Workshop

Embedded Universalism

Moral Cosmopolitanism in a Pragmatic Perspective

University of Zurich, Ethics-Centre on June 16/17, 2011

Organisation:
Jan-Christoph Heilinger (Zürich) and Matthias Jung (Koblenz) in cooperation with Zed Adams (New York)

Varied as the meanings of “cosmopolitanism” are, there seems to be a basic (and quite literal) one: the attempt to be at home – that is: locally rooted and situated – in the world, understood as the larger whole transcending local contexts. Obviously this understanding points to the possible tension between particular given traditions and contexts and a universal frame for these: Can human beings indeed at the same time be embedded both in a local and a global value community? Are the moral claims that result from different embeddings not mutually exclusive, so that we have to decide whether to defend either a universalist or a particularist stance? And how do these questions relate to the important distinction between norms and values, and between “thin” and “thick” ethical concepts?

The slogan Embedded Universalism suggests a novel way of thinking about universalism that attempts to capture what is at stake when it comes to the moral powers of cosmopolitanism. We try to elaborate on the friction between universality and particularity in order to show how they can – indeed have to – go together if both universalism and particularism are to make sense. Without a particular, local embedding, universal claims are futile; without the drive for universality, particular moral views lose their specifically moral status.

Thus, the central aim of the interdisciplinary workshop will be to contribute to a background theory about, and method of, making normative judgments that escape the fruitless opposition between contextless pure, universal moral theory on the one hand and cultural relativism/parochialism on the other hand. Embedded Universalism is meant to allow for well founded moral judgments about crucial questions that arise in our globalized world. Examples would be conflicting moral claims between different cultural traditions or the question
about global moral obligations in the face of, say, world poverty. In order to elaborate on Embedded Universalism we will build on insights from several philosophical subdisciplines: normative ethics, meta-ethics, applied ethics, action theory, anthropology and social/political theory.

Particularly, we attempt to take up impulses from classic American pragmatism, as developed prominently in the work of John Dewey. Dewey’s emphasis on ordinary experience (as opposed to elitism) and on habits (as opposed to reflexive intentionality), his concept of qualitative thought (as opposed to all concepts of freestanding discourse) and finally his theory of valuation (as opposed to the idealistic separation of universal norms from vital processes of valuing) offer important starting points for context-sensitive concepts of universalism as promoted by a sound cosmopolitan stance.

The workshop is organised in three sections. Firstly, we attempt to critically assess the dominant standard view in moral theory, roughly the conviction that morally applicable criteria for decisions should be logically prior, fixed, completed and deducible from a single overarching principle. (This is not intended to neglect the obvious differences between, say, Utilitarianism and Kantianism, but to make explicit the tacitly shared presuppositions of these “classic” conceptions.) Secondly, we will contrast this standard view with an elaboration of a pragmatic alternative in moral theory, putting the emphasis on the mediation between situative meaning and principled reasoning, instead of choosing the deductive way. Thirdly and finally, we will confront the developed moral method with some current challenges in the domain of global ethics.

The project adds to the current debate in moral and political philosophy for at least three reasons: (1) It takes up hitherto unconnected current reconsiderations of the standard view in moral theorizing exhibiting scepticism about all kinds of transcendentalism (one example among many others would be Amartya Sen’s criticism of Rawls); (2) it reflects upon and elaborates the revived interest in classic American pragmatism and its conceptual alternatives to both liberalism and communitarianism; (3) and it confronts the moral methods with urgent topics in current global ethics, in which the pertinence of theory for practical decisions is made evident.