

# GROUNDS FOR RESPECT

*Particularism, Universalism, and  
Communal Accountability*



**KRISTI GISELSSON**

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LEXINGTON BOOKS

*Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK*

Published by Lexington Books

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Giselsson, Kristi, 1964-

Grounds for respect : particularism, universalism, and communal accountability / Kristi Giselsson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-0-7391-6894-3 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7391-6895-0 (electronic)

1. Respect for persons. 2. Human beings. 3. Philosophical anthropology. I. Title.

BJ1533.R42G57 2012

179.7—dc23

2012015219



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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# Acknowledgments

First I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to Jeff Malpas and Lucy Tatman, for their unfailing support and invaluable advice. I also want to gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Toowoomba Zonta International Women's Fellowship. I have many colleagues and friends who have helped in many various ways over the years and who have my thanks and gratitude, including Darren Cronshaw, Laurence Johnson, and the students and staff at the UTAS School of Philosophy. My thanks, too, go to an anonymous reviewer for their generous assistance, and to Michael Dodson, for his kind permission to quote from his Wentworth Lecture.

Moreover, I have personal debts of gratitude to some very special people, including Leanne Hankey, Mandy Cox, Kathrin Rozati, and Sue Mathieson. To my Swedish family, for their love and encouragement, and to my immediate family, Jean Taylor and Geoff Warrick, for all their love and support over many years. Lastly and most dearly, to my husband, Dan, and my son, Sean, both to whom this book is dedicated and to whom I owe so much more than words can express.





# Introduction

In this book I attempt to explore 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. In chapter 1 I 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 both 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.

I then engage with the recent posthumanist challenges to universal concepts of human being in detail, firstly at a broad theoretical level in chapter 2, where I explore the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, and then at an applied level in chapter 3, as posthumanist scholars seek to apply such theories to particular instances of marginalization and oppression. In this chapter I discuss the issue of indigeneity, which is explored in relation to the work of Bill Readings and Manahua Barcham and the political claims of Indigenous Australians. Also in chapter 3 I address the issue of gender, which is explored through the work of Judith Butler and

Donna Haraway. 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 marginalization of difference, and as such, these theories can be seen as arguments for particularism, for the recognition of difference over sameness. I argue 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 first three chapters, I conclude that some form of universalism is needed to ground respect for the particular, in order to justify *why* we should respect others. In the next three chapters I then explore current re-conceptualizations of universal moral consideration.

In chapter 4 I 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, looking in particular at the theories of philosophers Peter Singer, David DeGrazia, and Jeff McMahan, along with Cora Diamond and Eva Feder Kittay. 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, I will argue 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 5 I examine current arguments by scholars who work within the liberal humanist tradition but from a critical standpoint, including such scholars as Jeff Noonan, Stephen Darwall, Christine Korsgaard and Martha Nussbaum. These scholars attempt to address the issues of exclusion that have arisen from the universalist tradition by either re-conceptualizing traditional grounds for respect or by broadening the scope of moral consideration to those traditionally excluded from such consideration, such as animals and non-rational humans. Again, I shall suggest here that the issue of justification for the respect for others is still not adequately conceptualized, showing that such approaches, which emphasize self-determination, rationality, autonomy and/or intuition, fall short either in regard to their justificatory grounds or scope of moral inclusion. It is in this chapter that the concept of account-

ability, touched upon in earlier chapters, begins to be more fully considered regarding its role within ethics and human being, a role that I argue to be foundational in the next and final chapter, chapter 6.

In chapter 6 I conclude that an ontological understanding of human being is needed to provide an adequate foundation for the justification of respect for others. Such a foundation, albeit partial in its conception, is offered; one that emphasizes 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. I suggest 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 can be seen to be foundational to both human being and ethics and I conclude 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 book. 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 book (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 intercommunal 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 book 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 toward such humans. Denial of accountability is, therefore, a denial of respect, just as the recognition of accountability is the recognition of respect; for, as I shall be suggesting later, implicit in such recognition is the acknowledgement that human beings are ends in themselves.

## NOTES

1. Stephen Darwall, "Reply to Korsgaard, Wallace and Watson," *Ethics* 117 (Oct 2007): 53.

2. Jeff Malpas, "Human Dignity and Human Being," in *Perspectives on Human Dignity: A Conversation*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickess (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2007), 23–24.