

Xavier E. Edwards

Universalism and Particularism

Global Leadership and Diversity

The universalist approach is roughly: “What is good and right can be defined and always applies.” The book described one example of universalism in a simple activity like crossing the street. In other countries such as Germany, pedestrians wait at the crosswalk for the entire duration until they are permitted to walk. This happens every time, even if no traffic is oncoming. This example shows that some things, even if circumstances change, are still to be considered as right.

At work, despite cultural differences, everyone must report conflicts of interest that would otherwise impede them from executing their best, equitable judgment. In my personal life, I view certain principles such as justice, promise keeping, responsibility and respect as universal in that they are for all and not for some. Although society tends to make one believe that some of these universal principles are for some, as an African American male that is also a Christian, I stand firm on the belief that certain principles are for all regardless of who they are and what they are. When I am put in situations between stakeholders and I have to determine who or what is right or wrong, I often say that “I’m on the side of right.”

In particularist countries far greater attention is given to the obligations of relationship and unique circumstances. For example, instead of assuming that the one good way must always be followed, the particularist reasoning is that friendship has special obligations and hence may come first. Less attention is given to abstract societal codes.

As the book describes friendship as an example of this, it shows that there may be special circumstances where one has to leave the fundamental, universal principle of friendship in order to protect or save that friendship. For example, if a friend encounters a situation in which they may have to lie for a friend, then less attention is paid towards the universal idea and principle of truth telling and is focused more so on the special circumstance or obligation that has occurred. The lie now comes first and rises above the universal principle.

In the workplace, I have seen leaders actually engage their staff on key decisions and policymaking that is upcoming. This was not just done to foster a team effort but more so to show that those individuals had a special obligation in that their culture or their circumstances actually shaped how they would respond to those same decisions and policies. Thus, it was really important for that leader to make sure that these members were engaged appropriately. In my own life, I realize how important it is to deal with people depending on the relationship I have with them. It may differ greatly how one relative or friend responds to a situation I have made in relation to another.

In terms of my own tendencies, I believe that I would lean towards the universal approach in my family, socially and in the workplace. Of course, there can often be situations that would really make me think towards a more particularistic approach. However, my entire attempt is to ensure that I hold everyone to the same standard of right and wrong, and this often extends beyond cultural lines.