

Book Review

Paul Sagar: *Basic Equality*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. x, 224.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670525000129

Contemporary moral and political philosophy rest on the principle of basic equality, which asserts that all human beings are basic equals and should therefore be treated as such. Yet, as a matter of fact, human beings are strikingly unequal in many respects. For example, some individuals exhibit higher emotional empathy and awareness, while others demonstrate greater capacity for rational and moral action. But if humans are so *unequal*, why should they be treated as *equals*? This question of the basis of basic equality has recently sparked intense and sustained debate (e.g., Giacomo Floris and Nikolas Kirby, eds, *How Can We Be Equals? Basic Equality: its Meaning, Explanation, and Scope*, Oxford University Press, 2024).

Paul Sagar's *Basic Equality* enters this conversation with a novel approach that combines analytical philosophy with historical and psychological insights. The result is a comprehensive and original theory of basic equality that offers new perspectives on why humans are basic equals despite evident individual differences between them.

Sagar argues that most prominent “foundationalist” views, which ground basic equality in a shared underlying feature—such as the capacity for rational agency or the range property (e.g., Richard Arneson, “Basic Equality: Neither Acceptable nor Rejectable,” in *Do All Persons Have Equal Moral Worth?*, ed. Uwe Steinhoff, Oxford University Press, 2015; Ian Carter, “Respect and the Basis of Equality,” *Ethics* 121, no. 3 (2011): 538–71)—both lack a coherent rationale for why variations in these features do not generate differences in moral status and present “hyperintellectualist” theories (13) that fail to adequately explain why people believe in basic equality.

To address these issues, Sagar proposes an alternative approach that does not seek an abstract, independent justification for the principle of basic equality but instead views its justification as inseparable from its historical and social context. In other words, he contends that understanding whether the commitment to basic equality is *justified* requires an *explanation* of how and why it emerged (13). Basic equality, therefore, is a principle whose truth and justification are not universal and absolute. Instead, it is context-dependent: its truth and justification are relative to specific social and historical contexts, as well as a set of shared background commitments and values.

To explain the origins of the commitment to basic equality, Sagar draws on psychological research, which indicates that human beings are “psychological essentialists” (62): they believe that entities, including living beings, are defined by an underlying *essence* that makes them what they are. This aspect of human psychology explains the “proclivity to believe in the existence of a *human essence*: of something on the inside that makes this individual a member of the specific group *Homo sapiens*” (72). While psychological essentialism can lead to profound injustices—such as racism and even dehumanization—Sagar asserts that it also plays a crucial role in the acceptance of basic equality. He suggests that, due to historically contingent factors, most people in the developed West have recently adopted the belief that: “1) All human beings have an *essence* that makes them human. 2) If you have the human essence, *then you are a basic equal*” (86).

However, “*there is no such a thing as a human essence*” (84). So, how do we believe in something that is not real? Sagar argues that we believe in basic equality insofar as we are immersed in a double *fiction*: we act *as if* each of us has a human essence and *as if* this essence is the only relevant factor in our moral considerations (98). Therefore, the commitment to basic equality is a practice of immersive fiction where we view ourselves as equals simply by virtue of being human.

Given that basic equality is not a reality but rather a fictional practice, we must ask, “why, if at all, are we justified in adhering to this practice?” (122) According to Sagar, the justification lies in the substantial functional benefits of endorsing basic equality. History shows that denying basic equality results in societies where the great many “inferiors” are oppressed by the very few “superiors.” Therefore, we are justified in affirming basic equality—by engaging in the fictional practice of acting as if we are all equal—because it is crucial for opposing and mitigating cruelty and injustice (125). Basic equality is thus vindicated by its role in safeguarding and promoting values we hold dear.

Sagar’s theory offers an innovative approach to addressing the significant challenges encountered by traditional views of basic equality. It presents a thorough analysis of how and why we believe in basic equality, alongside an original vindictory account of why we should continue to uphold this belief.

Nevertheless, some may question whether Sagar’s theory provides a compelling justification for basic equality. First, as Sagar himself acknowledges, his theory will not persuade those who reject ethical relativism (52). By asserting that the validity of basic equality is contingent upon historical contexts and prevailing values, Sagar’s view lacks the theoretical resources to condemn the actions and beliefs of those who reject the principle of basic equality. It may be reasonable to accept, as Sagar does, that a philosophical justification for basic equality may not *convince* a staunch racist who, due to their personal history and beliefs, fundamentally denies that all humans are equals. But it is more difficult to accept a philosophical justification that cannot *explain why* White supremacy is wrong *independently of* one’s

commitments and experiences. For those who reject ethical relativism, a theory of basic equality should not only explain why those who *already support* the principle have compelling reasons to do so but also provide independent reasons for why anyone should accept its validity.

Secondly, Sagar's theory is unlikely to convince those who deny that human beings possess a moral status superior to that of nonhuman animals solely by virtue of their species membership. While Sagar addresses the speciesist challenge with considerable depth, dedicating the final chapter of the book to this issue, his approach may not fully address the concerns of the critics of speciesism. For example, Sagar observes that it is "a deep fact about us that we think humans matter more than animals" (159). Consequently, he argues, there is nothing inherently wrong in excluding nonhuman animals from the scope of basic equality by affirming that "*this kind of thing [human being] is special to us, and accordingly it is going to be treated specially*" (160). However, this perspective highlights the limitations of Sagar's context-dependent approach in critiquing the pre-existing value systems that shape our beliefs and commitments. By accepting that "this kind of thing is special to us, and accordingly it is going to be treated specially," his theory risks reinforcing rather than critically examining the speciesist biases embedded in our moral and social frameworks. Instead of merely acknowledging these biases as part of the historical and social context, we should critically evaluate whether there are genuinely non-arbitrary reasons for assigning moral priority to humans over nonhuman animals.

Despite these criticisms, *Basic Equality* stands out as a significant and valuable contribution to one of the most challenging and profound problems in contemporary moral and political philosophy. It offers an interesting framework for understanding why we should regard ourselves as basic equals despite our many differences, providing fresh insights into the justification of basic equality in a complex and diverse world.

—Giacomo Floris
University of York, York, UK