

Pragmatist Kant
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Kant's Universalism and Pragmatism
Hemmo Laiho
University of Turku

Abstract

In the talk, I analyze the apparent universalism present in Kant's thinking in relation to some of the key tenets of pragmatism, such as the emphasis on practical consequences, experimental attitude, and anti-apriority. (By 'universalism' I understand, roughly, a view according to which some points of view, attitudes, values, kinds of knowledge, or cognitive frameworks, are universalizable.) I begin by introducing two kinds of universalism in Kant, or as I call them, relative universalism and absolute universalism. Though the former is limited to specifically human point of view, while the latter is supposed to extend to rationality as such, both share the idea that there is something necessary and fixed in our human undertakings, whether these be everyday ones, aesthetic, moral, or scientific.

I proceed by showing how the two kinds of universalism emerge in Kant's aesthetics, Kant's ethics, and Kant's theory of cognition, respectively. Kant's aesthetics, as presented in the third *Critique*, is clearly universalist, though only in a weak sense, because the demand on the universality of the claims of taste is relative to judges who share, or are presupposed to share, the same specific cognitive basis for aesthetic estimation. Kant's ethics, in turn, as presented in the second *Critique* and in the *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, is universalist in much stronger sense. The ultimate principle of morality, so-called categorical imperative, is supposed to bind all possible rational agents without exceptions. What is morally good is that absolutely and universally, period. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to which I shall pay special attention, we encounter both kinds of universalism. On the one hand, we have space and time as humanly necessary forms of sensible cognition. On the other hand, we have the categories as the necessary forms of all kinds of rational thinking. Both of these doctrines have been questioned. It can be claimed, for instance, that space and time as Kant saw them are strictly tied to the Euclidean geometry, but given that there can be other kinds of geometries, the supposedly universal foundation of Kant's theory of space-time tumbles down. Accordingly, pragmatist-minded could claim, for instance, that Kant's theory is successful only insofar as it finds practical Euclidean application, not per se. In a similar vein, Kant's categories can be seen as tied to the theoretical commitments of Kant's time, Newtonian physics in particular. If so, the category of Cause and Effect, for example, can be said to reflect a certain kind of conception of causality that only holds good under certain mechanistic presuppositions. So, basically, when our conception of causality changes—as it has from Aristotelian philosophy to Newtonian physics to theory of relativity and to quantum mechanics—Kant's category of Cause and Effect becomes at least partially obsolete just like his Euclidean conception of space and time.

But would this be the correct understanding of Kant's theory of cognition? I do not think so. (To make an allusion to Peirce, it is questionable that we need any new category lists.) This is not to say that Kant's theory of categories should be seen as the last word on the subject, but that his core idea behind the categories, when understood in the right way, is inescapable. The same goes for Kantian space-time. As I shall illustrate in the talk, space-time and the categories, as the ultimate principles of experience, should both be understood in a very primitive and rudimentary way. We apply them, or represent in accordance with them, whenever we refer to locations, durations, existence, properties, magnitudes, events, or interaction, in whatever exact way such an application actually takes place. Bluntly put, it is simply impossible to do without them. So, for example, whatever differences there are between our understanding of causality today and back then, the category that goes by the same name represents that which is shared by both instances. The specifics beyond this core, or form, as Kant would call it, might just as well evolve and change from one framework to another, but the form itself does not. Analogical lines of thinking can be found from Kant's aesthetics and ethics.

The question then is how well do Kant's universalist demands we find in his aesthetics, ethics, and theory of cognition agree with pragmatist tenets? Do they agree at all? If they do not, which tenets should we qualify? As I shall argue in the talk, we must inevitably make some universalist commitments in the end—like those Kant tried to explicate with his table of categories and categorical imperative. A further question is to what extent such commitments are compatible or incompatible with pragmatism.