

The Universal and Contingent Impossibility and Desirability of Ethics in Ato Sekyi-Otu's *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays*

What does it mean to say that ethics are possible today? At least two things.

First, it forces a re-evaluation of a disciplinary or cultural state of affairs that I understand Ato Sekyi-Otu to be most principally intervening against: an overzealous conflation of moral universalism with the European cultural imperialism which it has so often concealed. This conflation allows for potentially deleterious and inegalitarian cultural mores to go unchallenged or unscrutinized, insofar as such challenges can be dismissed as extensions of cultural imperialism. Thus, Sekyi-Otu makes possible and ineluctable the asking of such questions as whether or not allowing a Canadian 11-year-old to invoke her aboriginal right “to refuse chemotherapy for treatment of her leukaemia in favour of traditional healing,” (67) and so allowing her to die, as did an Ontario court in 2014, is in the order of good things, and if it is, how it is. Sekyi-Otu's wide-ranging lines of argument do not set out to resolve this dispute or disputes like it; rather they serve to intervene against a kind of ethical segregation that would foreclose the possibility of such disputation in the first place.

Second, to insist, as Sekyi-Otu does, that ethical claims, as normative and universal, are possible today runs against both a Derridean and a Foucauldian account of “the good,” both of which accounts continue to have considerable currency in the academy. How that running-against plays out is what I would like to consider in what follows, though always keeping in mind the Africentric thrust of *Left Universalism's* claims. Granted, Sekyi-Otu gives Foucault and Derrida only passing mention in his book – and hardly anyone does not receive at least passing mention in his book. However, I understand Sekyi-Otu, in his dizzying citational field, to be taking advantage of an epistemological upshot to his ethical argument that there is a “vernacular ‘Kantianism’ native to every culture” (18), that every moral claim partakes of the universal, irrespective of where it comes from – the upshot being that everybody who talks ethics is talking the same language, whether they know it or not, and so can be made to talk to one another. It is this which allows Sekyi-Otu's interlocutors to run the gamut from, well, Armah to Žižek. Indeed, Sekyi-Otu undertakes his own project of what he calls “conjunctive anamnesis” (148) in re-membling discourses that are geographically or disciplinarily severed. It is in the spirit of this conjunctive project that I add Foucault and Derrida's vernacular Kantianisms to the discussion of Sekyi-Otu's universal claim.

I conceive of the Derridean branch as insisting that ethical practices and values – such as hospitality, forgiveness, mourning, justice – are fundamentally and irreducibly impossible, that the impossible reconciliation between, on the one hand, fallible and violent legal institutions within a given historical space, and on the other hand, unconditional universal values, for the protection and encouragement of which we would wish to transform and improve those institutions, is what makes ethics, ethics (*On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 22–23). This contradicts Sekyi-Otu's account, which holds that every local ethical claim, even in the introverted form of “this is the way we do things here,” (Sekyi-Otu, 21) must be understood as implying a universal normative set, and it is the possibility of this articulation from the local to the

universal that marks the ethical as ethical. Under one particular and contestable framing of deconstructive thought, then, we have an understanding of ethics as fundamentally, universally impossible, pace Sekyi-Otu.

By contrast, the Foucauldian consideration of ethics that I want to discuss here is one which recognizes the contingent, rather than fundamental, impossibility of ethical practice. This is the line of argument pursued in Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the Subject* – that care or knowledge of the self, as ethical obligation and first step towards the good, is in principle a practice that is open to everybody, but which very few are actually capable of pursuing. This structure of interplay “between a universal principle which can only be heard by a few, and this rare salvation from which no one is excluded a priori,” becomes for Foucault a fundamental political problem for Christianity and the West (119). I might be identifying here a particular kind of universalism, and misreading it as a universal universalism, but it seems to me that the situation Foucault describes, where ethical obligation which can be fulfilled has the latent property of being universal but the manifest property of being particular as a consequence of an uneven distribution of resources or opportunity, poses a serious problem for ethical practice in the postcolony, where the distribution of resources is unjust and becoming more so. Ought, says Kant, implies can; what do we do with vernacular Kantians who, because of legacies of dispossession and displacement, can't?

Taken together, one might be forgiven for thinking of this dual invocation of Foucault and Derrida as a sophomoric attempt at refuting Sekyi-Otu; universal ethics are conceptually impossible, following Derrida, and even if this were not the case, universal ethics are contingently impossible, following Foucault. The problem is that I agree with Sekyi-Otu, and I am wanting to determine how to maintain that agreement without a wholesale dismissal of the Derridean and Foucauldian ventures.

We might begin that process by revising Foucault. Without contesting his description of a particular strain of self-knowledge coming to establish a schema for how putatively universal salvation discursively operates in a Christian tradition, we might not be willing to apply that schema to all ethical thought everywhere, least of all now. Foucault suggests that ethical practice is a luxury of the aristocracy to dear for the proletariat; we might suggest that in light of the seriousness of our global predicament, and the uneven distribution of precarity within that predicament, it is precisely the proletariat and precariat who can least afford to sidestep the ethical injunction of community and equality – in short the ethical injunction of communism. And we would be right. But this would not make Foucault wrong, or not about this; because after all, the revolution has not come, the ethical has been and is being sidestepped.

But what is this ethical? For Foucault it designates a particular discourse and a way of conceiving of the subject, evacuated of its normative component outside of the specific structure of power that enforces or proposes it, of positive signification only to those elect who have the resources or wherewithal to go from ethical obligation to ethical act. For Derrida, it is the impossibility of fully mediating between act and obligation that identifies and defines the ethical; there is on the one hand no purely ethical act, because it is an act and thus limited by being manifest, and on the other no purely ethical obligation, because as pure obligation without material support, it is inert.

And for Sekyi-Otu, if I understand this book correctly, the ethical designates an autonomous, normative set of obligations and rights, which is universal by dint of an appeal to some fundamental humanity in the background of every normative claim (Sekyi-Otu's axiom of "honouring the human") but local insofar as it wishes to protect particular manifestations of that universal ("deferring to difference"). These two demands are in turn supported by the obligation to "cultivate the commons," that is the obligation to reinforce the civic ground, at the scale of the nation, upon which this honouring and deferral can legitimately take place. Which is to say that Sekyi-Otu is attempting to mediate between the universal, the individual, and the collective, so as to work through the supposed impossibility of the Derridean dyad, and indeed to work through the main difficulty faced by philosophies of the subject. The solution is neat; rather than suggest, with Derrida, or with the cultural essentialist, that the particular/self and the universal/Other are in a relationship of contradiction, let us suppose or recognize that these are at best in a relationship of contrariety, and possibly one of entailment. And so while we might not always know precisely *how* to shuttle from the particular to the universal, the point remains, *pace* Derrida (or *pace* a vulgar Derrideanism), that we can perform this mediation, at least conceptually.

I am less certain of the Foucauldian problem. We may be able to recognize that a given local ethical claim or ethical judgement fulfils a universal norm; or, if this is not a process of recognition, then a fashioning-together of a local set of norms which can be understood by their universal entailments. Our capacity to fulfil that obligation, however, whether we recognize the obligation as universal or not, is contingent upon particular, local, material conditions; Bertolt Brecht's old rejoinder: first the grub, then the morality. This is the issue that Sekyi-Otu's final chapter, "Enigmas and Proverbs," takes up, within the context of African literary culture's ostensibly vexed investments in the true, the beautiful, and the universal, on the one hand, and the abject, the particular, and the local, on the other. If anything, Sekyi-Otu doubles down on Foucault, concluding, approvingly, with a discussion of the profoundly hard work and the profound absence of guarantees that the novelists Ayi Kwei Armah and Bessie Head demand of and offer to their narrators, protagonists, and readers; Head's *A Question of Power* in particular is a novel in which belonging [less; merely "a gesture of belonging" (206)] is achieved only at the far end of a litany of dispossessions, and without any promise of persistence. Says Foucault: the ethical choice is theoretically open to all, but practically only to a few. Says Sekyi-Otu: the ethical choice is the only choice that we might survive, and it will be taken by even fewer than that.

Two thoughts on this: first, I think Sekyi-Otu is right to insist upon the primacy of work in Armah and Head. I recognize that this is very likely my succumbing to a leftist fetishizing of communal labour, but it seems to me to be the necessary, if insufficient, component to answering both the Derridean and Foucauldian concerns that I have been thinking through in this response. Because if we wish to assert that the relationship between the individual and the collective can be mediated, then this mediation must come through labour – as the individual comes to recognize and shape the relationship between their labour and that of the collective, the mutual interests of both becomes apparent; this becomes the ground of possibility by which,

as is important for Sekyi-Otu, communism can be arrived at by an active and ethical choice, not simply by ways of some inagential scientific–Marxist teleology.

Second, this collective labour seems to me the likeliest source of some common ground upon which the appeal of such an ethical choice might be persuasively posed, and heard. Latent in Sekyi-Otu’s prerogative to honour humanity, to defer to difference, and to cultivate the commons, is the recognition or establishment of some kind of community – some kind of space in which radical, ethical judgement can be voiced and engaged with. Says Simone Weil, another vernacular Kantian who was particularly engaged with that cultivation described by Sekyi-Otu, named in her output *enracinement*:

Art has no immediate future because all art is collective and there is no more collective life (there are only dead collections of people), and also because of this breaking of the true pact between the body and the soul... It is therefore quite useless for you to envy Leonardo or Bach. Greatness in our times must take a different course. (*Gravity and Grace*, 151)

Which is to say: I think Sekyi-Otu is right, in his recuperation of the universal, of the normative, of the individual, and the enigmatic. But it is not enough to be right; one must also be persuasive, because survival, if survival is what we want, is contingent upon collective action. How do we call the collective into being, how do we make ethical claims upon it in a way which it will hear? Time is running very short.

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Rethinking the Center from the Left: Postcolonial Humanity and Universalism in Ato Sekyi-Otu’s *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays*

Left Universalism, Africentric Essays is unpretentious in its aim: to defend universalism from an Africa-centered purview. Ato Sekyi-Otu’s critical move lies in severing the ties that situate universalism as a Eurocentric logic of imperialism while disavowing the nativist relativism often attributed to postcolonial studies in what he calls, “postcolonial