

Liberalism, Multiculturalism, and Education: Is There a Fit?

Stacy Smith
Cornell University

INTRODUCTION

Raging debate over multiculturalism has permeated virtually every facet of academic endeavor. Appropriately, political philosophers and philosophers of education are as embroiled in these discussions as any other academicians. Theoretical traditions are being reexamined in light of demands for group representation in political participation and resource distribution. Scholarly attention to the "recognition" and "difference"¹ of cultural groups suggests that a multicultural agenda must address histories of exclusion and domination. Multiculturalism aspires to replace discriminatory practices with equal status relationships in an inclusionary public realm. For political philosophers this agenda raises the question: What theoretical orientation is most hospitable to the ideals of multiculturalism? For philosophers of education the question becomes: What educational practices are consistent with a multicultural public ethos?

While many traditions are drawn upon in multicultural discourse, this paper will explore the fruitfulness of a marriage between liberal theory and multiculturalism.² First, I will address a few standard objections to liberal theory that are particularly salient to the multicultural debate. Next, I will discuss some virtues of liberal theory that make it an attractive partner for multiculturalism. Finally, I will explore implications of liberal tenets for multicultural education. I will conclude with potential problems within a marriage between liberal theory and multiculturalism.

STANDARD OBJECTIONS TO LIBERAL THEORY

Possibly the most frequent critique of modern liberalism is that of abstract individualism. Detractors contend that the liberal emphasis on individual rights is non-relational, failing to recognize the essential embeddedness of persons in social contexts.³ Accordingly, the role of culture is seen to be subsumed under a definition of self preoccupied by individual interests and autonomous free choice.

In response to these charges, Kymlicka claims that, within modern liberalism, people are not abstract individuals, but *social beings*, whose essential interest is in living a good life. He contends that what is important for liberals is not abstracting the individual from society, but providing social conditions under which people can choose their essential good.⁴ It is this provision of social conditions, by way of a formulation of the basic structure of society, that Rawls is concerned with in positing the concept of "justice as fairness." Rawls's idea of justice as the first virtue of political society does not necessarily abstract the individual from his/her social context by ruling out important virtues such as bonding, love, and identification.⁵ Accordingly, he refers to society, not as a union of individuals, but as a "*union of social unions*." He also insists that justice is not a comprehensive metaphysical ideal, but a political conception appropriate for a partitioning of societal realms, whereby justice may be most appropriate for the public realm, but an ideal such as loyalty or caring might be better suited for other "nonpublic" realms.⁶

An emphasis on the social conditions which necessitate a political conception of justice indicates that modern liberals are not so naive as to consider the "self" as atomistic or existing prior to social relationships. But, aside from abstract individualism and of equal concern to multiculturalism,

modern liberalism may also seem vulnerable to charges of Eurocentrism. Critics argue that, both historically and metaphysically, liberalism rests on particular notions of the self and society that pass as universal in the interests of Western cultural imperialism.⁷

Yet, modern liberals have taken great pains to separate a political conception of justice from metaphysical foundationalism. Rawls's move -- from conceiving of justice as an overarching moral or philosophical ideal to grounding it as a workable political principle for constitutional regimes -- allows for the concept to be claimed from within many doctrines, rather than being imperialistically imposed from a Eurocentric vantage point. Rawls argues that this capacity for different traditions to share a political conception of justice as consistent with their own ideals augments both social unity and stability.⁸ Hence, Rawls's conception of justice as fairness addresses both charges of universalism and doctrinal imperialism.⁹

Associated with charges of Eurocentrism are more pragmatic concerns that the liberty and equality of opportunity espoused by liberals have never been realized in American institutions. Such concerns oversimplify the complex relationship between political ideals and contextual implementation and mistakenly place fault with the ideals. As Parens asserts: "Our failure is not in adopting such principles but in failing to live up to them."¹⁰ The argument that liberal tenets have never been entirely realized is not a sufficient reason to abort the project. The following reconciliation of the ideals of liberalism and multiculturalism represents an attempt to address both theoretical discrepancies and structural inequities in our current sociopolitical context.

ATTRactions OF LIBERAL THEORY FOR MULTICULTURALISM

Multiculturalism's foci on the politics of recognition and difference seem to require at least two things of liberal theory: first, an acknowledgment of the importance of culture to the exercise of individual rights; and second, protection of many different conceptions of the good for individuals and groups alike. Modern liberal theory addresses these concerns by positing an impartial or neutral public sphere for the adjudication of justice claims, basic rights of individuals that take into account the importance of cultural membership, and necessary conditions for the examination and pursuit of various cultural goods.

Critics charge that liberal neutrality and impartiality neglect, or even disallow, certain conceptions of the good and that public/private distinctions maintain relations of domination. But liberal theorists are not blind to these issues. More recent works of Rawls and Kymlicka address some of the weaknesses within modern liberal theory that are of preeminent concern to multiculturalism. Whereas Rawls's work informs the relationship between difference and the public sphere, Kymlicka's work illuminates the relationship between the individual and his/her cultural background.

TOLERANCE FOR DIVERSITY

The liberal ideal of neutrality allows for tolerance of many different visions of the good life. Liberals acknowledge that modern constitutional regimes are comprised of different groups with varying notions of the good life, which are often conflicting and sometimes incommensurable. Hence, public agreement regarding the good is not sought. Instead, liberal political theorists seek to provide grounds which legitimate the power of the state, or the public, in mediating conflicting interests. The project of legitimation is generally conceived of in terms of rules for participation in public discussions in which legitimate political decisions are made.

Rawls's offers the idea of a free-floating, overlapping consensus to describe what can be talked about, how it should be talked about, and the level of agreement that should be sought in liberal public discourse. He is interested in providing some grounds for stability and unity among the disparate groups of the state.¹¹ Thus, his overlapping consensus is intended to narrow the range of disagreements between different groups who support multiple visions of the good. But he does not

seek to get rid of disagreement by searching for deeper commonalities which might subsume or ignore differences. Where Ackerman has been criticized for advocating silence surrounding disagreements,¹² Rawls suggests instead:

that questions are not removed from the political agenda, so to speak, solely because they are a source of conflict. We appeal instead to a political conception of justice to distinguish between those questions that can be reasonably removed from the political agenda and those that cannot. Some questions still on the agenda will be controversial, at least to some degree; this is normal with political issues.¹³

Rawls's reassurance that conflictual issues may remain on the table is important for protecting the degree of diversity, and possibly incommensurability, suggested by the politics of difference. But his emphasis on what *can* be removed is still somewhat troubling. Can we really expect the dialogic process to be so straightforward that we will reasonably agree to remove such weighty issues that those remaining will only cause "some degree" of conflict?

Benhabib is concerned about a model of discourse that takes some conceptions of the good life and privatizes them by removing them from the table of public debate. Benhabib concedes that public conversations need to be *constrained*, but disagrees that any substantive issues should be beyond the realm of discussion. She advocates a model of practical discourse ethics in which "no issues of debate and no conceptions of the good life are precluded from being voiced in the public arena of the liberal state."¹⁴

Benhabib's concerns are important to the multicultural agenda for a number of reasons. She is particularly suspicious of two tendencies within liberalism: the ideal of impartiality and the insistence on strict separation between public and private spheres. Benhabib is uncomfortable with impartiality because it denies the essential embeddedness of the self in social relationships. In addition, Benhabib's suspicion of the public/private distinction is firmly rooted in a feminist critique of historical exclusion of women from the public sphere. Benhabib asserts that it is too convenient to label issues as "private" when they are uncomfortable to discuss and/or reflect oppressive power relations.¹⁵

Strike's conception of the overlapping consensus presents a more realistic picture of the depth of struggle surrounding not only how to engage in public discourse, but what can be talked about. Like Rawls, he suggests that differences cannot be ignored nor subsumed under commonalty. But Strike seems more willing to account for the importance of what Rawls would label "private" concerns. For Strike, substantive discourse is required, surrounding what can be agreed upon given the depth of diverse outlooks.

The question is not "On what do we all currently agree that can serve as a basis of political discussion?" Nor is it an answer to the question, "What can we agree on once we have bracketed such differences as religion, gender, race and ethnicity?" It is more like "What can we agree on, given ample time for debate, that allows us to meet in the commons and that does not require us to abandon or bracket those background convictions on which we differ?" This means that the construction of a fabric of public reason, of a commons, requires *real arguments between real interlocutors with real substantive moral convictions* [emphases added].¹⁶

One strength of Strike's interpretation of the overlapping consensus for multiculturalism is his acknowledgment that actual people with deeply held beliefs will be coming to the table to engage in substantive discussion. This emphasis is more consistent with the rootedness of social identities suggested by Benhabib and Young and suggests a more meaningful model of public discourse than that of Rawls's -- one capable of grappling with issues that are controversial, rather than merely pushing them aside.

Strike's willingness to grant that convictions accompany individuals into the commons seems to move away from the strict separation of public/private and political/non-political apparent in Rawls's work.¹⁷ Rawls's insistence that associational ties are voluntary and apolitical seems antithetical to the politics of recognition and difference. Commonly held notions regarding the

interrelationships between culture, socialized identities (ethnicity, gender) and ascribed biological attributes (race, sex) suggest that cultural associations are not always voluntary. Nor, if one believes that selves are socialized or dialogically constituted beings, does it seem likely that either associational or affectional ties can be left at the door of the political arena. This separation of public versus nonpublic identity in Rawls's theory of justice raises questions about where culture fits in. Is culture essential to the equal rights of the individual as a basic or primary good? Or is it on the same level as voluntary associations? Resolution of such questions is crucial to the discourse between multiculturalism and liberal theory. It is precisely this weighty issue that Kymlicka addresses.

CULTURE AS A PRIMARY GOOD

A large part of Kymlicka's project in *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* is to reconcile modern liberal theory with the notion of culture as a primary good. Kymlicka bases the importance of this project around the protection of minority rights -- particularly within the Canadian context -- on both philosophical and pragmatic grounds. He acknowledges that for liberalism to remain a dynamic and robust political philosophy, it must respond to eminent and immanent concerns regarding its supposed lack of theoretical attention to the relationship between individual and community.

From without liberalism, critiques of abstract individualism articulated by feminists and communitarians require liberals to demonstrate at least a "basic understanding of the importance of cultural membership."¹⁸ From within, insufficient attention to culture raises problems when balancing equality of opportunity with minority rights. Kymlicka suggests that this inherent tension can be addressed in one of two ways: one can discard liberalism as incomplete and inhospitable to minority rights, or one can "attempt to reconcile minority rights and liberal equality."¹⁹ He undertakes such a project of reconciliation, arguing that this endeavor also makes sense on pragmatic political grounds in terms of appealing to political decision makers who have power over issues of group rights.

Kymlicka asserts that defending minority rights within liberalism requires two things: 1) showing that cultural membership has a more important status in liberal thought than is explicitly recognized; and 2) showing that the members of minority cultures may face particular kinds of disadvantages with respect to the good of cultural membership which require and justify minority rights.²⁰ For our purposes, we will focus on his exploration of the first provision -- an argument for the reconciliation between modern liberal theories of justice, and substantive recognition of the importance of cultural membership.

Kymlicka grounds his discussion within the parameters of Rawls's conception of the "liberties of equal citizenship." He acknowledges that Rawls's insistence on the priority of liberties of citizenship appears to make his theory of justice incompatible with minority rights. But he pursues *why* Rawls places such great emphasis on these liberties in the first place, suggesting that the salient point for emphasis is that "the freedom to form and revise our *beliefs* about value is a crucial precondition for pursuing our essential interest in leading a good life" [emphasis added]. Crucial prerequisites to guarantee this freedom are posited as 1) the social conditions to make intelligent decisions about value; and 2) self-respect as a precondition "of any rational plan of life."²¹

Within this framework, Kymlicka makes his crucial move to demonstrate the inextricable links between cultural membership and the liberties of citizenship. Since the work of J.S. Mill, the importance of free exchange and debate surrounding the good life has been a cornerstone of modern liberalism. Kymlicka follows Rawls's lead in releasing this quest from any comprehensive moral ideals. He argues:

Liberals should be concerned with the fate of cultural structures, not because they have some moral status of their own, but because it's only through having a rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the options available to them, and intelligently examine their value.²²

Kymlicka suggests here that culture is crucial to and necessary for individual freedom. He argues that we must look more closely at where beliefs, self-respect, and ideas about value come from and concludes:

The decision about how to lead our lives must ultimately be ours alone, but this decision is always a matter of selecting what we believe to be most valuable from the various options available, selecting from a *context of choice* which provides us with different ways of life.

This is important because the range of options is determined by our cultural heritage [emphases added].²³

Kymlicka goes on to assert that the relationship between cultural membership and self-respect urges parties to "original position" to grant cultural membership status as a primary good.²⁴ Hence, in his conception, culture is not merely associational nor voluntary, but fundamental to individual well-being and the exercise of basic rights of equality and liberty.

At the same time that Kymlicka makes a case for the importance of cultural membership, he continues to stress liberal choice.²⁵ By emphasizing both cultural membership and cultural choice, Kymlicka is simultaneously advocating and downplaying culture's importance -- it is necessary for the individual to make choices, hence the individual can choose to opt out of his or her cultural membership. In accordance with deontological liberalism, the examination of value is freed from particular ends, but not from any standards of relative worth. Cultural choice is implicitly valued over cultural reproduction.

The tension between cultural choice versus cultural reproduction, found within both multiculturalism and liberalism, indicates a key difference between conditions that allow freedom to *examine* the good and conditions that allow freedom to *pursue* the good. Kymlicka's argument suggests that, for examination of the good, culture is essential as a context for choice; for pursuit of the good, culture must be viewed as an object of choice. Before exploring what this tension means for the relationship between multiculturalism and liberalism, let us see how it plays out in the arena of education.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND CONDITIONS FOR CHOICE

Many multicultural educators are concerned with students' capacities to move beyond their cultural boundaries to a position of cultural choice.²⁶ However, according to one multiculturalist critique, students are not currently free to pursue cultural choice. Because society and schools are dominated by mainstream or Eurocentric interests, one notion of the good life prevails over alternatives. The crux of the problem is identified in terms of *representation* of various cultures within the educational process. The argument for representation proceeds as follows. Without accurate and adequate portrayal of marginalized groups' experiences, free choice is disallowed for two reasons. First, omitted or distorted information affects students self-esteem, having negative consequences for academic success.²⁷ Second, such alienation from schooling becomes a vicious cycle during which marginalized students are denied access to "high status" knowledge, which may afford them future opportunities.²⁸ Thus, students from certain groups do not have equal opportunity to pursue their vision of the good.

The first issue has to do with representation of alternative conceptions of the good and primarily impacts students ability to *examine* their own conception of the good. The second issue has to do with access to educational resources to enable students equal opportunity to *pursue* a vision of the good which they see as most valuable. Multiculturalists are concerned with reforming educational institutions to address these inequities. In terms of representation, for the liberal conditions of free choice to be met, it seems that students need two main things: 1) the *means* to make intelligent choices, and 2) various *ends* to choose from.

In terms of means, remembering Rawls's and Kymlicka's emphasis on the importance of self-respect for determining value, recognition becomes essential for free choice. According to multiculturalists, students need to see their cultural selves reflected in schools in order for self-esteem, motivation, and academic success to increase. Places to see such reflection include content, approaches to knowledge, teaching styles, and personnel. Accurate cultural representations in these areas will improve conditions for students to gain skills to make informed choices between cultural goods. In terms of ends, accurate cultural representation becomes a requirement for equal consideration of different conceptions of the good. Portraying various visions of the good expands the options of choice for all students, not only those from culturally marginalized backgrounds.²⁹

Is accurate representation of groups enough to secure the conditions for examination and pursuit of the good? For liberals, the principle of *equal protection* has been a primary tool for providing free conditions under which different views of the good can be pursued. However, in a society where one cultural group is dominant, treating everyone the same may not be an execution of justice nor fairness. For example, success demands sacrifices from marginalized groups that it does not require of the mainstream group. Fordham's research suggests that "African American students who become high academic achievers resolve the conflict caused by the interaction of their personal cultural knowledge with the knowledge and norms within schools by becoming "raceless" or by "ad hocing a culture."³⁰ If, in fact, enculturation predisposes students toward different approaches to learning, equal conditions would require *different treatment*, because treating all groups the same systematically disadvantages some.³¹ Hence, equal opportunity may require certain rights and protections for students from minority groups. To be consistent with liberalism's own principles, treating students equally may require treating them differently.

Multiculturalists' advocacy of cultural representation and special status treatment suggests the importance of recognition to making choices about the good life. But this emphasis on culture is still undermined by the insistence that students can and should choose whatever vision of the good life seems most valuable. A deeper notion of culture would limit one's ability to forfeit cultural identity, but would be more consistent with arguments for the rootedness of selves and the importance of culture as a context or screen for making choices about other, perhaps less weighty, goods. At this point, let us return to the theoretical realm to explicate the tensions between liberalism and multiculturalism that we have seen played out in the educational arena.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH A MARRIAGE BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

The liberal emphasis on conditions to examine and pursue one's ends is problematic for three reasons when considering cultural goods. First, insistence on a *political* identity which values basic *individual* equality and liberty may pose problems for groups whose comprehensive doctrines place more value on a *social self*. Second, the notion of individual choice assumes that a culture, or parts of it, can be forfeited for something else that is more valuable. This assumption undermines the idea of a culture as a coherent whole. Choice is also at odds with the importance of culture in identity formation, as asserted by many multiculturalists. For someone like Asante who emphasizes "psychological and cultural dislocation," the inextricable linkage between a person's cultural affiliation and psychological well being seems to minimize choice surrounding cultural goods.³²

Third, the notion of free choice presumes some level of autonomy; it seems to be based on the assumption that people have definite interests of their own that can be clearly delineated from other people's interests. Kymlicka and Rawls attempt to defend liberalism against charges of abstract individualism by stressing social conditions for choice. But, continued division between public and nonpublic identities, and the abstraction required for parties to the original position are problematic. Are liberals still abstracting individual interests out of social contexts in ways that do not mesh with identity formation and social interaction?

All of these questions revolve around key relationships between self, culture and choice. For a lasting relationship between multiculturalism and liberalism to be forged, such questions need to be resolved. Further exploration of the relationship between individuals and culture, and of congruence between substantive diversity and the public sphere, will help to illuminate these issues.

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1. See, for example, Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
 2. Some multicultural educators appeal to postmodernism, critical theory, and feminism as theoretical frameworks for multicultural critique. See James Banks, "The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education," *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 5 (1993): 4-14. Communitarianism would provide another possible point of departure. For our purposes, liberalism will be considered on its own merits, without an explication of the shortcomings of alternative theoretical orientations.
 3. See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992), 68-88 and Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 96-121.
 4. Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15-17.
 5. John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 241.
 6. These arguments are made in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," 238-41.
 7. Joshua Parens, "Multiculturalism and the Problem of Particularism," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 1 (March 1994): 172.
 8. Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," 249-50.
 9. Another basis for the charge that liberalism is Eurocentric revolves around history, ethnicity, and geography. Arguments that liberalism is Eurocentric because of who "invented" it gloss over the cultural diffusion of ideas and neglect the emancipatory potential of liberal ideology.
 10. Parens, "Multiculturalism and the Problem of Particularism," 180.
 11. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 134.
 12. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 95-99. See Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
 13. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 151.
 14. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 97.
 15. *Ibid.*, 95-104. Young shares Benhabib's concern with the ideal of impartiality and public/private distinctions. She argues that "this conception of the public has resulted in the exclusion of persons and aspects of persons from public life." Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 120.
 16. Kenneth Strike, "Discourse Ethics and Restructuring" *Philosophy of Education* 1994, ed. Michael Katz (*Philosophy of Education*, 1995), 16.
 17. Rawls refers to associational, personal, and familial relationships as "nonpolitical." He says that associational ties are voluntary, and that familial and personal ties are affectional (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 137). Thus, he views these relationships as constitutive of one's "nonpublic identity." He contends that, even if a person experiences an earth shattering level of change, his/her political identity remains unaffected (Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," 242).
 18. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, 154.
 19. *Ibid.*, 153.
 20. *Ibid.*, 162.

21. Ibid., 163-64.
22. Ibid., 165.
23. Ibid., 164-65.
24. Ibid., 166. One problem with presuming that parties to the original position will recognize the importance of cultural membership to self-respect is that people from dominant groups often do not have an awareness of their own cultural membership. For example, white people will insist "I don't have a race."
25. See Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, 11-19.
26. For instance, Banks talks about enabling students to "cross cultural borders freely." See Banks, "The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education," 8.
27. Taylor argues that mis- or non-recognition may actually be harmful to identity development (Taylor, *Multiculturalism*). Some multiculturalists share this analysis, citing lack of self-esteem as related to lack of recognition in Eurocentric schools. See Molefi Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education," *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991): 170-80.
28. See Jeanie Oakes, Adam Gamoran, and Reba Page, "Curriculum Differentiation: Opportunities, Outcomes, and Meanings," in *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, ed. Philip Jackson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 570-608.
29. Assertion of the need to represent cultural worldviews to give different alternatives of the good life can be problematic to the extent that it is assumed that specific cultures/groups share one idea of the good life. Such a presumption raises issues of homogeneity, authenticity, and essentialism. Who is to say what the fundamental good is for a certain group?
30. Banks, "The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education," 7.
31. Research on cognitive and learning styles, for example, indicates that teaching heterogeneous groups of students requires a broad array of pedagogical techniques to appeal to all students' best modes of learning.
32. See Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education," 170-80.

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