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Philosophy and the Values of a Multicultural Community

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Many philosophers are wary about recent calls for greater cultural diversity in university curricula, especially demands that non-Western traditions and modes of thought be given significant recognition. Philosophy departments are often among the last to institute such changes and to join interdisciplinary efforts at implementing this diversity. But I will argue that attention to multiculturalism should be seen as a boon to philosophy.

Philosophy can come into the educational debate over cultural diversity in two places. One concerns philosophy as a specific intellectual discipline among others, and the way diversity is to be explained, justified, and incorporated within its courses. The other is philosophy as contributing to the overall exploration of the issues of multiculturalism as they apply not only to course content but to the classroom and the university as multiracial and multicultural communities of learning. Important as the first is, we should not confine ourselves to a narrow disciplinary focus but should see philosophy as having its role to play in creating what the recent Carnegie Foundation Report "Campus Life: In Search of Community" expressed as a community which is, among other things, just, caring, open, and civil.¹ Taking this role seriously can also show how philosophy can expand to include issues of race, culture, and ethnicity into many courses in ethics, social, and political philosophy, and perhaps other areas of philosophy as well. I would like to begin such an exploration of philosophy and multicultural community today.

I will discuss three distinct values desirable in a multiracial, multicultural campus. They are: (1) opposition to racism, (2) multiculturalism, (3) sense of community, connection, or common humanity. These values are seldom clearly distinguished, and are often entirely run together, defeating clear thought about the real goals and possibilities of multicultural communities.² Failure to make these distinctions blinds us both to possible tensions among these distinct values and to the raising of the question of how best to realize them all so as to minimize that tension.

1. Opposition to racism: The notion of "racism" is highly charged

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emotionally, and the term is used in contemporary parlance in a number of ways. There has been a well-documented increase in what are unquestionably racist incidents on campus, but also frequent yet more controversial *charges* of racism for any number of remarks and behavior. I want to suggest that the core meaning of "racism" is connected with the *domination or victimization* of some groups by others, and with the notion of the subordinate groups as inferior or less worthy than the dominant group. I will call an act or reaction "racist" if it expresses a notion of a member of a different racial group as being inferior.³

On this view the following phenomena, often called "racist" by many students, are not (necessarily, or usually) racist: (1) Departure from pure meritocratic justice: Affirmative action programs which prefer a minority student with lower test scores to a Caucasian student with higher ones. (2) Minority exclusiveness: Black students sitting together in the college dining room, thereby making it uncomfortable for whites to join them. (3) Stereotyping: A white student's unthinkingly assuming that a Latino student is from a lower socio-economic background than his own.

None of these actions express beliefs of superiority toward other groups; this is why they should not (I suggest) be called "racist." This does not mean that these actions and policies cannot be criticized as violating some other moral value appropriate to multi-racial communities, especially college communities. My point is precisely that there are several values relevant to a multiracial community-values which are distinct from one another.

While all racism is bad, on the definition of racism as dominance-attitude, not all manifestations of racism are *equally* bad. To oversimplify a complex issue here, racist attitudes which lend support to an existing structure of racism in which the possessor of the racist attitude is a member of a dominant group are worse than racist attitudes of a member of a subordinate group toward a member of a dominant group; for the latter do not support an existing structure of domination. For example, beliefs and doctrines of Caucasian inferiority to people of color are genuinely racist and worthy of condemnation. Yet these manifestations of racism toward whites are not *as* bad, dangerous, or condemnable as doctrines of white superiority to people of color (or attitudes expressing those doctrines), since the latter, and not the former, play a role in supporting actual structures of domination. The source of the value asymmetry here is that racism supporting existing subordination invokes and reinforces the social weight of this structure of dominance, bringing it down against its victim, and thus (other things being equal) more deeply shames and harms its victim than does subordinate-to-dominant racism, which does not carry that social and historical resonance. (The different force of the formally similar expressions "honkie" and "nigger" illustrates this point.)⁴

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This asymmetry helps clarify the frequent mutual incomprehension between white and non-white students concerning racism. Many black students tend to think of racism solely as a phenomenon of whites against blacks or other non-whites. White students by contrast tend to equate—and condemn equally—all attitudes of racial insult, exclusion, or differentiation, by any racial group toward any other.

Aside from the point made earlier that some of what these white students call "racism" is not actually racism (according to my account), each group holds part of the truth. The non-white students see that the core and most socially dangerous phenomenon of racism is the actual, historical domination or victimization of one group by another, and attitudes of superiority (whether conscious or not) which directly support that domination. Many white students fail entirely to see this, not acknowledging—or not acknowledging the significance of—continuing subordinate status (in the United States) of people of color.

The white students, on the other hand, are correct to see clearly that *all* manifestations of racial contempt and superiority are worthy of condemnation, precisely because they are the *sorts* of attitudes which do underpin racial subordination. The non-white students' attitude has the effect of entirely letting non-whites off the hook for objectionable attitudes of superiority or contempt toward other groups.⁵

To state briefly what is involved in learning to oppose racism, and in embodying that value in an educational community: There is a philosophical component involved in understanding why racism is wrong, involving among other things learning how racism damages its victims; but learning the psychological, sociological, economic, and historical dynamics of racism and of resistance to it are essential as well. Public condemnation of racism on the campus is also essential.

2. *Multiculturalism*: Like "racism," this is a term of great currency and imprecise usage. I will use it to encompass the following two components: (a) understanding and valuing one's own cultural heritage, and (b) having respect for and interest in the cultural heritage of members of groups other than one's own. Note that condition (b) takes multiculturalism beyond what is often referred to as "cultural pluralism"—a situation in which different groups are each turned inward into their own group, valuing and learning about their own cultural heritage but being indifferent to that of others. While the idea of cultural pluralism perhaps contains the notion of tolerance for and recognition of the right of others to pursue their own cultural exploration and learning, "multiculturalism" as I am understanding it goes beyond this to encompass a positive interest in and respect for other cultures.

Often the initial association with "cultural diversity" or "multiculturalism"—for example when implying a policy to diversify the curriculum—is as (1) giving non-Caucasian students an understanding of

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and validation of their own cultural heritages (and thereby also broadening the sense of inclusion in the university's intellectual enterprise), and (2) expanding Caucasian students' intellectual horizons and reducing their ethnocentrism. Yet these two albeit crucial goals do not comprise the whole of what I mean by "multiculturalism." For in addition, my definition implies that members of *every* group (whites and non-whites alike) be involved in overcoming their own ethnocentrism, one possible curricular implication being that every student ought to study, say, two cultures other than her own.

Bypassing for this short presentation further difficulties regarding the definition of multiculturalism (e.g., what constitutes a "culture," which cultures should count for curricular and non-curricular attention, how respect for different cultures is consistent with criticism of them), I want to focus on how what I have called *multiculturalism* is a distinct value from what I have called *opposition to racism*, yet how both are essential in a multiracial community. First, each involves looking at the same group through distinct lenses. From the viewpoint of anti-racism, groups are divided into dominant and subordinate. From an anti-racist perspective, to study for example Native Americans or African-Americans involves looking at the way these groups have been oppressed, undermined, damaged, and the like by white America, at the beliefs and policies which have supported this mistreatment, and at the subordinate

group's resistance to this subordination. It is to study subordinate groups primarily in their role as victims and resisters.

By contrast, to learn about cultural groups from a multicultural perspective involves studying the group's customs, rituals, language, systems of thought and religion, forms of cultural expression, accomplishments and contributions to the wider societies of which they are a part, and the like. The contrast resides not so much in distinct aspects of the groups in question focused on by the multicultural *versus* the anti-racist perspective; for subordinate groups' forms of cultural expressions are often so intimately bound up with their oppressed status and history that no simple delineation is possible. (Consider for example Afro-American music, Jewish humor.) The point is that both anti-racism and multiculturalism bring an analytical perspective on the study of cultural groups that the other lacks.

"Multiculturalism" is the preferred rubric of many educators.⁶ But multiculturalism without anti-racism projects a world (or society) of cultural groups, each with its own way of life, forms of cultural expression, accomplishments and the like, all existing on something like an equal level. While this sense of equality—to teach and learn informed respect for every culture—may be appropriately (if only roughly) seen as an appropriate aspiration taken purely by itself, it obscures the fact that in our world and our society some of these cultures have been

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subordinated, undermined, and mistreated by other ones. It is as if one could just affirm that each group is equal, without taking into account the fact that in the world they are not treated as equal; it is this lack of equality that the anti-racist perspective keeps before us.

At the same time, the anti-racist perspective is also by itself incomplete. First, seeing a culture in terms of its victimization—or even its victimization and its resistance to that victimization—is an only partial perspective on that culture, omitting (or omitting important dimensions of) cultural expression and accomplishment. Second, the value perspective of anti-racism is itself only partial. To see that racism is wrong—and to firmly believe that it is wrong—is not the same as, and does not even require, actually having a positive appreciation for the culture of the subordinate group. In fact it is possible to be genuinely anti-racist while knowing little about the cultures of different groups that have been discriminated against. For example, many European, Christian, rescuers of Jews during the Nazi occupation expressed a fully anti-racist outlook in attempting their noble and dangerous rescue efforts; but few had genuine respect for Jews as a distinct cultural/religious group.⁷

While I have been arguing for the distinctness of anti-racism and multiculturalism as goals and values, they are also, or can be, mutually supportive. Learning to value a different culture can certainly help to bring home to a student the wrongness of that culture's mistreatment (even if the student were already in agreement on the abstract point that racism is wrong). It can awaken students for whom opposition to racism does not run very deep to the humanity of others—in its particular manifestation in the culture being studied. Both anti-racism and multiculturalism involve taking those outside one's own group seriously. Though they do so in different ways, both have the power to combat egoism and ethnocentrism.

3. *Sense of community, connection, or common humanity*: In addition to exemplifying the values of opposition to racism and multiculturalism, one also wants the college community to constitute and to foster a cross-racial sense of connection or community. At first glance, this might not seem a distinct value. For isn't opposition to racism grounded in a sense of common humanity? Isn't racism wrong because it violates that common humanity? And doesn't the mutual respect involved in multiculturalism also express a sense of community?

But a sense of (cross-racial) community is, I want to argue, a distinct value. For a genuinely anti-racist individual does not necessarily have a sense of connection to those of another race, even while she or he regards those others as equals. For this sense of community can be negated not only by regarding others as *inferior* but simply by experiencing them as "other," as apart from, distant from, oneself, as persons one does not feel comfortable with because they are not members of one's own group.

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It seems clear that many college students do not feel a genuine or full sense of cross-racial community, even though these same students are not racist in the sense defined here; they do not regard the other groups as inferior. Yet to be a genuine *community*, and not just a collection of people seeing each others as equals, a learning community must embody more than anti-racism.

There are ways of teaching and learning about racism which may fail to create, or even to hinder, a cross-racial sense of community. These ways reinforce a "we/they" consciousness in both the white and the non-white students; for example, never mentioning whites who stood against racism but projecting simply a (not really incorrect, but only partial) image of racism as "white oppressing black." It is undoubtedly true that learning about racism and why it is wrong has the inherent potentiality to undermine or strain this sense of connection. And classes on this subject might find ways within the pedagogical structure of the class to meliorate that effect—for example by having cross-racial groups work on class projects. Ultimately, however, such classes are necessary to help reconstruct or create a sense of community at a more informed level. Without a firm anti-racist component, any sense of cross-racial community will fail to involve true equals.

A sense of (cross-racial) connection is distinct from multiculturalism as well, even though multiculturalism teaches respect for others. The more minimal condition of valuing one's own culture and tradition goes nowhere toward creating a sense of cross-racial community, and its inward-turning can serve to undermine that connection (though at the same time for some minority students this aspect of multiculturalism might be a necessary condition for their being able to experience a sense of connection with white students—from a base of cultural self-respect.)

Even including the second condition of multiculturalism (respect for other cultures) does not guarantee a sense of community. For there are ways of presenting other cultures which can simultaneously promote a sense of respect yet of distance from members of that culture—for example placing too much emphasis on the self-enclosed, self-coherent, and differentness of each culture. Such a presentation would be *intellectually* deficient in not recognizing the multiplicity within each culture, its changes over time, its influences from other cultures, and (in most cases) values or elements it shares

with other cultures. But my point here is that this intellectual error also has the unfortunate moral effect of helping to create or perpetuate among students a sense of distance between members of different cultures.

Recognizing these potentially divisive or distancing effects of both anti-racism and multiculturalism has been one source of opposition to both of them. "Why don't we just emphasize commonalities among our students, and reinforce them through a curriculum emphasizing a

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common Western and national tradition," say some (for example, occasionally in the "Point of View" column of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*). But ignoring both racism and genuinely culturally distinct sources of identity will not make these go away. Moreover, as I have tried to argue, both anti-racism and multiculturalism represent distinct and worthy goals, which an educational community must uphold and institutionalize. Any sense of community in the absence of a recognition of these values will in any case be a false and deceptive one.

What is necessary, I suggest, is to take seriously the three distinct goals, to recognize that it may not always be possible to realize all simultaneously, but to search for ways—in the curriculum, the classroom, and the organization of life on campus—to minimize the conflict among them, and to teach those values in ways that do mutually enhance one another to the greatest extent possible.

What I have presented here is a mere sketch of a nest of complex philosophical and value issues concerning multi-racial college classrooms and communities. Philosophy should not cede the discussion of these issues to social scientists, historians, and literature teachers, as we have tended to do. There is clarificatory and constructive work to be done here to which philosophy brings a necessary perspective. That work needs to be done in various courses in moral, social, and political philosophy, as well as in contributions to campus-wide debate.

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Notes

¹Carnegie Foundation For the Advancement of Teaching, *Campus Life: In Search of Community* (1990).

²For example the excellent Carnegie study mentioned above takes up racial/cultural issues primarily in its "A Just Community" chapter, misleadingly implying a conceptual unity to the distinct issues of access and retention, ignorance of groups and traditions other than one's own, outright discrimination, and minority in-group exclusiveness. ³To simplify, I will continue to use the language of

"dominant/subordinate," though this bypasses not insignificant differences among the terms "subordination," "victimization," "exploitation," "oppression," being "dominated," being "discriminated against," being "mistreated," being an "object of injustice"—all of which terms are used in this context.

⁴This too-brief account of moral asymmetries in manifestations of racism is spelled out in my (unpublished) talk in the "Ethics and Society" Lecture Series, Stanford University, April 1990. ⁵Note that the forgoing analysis does not concern racism of one subordinate or vulnerable group toward another—e.g., Koreans toward blacks, or blacks toward Jews. This complex matter is discussed in the manuscript

mentioned in the previous footnote.⁶Cf. the excellent article defending multi-cultural education, but in distinction from and even denial of the anti-racist perspective, by Diane Ravitch, "Diversity — 134 — and Democracy: Multicultural Education in America," *American Educator*, Spring 1990.⁷On this see the L. Blum "Altruism and the Moral Value of Rescue: Resisting Persecution, Racism, and Genocide," in L. Baron, L. Blum, D. Krebs, P. Oliner, S. Oliner, and Z. Smolenska, *Embracing the Other: Philosophical, Psychological, and Historical Perspectives on Altruism* (New York: NYU Press, forthcoming). Lawrence Blum, *Philosophy, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Massachusetts 02125 USA*