

Liberal Pluralism?

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Richard Shweder invoked Socrates in his remarks, and he has magnificently played the role of the Socratic gadfly. His effort to push us to understand how the practice of female circumcision could be morally sensible from the native point of view helps to unsettle our settled convictions. Likewise with his recounting the circumstances of the Tuskegee research program. In his effort to get us inside the moral point of view of the other, he is at his most successful, even if in the end we might endorse anew our original judgments about female circumcision and Tuskegee.

Socrates, and Shweder, ask us, in effect, to keep an open-mind about practices and cultural traditions that might disgust us. These might be not only morally intelligible practices, but morally defensible ones as well. I am all for open-mindedness. But I strongly doubt that open-mindedness can be elevated into a political principle. Open-mindedness has its limits. I am reminded of one particularly acerbic review of another philosophical gadfly, Richard Rorty, which claimed that Rorty was so open-minded that his brains were falling out.

I shall keep my comments short and focus on where, politically speaking, open-mindedness should end. My aim is to show why we must strive to avoid open-mindedness becoming mindless tolerance. This forces me to address Shweder's arguments in favor of liberal pluralism. I can summarize my remarks in the following way: By claiming that no individual or polity can simultaneously maximize all that is good, by admitting the tradeoffs and incommensurability between and among competing goods, it is quite clear how Shweder is a pluralist. But I heard little in his remarks that would warrant attaching the adjective "liberal" to his pluralism. I too am a liberal pluralist. But I do not recognize anything distinctively liberal about Shweder's liberal pluralism. All I can see is the pluralism.

Here is what I take to be Shweder's central conclusion: The kind of exercise Berlin's theory of value pluralism invites us to undertake is based on the claim that there are many terminal goods and they are inherently in conflict; and as a result there is no general expectation of historical changes producing something like overall moral progress. Inevitably, given the plural nature of objective values, progress on one moral front will interfere with progress on some other moral front, and there will be moral losses and moral gains associated with any particular relatively stable or customary form of social life. According to this view no one way of life is the very best way of life, and one of the aims of moral theory is to help us understand why. Another aim of moral theory is get us to realize how all-too-easy it is to conflate the idea of general moral progress with the achievement of only one subset of goods, our set of culturally selected and privileged goods.

But liberalism is a political theory as much as a moral theory, and what I want to hear from Shweder is how we should organize our political institutions in light of value pluralism. I assume that that the adjective "liberal" is supposed to be doing the political work for him. But there is no evidence of this work in his talk. What I will

do is try to construct this for him. He can then respond in one of two ways: he can tell me how I have misunderstood liberalism, as a political theory, and then lay out for us his view of the liberalism in liberal pluralism. Or he can drop his pretense to liberalism, and simply call himself a pluralist. If it is rhetorically convenient to attach some adjectives, let these be value pluralism or Berlinian pluralism rather than liberal pluralism.

So what would a distinctively liberal pluralist position look like? Let us begin with an elementary question: what is pluralism good for? The liberal answers this question in a way that I take to be worrisome to most anthropologists and unreconstructed pluralists. The liberal says that pluralism is not an intrinsic good. The existence of multiple ways of life, of a diversity of cultural groups and traditions, does not mean that different ways of life or groups and traditions are themselves goods. For the liberal, a way of life, or a cultural attachment, is good because it is good for the individual. Freedom and flourishing is possible only within a way of life, only with cultural attachments. What is valuable about pluralism is the value that particular ways of life and cultural traditions bring to individuals.

Another way of expressing this point is to say that value pluralism in liberal societies is the natural and inevitable outcome of political institutions that protect individual freedom. It would be a miracle if, under conditions of freedom, all people converged on only one conception of the good life. Liberalism in this sense is the political apparatus that makes possible widespread value pluralism. What exactly does it mean to say that, to the liberal, pluralism is not an intrinsic good? To put the matter rather baldly, it means that if people decide not to carry on a way of life or a culture and rather to abandon it or remake it α and as a consequence the culture were to disappear α there is nothing for the liberal to regret or redress. In fact, were the state to provide positive supports for cultural traditions and ways of life that no longer claimed the allegiance of any members, it would almost certainly be an injustice.

To use another example, when a language dies out because there are no longer any speakers around willing to speak it, the disappearance of that language is nothing to lament from the point of view of liberal political institutions. For the liberal, individuals possess rights. Cultures do not possess rights over their adherents; languages do not possess rights over their speakers. So when Shweder says that no one way of life is the best way of life, the liberal says it is for the individual to decide what way of life, or what combination of ways of life, is best for him or her. In general, I think Shweder's commitment to pluralism so outweighs his commitment to liberalism, that the interests of groups, cultures, ways of life potentially endanger the interests of individuals who inhabit these groups, who bear these cultures, and who pursue these ways of life. Liberalism is committed to ethical individualism. Pluralism, as I understand Shweder, permits ethical collectivism. So even while liberalism is the political framework under which pluralism may thrive, it is still in tension with certain ways of life, with certain forms of pluralism. To my mind, when liberalism and pluralism collide, it is liberalism that should prevail over pluralism. Perhaps Shweder would argue otherwise, but so far as I can tell he does not even appreciate the tension.