Ethnocentric Universalism: Its Nature, Epistemic Harm, and Emancipatory Prospects

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Abstract

This paper does three interrelated things. First, it argues that the universalism that forms the target of criticism and attack by decolonial theorists from the Global South is a debased form of universalism, what might be termed "ethnocentric universalism." Second, equipped with a conceptual grip on ethnocentric universalism, it shows that the picture on which ethnocentric universalism confers some innocuous epistemic privilege to members of dominant groups is not quite accurate—ethnocentric universalism is incompatible with the epistemic flourishing of members of dominant groups. And third, based on that claim, and the additional consideration that ethnocentric universalism equally undermines the epistemic flourishing of members of historically marginalized groups, it proposes an emancipatory framework for engaging with it.

Keywords: Ethnocentric Universalism. Intellectual Ethnocentricism. Universalism. African Philosophy. Latin American Philosophy. Epistemic Vices.

I.   Introduction

Universalism as a feature of global society and culture is a puzzling phenomenon. On the one hand, there is the intuition that universalism is an inviolable principle because it is needed to stave off the specter of relativism and to uphold human dignity and our shared humanity in the global community.[2] On the other hand, there is the intuition widely shared by several decolonial

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[2] Such intuition is clearly discernible, for example, in the thoughts of the framers of the UN universal declaration of human rights (https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights).

theorists from the Global South that universalism is bad because it is the guise under which all forms of epistemic injustice and other historical wrongs have been meted out to non-Western cultures and peoples (i.e., members of historically marginalized groups) through the often unspoken privilege that it confers on members of dominant groups to shape and determine the knowledge and epistemic practices of non-Western people. For example, Grosfoguel (2013) expresses this intuition when he says:

> In Western philosophy and sciences the subject that speaks is always hidden, concealed, erased from the analysis. The 'ego-politics of knowledge' of Western philosophy has always privilege the myth of a non-situated 'Ego'. Ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location and the subject that speaks are always decoupled. By delinking ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location from the subject that speaks, Western philosophy and sciences are able to produce a myth about a Truthful universal knowledge that covers up, that is, conceals who is speaking as well as the geo-political and body-political epistemic location in the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks (p.213).

In the same vein, Mignolo (2009) expresses the view that:

> The basic assumption is that the knower is always implicated, geo- and body-politically, in the known, although modern epistemology managed to conceal both and created the figure of the detached observer, a neutral seeker of truth and objectivity who at the same time controls the disciplinary rules and puts himself or herself in a privileged position to evaluate and dictate (p.162).

Both thinkers are highly critical of the ego politics of knowledge, a conception of knowledge that is ungrounded in time, place, and local bodies. Further, both see the ego politics of knowledge as a particular manifestation of universalism, one that confers *epistemic privilege* to members of dominant groups. The dominant groups in question are five Western European countries—Italy, France, England, Germany, and the United States (Grosfoguel, 2013). And the relevant epistemic

privilege includes being able to set the rules and canons in the disciplines, and being able to dictate what we all think and count as knowledge and science (for similar views, see Mitova, 2020; Quijano, 2007).[3]

This paper does three interrelated things. First, it argues that the universalism that forms the target of criticism and attack by decolonial theorists from the Global South is a debased form of universalism, what might be termed "ethnocentric universalism." Second, equipped with a conceptual grip on ethnocentric universalism, it shows that the picture on which ethnocentric universalism confers some innocuous epistemic privilege to members of dominant groups is not quite accurate—ethnocentric universalism is incompatible with the epistemic flourishing of members of dominant groups. And third, based on that claim, and the additional consideration that ethnocentric universalism equally undermines the epistemic flourishing of members of historically marginalized groups, it proposes an emancipatory framework for engaging with it.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II begins with the general notion of universalism and distinguishes various shades of it. Section III then tries to provide an illuminating account of the shade of universalism that is the target of criticism and attack by decolonial theorists from the Global South and several others. Section IV uses the insight of the account in section III to explain the incompatibility of ethnocentric universalism with the epistemic flourishing of members of dominant groups as well as members of historically marginalized groups. And section V lays out an emancipatory framework for engaging with the problem.

I would like to say something here about the approach of this paper. The paper is written from the perspective of social epistemology and deals with the interest we all have as individuals and as groups in acquiring knowledge and other epistemic goods, and the capacities and social conditions that support or undermine this interest (I say more on this in section IV). That said, let us begin with the most general aspect of our subject—the notion of universalism.

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[3] I should note here that what these authors write mostly about is the epistemic privilege that universalism confers on dominant groups. And what they all try to do from a theoretical standpoint is to unmask the pretensions about knowledge that sustain this privilege. Hence, their project is called *epistemological decolonization.*

II.   Disambiguating Universalism

In ordinary contexts we use the term "universal" to refer to something that holds across board without arbitrariness, as when we speak of "universal health care" or "universal human rights." More generally, universalism is a claim that some principles, values, ideas, benefits, or attributes apply to all members of a set without discrimination or arbitrariness. For example, let the set be the set of *Homo sapiens*, then universalism amounts to the claim that some principles, values, ideas, etc., apply to all living human beings on the planet irrespective of their race, color, class, religion, ethnicity, political beliefs, ideology, or age. Accordingly, we can distinguish different kinds of universalism depending on the domain in question. For example, we can speak of moral universalism, cultural universalism, economic universalism, religious universalism, methodological universalism, and so on. I discuss briefly moral, economic, cultural, and religious universalism as paradigm examples.

Moral universalism is the *locus classicus* of universalism. Indeed, many theorists tend to equate (or more accurately, can be read as equating) universalism with moral universalism. For example, in her excellent book on the subject, Khader (2018) states that "unless otherwise specified, I use the term 'universalism' to refer only to moral or normative universalism" (p. 22). And she goes on to define moral universalism as "the notion that some things are better and worse for human beings across all contemporary contexts" (p. 22). I think this gives us an apt definition of the notion. Following this definition, let us distinguish between *positive moral universalism* and *negative moral universalism*, where the former is the claim that freedom and dignity are better for human beings irrespective of their race, religion, ethnicity, political beliefs, and so on, and the latter, the claim that slavery, torture, oppression, and discrimination are worse for human beings irrespective of their race, religion, ethnicity, political beliefs, and so on. So construed, moral universalism is clearly a normative concept, providing guidance for actions and attitudes for all kinds of justice related initiatives in the world, and without which those initiatives lack a proper

ethical foundation. Indeed, it is for this same reason that Khader (2018) opposes relativism. She says "[relativism] precludes normative views originating from the colonized from having universal force—that is, from having moral purchase on Westerners" (Khader, 2018, p. 29).

Moral universalism is related to economic universalism. Indeed, since after the end of the Second World War, in both the Global North and South, an emerging feature of world culture is the idea of social cash transfer as a key development policy and human rights protection for all (Leisering, 2018). That is the main idea of economic universalism. Thus, it is deeply intertwined with moral universalism since it is a way of addressing the question of human right protection for all. Indeed, some theorists think that it is through economic universalism that we can make sense of the notion of moral universalism (Pogge, 2002).

Cultural universalism, on the other hand, is the claim that if we take human cultures and civilizations as a broad set, every possible item that makes up that set invariably shares some general conditions that make intercultural communication possible, namely, our biologico-cultural identity as *Homo sapiens,* which involves reflective perception, abstraction, deduction, and induction (Wiredu, 1996). A key feature of these items is that they are at once inherited and acquired capacities to know, learn, and understand each other as members of the human community (Wiredu, 1996).

And finally, religious universalism is the claim that everyone deserves to be saved. Here, the universalists are those who believe that it is impossible that a benevolent God would elect only few persons and doom the rest to eternal punishment (Shijun, 2009).

There is a straightforward sense in which moral, economic, cultural, and religious universalism are untendentious. The guiding thought here is that if P is a property which is a basic feature of every group, or a standard which is applicable to every member of a group, then the claim about P being universal is non-tendentious.

Next, I want to argue that a clearly untendentious universalism can easily slip into a tendentious form of universalism either through how it is interpreted or implemented, or a

combination of both. And when this happens, we tend to have a particularly egregious or corrupt form of universalism we might call "ethnocentric universalism." This is the case, for example, of moral and religious universalism. Take moral universalism. Moral universalism seeks to apply normative principles to all subjects without arbitrariness or contradiction. But this perfectly fine claim easily leads to something problematic. One example of this can be found in the feminist movement, where some feminists think of the West as the "single gender-just endpoint" in feminist aspiration and praxis, and thus, interpret human dignity and freedom for women in non-Western societies in terms of the cultural forms that distinguish Western women, such as, being free of veils (Khader, 2018).

In the same vein, religious universalism makes a proper claim about what is spiritually deserving of humans. Again, this proper claim easily leads to something problematic when, for example, some proponents of a particular religious body of beliefs think that the only path to the salvation of indigenous people is the adoption of their religious doctrines and the requirement that these people turn against their own inherited traditions, the hinge on which their existence and those of their ancestors turn.

Notice that the claim here is not that ethnocentric universalism only emerges in this fashion. In other words, I am not stating some necessary conditions for the emergence of ethnocentric universalism. This leaves room for the kind of analysis that Grosfoguel (2013) gives when he claims that the emergence of universalism (what we are calling ethnocentric universalism) is attributable to the epistemological paradigm inaugurated by Cartesian philosophy. Speaking of this philosophy he says: "The importance of Rene Descartes for Westernized epistemology can be seen in that after 370 years, Westernized universities still carry the Cartesian legacy as a criteria of validity for science and knowledge production. Even those who are critical of Cartesian philosophy, still use it as criteria for what differentiates science from non-science" (Grosfoguel, 2013, p.76). Further, I am not stating some sufficient condition either. One can think of a tendentious interpretation of universalism that is not clearly a case of ethnocentric universalism.

A good example can be seen in economic universalism. As Leisering (2018) rightly pointed out, because universal social security makes lofty demands on state actors and international organizations, and because such universalist claims tend to be framed in very vague terms, these state actors and international organizations often resort to idiosyncratic or tendentious interpretation of the universalistic claims to navigate the situation. Even so, one would not think that the result leaves us with a form of universalism of the kind that the decolonial theorists are after.

Rather, what I am stating here is a much weaker claim of what sometimes occurs with some shades of universalism with the goal of isolating what is of theoretical interest—ethnocentric universalism. Having thus isolated it, we should try to understand it better. That would be the task of the next section.

III.   Getting a Conceptual Grip on Ethnocentric Universalism

Ramón Grosfoguel's treatment of the subject is a useful starting point. He says that universalism (i.e., ethnocentric   universalism) is a situation whereby the "theories [of one group] are supposed to be sufficient to explain the social/historical realities of the rest of the world" (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 74).

Since the object of universalism is not just theory, I suggest something more encompassing: the notion of "cognitive paradigm." What do I mean by this term? By cognitive paradigm, I mean roughly the characteristic worldview of a people as embodied in their religious system, customs, values, belief system, practices, stories, myths, and legend, which in turn makes various aspects of their lives, including their mode of settling questions, the typical questions they are prone to ask, what count as permissible ways of answering those questions, and so on, intelligible. For example, among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, and indeed in many parts of Africa, there is a pervasive and entrenched belief in the existence of the various elements of the world beyond the physical, including, ancestors, the living-dead, spirit, and spiritual beings (divinities, and God's associates) as well as their relationality with the physical, human, and the

natural world (Mbiti, 1990). This belief makes various aspects of their lives and their mode of answering questions intelligible. An example of such mode of answering questions is the practice of consulting Ifá, a divinatory practice among the Yorubas. Such a practice may strike a subject raised and accustomed to a Western view of the world as not being intelligible at all. That is the intuitive idea of cognitive paradigms being invoked here. And I use Cognitive Paradigm (s) to indicate that a comparable picture holds for members of dominant groups. Note that the use of upper cases for the latter and lower cases for the former is deliberate here. It indicates that power and hierarchy are deeply implicated in ethnocentric universalism.

Next, because ethnocentric universalism is not a mere objective feature of the world but the way we relate to the world and how this influences our thought and behavioural patterns, I adopt a dispositional account of ethnocentric universalism. The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to register the point that like every disposition, its manifestation is not always a foregone conclusion among agents influenced by it. For example, in epistemically virtuous[4], or self-critical agents, the disposition is unlikely to take root and also unlikely to manifest itself in conducts.

With these clarifications in view, I propose the following account of ethnocentric universalism:

Ethnocentric Universalism: A cognitive, affective, and behavioural disposition to use one's Cognitive Paradigm as a measure, or standard for other cognitive paradigms, and the questions, answers, sources, methods, concepts, experiences, and practices these paradigms make intelligible.

Let that stand as the most basic feature of ethnocentric universalism. This basic or foundational feature generates other secondary features. Below, I identify and discuss five of these features. They include sufficiency, othering, missioning, hierarchy, and transcendence. These are mechanisms or techniques   by which the phenomenon of ethnocentric universalism manifests

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[4] An epistemically virtuous agent is one who possesses intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and so on.

and perpetuates itself and brings about the oppression of historically marginalized groups so central to it.

1. Sufficiency: Since Cognitive Paradigm is a measure of other paradigms, it is also taken as sufficient for grasping, knowing, or understanding other paradigms, and the various questions, answers, sources, methods, concepts, experiences, and practices they are supposed to disclose. This easily explains why what is thought in both the social sciences and the Humanities are based largely on the "theory produced by men of the five Western European countries"(Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 74). It also explains cases of epistemicides or genocides that Grosfoguel (2013) and Santos (2013) write about. These epistemicides include the following: the epistemicides or genocides committed against Muslims and Jews in the conquest of Al-Andalus, against indigenous peoples in Americas and Asia, including the burning of thousands of 'codices,'[5] against African people and their enslavement in the Americas, and against women who transmitted Indo-European knowledge, accused of being witches, and burnt alive (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 77). Think of these actions this way: why would anyone in a position of power feel the compelling need to preserve such systems of thoughts and practices if one already holds the belief, implicit or explicit, that the human community already possesses, by way of one's Cognitive Paradigm, what is sufficient to make sense of the world? I shall return to this point (in section IV) because I think there is a way of thinking of these actions that do not require theorists from the Global South to explain them as genocidal—an extremely morally evocative term.

2. Othering: Again, since Cognitive Paradigm is a measure of other paradigms, it can reconstitute them by recalibrating them, renaming them, reimagining them, reordering them, and so on, in relation to itself. For example, before the conquest of the Americas, there were great number of people with their own history, practices, identity, languages, memory, and so on, such as the Chibchas, Axtecs, Mayas, Quechuas, Aymaras, Incas, and others. After the European and the

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[5] These are richly illustrated texts about the life, history, religion, and culture of indigenous people.

British conquest of these places, they were simply called the "Indians", a racial identity. The same with the Bacongos, Congos, Zulus, Ibos, Yorubas, and Ashantis. After the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they were simply called Negroes or Blacks in America, a racial reclassification (Quijano, 2000, 2007). Indeed, as the Human Genome Project[6] definitely showed, there is no biological basis of race, only a social construction, dictated by "the whims of persons in power, who have historically always been people of white, Western, and European descent"(Chawla, 2017, p. 6; see also Appiah, 1996).

3. Missioning: Since Cognitive Paradigm is a measure of other paradigms, it is fitting, even necessary for members of dominant groups situated within it to seek to redeem historically marginalized groups and their members situated in cognitive paradigms. In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Abu-Lughod (2015) captures this aspect of ethnocentric universalism when she writes:

> When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation? What presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority, and are a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged (pp. 46-47).

The same criticisms are due to other traditional forms of *saving to* witnessed in colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the injustice and devastation they brought in their wake in the lives of indigenous people and their cultures.

4. Hierarchy: In virtue of being a measure of other cognitive paradigms, Cognitive Paradigm also stands over and above them. Thus, it can engage in asymmetrical relationships with these other paradigms and the various elements they make intelligible. Again, this is the story of the colonial and the neo-colonial relationship between the West and Africa, Latin America, and other colonized parts of the world. Consider for example, the practice of giving English names to Africans upon

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[6] This is an international project that sought to sequence the human genome and provide information about the human blueprint.

birth by Christian Churches in the name of Christian unity: James, Anthony, Michael, Mark, George, and so on, a practice that continues to this very day. Imagine suggesting that in the name of Christian unity, or whatever provides the justification for this practice, African or Mexican names would be given to Western children at their rebirth in Christian churches? How provocative that would sound?

5. Transcendence: Finally, as a measure of other cognitive paradigms, Cognitive Paradigm is not normally regarded as being in the same ballpark with other paradigms. Decolonial theorists give voice to this feature when they liken the subject situated in Cognitive Paradigm to the Cartesian disembodied and dislocated subject, freely floating in space and time. Here is Mignolo (2009) on this score: "And once upon a time scholars assumed that if you 'come' from Latin America you have to 'talk about' Latin America; that in such a case you have to be a token of your culture. Such expectation will not arise if the author 'comes' from Germany, France, England or the US" (p.160).

In line with several of these theorists I have been mentioning here, such as, Grosfoguel (2007), Quijano (2007), Mignolo (2009), and Mitova (2020), the picture this analysis presents is one in which ethnocentric universalism confers epistemic privilege to members of dominant groups. And the sense of this privilege can be expressed generally and schematically by saying that in Sufficiency, Othering, Missioning, Hierarchy, and Transcendence, the knower and the knowledge situated in Cognitive Paradigm enjoy an excess of credibility and esteem relative to the knower and the knowledges situated in cognitive paradigms.

Next, I want to show that this picture is not quite accurate—it suggests a situation that is epistemically innocuous for members of dominant groups. On closer scrutiny, however, that is not the case. Ethnocentric universalism, when used as a default cognitive template, inflicts knowers situated in Cognitive Paradigm with significant epistemic harm, and to that extent, impairs their epistemic flourishing. If I am right, ethnocentric universalism is bad twice over: it is incompatible with the epistemic flourishing of members of dominant groups and members of historically marginalized groups.

IV.   The Harm of Ethnocentric Universalism

I begin with some stage-setting. I am concerned here with the evaluation of epistemic conducts (inferring, judging, asserting, claiming, questioning, wondering, and so on) displayed or not displayed in the context of intercultural encounter and exchange. Evaluating such conducts is to be in the business of asking whether or not one has exercised the appropriate sensitivity to the requirements of reason as given by that specific cultural context. More accurately, in evaluating such conducts one is asking whether a subject has exercised the relevant intellectual virtues by responding to the requirement of reason in that cultural context or a subject has failed to do so due to some intellectual vices. And here, intellectual virtues are those traits of characters that are conducive to the acquisition of knowledge because they are responsive to the requirement of reason while intellectual vices are those traits that hinder this acquisition because they make one irresponsive to the requirement of reasons. But intellectual vices are not just cognitive traits that hinder the pursuit of epistemic goals, they are ones for which the subject can be held responsible for or can be criticized for (Cassam, 2019; Tanesini, 2021).

I shall argue that through sufficiency, othering, missioning, hierarchy, and transcendence, ethnocentric universalism tends to foster two epistemic or intellectual vices among subjects situated in Cognitive Paradigm, namely, closed-mindedness and intellectual arrogance, which in the context of inter-cultural encounter and exchange impair the epistemic flourishing of members of dominant groups and members of historically marginalized groups (their intellectual capacities and their epistemic fortune).

I start with closed-mindedness. Heather Battaly defines closed-mindedness as "an unwillingness or inability to engage (seriously) with relevant intellectual options" (Battaly, 2018, p. 262). In addition to intellectual options (questions, methods, sources, concepts), let us add the cognitive paradigms, which host and make intellectual options possible and intelligible. And here is why and how ethnocentric universalism leads to closed-mindedness. Since ethnocentric universalism disposes one to think, act, and feel as if Cognitive Paradigm is sufficient for grasping

the truth about our world, as if one's cognitive access to the world is qualitatively superior to others who are similarly placed in that world, as if one has the freedom to engage in asymmetric relation and exchange with other epistemic subjects, and so on, one becomes either unable to notice the presence of other cognitive paradigms and the intellectual options they host, or if one does notice them one cannot bring oneself to appropriately respect them.

Let us take a concrete case that shows the disposition in action: Christopher Columbus' first encounter and exchange with Indian Americans, which he penned down in his diary as follows:

> They afterwards came to the ship's boats where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts, and many other things; and we exchanged them for other things that we gave them, such as glass beads and small bells. In fine, they took all, and gave what they had with good will. It appeared to me to be a race of people very poor in everything. They go as naked as when their mothers bore them, and so do the women, although I did not see more than one young girl…They should be good and talented servants, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them. And I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion (Markham, 2017, p. 37).

Why would Columbus *infer* from the great hospitality and respect shown to him by the indigenous people he had encountered the conclusion that they were cowardly and timid people, good for servanthood? Is that sort of conclusion warranted by that sort of evidence in indigenous lands, whose people are apt to be very hospitable to strangers? Did Columbus miss this aspect of indigenous culture (the profound sense of respect for people and hospitality to strangers) because he was mentally glued to certain mental model of how people who exhibit such respect and hospitality stereotypically indicate timidity and servanthood? Similarly, why would he *infer* from

the absence of the trappings of his culture among the indigenous people the conclusion that they were poor in everything?

To make the analysis more concrete, let us focus on Columbus' *claim* that the people have no religion, and thus, no system of beliefs and practices about God, deities, and the world. Because this claim flies in the face of what is easily ascertainable about the life of indigenous people, some have suggested that the appropriate translation is that of a reference to 'sect' and not a reference to 'religion' (Grosfoguel, 2013). But there are good reasons to think that this common translation found among several authors is the correct one. And the reason is this. For someone like Columbus brought up apparently in a fundamentalist way of thinking of the Christian faith, the term 'religion' applies only to his own Christian faith. Thus, when Columbus claims that the people have no religion, he was coming from this posture: the indigenous people had no religion since that term does not apply to their practices. They therefore stood in need of being brought to the light and to the truth.

The case also shows how ethnocentric universalism is knowledge depriving. Columbus has just entered a world of difference, where under normal circumstances, an attitude of wonder, or questioning is supposed to ensue. He was supposed to be struck deeply and to question even his own understanding of the world: How could the indigenous people live in such harmony with nature, and yet are able to thrive and survive? What are their practices and rituals, and how are they related to the practices and rituals that he has been brought up to embrace and hold as *special*. Since these people have been living for ages before this encounter, does it mean that those who died before this encounter had no knowledge of the truth? But how unjust that would be and how do we square that potential injustice with the attribute of justice so defining of the God of the Christian faith? Indeed, how could something of such great importance about the lives of these people stand and fall on the chanciness of this journey that he himself (Columbus) has embarked upon, brought into sharp relief in the manner in which he found the people? And finally, since he has now met people who by his own lights have no religion, or have one totally unlike what he

was accustomed to, which of these religious attitudes (theirs or his) stands closer to the truth? If it is the Christian religious attitude, does that conclusion arise from the fact that he is an adherent of this religion? These are some of the *deep questions* a good inquirer would pose, one not afflicted by a universalism induced closed-mindedness. Notice that the point is not that upon encountering otherness, one ought to abandon one's convictions—that would be a manifestation of intellectual timidity, or cowardice. Rather, the point is that in being able to take on a pondering and a wondering attitude as a good inquirer, one thereby opens the space of possibility, including the capacity to enter into a sympathetic understanding of the other.

Further, given that the expedition was an investigation whose findings were of interest not only to Isabelle 1 and the Crown of Castile, but also to the wider European public, a kind of group inquiry, closed-mindedness undermined this investigation since it made accurate representation of the Indian Americans in the social imaginary of the European population impossible to attain. In fact, closed-mindedness makes it such that one thereby fills the social space with inaccurate accounts, misrepresentations, and prejudicial stereotypes, that in turn provide the foundation for potential cases of epistemic injustice in the context of inter-cultural relation and encounter between members of dominant groups and members of historically marginalized groups.

The issue here is quite general in nature because this is the same story of colonial and intercultural "encounter" between Africa and European powers. Indeed, the reports about Africans in literature, in philosophy, and in ethnographic materials can be seen in this light. They were production of ignorance, false beliefs, and prejudice, rooted in closed-mindedness, and induced by ethnocentric universalism. In turn, this led to a whole industry of stereotyping about African traditional thought systems and practices as animistic, fetishistic, magical, and totemic, about African logic and reasoning patterns as pre-logical, pre-literate and pre-scientific (e.g., Lévy-Bruhl & Clare, 2018), and about African civilization and history as dark and infantile (e.g., Conrad, 2019; Hegel, 1980).

The second example I want to focus on is the epistemic genocides that Grosfoguel (2013) and Santos (2013) write about (briefly mentioned in section III). Grosfoguel (2013) calls them the four genocides of the Long 16th century (1450-1650). But genocides require genocidal motive or desire or intention, that is, an active, wilful, and noxious motive to exterminate a group, something that is very hard to establish in any conclusive manner in all the cases they mentioned. More importantly, and in connection to the present analysis, it seems more natural to think of these cases—the massive destruction of Islamic and Judaic knowledges during the conquest of Al-Andalus, the destruction of libraries in the conquest of the Americas, and the deprivation of Africans in the Americas from talking, thinking, and practicing their own cosmologies, knowledges, and worldviews in the Long 16th century—as the result of closed-mindedness rather than genocidal motive. This is because those responsible for these conducts may have done so simply out of their utter inability to see any value or worth (epistemic, practical, and religious) in these practices and knowledge systems given their own background and tradition, that is, given their situatedness in Cognitive Paradigm rather than any positive *intent to exterminate* a group.

Ethnocentric universalism also leads to another attitude vice, namely, intellectual arrogance. As Cassam (2019) observed, its characteristic feature is that of an intellectual superiority complex that leads individuals who possess it to the dismissal of the view and perspective of other people. I argue that because hierarchy, transcendence, and sufficiency make a statement of intellectual superiority—superiority not necessarily in terms of one's intellectual ability, as the notion (i.e., intellectual superiority) is often understood (Cassam, 2019; Tanesini, 2021), but superiority with respect to Cognitive Paradigm and the intellectual options it discloses or makes intelligible—ethnocentric universalism leads subjects so situated to a number of problematic behavioural tendencies. These include:

a. A tendency to disparage and discredit the cognitive paradigms as well as the intellectual achievements of historically marginalized groups. Suffice to say that such disparagements lie at the root of the negative standing of the sciences (e.g., medicine) of historically marginalized

populations in the global credibility economy. Here is an example. In 2020, the New Zealand Government made a proposal to credit the indigenous knowledge or science of Māori people with equal status alongside (Western) scientific knowledge in the academic curriculum in order to improve the learning outcomes of Māori students in secondary school. As a response to this proposal, a notable scientist, Richard Dawkins, penned an open letter to the Royal Society of New Zealand excoriating the proposal. He argued: "The world is full of thousands of creation myths and other colourful legends, any of which might be taught alongside Māori myths. Why choose Māori myths? For no better reason than that Māoris arrived in New Zealand a few centuries before Europeans…Science classes are emphatically not the right place to teach scientific falsehoods alongside true science. Creationism is still bollocks even if it is indigenous bollocks" (Dawkins, 2021). Dawkins' equation of indigenous science with myths is deeply damaging to the credibility of indigenous science, Māori science especially. Moreover, he should have known better: indigenous science and myths are clearly two separate phenomena. While myths usually involve elaborate stories of distant past, often ungrounded in actual history, indigenous knowledge from indigenous science is not. Indigenous knowledge is mediated by quotidian experiences of particular individuals and groups in particular time and places. More directly, indigenous science refers to the "dynamic way in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organize that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives" (Semali & Kincheloe, 2002, p. 3). Dawkins also ought to know that a foundational theory of his field, the theory of evolution, owes much to indigenous people, namely, the Galapagos inhabitants who pointed out to Darwin how they can tell from which island tortoises and finches came, by their markings and shape, resulting from micro evolution (Darwin, 1889), and that twenty-five percent of Western prescription drugs come from indigenous science (Puri, 2001; Sillitoe, 2007).

b. A tendency to claim the complete knowledge of other groups and to speak for them. But this relation is not expected to be symmetrical. As an example of this, consider the following remarks by Tempels, a Belgian missionary, in his acclaimed book, *Bantu Philosophy,* one of the first in African philosophy: "We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is" (Tempels, 1959). Here, Tempels speaks in such a condescending manner as a master speaks about a servant about whom he possesses some privileged knowledge. Again, it is assumed that this relation is not symmetrical, that is, the servant is not expected to have such privileged knowledge about the master.

c. A tendency to seek to replace the culture of other groups with one's own culture, including language, literature, traditions, and values and to expect that there is no symmetry in this relation. Indeed, this is the story of the colonial and the neo-colonial relationship between the West and Africa as well as with other colonized places in the world.

These tendencies, when they materialize in this way, impair the epistemic flourishing of dominant groups. To flourish in this sense is to inhabit a world where epistemic goods like knowledge, understanding, and accurate beliefs are potentially at one's disposal so that if one aims at attaining them about any relevant subject matter, say about far distant peoples and cultural groups, one succeeds in getting them. That is, the distance between the state of not knowing and that of knowing is within reasonable limits so that bridging the gap is not an impossible feat. But precisely, bridging that gap in inter-group exchange and relation is what these tendencies make well-nigh impossible to attain. Relatedly, if knowledge is a fundamental good[7] such that a life that is systematically deprived of it is impaired in some fundamental sense, then these tendencies, in systematically leading to the deprivation of the knowledge of otherness, impair the epistemic

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[7] For a defense of the value of knowledge, see Williamson (2000), and Pritchard (2010).

flourishing of the lives of members of dominant groups. There is a further dimension to this impairment in the context of inquiry. When we engage in inquiry, we want answers to our questions. We also want to legitimately close our inquiry by having the right to be confident that the question that motivated a specific inquiry about distant groups has legitimately been addressed. But how can one have a right to be confident (or be justified) that one has legitimately closed an inquiry if the habits of thought (e.g., closed-mindedness and intellectual arrogance induced by ethnocentric universalism) upon which it is based undermine its rational basis?[8]

Further, these tendencies and the actions they lead are epistemically harmful to marginalized groups because they lead to intellectual inferiority complex among members of marginalized groups. Intellectual inferiority complex in intercultural contexts, in turn, leads marginalized agents to attribute too much credibility and esteem to the claims, doctrines, knowledge systems, and intellectual achievements of members of dominant groups in a way that is not sensitive to the real epistemic worth of these items. Worst still, since credibility and esteem are finite goods like wealth (Coady, 2017), this *complex* also leads marginalized knowers to attribute too little credibility and esteem to their own competence, claims, doctrines, knowledge systems, and intellectual achievements in a way that is not sensitive to the epistemic worth of these items. An example of this, one that anyone who has spent considerable time on the African continent can relate with can be seen in how contemporary African leaders often value policy guides from Western capitals and disregard local experts from the continent even when these same local experts have been educated in the same universities in Western Europe with the experts in Western capitals and are equipped with local knowledge, which is extremely valuable in solving local problems (Anderson, forthcoming).

Finally, these tendencies in intercultural contexts also lead to a *state of permanent epistemic oppression* for members of marginalized groups, owing to a permanent subjugation of their

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[8] The idea that intellectual vices can undermine inquiry in this way is defended by Cassam (2019).

interpretative resources, such as, native names (which are interpretative resources for indigenous people), local concepts, local languages, and localized knowledge.

If ethnocentric universalism is harmful in the way just spelt out, then members of dominant groups and members of marginalized groups should have an interest in emancipating from it. The next section presents a sketch of a framework for engaging with this task.

V.   Ethnocentric Universalism: Towards an Emancipatory Framework

Again, I focus here only on the aspect of ethnocentric universalism I have tried to shed light on—its epistemic harm. And I want to propose an emancipatory framework for engaging with this aspect of our social epistemological predicament. In doing so, I do not assume that the full spectrum of ethnocentric universalism can be addressed in this way.

To begin with, for the purpose of the present discussion, I take emancipation as "embodied subjectivities casting themselves loose from the weight of custom, norms, and routines, especially as these are institutionalized or masquerade as natural givens" (Coole, 2015, p. 533). As with such projects, three questions need to be addressed: who is to be emancipated, from what, and how? (Butzlaff, 2022; Coole, 2015).

The "who" question can be given a straightforward answer: members of dominant groups situated in Cognitive Paradigm and members of marginalized groups situated in cognitive paradigms who are harmed by ethnocentric universalism. As for the second question, from what are these subjects being emancipated from, we address it by drawing insights from our discussion in the previous section. More generally, we can express the target of emancipation as closed-mindedness and intellectual superiority and intellectual inferiority complex within inter-cultural contexts, encounter, and exchange, and the various ways these are institutionalized as natural givens. If we succeed in doing this, the result would be a world in which, as Frantz Fanon says, there is no superiority or inferiority and where members of dominant groups and members of marginalized groups both genuinely try to touch each other, feel each other and *discover* each other (Fanon, Philcox, & Appiah, 2008).

As for the third and final question, the "how" question, I suggest three modalities—self-awareness or self-knowledge, self-criticism, and the recalibration of credibility judgments and attribution (of other epistemic goods as well). I take each in turn. Self-awareness or self-knowledge is the starting point for the rooting out of any intellectual reflexes of thoughts and judgments, especially closed-mindedness and intellectual superiority or intellectual inferiority complex in inter-cultural contexts. And the basic idea here is that it would be well-nigh impossible to root out any intellectual reflex that one is not aware of, and more importantly, that one is not aware of *as a problem* in the first place. Another consideration that lends support to this insight is that intellectual vices tend to be stealthy, that is, they tend to conceal themselves in individual subjects who possess them, and this often under the guise of excuses, rationalizations, and ego-defensive behaviours (Cassam, 2019; Tanesini, 2021). So, any hope of eradicating them in inter-cultural contexts would lie in a process of self-discovery and self-knowledge. Is such a process of self-discovery and self-knowledge beyond ordinary subjects to attain in intercultural contexts? I don't think so. One might be challenged when one has manifested a certain insensitivity to the worldviews of other people, say of indigenous people. That counts as a source of self-knowledge and self-discovery. Also, human beings are all self-reflective creatures. The extent of this among individuals may vary, but no one doubts that we are able to engage in self-critical thinking some of the time. Again, when that occurs, we gain some form of self-knowledge and self-awareness. Finally, there is a historical consciousness that often gets awaken by people who have been at the receiving end of slavery or colonialism in their experience of racism, oppression, or marginalization, or in their study of history. This historical consciousness is a sort of self-awareness and self-knowledge of one's place in the global scheme of things. Again, when that occurs, one gains some knowledge of oneself and one's marginalization and how one is affected in one's epistemic practices by this marginalization.

Those moments also provide occasions for self-criticism of one's judgments and conducts, both as members of dominant groups and members of historically marginalized groups too. Here,

self-criticism is understood as a function of human transcendence, the need or desire inbuilt in us as human beings to aspire to something better as agents in the world.

Further, self-criticism and self-knowledge in intercultural contexts feed into each other, leading to a virtuous circle. That is so because the fruit of self-criticism is self-knowledge, and self-knowledge often leads back to self-criticism.

Finally, both self-knowledge and self-criticism lead to a recalibration or self-adjustment in one's judgment and attribution of epistemic goods, such as, knowledge, credibility, and esteem, both as members of dominant groups and members of historically marginalized groups. This would occur normally as a function of agents regulating their epistemic performances and practices in intercultural contexts in the light of their self-knowledge. For example, as a member of dominant groups, one may realize to one's surprise that one is often prone to dismissing the views of historically marginalized populations and their experts. This may lead to the resolve to always give *sympathetic hearing* to such agents when in such situations. Typically, one begins by being more vigilant of oneself and conducts in intercultural contexts, and intervening in one's spontaneous responses to the world when one notices a tendency towards the foreworn habits of thoughts, judgments, and conducts. This also holds for a member of historically marginalized group who realizes to his or her surprise a certain tendency to give too much credibility and esteem to the views and intellectual achievements of members of dominant groups, and too little to members of his or her own group.

If one succeeds in doing so, even in *limited occasions*, the result is a gradual realignment or recalibration of one's credibility judgment in inter-cultural contexts. Human success in recalibrating ingrained habits of thought, judgment, and attribution of epistemic goods in intercultural contexts is, thus, at best a piecemeal and always an ongoing process.

But why think that this analysis represents how ordinary subjects are able to emancipate themselves? My response is that I write as a member of historically marginalized groups who is a participant in these experiences, and emancipatory aspirations and praxis, and who is attempting

to capture this praxis in a coherent manner. If I am right about my recapitulation of my experience of this praxis, I thereby indicate correctly how ordinary subjects in propitious circumstances do engage in this emancipation too. Moreover, the analysis appeals to platitudes or principles that are plausible in their own right, and which we can clearly recognize in everyday contexts. For example, recalibration is thought here as a function of practice. But this is something we find already in many mundane contexts such as the practice of becoming a grandmaster chess player, which comes with having the perception of a grandmaster chess player. More generally, practice alters perception, including the reflexes that constitute our perception of the world. But perception, in turn, alters practice in any domain including the epistemic.

Conclusion

Given the core claims defended in this paper, namely, that ethnocentric universalism is epistemically bad for everyone, including members of dominant groups and members of historically marginalized groups, and that the emancipatory prospects of members of both groups is grounded in self-knowledge, self-criticism, and self-adjustment, ethnocentric universalism is not an iron-law of the universe and the goal of defeating it is likely possible only through the historically mediated quotidian experiences of local bodies in local spaces and time.

Declarations

I hereby declare that I have no conflict of interest in connection with this submission.

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Notes on Contributor

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