

Taylor, Equality, and the Metaphysics of Persons

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Some years ago, shortly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, I spoke with a former tank commander of the Israeli army. This formidable young woman made a case for the right of Israel to remove Arabs from their land that was rooted in an assertion of cultural superiority. Israelis, she claimed, would make productive use of land that Arabs now unproductively occupied. Israeli values were advanced, Western, and democratic. Arabs, in contrast, were ignorant, violent, and primitive.

Such a position might be rebutted in two ways. First, we might challenge the view of Arab culture. Second, we might challenge the relevance of the cultural appraisal to the denial of equal rights. Liberals have often taken the second approach. Kantian liberals often ground equal dignity in a doctrine of persons emphasizing their autonomy and their status as moral agents.

Such responses have become unpopular. Some are suspicious of their metaphysics and universalism. Others claim that Kantian persons have been created in the image of white, European men. Still others have developed views about personal identity that make it difficult to value people independently of valuing their culture. On such views, equal dignity requires recognition of cultures.

Such a claim may carry force to those firmly and antecedently committed to equal dignity, but it is not responsive to my tank commander. Indeed, the unwillingness to distinguish between the worth of persons and the worth of their culture is a key premise of her argument — one that the doctrine of persons is intended to defeat. If we reject such responses, what are we to say to my tank commander?

In “The Politics of Recognition” Charles Taylor explores the possibility that in order to affirm individuals’ equal dignity, we must acknowledge their cultures.¹ He claims that individual identities are socially and dialogically constructed. That is why recognition is important. The views of others may not be the last word concerning our identities, but they are the first word. If so, misrecognition can damage and can be the basis of oppression and domination.

Such observations form the basis of several criticisms of what Taylor terms procedural liberalism. Taylor sees this form of liberalism as rooted in a Kantian view of the self in which the essential feature of the self is autonomy; procedural liberalism requires, in order to respect human dignity, a polity in which each person is able to conceive and pursue his or her own vision of the good.

Taylor argues that while procedural liberalism is committed to the view that different cultures are to be tolerated and respected, it also insists that we must live according to a common set of political rules uniformly applied. This kind of liberalism, he claims, is unable to vary basic rights in order to accommodate the survival requirements of minority cultures. It is, for example, unable to acquiesce to the language laws of Quebec even though these may be a condition of the survival of French language and culture in predominately English Canada.

Nevertheless, Taylor claims, the politics of difference that resists this form of liberalism has not abandoned a commitment to universalism. Its resistance to domination and oppression presupposes a commitment to some ideal of equal dignity. This frames a problem for the final part of Taylor's paper. How is it possible to defend both the idea of equal dignity and the claim that selves are socially and dialogically constituted?

The difficulty is this: If we tell Taylor's story about how selves are constituted, we may find it hard to tell the Kantian story about how selves are valued. Kant's story claims that it is persons, independently of their individual characteristics, that are fundamentally valuable. This view of selves is inconsistent, critics charge, with selves that are socially and dialogically constituted. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, for example, Michael Sandel argues that liberals view culture as a possession of persons, but not as constitutive of persons. Culture, in his language, is mine, but not me. If so, then there must be something that lies beneath and behind my cultural manifestations. Since this something, the person, cannot be described by its uncultured attributes, its qualities must be both abstract and universal.²

The Kantian picture of a self provides a reason for respecting cultural diversity that is independent of our assessment of the worth of different cultures. We respect different cultures because we must respect the cultural choices of autonomous human beings. However, this picture does not secure recognition of other cultures *if* recognition requires a positive substantive appraisal of them. *In the Kantian framework, it is equal respect, not equal recognition, that we owe to other cultures.* Respecting other cultures while not recognizing their worth is, in Taylor's eyes, inconsistent with the view that selves are socially and dialogically formed. If I am dialogically and socially formed, respecting me, but not my culture, may not be possible. The social construction of identity thus seems to undermine the Kantian basis for respecting persons and their cultures.

Suppose we agree that human beings are culturally constituted. Suppose that this claim is linked to the claim that some cultures are superior to others. Insofar as people are in fact constituted by their cultures, should we not conclude, with my tank commander, that the demand for equal recognition is simply wrong, that people are not, in any morally relevant sense, equal, and that this judgment should be reflected in our political culture. Arguments for socially constructed selves, linked to objectivist views of cultural appraisal, are easily made into arguments against equal dignity. That such arguments are so far infrequent suggests that we may be living on the cultural capital of Kantian views.

Taylor briefly considers one popular solution to this dilemma. Perhaps we can know that all cultures are equal because we know that all standards for appraising cultures are equally arbitrary. This solution is rejected because it makes the equality of cultures true *a priori*, but in doing so it denies what equal recognition demands: a positive affirmation of the worth of other cultures based on a considered appraisal of them. At the same time, to judge other cultures simply by appealing to the standards inherent in our own is clearly question begging and parochial. Thus, it seems we will need to provide grounds for valuing other cultures that meet three conditions: First, there must be standards of worth by means of which we can assess

the merits of cultures. Second, these standards of worth cannot be merely those of some particular culture. Third, judgments of the worth of other cultures must be rooted in real and studied assessments.

Taylor has by now reformulated the issue of the basis of equal dignity into a question something like this:

How may A, a person embedded in culture, C, come to recognize the worth of culture D (and pursuantly provide equal recognition to the members of D) when A is able to judge the worth of D and thus Ds only by appealing to standards of appraisal that are embedded in C where there is no reason to suppose that the standards of C and D will be the same?

Taylor develops two arguments which, in tandem, begin an answer to the question posed.

First, he tries to show how we might make a *prima facie* judgment of the worth of a culture apart from any grasp of, or acceptance of, the standards of cultural appraisal of that culture. We do this by assuming that any culture that has proven durable must have done so in part because it contains something of worth. If so, we can achieve a *prima facie* recognition of the value of that culture without having done the work of making an informed judgment of that culture's worth.

Second, he holds out the possibility that we might eventually develop shared standards for appraising diverse cultures. We are offered, without much argument, a "Gadamerian" hope of fused horizons.

These arguments provide a plausible answer to a question something like this: Why should members of culture C expect to find it worth while to study the culture of people who are not members of C? The answer is that there are reasons to suppose that we will find something of worth there even if we must also expand our horizons to see it. This seems right and reasonable, and I do not wish to trivialize this conclusion. It provides one answer as to why we should favor multiculturalism in various curricula. But we should remember that this is not an answer to the question that we were working on. We wanted not just an answer to why we should expect to find some value in other cultures, and to why it is worth our time to study them, but an answer to a question about the basis of equal dignity. We needed that because the traditional liberal story has been rejected in favor of a view that selves could not be disentangled from their cultures.

I do not see that an argument capable of sustaining a conclusion of equal dignity has been made. The conclusion we have reached is that there are reasons to suppose that we will find *something of worth* in all cultures that have proven reasonably durable. However, the *something of worth* claim is a stunningly weak form of recognition for other cultures and, pursuantly, a weak form of recognition for their members. It is, after all, consistent with assertions of cultural inferiority. Nothing in this view is inconsistent with my tank commander's view of Arab culture; she, after all, has not claimed that Arab culture is utterly worthless. If we cannot separate judgments about the value of people from appraisals of the value of their culture, the defense of equal dignity requires a stronger conclusion than that we will find something of value in every culture. The conclusion we need is that there are reasons to suppose that we will find all cultures of equal value.

Taylor, however, has not argued for such a conclusion. Moreover, on his assumptions, it is an implausible one. Taylor has claimed that the merits of cultures can be objectively assessed. That such assessments would produce judgments of substantive equality across the board between cultures is as unlikely as, for example, that each NBA season would produce a tie between all of the league's teams.³

One more concern: Taylor's approach to the problem of recognition may involve an implicit fatalism about the way in which we are embedded in our cultures, one which is in tension with his hope for fused horizons. Consider two functions that cultural appraisal might have. First, it might serve a *comparative function*. We might use judgments about the merits of various cultures to order them from better to worse. Second, it might serve an *adoptive function*. We might appraise cultures in order to consider adopting some of their practices or standards of appraisal. Taylor's argument is developed in a way that emphasizes the comparative function. He is concerned with recognition. Even his discussion of the Gadamerian fusion of horizons suggests that we are not fusing cultures, but ways of judging them (although I doubt that such a distinction could be maintained). Why not emphasize the appraisal of culture as part of a process of collective or individual growth, of seeking the best?

Perhaps one reason for allowing the comparative question to have the upper hand over the adoptive question is a suppressed assumption that we are embedded in our cultures in a way that is difficult to change. We are our culture in such a way that our only response to encountering a superior culture would be a loss of dignity rather than a possibility of enhancement of life by learning something new, growing, and changing. There is something right about this. Identities are formed by culture, and identities are not the sorts of things that are changed like coats. Something about our self worth is likely to depend on the recognition of our culture. But people do change. Cultures do learn from one another. Identities do evolve. Neither our cultures or ourselves are so fixed that only issues of comparison and of recognition are important. Thus, we need to recognize the point of both the *comparative* question and the *adoptive* question. Moreover, to the degree that we can emphasize the importance of learning and growing by considering the practices and values of other cultures, to that degree can we be liberated from the need to defend what is ours, rather than what is best, I wonder if we might not profit more from a politics of possibility than a politics of identity. Perhaps Taylor's framing of the problem of identity and recognition gives in too much to fatalism about identities.

I am suspicious of Taylor's framing of the problem in another way. In contrast to the picture painted by Taylor and Sandel, most modern liberals tend to frame their characterization of persons in terms of the possession of certain human capacities, but wish to avoid Kantian metaphysics. Rawls, for example, claims that people possess two moral powers: a capacity for a conception of the good, and a capacity for justice.⁴ While these capacities are viewed as universally possessed, this claim seems an empirical claim more than an affirmation of Kantian metaphysics. Consider how problematic it would be to deny that people have these capacities. Many will argue that often the *characterizations* of these capacities are far from

universal. Perhaps they express the culture of white European men. But few who make these arguments are likely to conclude that only white European men have such moral powers. To say that is seemingly to agree with doctrines that we had hoped were long dead — that some people are less than fully human because they lack basic moral capacities.

Perhaps then what is wanted is a different specification of these capacities, one that recognizes that they can be instantiated differently in different cultures. Perhaps not. Nevertheless, my discussion of Taylor should suggest the considerable difficulty in abandoning the Kantian discourse, rather than in reconstructing it. Viewing these Kantian capacities as capacities capable of instantiation in different ways also suggests that we do not need to view persons as the “chooser behind the choice.” We may recognize that people are socially formed, and view them as persons nonetheless.

In making this point, it is also important to note that characterizations of human nature are never fully empirical. Nor are they appropriately made apart from a moral context. In characterizing human nature, we are, in part, picking out traits that are morally central given a background moral theory and an assumed context to which this moral theory applies. If so, we might claim, as does Rawls, that our talk about persons and their moral powers is, first and foremost, talk about the basis of equal citizenship, and that we may, along with this, recognize the situatedness of selves in other moral contexts. Then we would be developing what Rawls calls a political conception of the self.

Pursuantly, I wonder whether it is not a mistake to assimilate the question of self identity to the question of the nature of persons. We might distinguish the question “What am I as a citizen?” from the larger question “Who am I?” Insofar as we value equal dignity, the first question seems to call for a universalistic answer. “I am a person, a object of equal dignity,” counts as one. The second question seems to call for a particularistic specification, one that will recognize my cultural embeddedness in my own unique way. These questions are entangled. I cannot be a person without being a particular person. It is thus difficult to specify what it is to be a person without introducing culturally specific characterizations. Nevertheless, if, at the end, there are still two questions, it may be a mistake to treat the claim that I am culturally and dialogically formed as inconsistent with a suitably pliable and non-metaphysical account of personhood. If it turns out that other accounts of equal human dignity fail, we have some incentive to return to such an option. Moreover, a non-metaphysical account, one which takes careful note of the moral purposes it is intended to serve, is less likely to be over-generalized into moral contexts into which it does not fit. And we will be less likely to confuse our current characterizations of such selves with timeless traits. In short, such a view of persons may be able to accommodate both the communitarian who wants a situated self, and the critical worry that Kantian selves privilege some over others.

Conclusions: I do not believe that we can succeed in reconciling equal human dignity with socially constructed selves if we are required to abandon even a minimalist view of the moral importance of persons. We will give the game to my

tank commander. But we can have a view of persons that accommodates much of what its critics have asserted against it. Such a conception, developed for political purposes, would have some of the following features:

1. It would emphasize those human characteristics that are important to equal citizenship. It would represent itself as a political characterization of the self, as a picture of how citizens view themselves in their role of citizens, but also as consistent with the view that people have thicker identities.
2. It would view the capacities that characterize personhood as variably instantiated through different cultures, and it would view persons as differentially characterizable within different comprehensive doctrines.
3. It would regard people as having situated identities, but would resist a fatalistic characterization of this situatedness.

Finally, I think we need to strike a balance that leans more towards viewing multiculturalism more as a politics of possibility than as a politics of recognition. We should work to see the other, and the appraisal of the other's culture along with our own, more as an opportunity to learn and grow than as a threat to the worth of our identity. If we can tell ourselves that our equality as citizens depends more on our being persons than on the worth of our cultures, this may be a little easier.

1. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

2. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 55.

3. There are lines of argument worth exploring that might permit a move from *something of worth* to *equal worth*. One such argument would hold that once some threshold of worth has been reached a judgment of equal value is warranted. Rawls makes an argument like this in order to reconcile the equal worth of persons with empirical variations on the criteria for personhood. He uses an analogy to college admission where every freshman is equally a freshman regardless of variation in SAT scores or high school grades. (See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 504-12.) Another strategy is to claim that while we might make comparisons between different aspects of different cultures, there are no rational grounds for making global comparisons. Thus once a culture is found to have something of value, there are no grounds for holding it to be inferior or superior to any other culture.

4. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).