

Education and the Ethics of Respect

Randall Curren
University of Rochester

Robert Kunzman's essay opens by sketching and rejecting a familiar argument for multicultural education. I will call it the *Social Harmony Argument* :

P1: Multicultural education fosters mutual understanding (implicit).

P2: "[M]utual understanding fosters social harmony."

P3: Fostering social harmony is "vital" (implicit).

C: Therefore, providing multicultural education that fosters mutual understanding is vital. (In Kunzman's words, more or less, "mutual understanding is a vital goal of civic/multicultural education.")¹

Kunzman rejects this argument. He contests the truth of the premise that "mutual understanding fosters social harmony," on the grounds that "sometimes" greater understanding makes people "less inclined...to co-exist peacefully." This is an insubstantial objection. In order seriously to contest a claim of the form "A fosters (or causes) B," it is not enough to point out that there are "some" cases in which A occurs and B does not. For example, the claim that "smoking causes lung cancer" is not refuted by the existence of some smokers with healthy lungs.

Kunzman goes on to say that the advocacy of multicultural education "is more appropriately grounded" in the concept of mutual respect, and the proposition that "[mutual] understanding is a necessary, but not sufficient, element of mutual respect." He would presumably agree with the further claim that mutual respect is a necessary condition for social harmony, since he goes on to contrast mutual respect with "dismissive antipathy" and "ignorant contempt." What would follow is that mutual understanding is a *necessary condition* for social harmony. This creates a problem for Kunzman, because the *Social Harmony Argument* could be predicated on that claim as easily as the premise he rejects. So whatever else might be true of Kunzman's own argument, he does not succeed in showing that it provides a stronger foundation for multicultural education than the *Social Harmony Argument* does. What, then, is Kunzman's argument? In outline, it seems to go like this:

P1: Ethical education should be designed to promote interpersonal respect throughout society (implicit).

P2: To respect a person, one must "strive to understand her identity."

P3: To understand a person's identity, one "needs as full a picture as possible of her ethical framework."

P4: To have a full picture of the ethical frameworks of people throughout society, one must undertake "a wide-ranging consideration of what forms the identities of others," especially "ethnicity...religion, gender, and sexuality."

C1: Ethical education must therefore engage students in "a wide-ranging consideration of what forms the identities of others," especially "ethnicity... religion, gender, and sexuality."

C2: Ethical education must therefore [in order to promote respect and the understanding it requires] be multicultural.

In constructing this argument, Kunzman has borrowed heavily from Tom Hill's Tanner Lectures, but he introduces innovations that result in an argument for multicultural education that is weaker than Hill's.

The second premise, that to respect a person one must strive to understand her identity, is quite problematic. It is problematic, first, because it imputes too much content to the concept of respect. Kunzman relies on Stephen Darwall's work on the nature of respect, but overlooks the latter's remark that what (recognition) respect "requires as appropriate is not a matter of general agreement, for this is just the question of what our moral obligations or duties to other persons consist in."² The examples that Kunzman discusses do not make what is required by respect any clearer, and they do not lend much support to his specific suggestion that the amount of understanding required by or for respect varies as a function of context. An employer must decide whether to accommodate an employee's religious requirement "to pray at appointed hours," and Kunzman says that in this instance respect imposes "greater requirements for mutual understanding." If he means that respect requires the display of a sympathetic or "understanding" attitude or manner, then I quite agree, but if he means that the employer will make the right decision only if she has an understanding of the employee's specific religion — as Kunzman's argument requires — then I see no reason to agree. Why would it not be enough for her to understand that what is at stake is the requirements of a person's religion? The idiosyncrasies of the religion in question don't seem to matter, and knowing about them would not enable the employer to resolve the matter more ethically.

Kunzman also overlooks Hill's remarks about the limited content of his modified Kantian account of respect. Hill says such things as that we must respect persons "as the particular individuals they are, not merely as fellow members of common humanity," but he also notes that

What mutual respect requires... must itself be worked out, in many-sided conversations, in which the biases of each of us are amply exposed to the contrary perspectives of others.... Given cultural diversity, the lesson to be drawn... is that we cannot have proper respect and work out what [respect] requires in particular contexts unless we try to think from an inclusive human perspective, with moral humility, willingness to listen, to rethink, at times to suspend judgment, and often to compromise.³

Hill does go on to say that in order to "fully respect people of diverse cultural backgrounds" we need to make a "serious effort" to understand their cultures, and he advocates multicultural higher education as a means to facilitating such effort, on the rationale that "respect calls for us to confront our biases" and for "modesty and caution to curb our arrogant bias in judging others whom we hardly understand."⁴ Hill's argument for multicultural education is, in other words, that it is needed to overcome bias and ethical narrowness, to prevent unfair judgments of others, and to prepare us to be open-minded in collective reasoning — to be open-minded in undertaking the conversations through which the requirements of mutual respect in our society "must... be worked out."

In Rawlsian terms, Hill argues for multicultural education as a preparation for accepting the burdens of public reason — for accepting the possibility that one is in error and that on some matters reasonable people will disagree, and for framing one's own reasoned contributions to collective deliberations in a way that recognizes others may not share one's own ethical framework. Kunzman seems to depart from this, and lays a heavier burden on the concept of respect itself, in asserting that, "Unless we understand the ethical frameworks that inform deliberation about living together in society, we have not met the requirements of respect." Perhaps I am misreading this (I assure you, I *am* making every reasonable effort to understand it), but it seems to abandon the idea of public reason; it seems to tolerate contributions to public deliberation that rest essentially in citizens' diverse and sometimes idiosyncratic ethical schemes, and to put a corresponding burden on everyone to make all necessary efforts to understand all of those schemes. Those who care about making room for diversity, or respecting a person's right to pursue her own projects, would be truly horrified by the homogenizing propensities of any educational program that could adequately prepare people to accept and carry this burden.

Kunzman's premise that to respect a person, one must "strive to understand her identity," also seems mistaken in suggesting a more invasive stance towards others than I would have thought respectful, even by American standards, let alone those of cultures that retain a distinction between formal and familiar forms of the second-person pronoun. Kunzman includes "sexuality" and religion among his identity-defining categories. Is it disrespectful to not care, or seek to know, whether one's student or colleague is straight or gay? On the contrary. Some years ago, asked by a student whether he believed in God, Wilfred Sellars complained in response that the question was impertinent. Was he wrong?

Let me close with the observation that even if one granted Kunzman the premise I have been contesting, his conclusions would not follow. His argument is simply not valid. Nor, for that matter, is the *Social Harmony Argument* valid. Both identify ends that might be achieved through multicultural education, but neither establishes that such education is the best means, an essential means, or an acceptable means for achieving the end in question. For all Kunzman says, it might turn out that interpersonal respect could be better promoted by training children to be polite and interested listeners, to make visitors feel welcome, and so on, and by encouraging friendships between children of diverse backgrounds. Kunzman implies at the end of his essay that other approaches to moral education can do no better than promote a form of tolerance compatible with "dismissive antipathy," but his targets there are straw men, and like other theorists who defend a pedagogy of respect by denigrating mere tolerance, he ignores the possibility of putting friendship before conversation. As I have argued elsewhere, we are more likely to lay a foundation for difficult conversations in friendship, than to lay a foundation for friendship in difficult conversations.⁵

1. The conclusion supplied here is not precisely equivalent to what Kunzman actually says, but the argument is so elliptical it is hard to say what reformulations he would offer himself if called upon to articulate it more fully.

2. Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, ed. Robin Dillon (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183.
3. Thomas Hill, Jr., "Respect for Humanity," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 18, ed. Grethe B. Petersen (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997), 27.
4. *Ibid.*, 32, 34.
5. Randall Curren, "Civic Education in the Liberal and Classical Traditions," *The School Field* 13, no. 1/2 (2002): 107-19.