

Kant's Universalism and Pragmatism (short version)

Hemmo Laiho
University of Turku
heanla@utu.fi

1. Introduction

While some forms of pragmatism, or ideas of pragmatist thinkers, and even some of the pragmatists themselves, are easily recognizable as Kantian, and while Kant's critical philosophy can obviously be applied to issues raised by pragmatists, just like his critical philosophy can be challenged and varied from a pragmatist point of view, it is not easy to precisely explicate the relationship between Kant's critical philosophy and pragmatism. As a matter of fact, given the diversity of pragmatism, such an explication would be next to impossible to give. As recognized by many, thinkers labeled as pragmatist—or pragmaticist or neo-pragmatist—do not necessarily have much in common (see e.g. Haack 1992, 351; Pihlström 1996, 13). Bluntly put, if the common denominator between pragmatists is difficult to find, then all the more difficult it is to pinpoint the exact similarities and differences between pragmatism and Kant or Kantianism.

Hence a disclaimer: Given that pragmatism denotes and connotes so many things I simply assume in what follows that certain tenets can be regarded specifically as pragmatist tenets. These tenets may not hold true for every so-called pragmatist thinker, but each of them has been endorsed by thinkers known to be pragmatists, and they certainly come up in general introductions to pragmatism (see e.g. Hookway 2016; McDermid 2017).

I have three intertwining, assumedly pragmatist tenets in mind. First, pragmatism gives precedence to practical or experiential consequences of any given theory. Second, pragmatism prioritizes experimental problem-solving attitude over ivory-towerish theorizing. Third, pragmatism is against apriority if by this one suggests the possibility of some sort of foreknowledge that gives us truths or principles that are not only absolutely independent of experience but infallible and eternally fixed (see esp. Lewis 1923). In all, pragmatism is a view according to which theory and practice go hand in hand (see e.g. Pihlström 1996, 11, 34). On the whole, these tenets suggest that pragmatism is an anti-universalist branch of philosophy. In contrast, as I explain below, Kant's critical philosophy is in many respects universalistic to the core.

By universalism I understand a view according to which some points of view, attitudes, norms, kinds of knowledge, cognitive frameworks, and, in particular, the principles governing them, are universalizable, and as such, transcend actual human practices. Given that actual human practices, however loosely we formulate this notion, clearly evolve and change just as much as do theories and the criteria they have to meet in

different scientific, moral, and aesthetic communities, it seems that a true pragmatist must abandon such universal principles for once and for all.

I begin by showing how there are two kinds of universalism present in Kant's critical philosophy and how the two kinds of universalism emerge in Kant's aesthetics, ethics, and theory of cognition, respectively. What I call relative universalism is limited to human point of view. What I call absolute universalism transcends the human point of view and extends to rationality as such. Still, both kinds of universalism share the idea that there is something necessary and fixed in our human undertakings, whether these be everyday ones, aesthetic, moral, or scientific. The question then is whether, or to what extent, the kind of universalistic demands or presuppositions we find in Kant's critical philosophy are in disagreement with the apparently anti-universalist pragmatist tenets.

2. Kant's Relative and Absolute Universalism

2.1. Relative Universalism in Kant's Aesthetics

Matters of taste are often seen as totally subjective and without any objective standards. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say. Kant's aesthetic theory, as presented in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is an interesting blend of subjective and objective elements. Kant simultaneously accepts a lack of definite standards and denies that beauty is just a matter of personal taste. Indeed, Kant seems to think, were taste merely a matter of personal pleasure, it would not even be taste properly so called. Although also a matter of pleasure, taste indicates something common, something shared, irreducible to our private likes or "the agreeable." (Kant 2000b, *passim*)

And so are claims concerning the beautiful, given that we judge things as regards their beauty in a proper way. Briefly put, as far as beauty is concerned, we must judge disinterestedly, that is, without any ulterior motives towards the object in question. Equally importantly, we must not judge the object according to concepts—roughly, what we know about it and take it to be for—but according to the way it affects us. In other words, the maker of an aesthetic judgment must judge "on the basis of what he has before his sense" (Kant 2000b, 116; AA 5:231; see also 5:350). This attitude towards the object distinguishes aesthetic judgment from cognitive judgment, the maker of which must judge "on the basis of what he has in his thoughts" (*ibid.*). Still, to make the aesthetic judgment to count as an aesthetic judgment of taste, as opposed to an aesthetic judgment of mere sensation, an additional criterion must be met: namely, that we attend the formal features of the object or our representational state (Kant 2000b, 174; AA 5:294; see also e.g. 5:190).

Only this way one can reflect "on his own judgment from a universal standpoint" (Kant 2000b, 175; AA 5:295). As Kant also puts it, when making genuine judgments of taste, we assume "universal voice" (Kant 2000b, 101; AA 5:216). That is to say that we expect that others agree with our judgment universally, making Kant's aesthetics explicitly universalistic. However, this kind of universalism is that only relatively or comparatively, because the demand on the universality of the judgments of taste is relativized to judges who share, or are presupposed to share, the same specific cognitive basis for aesthetic estimation, including the ability to rise above private sensation. What is more, Kant

explicitly states that the universal voice is “only an idea”—only to add that he is not going to explicate “what it rests on” (Kant 2000b, 101; AA 5:216).

Though Kant admits that the universal voice is just an idea, or perhaps closer to the point he wants to make, an assumption under which to proceed in matters of taste, he clearly wants to insist on something stronger. Kant’s key point is, I think, that such an idea is no less than necessary in the sense that were there no truth to such an idea there would not be taste in the first place. In other words, to make sense of the fact—assuming that it is a fact—that there truly is taste and true beauty instead of mere agreeableness is to assume a universal foundation for it, even if that foundation is merely a principle of judging relative to human standpoint and “ideal”, that is, not to be attributed to things in themselves, but to a purposive relationship among certain cognitive faculties (see Kant 2000b, 224–225; AA 5:350–351).

Somewhat curiously, it is totally irrelevant to Kant’s universalistic approach that in actuality we do know that there is no agreement in matters of taste, and that we may always suspect whether we actually succeed in judging in above described way (e.g. Kant 2000b, 121–122; AA 5:237). Kant’s universalistic conviction seems to come purely from so-called transcendental considerations. Accordingly, there simply could not be such experiential data that would prove him otherwise.

2.2. Absolute Universalism in Kant’s Ethics

Kant’s ethics, as presented in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, is universalistic in a stronger sense than Kant’s aesthetics. For starters, morality is not bound to the human point of view. The ultimate moral principle, so-called categorical imperative—“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant 2005, 73; AA 4:421)—is supposed to bind every imaginable rational agent without exceptions (*ibid.*, 90; AA 4:442). What is morally good is that absolutely and universally, period.

Categorical imperative, in its suggestion of universal moral law, is no less than the ultimate criterion for morally legitimate judgments and ethical norms. At the same time, it is a kind of test. Are you doing the right thing? If your guideline for the act you are about to perform complies with the universality demand made by the categorical imperative, then yes, you may rest assured that you act in a morally good way. But if your guideline for the act you are about to perform only complies with your own needs, then you are not going to act morally at all. Alternatively put, to act morally is to act in a certain way because it is our duty to do so, not because we (necessarily) like it (see e.g. Kant 2005, 171–172; AA 5:38–39).

Though Kant’s moral theory is highly complex, and the real-world applicability of the categorical imperative can be questioned, his basic point is quite appealing. To begin with, though Kant does not want to claim that morality has nothing to do with feeling, he nevertheless wants to show how morality, or our “moral disposition” (Kant 2005, 201; AA 5:76), cannot be based on any sort of feeling. Emotions and feelings come and go, vary from one circumstance to another, and are inherently private and personal. Clearly such thoroughly contingent factors could not provide the required communally binding force that

makes morality stand to its name. Cognitively speaking, to be able to reason morally is to be able to apply a universal principle to the empirical world, and, indeed, from a point of view that transcends our limited, less-than-ideal, and complexly conditioned experiential situation. What is more, only then we may also recognize that the moral law could not be any other way, and, even closer to the point I would like to emphasize, that otherwise morality itself would not be possible in the first place. (Morality also depends on freedom, but let's skip this further issue for brevity's sake.)

To put it differently, there must be something in our moral reasoning that does not fall into the prey of contingencies of our everyday feelings, or other instant reactions and prejudices, which is why morality must be based on something extra-empirical. Nor can it be based on our "animality", but must, instead, originate from "the moral law within me" (Kant 2005, AA 5:161)—even if the test cases for the categorical imperative do originate empirically and externally. In the end, as Kant would have it, the ultimate principle of moral reasoning must be embedded in rationality itself. Indeed, not only does morality transcend actual human practices, but its ultimate standard is totally independent of how we human beings actually happen to act, and, furthermore, how we happen to be constituted as far our specifically human nature is concerned (Kant 2005, 90; AA 4:442).

2.3. Relative and Absolute Universalism in Kant's Theory of Cognition

In Kant's theory of cognition, as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we encounter both kinds of universalism. On the one hand, there are space and time as humanly necessary forms of sensible cognition that hold true at least for every human cognizer (A26–27/B42–43; B72). Generally speaking, this is to say that at least as far as cognitive experience goes, we are spatiotemporally restricted beings, and given this limitation, the only legit object for scientific and other cognitive undertakings is the spatiotemporally confined empirical world of experienceable things, including ourselves as bodily creatures. Furthermore, unlike the actual empirical contents of our experience, the spatiotemporal form of experience is not only constant, but preconditions any actual empirical content our experience might possibly have.

On the other hand, there are the categories as the necessary forms of thinking. Just as with space and time, Kant ultimately links the categories with the possibility of experience: it is only by means of the categories that we can think about objects of experience (A93/B126). Only this time, similarly to Kant's approach in ethics, he nowhere limits the categories to human beings, but seems to think that to have any kind of rationally structured experiential cognition, no matter who the cognizer or thinking being is, or what kind of sensory constitution it exactly has, experience must be structured in accordance with the categories.

Though Kant is not explicit on the matter, or does not spend much time explaining the categories, I think he has the following in mind. In thinking about the spatiotemporal objects of experience, we necessarily employ certain structural features thanks to which we can refer to those objects—whatever they are—as more or less stable entities with or without such and such properties, just like those objects simply have to have location, spatial extension, duration, and so on, to be objects for us in the first place. In addition,

thanks to the constant structure of our thinking, we may think of any possible object of experience in terms of magnitude (e.g. mass) and interaction, or as a participant of events, or we do not come to think them at all. Briefly put, the Table of Categories (A80/B106) has all the possible basic ways of thinking about objects inscribed to it.

It is important to acknowledge that the Kantian categories are supposed to be purely formal elements of cognition. As such, they are not informed by empirical content but are absolutely unspecific in this regard. Indeed, the categories ground the possibility of any such experiential content, which is why it would be absurd for Kant to allow the possibility that we may categorize experience as we will. (Cf. e.g. Lewis 1923, 175)

3. Kant's Universalism and Pragmatism: In Opposition or Not?

How well do Kant's universalistic demands we find in his aesthetics, ethics, and theory of cognition, agree with pragmatist tenets? At first sight, it may seem that Kant is clearly an anti-pragmatist thinker whose theoretical commitments are quickly problematized from the pragmatist point of view. For starters, Kant thinks that a priori and a posteriori elements are neatly separable. This trend is visible in all the three *Critiques*, beginning from the Transcendental Aesthetic (Kant 2000a; see also e.g. Kant 2005, 270; AA 5:163). Moreover, Kant does not seem to see any reason to question whether he has found the correct a priori principles. On the contrary, he thinks of them as universally binding and some of them even independent of human experience as such, even though his basic point would usually be that there must be principles governing human undertakings independently of particular instances of such undertakings given in actual experience.

Nor are there signs that Kant would regard context-sensitive practical or experiential consequences of his theoretical commitments as important. Rather, if you ask a pragmatist-minded, Kant, while laying out law-like principles from his ivory tower, ends up totally downplaying the role of actual experience and the complex entanglements of human practices. Then again, if we were to ask Kant himself, he would probably answer that if you take actual human practices as your starting point, you end up with mere contingencies. Or indeed, in a sense—as I have been hinting at in above—you end up losing such things as (genuine, correctly understood) taste, morality, and experience—because if Kant is right, such things are possible only because there is a certain necessitating structure underlying them, and the role of philosophy is to find out their governing principles.

There are many difficult issues contained in the previous paragraphs and many more beyond. For example, there is the cognitive question about the possibility, role and scope of aprioristic theorizing. Relatedly, Kant's commitment to all-encompassing rationality, which culminates in his practical philosophy, would be another big issue. Of course, one could ask similar questions about the supposed inseparability of theory and practice as demanded by pragmatists. One could also ask whether some particular pragmatist would agree or disagree with Kant in the end. Peirce, for example, seemed to be a firm believer of universal moral standards (Hookway 1985, 59, 65). Similarly universalistic tendencies can be found behind Peirce's notion of ideal science. Indeed, Peirce shared Kant's conviction that not everything can be fallible. Just like Kant's, Peirce's system of categories is supposed to be absolutely universal, not empirically falsifiable, and also his theory of signs seems to be a

thoroughly a priori enterprise (Hookway 1985, 63, 81, 108, 126). Even Lewis, with his anti-universalist conception of a priori, obviously is not against apriority as such, though Kant would hardly find that kind of version of apriority plausible.

Be that as it may, what I shall bring up in the rest of the talk is the idea that there must be something necessary and immutable in (or “behind”) our various human undertakings—a kind of fixed core, as it were. The basic idea is this. For us to be able to continue to track, communicate, and evaluate, say, Aristotle’s ethical ideas, or scientific claims made by Newton, is to take part of the same reasoning processes as these thinkers did. As I see it, the critical Kant is after such reasoning processes and their purely formal elements in the domains of theoretical philosophy, moral philosophy, and aesthetics (and teleology). As formal and universal, they are elements that are shared by every actual application, practical circumstance, or cognitive framework. Moreover, no such maximal projection could be backed up empirically even in principle. As already suggested, this is to say that we cannot be anti-universalist in all respects. For instance, referring to objects in terms of their properties—which I take to be an application of the category of Substance—is so basic element of cognition that it is simply indispensable (cf. Hookway 1985, 146). No change in logic or physics or any human practice changes that. Even if in a certain scientific explanatory context we would find a bearer-property relation as irrelevant, we would still be indirectly employing just that, and would continue to do so in our everyday life anyhow.

Certainly, 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 to quantum mechanics—Kant’s category of Cause becomes at least partially obsolete just like his Euclidean conception of space and time after the introduction of other kinds of geometries. Accordingly, a pragmatist-minded could claim that Kant’s theory of space-time is successful only insofar as it finds practical Euclidean application, not per se (cf. e.g. Lewis 1923, 177).

Yet, I think, Kant’s space-time and the categories, as the ultimate principles of cognitive experience, should be understood in a more rudimentary way. We apply them, or represent in accordance with them, whenever we refer to locations, durations, properties, magnitudes, events, interaction, existence, and so forth, in whatever exact way such an application actually takes place in whatever context. Bluntly put, it is simply impossible to do without them. So, 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. In this minimalist sense, some of the norms that govern natural sciences—or indeed all kinds of cognitive undertakings—do apply universally (cf. Pihlström 1996, 220). Otherwise there is no inquiry in the first place, basically. Or as Kant suggests in the second *Critique*, in defense of the a priori method, without “true universality” there would not even be “rational inference and so not even inference from analogy” (Kant 2005, 146; AA 5:12).

To give a rough illustration of this, imagine both Aristotle and Newton dropping rocks to the ground. Both think about moving things and make generalizations on the basis of the alterations they both testify. In short, both explain the causal behavior of the rocks. In so doing, both apply the exactly same categories, and share the exactly same basis of spatiotemporal determination of the places of the rocks. No commitments specific to Euclid have to be made, though Kant would insist that whatever they perceive can be given a mathematical idealization in Euclidean terms. The reason why Aristotle and Newton conceptualize things differently is not due to their different categorial frameworks (in Kant's sense) but to their different repertoires of empirical concepts and the different genesis thereof. Most crucially, to understand the differences of their procedures is to understand common reasoning processes at the basis of both procedures, however precise or imprecise our knowledge of the governing principles of those processes happens to be.

Or suppose we meet a space alien—like the one in *Arrival*. Sharing our thoughts might be painfully difficult, but assuming that it would be possible at least in principle, what would explain this but a shared categorial framework? In other words, the deep structure of our thinking—and language, for that matter—would have to be the same. And if so, the categories could not be socially produced in any strict sense (cf. e.g. Lewis 1923, 177). In yet other words, both human and alien experience and mind would have to have “a character which is universal, fixed, and absolute” (*ibid.*). Of course, as I have been suggesting, such a universal character has to be construed very minimally, and, as I have also been suggesting, Kant's intention was to do just that. At least this is so as far as his theory of cognition is concerned, but I think his approach in ethics and aesthetics is ultimately quite similar.

So, a properly Kantian thing to do is to limit fallibility (cf. Gava 2016) and demand strict formal restrictions on cognizing about the world also on our part—assuming that the matter has its say, too. Bluntly put, many things in our cognitive construction of the world might be “malleable,” but not all of them—including, in particular, the deep structure of the reasoning processes themselves (cf. Pihlström 1996, 220, 345; but see also 202). Otherwise, Kant might just as well accept the pragmatic tenets.

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