyes, crimes against humanity that should be difficult, if not impossible, to defend through any form of critical dialogue. However, any such cosmopolitan intervention must be embedded in "a process and practice of contestation, a politics waged against the very forms of domination and false universals that seek to co-opt it" (Ingram, 2016, p. 72), and thus be waged from below, by unique embodied individuals, in grassroots fashion.

I contend that where good science meets good philosophy, we find postmodernism. Meanwhile, Bazzul (2016) has asserted that the best interests of the planet are served by society's recognition that "reality" (e.g., science and human nature) and "dreams" (e.g., philosophy and ethics)—the actual and virtual—are "hopelessly entangled" (p. 25), and Adams St. Pierre (2011) has warned that "attempts to disentangle science and philosophy are always dangerous" (p. 614). Enslin and Tjiattas (2009b) developed a "qualified universalism" in their defense of universal access to education and in so doing grounded a bold philosophical claim in a specious scientific one. Accordingly, I feel that the authors' self-proclaimed philosophical agnosticism, their "self-evident" call for universal education, was irresponsible. It appears these authors have locked themselves in a mental prison, and a healthy dose of irony—an appreciation for the supremely fictive essence of universalism—would engender a greater appreciation for the potential neocolonialism espoused by their universalist claims. Enslin and Tjiattas (2009b), and Pendlebury and Enslin (2001), have been compelled by Martha Nussbaum's talk of universal capacities of agency and choice. What they all have seemed to ignore, however, is that to introduce certain alternatives can, in actuality, preclude all choice.

Morarji (2010) provided an example of this, drawing on her ethnographic research in a rural mountain region of Northern India to suggest that discourses of universal education may be complicit with a vision of development that coerces market participation and radically marginalizes agriculture and rural life:

> Education is widely perceived as a way out of rural backwardness into the modern economy. Yet my research indicates that not only do desirable choices often fail to materialize, but education reproduces rural decline by *closing off* cultural and material options for rural communities. (p. 51, italics in original)

Furthermore, much of this impetus is social, as many of the young people in her study were pressured by parents who were largely illiterate and uneducated to pursue education as a way to allay embarrassment and foment pride. However inadvertent, Enslin and Tjiattas'(2009b) pillar of universal education has contributed to this culture of alienation, "in which agriculture and rural life are inevitably residual, unfeasible and a compulsion rather than a rational choice" (Morarji, p. 51).

Neoliberal forms of education, then, with their tantalizing, overblown promises of prosperity and empowerment, might be irresistible to young peasants in Jaunpur, as well as their parents. But as Morarji's research showed, an exodus from rural areas to urban centers can spell the death of Indigenous knowledge systems and create a population of educated but unemployed young adults who lack the basic skills to return to the simple, yet fruitful lives of subsistence farming they otherwise would have had. In the particular case of access to formal education in this region of rural India, "compulsions experienced as aspirations stem from experiences of marginalization rather than representing 'natural' values and choices" (Morarji, p. 58). Universal education, then, may be an inadvertent call for universal exploitation. Or perhaps not. Or perhaps both yes *and* no. Regardless, these are the contingencies that I believe are more readily interrogated via a postmodernist lens of reflexivity and incredulity, by wedding the so-called truths of science with the radical doubts of philosophy. Ethical researchers have an epistemic responsibility (Code, 1987) to know better than to gamble all their chips on universalist ideals without hedging their bets.

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