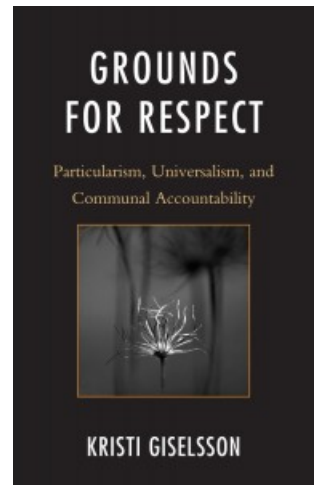


Review: Grounds for Respect



It's taken me a while to digest this book by local academic and author, Kristi Giselsson. Kristi is a compassionate and articulate philosopher who has made balanced and thoughtful contributions to the public debate on a number of social issues recently.

This book *Grounds for Respect: Particularism, Universalism, and Communal Accountability* is a published version of her doctoral thesis in philosophy at the University of Tasmania.

It is an exploration of "the question of what grounds are needed in order to justify respect for others." (Page 1).

This is a fundamental question, the diverse answers to which contribute a great deal to the unspoken (and often unknown) assumptions that shape and guide the cross-purposed conversations that epitomise public dialogue.

Giselsson's contribution is to explore this using philosophical analysis and critique. This necessarily involves a philosopher talking about philosophers, because that is how such an analysis works: positions are described, clarified, analysed for their differences; their implications are drawn, their internal and external logic put under test; and finally a path of good thought and good conscience is found through the heady tangle of these broad-shouldered giants.

For myself, this was my first introduction to this level of philosophical treatise. I came to the book motivated by the practical and socio-political applications: when you're talking about personhood issues such as abortion, euthanasia, marriage, freedom of speech and so on, then the nature and basis of *respect* is of significant relevance. I was struck, however, by the philosophical exploration itself.

I have only had one experience like it, when I first studied church history in my BMin studies, suddenly I had insight into where people were coming from, what motivated them, and why.

Similarly, Giselsson's exploration of the pedigree of philosophical thought, the sort of thought that is currently and actively applied in our Western World, gave me new insights. It also made me thirsty to learn more, hence my current little project.

Giselsson's thesis is that "some form of *universalism* is needed to ground respect for the particular; in order to justify why we should respect others" (Page 2). Universalism is the sense of *moral universalism* which asserts that there is a particular system of standard, morality or ethic that can be applied universally and which is not contingent on the particulars of a person (e.g. their rationality or autonomy).

Giselsson also emphasises a foundational *humanism* as a necessary aspect of our notions of respect. This is "humanism" as an affirmation of an innate, non-contingent, ontological, and unique reality (and value) of the human person.

The form of Giselsson's argument therefore includes an exploration and ultimate rebuttal of posthumanist philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard (all of whom I now want to read for myself).

...posthumanist critiques of universalist assumptions within humanism are themselves based on unacknowledged ethical assumptions of universal value and respect for others... (Page

2)

...at the very heart of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard's critique of humanism lay a moral judgment; that universalism is inherently unjust in its apparent exclusion of particular others... this ethical judgment is made without recourse to any justificatory philosophical grounds, but rather relies on the force of its rhetorical – and ultimately humanist – appeal alone. This ethical rejection of universal humanism has in turn had an enormous impact over a wide range of disciplines, but specifically in those areas of scholarship that deal with those traditionally marginalized within Western philosophy..." (Page 117)

The broad brush strokes of the argument might be characterised by breadth and depth. This first part of the book is a consideration of depth – is anything less than universalism enough to provide a coherent basis for respect? Giselsson shows that posthumanism either fails to provide for respect, or where it asserts its claim that it can, it has actually slipped into the universalism (albeit usually of a less caricatured sort) that is trying to be avoided.

The second part of the book looks at the breadth question and therefore tests the bounds of humanism. In particular, could animals be included as "human" to the extent that respect can be both encapsulated and applied? This second consideration tests utilitarian approaches such as that of Singer. Giselsson shows that while a utilitarian approach looks to assess a person's particular characteristics or functions to justify respect, a humanist approach asserts common ontological or innate grounds that are more robust.

By way of example:

Dismissive views of the elderly and those suffering from dementia are only affirmed by utilitarian principles that emphasize the greater good of society and the

comparative worthlessness of a cognitively impaired life.
(Page 175)

Having drawn the broad boundaries. Giselsson turns to those who thinking is within the bounds of universalist humanism and examines their formulation for grounds for respect. The thread being followed here is not the extent of human being but the characteristics – self-determination, self-creativity, accountability, subjecthood and the like are all explored. She finds them wanting for her purposes:

I have also argued that current Western liberal and humanist theories that attempt to readdress the foundations needed for universal respect still conceptualize these grounds in terms of what characteristics an individual must possess in order to qualify for equal moral consideration. These grounds still revolve around traditional notions of moral personhood, these being selfdetermination, rationality and autonomy; and they inevitably exclude all humans not possessing such qualities. (Page 259)

Giselsson therefore posits her own formulation of human being, which has to do not with biology or economic characteristics but with our “way of being” (Page 260). She therefore emphasises *community* as a necessary and innate part of human personhood and demonstrates that a concept for respect can rest upon the operation of accountability within and from the human community. She explores this conception for inconsistencies and negative implications and concludes:

The ontological foundation I have offered, while partial rather than complete in its conception, seeks to balance the tension between particularism and universalism by showing a structure of human morality that is irreducibly communal in its practice. Moreover, while arguing that the inter-dependent practices of social standards of value and reciprocal accountability are thoroughly communal in nature,

the universal standard of value implied by the assumption of reciprocal accountability – that each human is an end in themselves – ensures that justice is not reduced to communal consensus alone, as this standard provides for the possibility of respect for particular individuals beyond the relative nature of localized and particular norms (Page 296)

The foundation that Giselsson offers is indeed “partial rather than complete” because while she circumscribes respect with the well-argued conception of communal accountability she stops short, understandably, before filling that notion with articulations of what particular behaviours or attitudes or beliefs might be worthy of being held to account. Therefore, while she has demonstrated grounds for respect without recourse to divine revelation, I question whether she could build upon those grounds without doing so.

This book took some time to digest. It made me realise how little I know and how much I need to know about the philosophical tendrils that generate and move the values and people of our society. There is so much lack of respect, belligerence and assertions and misuse of one another in Western Society. Much of it comes from those sections of society who espouse care and tolerance and love yet find it so hard to articulate respect and understanding and community outside of their own narrow bands.

This book has made me thirsty to know more, to explore in particular some of the 20th Century philosophers who influenced the current generation of culture-shapers. To that end this book has whet my appetite. And that makes it a good book!

Q&A: 'Ministers: we accept equality'. What are your thoughts?

Clara asks (on my facebook wall): *I read an interesting article today titled, 'Ministers take aim at religious extremists: we accept equality'. Wondered your thoughts on this issue.*



The article that Clara refers to is this: <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/federal-election/ministers-take-aim-at-religious-extremists-we-accept-equality/story-fnho52ip-1226676430143>

The signatories to the letter referred to in the article can be found here: <http://www.australianmarriageequality.com/wp/2012/04/04/42-multi-faith-clergy-call-for-marriage-equality/>

The letter is actually quite old (April 2012). The fact that it is being raised in July 2013 as a rhetorical riposte to ACL attacks on Kevin Rudd is symptomatic of how these things get used as political footballs: "Christians talking against gay marriage? Well, here's our Christians talking about gay marriage and they support us!" There's nothing particularly wrong with that, that's one of the reasons the letter was written in the first place I'm sure.

So what are my thoughts? Nothing profound really.

This not a surprise. The signatories to the letter are mostly your left-leaning Anglicans and Unitings with the odd Baptist and so forth. Nothing unexpected. We could talk about how representative these leaders are of the Christian populace and the fact that they generally belong to the parts of the church

that are in decline, but whatever, that isn't the point.

For me the two interesting things are this:

1) Firstly: Christians must demonstrate that their views are Christian.

I'm not saying that these leaders aren't Christian. What I am saying is that it is not enough to say "I'm a Christian and I support SSM." They need to articulate and demonstrate the connections between the Christian philosophy and the SSM agenda and why they are congruous and supportive of one another. This is how you give your support substance and weight.

It is particularly so when you have signatories from a wide range of faith positions (including non-Christian) – what philosophical ground, that is common and not antagonistic to the positions held, is being used to espouse the opinion?

Without that it's not much more than a rather small petition.

From what I can see of the text of the letter (not easily accessible as far as I can see, even through the AME website) this hasn't been done. The two texts I do have are this excerpt:

"As clergy from various different faiths and denominations in Australia, we believe marriage is a fundamental institution in our society. It fosters greater commitment between partners, provides children with a sense of security and stability, and strengthens ties with families and communities. Marriage is a blessing to be shared, so we encourage people of faith who support marriage equality to voice their support for the reform by responding to the House of Representatives inquiry on same-sex marriage today."

This isn't much more than the "marriage is a blessing" and

“blessing should be shared” argument. Which says nothing at all really. None of us will disagree on the blessing of marriage. What we do disagree on is the characteristics of marriage which inform and construct and advance that blessing.

Rowland Croucher (say it ain’t so Rowland!) is the other text which does inform this a bit:

“How can I, a heterosexual who’s been very happily married for 50 years, tell anyone else they don’t have the right to form a loving, committed, lifelong union and enjoy the fruits of marriage as I have done?” wrote Reverend Dr Rowland Croucher, from John Mark Ministries, Victoria. “Marriage is not a club to be restricted to some. Like the Gospel, it is a blessing to be shared.”

And at least he gives some reasoning, albeit thin. Here Dr. Croucher connects “marriage” to the inclusivity of the gospel. Which has some merit, because the gospel *is* inclusive.

(The “how can I tell anyone else line” is rhetorical fluff because it doesn’t speak to the core issue of what marriage *actually is*, just to the fact that whatever it is it cannot be *arbitrarily* restricted – we all agree with that.)

Now this is all great, but as Christian leaders, these people need to present a clear and coherent connection between a Christian framework and their position. I won’t reiterate all that here, but the sorts of questions that go unanswered by Croucher et al. include clear rebuttals “OK, Rowland, but the Gospel is also exclusive (Christ alone) and calls for a surrender of one’s whole life (including sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual), how do you coincide these Christian truths with your statement about marriage?” And also fundamental questions of epistemology, Scriptural affirmations of the connection of marriage with the created order and so on.

In other words (and this speaks to why marriage is so contentious), our understanding of marriage derives from the full sweep of Christian philosophy. If you're going to talk about this you need to demonstrate coherence across the whole. These signatories haven't done this.

2) Secondly: "Christian" is not a badge. It's used that way by revisionists all the time who think in terms of "attributes" and "minorities."

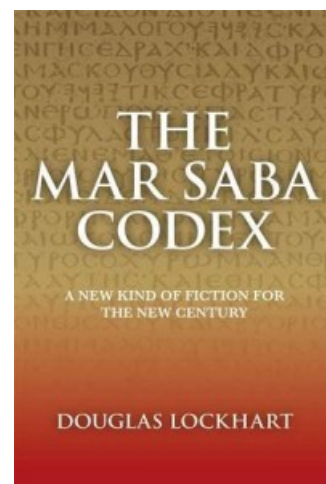
Religion has become an "attribute" of a person, not a voluntary and adopted wholistic framework for life. Therefore if you can demonstrate that one "Christian" agrees with you, you can assert that there is no reason why someone else wearing that badge shouldn't also.

This is an insipid and patronising understanding of how religion and worldviews work. The badges don't matter, it's the substance that counts. The people that don't support SSM have good reasons for not doing so. It's not enough to throw their badge back at them, you actually have to deal with their reasonings and demonstrate their unreasonableness.

To conclude. What are my thoughts? Nothing unexpected, just another demonstration of the insipidness that tends to dominate this debate.

Review: The Mar Saba Codex

Within the first few weeks of my moving to Hobart I happened to find myself at a book launch that someone had pointed out to me in the local newspaper. The event involved a local author writing on religious issues, and it also involved wine and a professor of philosophy at the nearby university. It intrigued me enough to go. The speech by the author, Douglas Lockhart, exhorted the church to redefine itself and its doctrine to be more reasonable, and intrigued me enough to buy the ebook.



There is a companion volume of philosophical theory and *The Mar Saba Codex* was consequently touted as being fast-paced, suspenseful, with interesting characters in interesting places. Although I wasn't expecting anything Dan Brown-esque I was hoping to find something with some grip and engagement.

I was a little disappointed. The characters are monochrome, the plot somewhat-stagnant, and the eventual suspense anticlimactic. I realised I was reading what could only be called a "narrative philosophy" – a sequence of dialogues loosely tied together around a mythical motif that attempts to espouse the benefits of a form of humanism that feels it necessary to demand the second mile from the Christian church and the borrowed guise of the Christian cloak. I feel no need to read the companion volume.

The narrative is wrapped around the finding of a letter written by an early bishop called *Theophilus*. The letter affirms an understanding of Jesus that underplays (eliminates?) the divine, eschews trinitarian theology, and embraces a somewhat-non-theistic somewhat-Jewish human messianicism. As we are introduced to the main characters – in particular Jack Duggan, a former priest-in-training, ongoing ancient-text expert and now disgruntled journalist – this letter is set up as a touchstone against dogmatism, absolutism, and revelatory epistemology – as if the divinity

of Christ somehow is the cornerstone for all that is wrong with the Christian religion.

For instance,

"I gave up believing in belief a long time ago." Duggan was faintly dismissive, "It's about power and very little else..."

"Choice is by definition heresy," said Mayle, reminding Duggan of an ancient truth, "You can't have choice if truth is a fixed entity. You either believe, or you do not believe."

In Paul's hands, the term 'Christos' has been used to create a God-man, a theologically inflated figure that even in Theodore's day, had generated bitter conflict for Christians and pagans alike.

In the Nazoraen view, which was the Aposotolic view, Jesus had not been the Second Person in a divine trinity... Only later... has this act of believing in Jesus been transformed by St. Paul into the magical rite of salvation through faith alone.

I did begin to wonder if Lockhart was going to simply use the characters' voices to tear down. It is one thing to fight against an edifice – but is it from a substantive philosophy that can build in its place? There are hints at the beginning that become explicit at the end – a subjective, experiential, humanism is Lockhart's answer

"Faith is more than knowing doctrine and Church teachign ; it is discovering God in experience and allowing experience to inform conscience."

"The 'I Am' of your being is not in place. 'Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you.' That's a quote from the Gospel of Thomas. The person who wrote those words was wide awake... It's the Christianity

behind the Christianity. It's what's been lost to doctrinalized Christianity for centuries."

And all this is well and good, I guess. Lockhart is a decent writer and a stimulating intellect. I could enjoy engaging with his ideas in their own right. But why this task of whiteanting them into Christian spirituality – a spirituality that he doesn't seem to grasp? He sees no positive in engaging with the bible as revelation, the sense of dependence on God is assumed to be stultifying and imprisoning, not releasing and freeing as so many have found it to be.

In the midst of all the voices – which I take to be Lockhart's own because they all sound so similar – the crux of the issue, becomes the point.

"God had never at any time worked miracles to make up for human deficiency."

Lockhart's philosophy, then, like all humanism, is a gospel only to the elite, the intellectually rigorous (for some definition of that) – the well able, the unbroken, the self-actualised – the non-deficient. In reality, the outcome of such a framework is the fruit of selfish selves. We *do* have a human deficiency, without God working miracles, there is no answer from humanism in the real world.

Perhaps this is why I found the story ultimately unreal. From the depiction of an Anglican Archbishop of Sydney – the sort of character I know quite well in my real world – that is simply strange, to a plotline involving an AWOL pope that requires a shark to be jumped. Maybe it was just because all the typos continuously broke down the fourth wall.

But it was a good stimulation. It caused thoughtfulness on my part. It demonstrates an expertise and an academic studiousness that I do not and can not match. At the book

launch Douglas Lockhart offered me a conversation over a glass of wine, or a decent whiskey. Perhaps I'll go find him and take up the offer.

Review: The Freedom Paradox

Clive Hamilton.
The freedom
paradox.
Towards a
post-secular ethics.

It's been a while since I read a book that was as academic as Clive Hamilton's *The Freedom Paradox*. The book is centred around a desire to construct a philosophical basis for morality, ethics and societal operations that are beyond modernistic rationality but which is not dogmatically asserted or mystically ungraspable. It is a dense book but with a style I came to appreciate – "long words, but short chapters" might be a good way to sum it up.

I am not a philosopher. I cannot critique Hamilton as to the accuracy of his use of the likes of Plato, Kant, and, most frequently, someone I've never even heard of – Schopenhauer. But I'm pretty sure I was able to get a grasp on some of the concepts that he attempts to communicate. And I can bring to these concepts my own considerations as an applied theologian.

So to put myself out on a limb, my take on what Hamilton is trying to say goes something like this:

*Beginning with the age-old philosophical construct of how I, the observer, the thinker, the only thing that I can take as "given" (I think therefore I am), interact with the world, Hamilton takes us through the concepts of **phenomenon** and **noumenon**. Phenomenon relates to the things that I-the-given can see, hear, cogitate about and consider. Noumenon relates to the ideal that lies behind the things that I see. For*

instance (my example) – if I see another person I interact with them through observation, relational interaction (conversation and the like), and thoughts (rationality) and emotions – these are things pertaining to the phenomenon. But the other person is more than just the conglomeration of my own reasonings and feelings and observations – that person is something in-and-of-themselves. The other person exists beyond the phenomenon in the unrealisable but real “noumenon.”

Hamilton seizes on this notion of the noumenon and disagrees with rationalists like Kant who assert that the noumenon is unknowable. Indeed, Hamilton says, it cannot be known by rational thought, but only by an “unsensible intuition.” And through such intuition we can know not only the noumenal self of others but also our own noumenal self – which are one and the same Self (capital “S”). This possibility of noumenal engagement then becomes a philosophical and post-secular (non-religious) basis for moral engagement, ethics, considerations of the meaning of life and so forth. For instance, I will treat another person differently if I can recognise (intuit) in them a noumenal essence (part of the Self that includes myself as the Subject of the engagement) rather than simply treating them as a (phenomenal) Object.

I hope that's not too much of an abuse of his argument! And there are a number of things to commend that flow out of it, for instance:

- This is one of the more robust engagements with the thinking of postmodernity that I've come across – in tearing down the idol of pure rationality Hamilton does not slip into (de)construction and the like.
- His consideration of true freedom being “inner freedom” that is far beyond the unfreedom put forwarded by populist capitalism and advertising has truth to it. On page 21, for instance, he writes, “Western society is characterised by an ever-devouring conformity flimsily camouflaged by a veneer of confected individuality...”.

- He often lends weight to ethics I would agree with – on page 120 he affirms the noumenal interaction of the sexual act and notes, “Sex in porn is not the exploration of one with another; it is an act of relief, like defecation.”
- His conclusions embrace some fundamental ideas that I also embrace – the innate (not merely socially constructed) value of life, for instance, and the recognition of a “noumenal” (what I would call “spiritual”) foundation to our worldview.

The main chasm that appears when you interact theologically with this book is wrapped up in a question asked me once by a young man at an SU camp – “Will, do you believe in Jesus, or in the *idea* of Jesus?” Hamilton presents some ideas and some of them align with the *idea* of Jesus. But without an historical, phenomenal narrative to hang them on Hamilton’s arguments and considerations about the noumenon lack authority or weight – they become ironically, or perhaps appropriately, his *own* intuitions of what noumenally *is*. This flaw is starkly present throughout but especially in the very last paragraph of the book which contains this sentence:

“So, if we suppose that the noumenon’s manifestation in the phenomenon is not without purpose but that the noumenon is intentioned, creation has a meaning.” (p247)

Hamilton has simply intuited (or *supposed*) that the noumenon is “intentioned.” And despite the fact that I, for different reasons, happen to agree with him on this point, the meaning of life, in his argument, simply rests, frankly, on his own intuitive guesswork.

All Hamilton’s comments on the content or nature of the noumenon rest on such a basis. Because of this propensity to simply rely on some self-revelatory “special knowledge”, and also because of the many allusions to Eastern philosophies and

religions, I found myself quickly comparing Hamilton's arguments to the ancient view of gnosticism – against which much of early Christian (even New Testament era) thought is presented. Indeed a contemporary gnostic website defines gnosticism as “the teaching based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means” which seems to affirm Hamilton's basic thrust. And, by way of example, Hamilton's “avatars of virtue” come across as positively (while not literally) aeonic – i.e. be construed, as the website puts it, to “exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves”:

“... the noumenon needs interpreters, individuals who by common consent represent metaphysical empathy in the phenomenal world. These are individuals whose life story embodies a message that echoes powerfully in the consciousness of ordinary people. Whether these figures are secular or religious, their moral selves are closer to the surface and cause them to radiate a kind of moral greatness.” (p166, emphasis mine)

And this ancient hue also colours Hamilton's view of Christ, evidenced when he tackles the issue of “Eternal Justice” in which he posits that categories of justice and compassion cannot belong in the noumenon and writes:

“Jesus' appeal from the cross for divine mercy was a moment of human weakness in which he forgot his own teaching.” (p173)

Which brings us to the main crux (pun intended) of the Christian engagement with this book. Hamilton can in the end only appeal to his own *gnosis* when he puts transcendence, “unsensible intuition”, or some form of engagement with the Moral Self above atonement as the answer to the human predicament. He places his idea of Christ into his own framework of ideas and does not interact with the

glorious scandal that it is at the heart of Christian thought and spirituality – that, to borrow Hamilton’s words, *the noumenal can and has been made known in the phenomenon* – God made flesh in Jesus Christ. If we are to engage with what truly is we must engage with the one who “was and is and is to come” and speaks to us the words of Truth. We know the noumenon because the noumenon has been made known.

And so this meaty book has bits that can’t easily be swallowed. While churches are acknowledged as being “keepers of the transcendant” there is no spiritual significance afforded the church in an implied kowtowing to the age of post-secularism. I would disagree – we are not bastions of dogma, we are the place where, in Christ, ordinary phenomenal people are able to eat, live, work, relate on a noumenal, spiritual foundation.

There is some fantastic exploration in this book. There are some moments where the reader says “mmm, interesting perspective, I hadn’t seen it that way before.” The man has an intellect and I admire how he has put his thoughts together. But in the end, and perhaps this is unfair as it may not be one of his aims, this book presents us without hope or assistance to those who find themselves stranded in the phenomenon of this fallen world.

