

Universalism and Vulnerability

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- Theory that there is a universal human nature much derided.

- One version of the critique: Paul Gilroy wrote: ‘incredulous voices have drawn attention to the bold, universalist claims of occidental modernity and its hubristic confidence in its own infallibility’. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993) 43

- Human universality seen as an 'Enlightenment' conceit, as inevitably imposing its own purportedly and falsely 'universal' values on those falling outside its scope.

- Specifically and famously, the universal discourse of human rights has been associated with the Enlightenment and with ‘the west’.

- One response is that universal values are not exclusively associated with the Enlightenment and the 'west'.

- E.g. Gita Sahgal has argued that the movement in India that challenged the twin ills of colonialism and fundamentalist Hinduism was, and still is, the universalising discourse of human rights.

- A second response:
- just because some people falsely universalised from their own perspective it doesn't follow that there is something wrong with the universal values themselves.

- Deeper critique of universalism though- it is reliant upon a view of the self as an autonomous, free, rational being that is, in the end, vacuous.

- A criticism of Rawls' self, the self that negotiates from behind a 'veil of ignorance' is that it is a fiction.

- It is such a watered down self that there is nothing left.
- So it is argued, in response, then, that the self is always 'encumbered' – in its culture, its traditions, its nations..

- As Gideon Calder has put it: ‘every universalism masks a particularism’.
- Whenever you try to describe what is universal about the self, you end up outlining something specific about the self.

- We have no choice, then, according to this argument, but to focus on our differences – our races, our sexuality, our culture, our nation.
- We must be ‘multi culturalists’ or post modernists, or ‘identity theorists’ or intersectionality theorists.

So universalism is an impossible ideal.

- But 'particularists' also face difficulties. Which set of characteristics should we identify with – a nation? A class?

- Universalism is important because it is only a perspective of universal humanity that enables us to see injustices – economic inequality, racial injustice, the intersection of injustices of race and class, for example.

- A different model of universal humanity sees all humans as sharing a finitude, a natural nature that is continuous with the non-human natural world, and a vulnerability.

- Rather than humans sharing in common a conception of pure autonomy, where each makes decisions in freedom and isolation from others, they share in common the opposite of that.

- Humans are natural, material, finite and vulnerable beings, who share these qualities with the rest of the natural world.

- We humans are different from other animals in having the ability to form moral ideals but we are continuous with the rest of the natural world in respect of our vulnerability.