

# **Grounds for Respect: Particularism, Universalism, Accountability**

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## **Thesis Abstract**

In recent years traditional liberal humanist foundations for respect for others have been challenged on the basis that universalist grounds have resulted in the exclusion of particular others from moral consideration or respect. This current questioning of the concept of universalism is of enormous significance, in that universalism has been one of the central assumptions of modern western philosophy and a foundational key to its moral and political theory. This thesis attempts to answer the question of what grounds are needed in order to justify respect for others; whether these grounds can be said to be universalist or particularist. In attempting to answer this question, past and current arguments for and against universalism are assessed as to the scope of their moral inclusion and the adequacy of their justificatory grounds. Current arguments for particularism – as represented by posthumanism – are discussed in order to gauge whether they do indeed represent a viable alternative to universalism. It will be shown that even scholars who have ostensibly rejected humanism on the grounds that it marginalises others, still rely on implicit assumptions and appeals to humanist concepts regarding the universal equality and unconditional worth – and therefore respect – owed to human beings. Given such reliance, it is concluded that some form of universalism is needed to justify respect for others; that universalism and particularism are indeed mutually dependant. The thesis then concentrates on gauging the efficacy of current critical liberal and humanist arguments for respect. These include an assessment of present day utilitarianism, where it is shown that the inclusion of animals within the realm of moral consideration results in the exclusion of certain humans from the same

realm; in short, that utilitarianism's foundational assumptions do not adequately justify respect. It is also shown that other current humanist scholars who have attempted either to reconceptualise traditional grounds for respect or to broaden the scope of moral consideration to those traditionally excluded from such consideration with arguments based on self-determination, rationality or intuition, also prove inadequate. It is concluded that an ontological understanding of human being is needed in order to provide an adequate foundation for the justification of respect for others. Such a foundation, albeit partial in its conception, is subsequently offered; one that emphasises a communal, as opposed to an atomistic, conception of human being and that seeks to balance the tension between particularism and universalism by showing a common structure of human ethical practice that does not occlude difference. It is suggested that this common structure is the universal human practice of communal accountability, which itself is inextricably linked to communal standards of value and justice. As these communal practices are foundational both to human being and to ethics itself, it is finally concluded that communal practices provide the universal grounds needed in order to justify respect for others.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis attempts to answer the question of what grounds are needed in order to justify respect for others. This question has become particularly pertinent in recent years as traditional liberal humanist foundations for respect have been challenged on the basis that such universalist grounds have resulted in the exclusion of particular others from moral consideration or respect. The current questioning of the concept of universalism is, moreover, of enormous significance, given that universalism has been one of the central assumptions of modern western philosophy and a foundational key to its moral and political theory. The question arises; why have these foundations come to be seen as exclusionary? To address this question we shall, in Chapter One, outline the reasons why such a critique has come about historically, focusing specifically on the ways in which western philosophy has been seen to fail in regards to the scope of its application, its justificatory grounds regarding universal moral consideration, and in its apparent dichotomy between the individual and the community. It should be stressed that this is only a presentation of the standard or non-nuanced account of western philosophy – as opposed to a critical appraisal of this standard account – for it is this standard interpretation, while at times a philosophical straw-man, which has continued to persist and which has provided much of the impetus to the wholesale rejection of universal humanism.

We will then explore the recent posthumanist challenges to universal concepts of human being in detail, firstly at a broad theoretical level in Chapter Two and then at an applied level in Chapter Three, as posthumanist scholars seek to apply

such theories to particular instances of marginalisation and oppression. While posthumanists have objected to western philosophy on a number of different grounds, one of their major objections to universalism has been its exclusion or marginalisation of difference, and as such, these theories can be seen as arguments for particularism; for the recognition of difference over sameness. We will see that posthumanist critiques of universalist assumptions within humanism are themselves based on unacknowledged ethical assumptions of universal value and respect for others. As these assumptions are implied rather than explicitly justified, they become reliant upon the rhetorical force of their arguments alone, leaving justification for respect for others without any logical or arguable foundation and therefore highly vulnerable to the contingencies of social persuasion and sentiment. For, in explicitly eschewing any metaphysical grounds for respect, posthumanist scholars fail to provide any grounds as to why we should, or ought, to respect others at all.

Following the discussion in the above-stated chapters, it is concluded that some form of universalism is needed to ground respect for the particular; in order to justify *why* we should respect others. The next three chapters explore current reconceptualisations of universal moral consideration.

In Chapter Four we discuss the current challenges to the grounds and scope of traditional liberal humanism through utilitarian-based arguments for the inclusion of animals within the scope of moral consideration. While classic utilitarian arguments regarding pain and pleasure (or preferences) are used to provide a universal standard of measurement in regards to moral consideration

for both animals and humans, we will see that not only does such a scale create new exclusions of particular humans, but that utilitarian theory still fails to provide satisfactory grounds as to why we should care about the pain or pleasure of others; in other words, why we ought to respect others.

In Chapter Five we examine current arguments by scholars who work within the liberal humanist tradition but from a critical standpoint. These scholars attempt to address the issues of exclusion that have arisen from the universalist tradition by either reconceptualising traditional grounds for respect or broadening the scope of moral consideration to those traditionally excluded from such consideration, such as animals and non-rational humans. Again, we see here that the issue of justification for the respect for others is still not adequately conceptualised, showing that such approaches, which emphasise self-determination, rationality, autonomy and/or intuition, fall short either in regards to their justificatory grounds or scope of moral inclusion. It is in this chapter that the concept of accountability, touched upon in earlier chapters, begins to be more fully considered regarding its role within ethics and human being; a role that is argued to be foundational in the next and final chapter, Chapter Six.

It is concluded that an ontological understanding of human being is needed to provide an adequate foundation for the justification of respect for others. In Chapter Six, such a foundation, albeit partial in its conception, is offered; one that emphasises a communal, as opposed to an atomistic, conception of human being that seeks to balance the tension between particularism and universalism by showing a common structure of human ethical practice that does not occlude

difference. It is suggested that this common structure is the universal human practice of communal accountability, which is inextricably linked to communal standards of value and justice. As such, communal practices are foundational to both human being and ethics and it is concluded that they provide the universal grounds needed in order to justify respect for others.

Before starting, however, it is important to clarify some of the terms used here and throughout the thesis. For a number of reasons, the term ‘posthumanism’ will be used rather than ‘postmodernism’ or ‘poststructuralism;’ first, because the one term – posthumanism – is less unwieldy than the two; secondly, because the term more accurately reflects the issues highlighted in this thesis (i.e., the universalist assumptions in humanism rather than modernism or structuralism); thirdly, because the scholars often referred to by such terms (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard), have either distanced themselves from their use or simply not used them at all; and finally, because current scholars working within this tradition have begun to use the term posthumanism in relation to their own work.

The term ‘accountability’ is used in the sense of being accountable to human beings if or when we injure them in some way – and conversely, they injure us – rather than in the sense of the accountability we may have, say, to our employers concerning our conditions of employment. As Stephen Darwall puts it, both a sense of injury, personal worth and an expectation of accountability are implicit

in the cry “Hey, you can’t do that to me!”<sup>1</sup> – although it will be argued later that accountability can be assumed both on behalf of others and on an inter-communal basis, as opposed to Darwall’s more individual conception.

That which distinguishes ethics from merely prudential or practical considerations, as Jeff Malpas points out, is that ethics is essentially concerned with human worth; “what marks out the questions of ethics are just those questions that concern the propriety of actions inasmuch as those actions affect our own worth as human beings or as persons.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the term ‘respect’ in this thesis is directly linked to the recognition of accountability; as intrinsic to the suggestion that some humans are unworthy of equal moral consideration is the denial of accountability towards such humans. Denial of accountability is, therefore, a denial of respect, just as the recognition of accountability is the recognition of respect; for, as shall be suggested later, implicit in such recognition is the acknowledgement that human beings are ends in themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Darwall, “Reply to Korsgaard, Wallace and Watson,” *Ethics*, 117 (Oct 2007), pp. 52-69; p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Malpas, “Human Dignity and Human Being,” in Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickess (eds) *Perspectives on Human Dignity: A Conversation* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2007), pp. 23-24.