

Democracy and Respect: A Kantian Approach To Multiculturalism

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Over the past few years, a considerable amount of ink has been spilled over the issue of multiculturalism in education, much of it in a state of overexcitement. What is clear is that American society is becoming increasingly diverse, a fact which is reflected in our classrooms. In response to these social and demographic trends, significant sectors of the academic community have called for the development of new curricula and course materials that are representative of the pluralistic character of our society. Yet critics of multiculturalism have charged that such changes, if implemented, will promote separatism both in academia and in society at large and represent nothing less than a slide towards relativism and a politically-correct rejection of the grand heritage of western civilization.

In this paper, I shall address these concerns by linking the project of multicultural education to the requirements for a healthy pluralistic democracy. I shall argue that multicultural education is necessary for the cultivation of democratic deliberation and mutual understanding required for the proper functioning of a pluralistic democracy. Such an argument rests on moral considerations arising from the very same tradition that the critics of multiculturalism claim to defend.

In my argument, I shall deploy materials found within the corpus of Kant's moral and political theory. In reading the relevant texts, I will be less interested in matters of textual exegesis than in the extraction and contemporary application of insights that they suggest. Thus, I do not claim to be providing an interpretation of Kant's work so much as seeking to build on certain remarks of Kant, remarks that Kant himself did not sufficiently elaborate upon. For this reason, my approach is Kantian, though I cannot claim that it is Kant's.

In the first half of my paper, I shall lay out the basic theoretical

framework with which I intend to approach the question of multicultural education. In particular, I shall discuss Kant's important idea of the realm of ends and a conception of rational deliberation required by that idea. I maintain that Kant has provided us with the outlines of an appropriate model for thinking about pluralistic democracy. I shall then turn to the application of this framework to the current disputes over multiculturalism, which I take to be a contested notion. I shall argue that a multicultural education is required to meet the needs of contemporary pluralistic democracy.

I.

The starting point of my discussion is Kant's idea of a realm of ends. You will recall that this concept is grounded on the notion of autonomy, a pedigree of some importance. The third formulation of the categorical imperative is that of the autonomy of the will, or the self-legislative activity of reason, according to which we are bound by the moral law because we impose it on ourselves. Although Kant never actually provides a proper rendering of this formulation, as he does in the cases of the first two formulations, he does claim that it is a synthesis of the previous two. Kant describes the three formulations as a "progression here like that of the categories" unity, plurality, and totality respectively, a description that refers to the first subdivision ("Of Quantity") of the "Table of Categories" laid out in the first *Critique*. Now it is tempting to dismiss this remark as merely another example of Kant's obsessive concern with the architectonic of his theory, but in doing so one risks losing insight into the character of the idea. The particular synthesis involved here indicates that the social totality prescribed by Kant's theory is one of unified plurality and not some total unity of will that is inimical to pluralism, such as is found in Rousseau for example.

This progression culminates in "the all-comprehensiveness or totality of the system of ends" so that the concept of the autonomy of the will "leads to a very fruitful concept, namely, that of a realm of

ends." The realm of ends is Kant's ideal of a community of rational agents, and he defines it as follows:

By 'realm' I understand the systematic union of different rational beings through common laws. Because laws determine ends with regard to their universal validity, if we abstract from the personal differences of rational beings and thus from all content of their private ends, we can think of all ends in themselves in systematic connection, a whole of rational beings as ends in themselves as well as of the particular ends which each may set for himself.¹

In this realm of ends, persons interact on the basis of mutual respect, and all are united under common laws that are the product of a collective self-legislation governing external relations among them. Participation in this legislative activity is an essential element involved with membership in the realm of ends, as it is a requirement of moral autonomy. In the absence of such participation, one is reduced to a state of heteronomy, subject to laws that are not of one's own making. The democratic character of this concept should be quite clear for democracy is the expression of autonomy at the social level, the collective self-legislative activity of a community of citizens.

The concept of a realm of ends itself sits rather uneasily within Kant's moral theory. It has often been argued that Kant's moral theory is essentially monological in character in that it requires no significant communication among rational agents, each person being possessed of the same reason, which legislates the same principles for each and all. Consequently, even in the absence of communication among them, every rational agent will reach the exact same conclusions regarding his or her duties. Unanimity of principles is arrived at not by collective deliberation but by a pre-established harmony that lies in the very nature of practical reason itself. One commentator has compared the realm of ends to a hall full of mathematicians,

each solving the same problem independently of all the rest. The mathematicians will invariably all reach the answer without ever having to consult one another. Under such circumstances, any communication among rational agents is superfluous and purely accidental.²

This criticism strikes at the heart of Kant's notion of a community of rational agents because it obviates the need for any collective deliberation among citizens. This is not the place to take a definitive stand on the accuracy of this criticism. For my purposes, it is sufficient to point out that there are textual materials on which to construct an alternative Kantian account of reason and its relation to community and then proceed from there. The relevant passages are found scattered among Kant's shorter essays and represent a significant detranscendentalization of Kant's politics.

The second thesis in "The Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" suggests a conception of reason as being essentially social and requiring communication among rational agents. This thesis states that "In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are to be fully developed only in the race, not in the individual."³ Kant's reasoning for this claim is fairly straightforward:

Reason itself does not work instinctively, but requires trial, practice, and instruction in order gradually to progress from one level of insight to another. Therefore a single man would have to live excessively long in order to learn to make full use of all his natural capacities. Since Nature has set only a short period for his life, she needs a perhaps unreckonable series of generations, each of which passes its own enlightenment to its successor in order finally to bring the seeds of enlightenment to that degree of development in our race which is completely suitable to Nature's purpose.⁴

Successive generations contribute to the development of reason through the social activities of “trial, practice, and instruction” and the communication of the resulting enlightenment to the next generation in the form of tradition. In this way, Kant’s emphasis on “trial, practice, and instruction” contains the seeds of a conception of reason in which communication plays an essential role.

Related points are made in two other texts, “What is Enlightenment?” and “What is Orientation in Thinking?” In the former essay, Kant argues that the public use of reason is necessary for enlightenment, the ability of a person to make use of his or her own reason: “The public use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.”⁵ Only if individuals are free to discuss and debate can persons employ their own reason, and without such employment, one can never free oneself from one’s “self-incurred tutelage.” Like any other capacity, one’s reason must be exercised if it is to be developed. This exercise of reason must be public if it is to be corrected and purged of error. While Kant’s conception of the public use of reason is rather narrow, being restricted to “the use which a person makes of it as a scholar before the reading public,” it contains the recognition of the necessity of public discourse for rational agency.

Kant makes a similar point in the short essay “What is Orientation in Thinking?” There Kant argues that thinking itself is impossible without the ability to communicate one’s thoughts to one’s fellow citizens:

Freedom to think is first opposed by civil restraint. Certainly one may say, ‘Freedom to speak or write can be taken from us by a superior power, but never the freedom to think.’ But how much, and how correctly would we think if we did not think in common as it were with others, with whom we mutually communicate! Thus one can well ask that the external power which wrests from man the freedom publicly to com-

municate his thoughts also takes away the freedom to think – the sole jewel that remains to us under all civil repression and through which alone counsel against all the evils of that state can be taken.⁷

Without the ability to communicate our thoughts, then, we lack the corrective of criticism from others and the access to information of which we are ignorant. Without open, public examination, thinking itself becomes problematic. Unfortunately, Kant himself did not fully elaborate on these matters in the context of his moral theory, but we can start with his recognition of the centrality of communication for both reason and human community.

Now the notion of a realm of ends is an idea. From the standpoint of morality, “a possible realm of ends” is regarded “as a realm of nature,” that is, “it is a practical idea for bringing about that which is not actually real but which can become real through our conduct, and which is in accordance with the idea.”⁸ As such, it serves as a guide to conduct and a standard for the evaluation of existing institutions. In order to be guided in our conduct by this idea, we must apply it to existing circumstances, which can only be known empirically through the communication of public discourse.

While Kant is often seen as an “a priori moralist,” he was not so naive as to fail to recognize the importance of empirical conditions for morality. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant is quite clear about the importance of matters of fact for his moral theory. While “the concept of justice [recht] is a pure concept,” it must also take “practice (i.e. the application of the concept to particular cases presented in experience) into consideration.”⁹ Consequently, “a metaphysical system of justice would have to take into account the empirical diversity and manifoldness of those cases in order to be complete in its subdivision,” which is impossible.¹⁰ Thus the first part of his *Metaphysics of Morals* is entitled *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice (Die Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre)* and not the Meta-

physical System of Justice, "for, if we take these cases of application into account, we can expect to attain only an approximation of a system, not a system itself."¹¹ Civil society, however, requires a system of public law that takes into account just this "empirical diversity and manifoldness," the understanding of which can only be generated by public discourse. The legislation of specific laws within such a system, then, must be the outcome of the collective deliberation of the members of civil society.

II.

The fundamental problem confronted by a pluralistic democracy is best expressed by taking the dictum *e pluribus unum* as a challenge rather than a description. A pluralistic democracy faces the task of reconciling the diversity of its citizenry with the need for unity in the common identity of citizenship, or, to put it in Kantian terms, it must construct a unified plurality. Of course, contemporary American society confronts differences and tensions unknown to the Prussia of Kant's time. Class antagonisms are compounded by divisions of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference, and the maintenance of social unity under such conditions is highly problematic. The consequences of the failure of a society successfully to resolve the tensions produced by its own pluralism are all too apparent today in the separatism, social disintegration, and violence to which some pluralistic societies have succumbed and by which others are threatened.

If a pluralistic society is to survive, it must find some means of fostering the emergence of unity from diversity. One possibility, of course, is simply to impose unity from above through the suppression of all voices other than those of the dominant group. This can be done either through the coercive apparatus of the state or through the manipulation of available information by controlling the means by which it is disseminated. Both strategies violate the basic tenets of democratic self-rule, which is based on free and unfettered delibera-

tion on the part of an informed citizenry.

Given the nature of a pluralistic democracy, unity cannot be artificially imposed from above, but must be constructed through public discourse on the part of the various constituent groups and individuals of a society. Education plays a crucial role in this process and must be designed to reflect the diversity prevailing within society. The development of an appropriate multicultural curriculum is essential to this project.

Now I take it that multiculturalism itself is a contested concept and its meaning open to dispute. I understand multiculturalism in education to be an effort aimed at opening or expanding the curriculum so that it includes voices and perspectives that have traditionally been excluded. An appropriate multicultural curriculum would incorporate works from women and minority perspectives within the United States as well as works from major non-European cultural traditions of the world. At the heart of multiculturalism properly understood, then, is a drive for inclusion.

Let us now examine the connection that I have asserted to exist between multicultural education and Kant's notion of a realm of ends, which I have taken as a model of pluralistic democracy. There are two key points I wish to make in this regard. First, mutual respect, which characterizes the dealings of members of the realm of ends, requires mutual understanding for one cannot respect another if one does not understand her. Though understanding is not a sufficient condition of respect, it is certainly a necessary condition. One can have contempt for a culture that one understands, that contempt may even be the product of one's understanding, but it makes no sense to assert that one respects a culture of which one has no understanding and no inclination to understand. On the contrary, such an attitude would quite reasonably be interpreted as evincing a lack of respect. Second, an understanding of the empirical diversity of the community is necessary for truly rational deliberation over the laws that are to govern members within the system of ends. Such deliberation must

be informed by a knowledge of empirical conditions and subject to correction by the criticisms offered by alternative perspectives. Consequently, if we are seriously to undertake in our educational institutions the cultivation of mutual respect and the capacity for rational discourse, we must insure that citizens receive some minimal exposure to the cultural achievements and historical experience of the major constituents of our society, which is simply to say that we must provide them with a multicultural education. Thus, multiculturalism is necessary to foster mutual understanding and comprehension of experience among the different components of the society without which democratic deliberation is simply impossible.

Though we cannot mandate the acceptance of the perspective and corresponding views expressed by any party to the discourse, as this must be earned over the course of the discussion, a seat at the table can be guaranteed. In fact, who we are is determined by who is at the table, for exclusion from democratic deliberation is exclusion from the community. In a pluralistic society, common identity can not be assumed as a given, but must be constructed in the course of the continuing discourse within society. Multiculturalism as a response to the demand for respect on the part of previously excluded groups is an essential part of this project.

Notes

1. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. L.W. Beck, p. 51.
2. Robert Paul Wolff, *The Autonomy of Reason*, p. 183.
3. Kant, "The Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *On History*, ed. by Lewis White Beck, (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 13.

4. Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," p. 13.
5. Kant, "What is Enlightenment?," *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Lewis White Beck, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 287; VIII, [36].
6. Kant, "What is Enlightenment?," p. 288.
7. Kant, "What is Orientation in Thinking?," *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, p. 303; VIII, [44].
8. Kant, *Foundations*, p. 55.
9. Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, p. 3.
10. Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, p. 3.
11. Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, pp. 3-4. This point is brought out quite nicely in the original German title. Ladd translates the German word *Anfangsgründe* as 'elements,' though it can also be translated as 'first principles.' This word is actually a plural compound noun composed of the nouns *Anfang* (in English, 'beginning') and *Grund* (in English, 'ground'). Literally, then, it means beginning grounds, which I think captures better the incompleteness of Kant's moral theory.