Multiculturalism

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Abstract

Multiculturalism refers to (1) the state of a society or the world in which there exists numerous distinct ethnic and cultural groups seen to be politically relevant; and (2) a program or policy promoting such a society. Political philosophers aspire to deal with the challenges posed by multiculturalism fairly – but there is deep disagreement about what constitutes fair treatment. Multiculturalism might entail the granting of rights (individual or collective) on the grounds of the value cultures have for individuals, or even society as a whole. A multicultural state then might be one in which different forms of recognition are granted to cultural groups to secure the valuable goods cultural membership provides equally and avoid unfairly privileging dominant groups. On the other hand, it can be argued that precisely because of deep social and cultural diversity, the state should remain neutral between groups and ensure that basic liberal rights are fairly and consistently applied across cultural differences. Granting recognition to groups risks undermining the security and welfare of individuals by 'politicizing' forms of cultural identification best kept out of public decision making about the distribution of goods and resources. These views reflect not only conflicting intuitions about the relation between culture and individual welfare, but also deep disagreements about the nature of equality and freedom.

Multiculturalism has come to refer to (1) the state of a society or the world in which there exists numerous distinct ethnic and cultural groups seen to be politically relevant; and (2) a program or policy advocating or promoting such a society. The first is a factual claim, the second evaluative. But like so many claims in the social sciences, the empirical claim involves much more than empirical judgments, and the evaluative claim is contested by as many who promote it (and certainly does not follow from the empirical claim). Controversy has raged over what the best response to the fact of cultural diversity in the world might be, and it is not too much to suggest that the social and political issues raised by multiculturalism continue to be among the most pressing and important of our time. In recent years, multiculturalism also has come under increasing attack from commentators on both the left and the right. Coming to grips with these issues requires asking some difficult questions about the nature of culture and its relation to human welfare, and especially what political consequences follow in light of the answers given. Political philosophers aspire to deal with the challenges posed by multiculturalism *fairly*; the problem is, no one is quite sure what this actually entails.

The Relevance of Culture

Human societies have always been culturally diverse and certainly most organized political societies. Yet for much of the history of Western political philosophy, the ideals of political life that have been promulgated have presumed that citizens shared not only a common political status but also a common descent, language, and culture. Aristotle, for example, one of the central figures in the history of Western political thought, presumed this despite himself being a 'resident alien' of Athens. John Stuart Mill, champion of modern liberty and individual autonomy, thought that free institutions were next to 'impossible' among a people 'without fellow feelings,' or who read and spoke different languages. He argued that the boundaries of a state should coincide "in the main with those of

nationalities" (Mill, 1975: p. 392). The presumption that states should be culturally homogeneous was inspired in part, no doubt, by straightforward prejudice against foreigners and outsiders, but it also was linked to a series of issues that continue to bedevil contemporary political philosophers. Among these include the following: Does justice require a common culture to motivate the goodwill and sacrifices it typically demands of citizens? Can a political society be stable if too much emphasis is placed on the diversity of its peoples and cultures? Can democratic institutions work, and be seen to be legitimate, if the citizens of a state speak different languages, have different worldviews, and even perceive the history of their nation differently? Finally, if individuals are fundamentally equal, can we balance the demands of equality with the diverse moral commitments of particular cultures?

Political philosophers from Aristotle to Mill (and beyond) have tended to answer these questions in the negative; too much cultural diversity threatens to undermine the possibilities for a peaceful, prosperous, and ultimately just political community. The problem is, the challenges of cultural diversity are impossible to avoid. The history of the twentieth century, and especially of recent decades, makes this abundantly clear; witness the reemergence of nationalism, the spread of violent ethnic conflict, and the extraordinary movement of peoples across borders fleeing persecution of various kinds and seeking new hope in distant lands.

Before tackling these questions directly, however, it is important to get a sense of what actually is meant by 'culture' and how it has come to occupy a preeminent position in discussions concerning distributive justice and the emergence of 'the politics of difference.'

Diversity of What?

Theorists concerned with multiculturalism agree that culture matters, but they disagree profoundly over how and why it does. Liberal political philosophers, in particular, have struggled to reconcile their commitment to the welfare of

individuals with what seems to be the collective nature of cultural identification. But first, when political philosophers talk about cultural diversity, what are they are actually talking *about*?

The concept of 'culture' has a complex history and, as a result, a set of meanings sometimes at odds with each other (Moody-Adams, 1997; Appiah, 2005). At a basic level, culture refers to the particular set of habits, beliefs, and customary practices of a people or society; to its way of life. In the nineteenth century, culture often was tied closely with quasi-biological notions of race and ethnicity, and thus to judgments about the inherent superiority of one form of culture over another – a tendency that continued to manifest itself in murderous ways throughout the twentieth century. Linking culture to biological or quasi-scientific characteristics thus has come to been seen as extremely dubious, involving both bad science and questionable ethics. Instead, anthropologists (among others) have argued that culture should be understood as a set of ultimately malleable and negotiable cognitive and social frameworks governing human behavior that is complex and dynamic rather than static and that is patched together from a variety of sources rather than woven of the same cloth (Geertz, 1973; Clifford, 1988; Moody-Adams, 1997; Appiah, 2005).

But how are cultures individuated politically? Some insist that the groups that matter politically are those grounded in *ethnicity* (stripped of any biological or scientific overtones): a people united by certain prepolitical allegiances of ancestry, collective memory, homeland, or culture (Smith, 1986). For others, cultural diversity refers to a range of different groups – whether based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic class, language, lifestyle, or sexual orientation – who are disadvantaged relative to a dominant political culture manifested in the main institutions and 'public reason' of the state in which they reside (Young, 1990). Those shared characteristics or practices, often only perceived as being shared in light of 'mainstream' oppression or rejection, are said (for better or worse) to partly constitute the culture of a group.

Another important account of cultural diversity is provided by Will Kymlicka (1995a, 1998, cf 1995b, 2007). He argues that multiculturalism involves two different kinds of cultural diversity. The first is a diversity of 'societal cultures.' The second is created by individual and familial migration. A societal culture provides its members "with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres" (1995a: p. 76). It consists of not only collective values and memories, but usually also a shared language and territory (1995a: pp. 76–80). Note that these are *cultural* groups rather than groups based on race or descent. Membership thus is defined in terms of integration into a cultural community rather than in terms of descent. Aboriginal 'Nations' and the Quebecois, for example, are societal cultures, but also ones in which there is a high degree of racial and ethnic intermixing and thus great internal diversity. Although a state may contain a dominant societal culture, it also might include other minority cultures. Kymlicka called these groups 'national minorities': at the time of their incorporation into a larger state they possessed (1) a distinct 'social vocabulary' embodied in a full set of social practices and institutions, (2) were territorially distinct, and (3) self-governing. The capacity and motivation to form such a culture, for Kymlicka, means it is characteristic of 'nations' or 'peoples.' Migrants, on the other hand (and refugees, although they present a difficult case), essentially have chosen to give up their societal culture when deciding to migrate (1995a: pp. 100–101). So multiculturalism involves (at least) both 'polyethnic' diversity (arising from individual and familial migration) and 'multinational' diversity (arising from the incorporation of previously self-governing cultures into a larger state). Religious groups who seek out marginalization from mainstream society present something of a special case, which will be discussed later. Furthermore, there are groups which cut across ethnic and national lines – such as women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled – who, at different times, make claims based on their disadvantage or difference relative to a dominant societal culture. These claims tend to have more in common with 'polyethnic' rather than 'multinational' claims, however, since they usually concern the terms of integration into society rather than a demand for the preservation or protection of a distinct society (cf Kymlicka, 1998: pp. 90–103).

The reason why so much hangs on how a culture is to be individuated is because of what is said to follow in terms of the *rights* members of that culture – or indeed the group itself – can claim. For Kymlicka, 'national groups' are entitled to strong group rights; that is, those that entail varying degrees of self-government and protection from the decisions of the wider political community. Polyethnic rights are important but much weaker; they are concerned mainly with ensuring that the terms of integration into the dominant societal culture are as fair as possible.

Any set of distinctions generates anomalies and hard cases, and Kymlicka's is no different. Some groups, like certain religious groups, seem to fulfill the criteria for being a 'societal culture' and yet usually are not granted rights associated with national minorities. In some cases however, some 'ethno-religious' sects – such as the Amish or Hutterites in North America – have been granted exemptions from general laws to enable them to maintain certain key features of their religious life. But these are historically special cases; they usually involve a theology that seeks to minimize contact with the modern world. Other groups, such as refugees and some migrant groups (e.g., Muslim communities in the United Kingdom), do not fit comfortably into either category; they are not national minorities, but they also seem more vulnerable to collective harm than the discussion of 'polyethnic' rights might suggest. But how is it that rights follow from claims about culture in the first place?

Cultural Rights

What is striking about recent debates among liberals about multiculturalism is how liberalism's traditional concern with individual well-being has been linked to the value of cultural membership – an ostensibly 'collectivist' value. Not all cultures are individualistic, of course, but liberals generally are concerned with how culture matters for the lives of individuals. But how exactly does culture matter in this way? And even if it does, is it something in relation to which rights should be, or even could be, assigned?

Consider three basic arguments:

1. *The argument from cultural diversity*: Respect for cultural pluralism entails preserving existing cultures. Pluralism is valuable because it provides individuals with alternative ways to live, promotes critical reflection on the culture within which one currently lives, and thus promotes change and growth within cultures generally.
2. *The historical injustice argument*: Certain group rights are justified insofar as they are aimed at redressing or compensating for a history of past injustice against particular historical communities at the hands of dominant majorities.
3. *The value of cultural membership argument*: Certain group rights are justified insofar as membership in a culture has value for individuals, and there is a link between the welfare of the group and welfare of its members. Group rights contribute to the preservation of that culture and thus to the welfare of its members.

All three arguments have played a prominent role in recent debates. However, (1) seems incomplete, because the promotion of cultural diversity per se does not necessarily justify the protection of any *particular* culture. Furthermore, if more cultural diversity is better than less, then either all cultural practices are multiculturalism-enhancing and deserving of toleration or support, or only some are. The former cannot be true (as surely some cultural practices are not so deserving), and the latter forces us to identify those properties, which make some cultural practices valuable and others not. This is no easy task. This leads to consideration of (2) and (3). Perhaps the most powerful case has been one made in relation to (3). The historical injustice argument will be returned to in the Section The Future of Multiculturalism.

One way in which cultures matter to individuals is that they constitute an important aspect of their identity, or as Kymlicka put it, provide a meaningful 'context for choice': "freedom involves making choices amongst various options, and our societal culture not only provides these options, but also makes them meaningful to us" (1995a, 1995b). So in addition to the familiar liberal emphasis on individuals having the freedom of expression, movement, and association, they also need access to a societal culture. A societal culture is a basic 'primary good' for all individuals, and thus relevant to a liberal theory of justice (on primary goods, see Rawls, 1971).

A variation of this argument (but made independently of it) is the relation said to exist between cultural identity and individual self-respect or self-esteem. People's self-respect can be bound up with the way in which their group is perceived by others. Lack of esteem for the group can translate into lack of esteem on the part of individual members and this constitutes harm, the remedy of which may justify granting some form of group rights or rights of self-determination (Taylor et al., 1992; Margalit and Raz, 1990; on the 'social bases of self-respect' see Rawls, 1971: pp. 303, 440).

But do individuals require access to a *particular* culture to secure these benefits, one they can call their own? There are at least three objections to this strategy. Some argue that liberals should not be in the business of preserving particular cultures, since the kind of society they should be promoting is one in which individuals are free to move and adapt *between* cultures

as much as within them. So as long as individuals have access to a societal culture – and especially one made up of a diversity of cross-cutting cultural influences – their 'context for choice' is secure. If there is a cultural structure that liberals should promote, it is a cosmopolitan one, a common but diverse 'mélange' of cultural meanings conditioned by the basic liberal freedoms of conscience, expression, association, and exit (Waldron, 1992; Turner, 1993; Appiah, 2005, 2007).

A variation on the cosmopolitan argument is to place greater emphasis on the value of diversity or difference itself. There is no identity without difference, and thus to talk of 'societal cultures,' or even a singular 'cosmopolitan culture,' is to risk missing the inherent multiplicity and hybridity of political and cultural identities. Individuals and groups are constituted by a diversity of moral sources, and the central task of justice should be to remain 'critically responsive' to this fluidity and diversity, rather than reinforce 'found' or extant cultural structures (Bhabha, 1994; Connolly, 1995).

Finally, granting special rights to cultural groups on the grounds of their value for individuals involves a delicate balancing act between the rights of individuals and the measures needed to ensure the survival of the culture. The dangers here are ones to which liberals should be especially sensitive. For some, even to talk about 'societal cultures' or groups as meriting political recognition is to engage in dubious metaphysics and unwise politics. The basic units of social reality cannot be group-based because groups are simply the product of interactions between individuals; there are only associations constituted by individuals and not vice versa (Kukathas, 1997). Thus, there are no grounds upon which to provide political or legal recognition for groups on the basis of their playing a 'constitutive' role in individuals' personal identity. Of course, individuals are free to associate with whom they please. But they are equally free to exit those associations. Moreover, empowering groups works against promoting the kind of social solidarity required for effective democratic societies – either by promoting divisive ethnic 'entrepreneurship,' or undermining a sense of common purpose required for comprehensive social programs (Barry, 2001).

The Politics of Multiculturalism

Disagreement over the social ontology of multiculturalism only intensifies when the more concrete matter of deriving political and institutional arrangements from them arises. The 'politics' of multiculturalism refers to the way in which the consequences of social and cultural diversity are thought to necessitate social and political change.

If the argument is that cultures matter to individuals because they are connected to the capacity for living a good life – whether in terms of providing the 'social bases of self-respect' or as a meaningful 'context for choice' – then does it follow that the *state* has a direct interest in recognizing or promoting a societal culture (or set of cultures)?

For cosmopolitans, it does not follow at all. People are sure to value their cultural attachments, but the state should steer clear of tampering with these commitments. It should treat them the way it treats religious beliefs, as a private matter about

which the state is officially neutral. If it promotes anything, it should be the ability of people to live according to whatever way of life they wish drawn from the many possibilities on offer, consistent with the basic rights of others to do likewise. So the state should remain 'indifferent' toward and generally tolerant of the associations individuals wish to form or join. The costs of a 'politics of difference' – of recognizing and encouraging individuals to organize politically around their cultural identities – outweigh any potential benefits. Politics can be a source of oppression as much as any other social practice, especially given the potential for cultural elites or others to gain control of the resources and institutions set up to protect cultural minorities and use them to take advantage of more vulnerable members or to enrich themselves (Kukathas, 1997: p. 149; Hardin, 1995; Barry, 2001). If individuals are being harmed as a result of their cultural attachments, then the remedy is to ensure a more consistent application of basic liberal rights and protections, not to recognize the groups to which they belong.

The latter view has been referred to as pursuing a policy of 'benign neglect' or 'neutrality.' Cultures neither deserve nor require state assistance to survive, and if they do, they probably are not worth preserving anyway. This view also has been associated with a 'civic' as opposed to 'ethnic' account of the state. A civic state is one in which citizens are members in virtue of a shared commitment to constitutional principles or values that are independent of particular cultural attachments (Habermas, 1993). An ethnic state, on the other hand, presupposes a set of values grounded in a shared cultural framework based on common descent or ethnicity. Hence, also the appeal to civic and ethnic nationalisms, the former involving 'constitutional' patriotism grounded in cosmopolitan principles independent of ethnocultural and historical features, and the latter entailing a particularist patriotism grounded in 'blood and soil.'

Practically speaking, however, the pursuit of neutrality or 'benign neglect' in these ways is extremely difficult to accomplish. States play a crucial role in coordinating social and economic activity, and it is inevitable that, in the process, certain cultural presumptions and practices will be favored over others. Almost every state, for example, has to establish internal boundaries, a common educational system, an 'official' language (or set of languages), and common holidays, and has to enforce a basic legal framework within which citizens will have to act. In other words, the idea that government could be neutral when it comes to the treatment of all cultural groups is not only difficult to imagine, but perhaps even 'incoherent' (Kymlicka, 1995a: p. 108). States have an inescapable cultural component built into them. Moreover, those states that often are invoked as exemplars of civic rather than ethnic nationalism or as having pursued a policy of 'benign neglect' have in fact possessed a distinct societal culture made up of more than just allegiance to cosmopolitan principles and values. Some groups have suffered harm as a result of their difference from this dominant societal culture. Some of these states have granted relatively strong group rights to various cultural groups in light of their disadvantage or via historic agreements in the course of nation building. (All of this seems true of the United States and Canada, for example, two apparently quintessential 'civic' nations.)

Focus on the *harm* people have suffered in relation to their particular cultural attachments has featured prominently in recent debates, mainly because of the appalling treatment just about every state has at some point handed out to minority groups. This touches on the historical injustice argument mentioned previously. Protecting societal cultures may be justified as a means of redressing or compensating members of that culture for a history of past discrimination or oppression at the hands of a dominant majority or minority (Buchanan, 1991; Spinner-Halev, 2012). There are questions surrounding this argument too, however. First, would citizens have to agree on a specific account of their nation's history to fix responsibility for these past injustices? This is difficult to imagine in many places in which intercultural conflict has been particularly brutal. Mutual loathing and distrust undermines cool and impartial reflection on the past.

Second, why should the viability of group rights depend on the group having been oppressed or discriminated against? Tying the granting of group rights to the existence of (past or present) discrimination by or exclusion from a dominant societal culture risks misunderstanding the motivation of groups seeking such rights.

Some societal cultures, it might be argued, are owed special rights independently of any historic pattern of disadvantage they may have suffered (as is argued is the case with Aboriginal peoples; see Kymlicka, 1995a: p. 142; Tully, 1995, 2008). Group rights, in other words, are not necessarily about compensation for exclusion from or discrimination by a dominant culture, but rather about the intrinsic commitment members of particular groups have toward their societal cultures.

But what kind of rights follow specifically in light of the arguments canvassed earlier? It is here that the generality of normative discussions about cultural rights runs up against the complexity of the world in which they are claimed; for it is difficult to imagine a generalizable set of rights that can be applied to all cultural groups equally, given the complex interplay of history, context, and principle in each case. The tensions inherent in the desire to protect both societal cultures and individual well-being emerge with particular force. The very measures needed to protect a societal culture might conflict with the actual freedoms and capacities of the individuals in whose name the protection is being offered in the first place (Hardin, 1995; Okin, 1998; Eisenberg and Spinner Halev, 2005). This is particularly true for those more vulnerable members of a societal culture, such as women and girls (Shachar, 2001; Song, 2007). Having suffered past injustice is no guarantee that relations *within* that group will be just. As a result, it is probably best to think of cultural rights as involving a bundle of different kinds of claims rather than as a complete set of universalizable principles, albeit always conditional on them not to harm the basic interests of individuals. Considered as such, they might include, among other things, the right to be exempted from certain laws or government policies; assistance for the maintenance of linguistic, educational, or cultural activities; various forms of recognition (legal, moral, and political); 'affirmative action' programs, representation rights, self-government rights (within a state or federation); and ultimately secession (Levy, 1997; on secession see Buchanan, 1991). Some of these claims involve negative rights of

noninterference, some positive rights of assistance, and others a combination of the two. Some might be compatible with individual rights (wieldable by individuals as members of that group) and some held exclusively by the group (wieldable by an agent or representative of that group). Much will depend on the context in which they are appealed to. Many inevitably will be controversial.

Aboriginal peoples, for example, have a strong claim for self-government rights because they hold land (or have strong claims to land), possess a distinct societal culture, were previously self-governing, and have suffered a long history of oppression and discrimination at the hands of most settler states. Despite the fact that some Aboriginal practices entail significant restrictions on individual liberty (e.g., rules governing property holding), most liberal theorists think the value and importance to Aboriginal people of maintaining their distinct cultural structure outweigh some of these concerns, or at least that fears of potential abuse are overstated (Kymlicka, 1995a; Tully, 1995; but cf Okin, 1998; Ivison, 2002). Needless to say, when concerning matters such as family law or criminal punishment, opinions begin to differ (Turpel, 1991; Okin, 1998; Pogge, 1997; Shachar, 2001). Self-government rights are the source of considerable debate and social division in countries where they have been claimed or granted. They present a significant challenge to traditional conceptions of equal citizenship and the principle of equality before the law.

Claims by religious groups, on the other hand, generally are not thought of in the same way. They might possess a distinctive societal culture, but save in exceptional circumstances they are not usually thought of as thereby possessing rights to a particular territory or self-government. Their claims more likely will have to do with exemptions from certain state laws, or for state support of education and cultural activities. But in states where religious groups do have extensive exemptions and privileges against the general population (e.g., as in Israel), even these 'weaker' claims can cause considerable social tensions (especially when combined with claims for self-government on the part of another historic community or societal culture living on the very same territory).

The Future of Multiculturalism

It often is suggested that the seemingly irreversible forces of globalization will result in the eventual eradication of the local or particular in favor of a global, although not necessarily cosmopolitan, Western, consumerist culture. Or, that with the end of the Cold War and the 'triumph' of liberal democracy, the great ideological battlelines of the past will be tamed and redrawn within a generally liberal framework (Fukayama, 1992). Recent developments in world politics, however, and especially ongoing ethnic tensions and conflict suggest otherwise. The local and particular has come back with a vengeance. Furthermore, within the established liberal democracies, many are questioning the programs established to promote multicultural identities, especially where they involve providing groups with extra resources or support to maintain their way of life, or as compensation for past discrimination and injustice. This is particularly evident in

disputes surrounding the claims of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Australasia, and reconsideration of 'affirmative action' programs and differentiated citizenship rights in the United States and Europe. The future of multiculturalism, in other words, might appear rather bleak.

Some have laid the blame for disenchantment with multiculturalist policies at the feet of those who were loudest in insisting on the 'recognition of difference' in the first place. Overemphasis on difference has encouraged (perhaps unwittingly) the reification of ethnic and cultural modes of identification, instead of taming them and making them more open-ended and dynamic (Turner, 1993; Hollinger, 1995; Barry, 2001). The constant demand for greater inclusiveness and plurality in every sphere of a nation's cultural life – from its school curricula and national history, to its political parties and assemblies – has sown the seeds of resentment and distrust rather than cross-cultural understanding (Schlessinger, 1991; cf the essays in Taylor et al., 1992; Connolly, 1995; Tully, 1995; Kymlicka, 1998, 2007). The constant focus on cultural, ethnic, and historical identities risks undermining, so it is argued, the necessary conditions for a stable and ultimately just political society, that is, a commitment to a common set of basic individual rights that are justifiable independently of any particular ethnocultural framework (Ignatieff, 1998; Barry, 2001).

Is the future multicultural? In many ways it must be, for the only way to rid societies and states of their diversity is to forcibly remove it, and that entails injustices of the worst kind (with which we are all too familiar). The case against multiculturalism as undermining political stability and the conditions for justice is weak, for it is clearly *not* the case that culturally homogeneous societies are the most just. It is also partly an empirical question, and the evidence so far suggests no strong correlation between multiculturalism and declining support for egalitarian policies (Banting and Kymlicka, 2006). Paradoxically, perhaps, the desire to respect difference and acknowledge alternative sources of moral commitment indeed may lead to the emergence of a kind of cosmopolitan culture 'multiculturalists' often are said to abhor. But if it does, this will not entail having moved 'beyond multiculturalism,' whatever that means. The common culture of justice is multicultural because the people to whom justice must be done and the societies within and between which it must be achieved are multicultural.

See also: Democracy: Normative Theory; Discrimination and the Law; Discrimination: Racial; Diversity and Disagreement in Ethics: Philosophical Implications; Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups: Historical Aspects; Ethnicity, Sociology of.

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