Multiculturalism: The ‘Good’ Side of Culture

Recap

Last week I mentioned two reasons why we might be worried about using ‘culture’ as a category for normative political theorising:

1. It encourages us to homogenise cultures and, if implemented in politics, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.
2. There is a tendency to only recognise something as cultural from the outside. This may lead to differential treatment between dominant (usually majority) cultures and non-dominant (usually minority) cultures; culture is only associated with the latter.

Multiculturalism: an overview

A lot of the literature on multiculturalism can be understood as addressing the following three sets of questions:

1. What about culture (or cultural diversity) is good? Why is it good? And how (if at all) should it be fostered and promoted by the liberal state?
2. What about culture (or cultural diversity) is bad? Why is it bad? And how (if at all) should it be discouraged by the liberal state?
3. If there are some respects in which cultures are good and some respects in which cultures are bad, and if both require action, how can the liberal state harmonise these competing demands?

Positive multicultural policies

Policies that are sometimes advocated by multiculturalists to try to promote and foster cultures include:

- Exemptions from generally applicable laws (e.g. Sikhs and motorcycle helmets, Rastafarians smoking cannabis during religious ceremonies).
- Funding for cultural activities (e.g. language programmes, festivals, art groups).
- Limited forms of self-government (e.g. allowed to set up own schools, have own family law courts).
- Guaranteed representation in government (e.g. through quotas for certain ethnic groups).

(See Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, pp.37-38.)
Three arguments from Will Kymlicka

1. The argument from autonomy

- A liberal society is committed to promoting autonomy. Being autonomous, for Kymlicka, implies (a) that ‘we lead our lives from the inside, in accordance with our beliefs about what gives value to life’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.81), and (b) that we are ‘free to question those beliefs’ in light of ‘an awareness of different views about the good life, and an ability to examine those views intelligently’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.81).

- Societal cultures are extremely important for our capacity to lead autonomous lives. Being part of a societal culture provides a ‘context of choice’, which is required for autonomous agency:
  - Understanding a practice or belief is a matter of understanding it from a standpoint within a culture: ‘a belief about a value or practice is, in the first instance, a matter of understanding the meanings attached to it by our culture.’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.83)
  - Evaluating a practice or belief requires resources drawn from a particular ‘cultural narrative’:
    - ‘Whether or not a course of action has any significance for us depends upon whether, and how, our language renders vivid to us the point of that activity. And the way in which language renders vivid these activities is shaped by our history, our traditions and conventions. Understanding these cultural narratives is a precondition of making intelligent judgements about how to lead our lives.’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.81)

Criticisms

- An obvious communitarian complaint is: why only think of values and beliefs as culturally and historically conditioned when we are thinking about the option set for autonomous action? In particular, why not apply this idea to the value of autonomy? Why assume the importance of autonomy and the liberal state, without viewing it as a culturally-historically dependent conception?

- Even if we need to be part of a culture to be able to make meaningful choices, it doesn’t follow that we need access to any particular culture (including, for instance, the one that we were brought up in) to be able to make meaningful choices. This argument needs supplementing.

2. The argument from self-respect

- Self-respect is an important good, which liberal states should try to foster.

- Cultural membership is important for self-respect. People identify with the cultural group to which they belong, and so their self-respect is bound up with the group. Consequently, if the group is afforded a lack of respect, this will undermine the self-respect of individuals within that group.
  - ‘people’s self-respect is bound up with the esteem in which their national [or cultural] group is held. If a culture is not generally respected, then the dignity and self-respect of its members will also be threatened.’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.89)
Criticisms:

- Proves too much: people’s dignity and self-respect can be (and are) connected to all kinds of things. The obvious response is that there is something distinctive and important about cultural identity. But if so, what is it? Once again, it looks like this argument needs supplementing.

- Is there a close connection between an individual’s self-respect and the respect afforded to their culture? If there is, are the kinds of policies advocated by multiculturalists guilty of tokenism?

3. The argument from equality

- Cultural identity is valued by members of cultural groups (it is also valuable for the reasons sketched above).
- Sometimes members of minority cultures are ‘unfairly disadvantaged in the cultural marketplace’, since their access to the resources required to exercise their cultural identity might be more limited that members of the majority culture through no choice or fault of their own. For instance, the ‘viability of their societal cultures may be undermined by economic and political decisions made by the majority. They could be outbid or outvoted on resources and policies that are crucial to the survival of societal culture.’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.109)

- A liberal society should not allow unchosen inequalities in the distribution of goods (cf. Ronald Dworkin). However, as shown above, the ability to access culture and cultural practices is a good. So, these kind of unchosen disadvantages in the ability to access culture cannot be allowed in a liberal society. Cultures must be protected. (See Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.109).

Liberal opposition

Here are three ways in which the above has been challenged by other liberals.

1. Culture and expensive tastes

Brian Barry argues that a commitment to equality does not (at least in most cases) demand the kind of ‘positive’ multiculturalist policies suggested above. Cultural practices, preferences and beliefs do indeed generate particular burdens for members of certain cultural group, but this does not create unjust inequalities. It is no different to any other kind of ‘expensive taste’, which generates a particular burden on the person who has the expensive taste, but does not require compensation. (See: Brian Barry, Culture and Equality, pp.34-35). Expensive tastes/religious beliefs differ from, for instance, disability:

‘The position of someone who is unable to drive a car as a result of some physical disability is totally different from that of somebody who is unable to drive a car because doing so would be contrary to the tenets of his or her religion. To suggest that they are similarly situated is in fact offensive to both parties. Someone who needs a wheelchair to get around will be quite right to resent the suggestion that this need should be assimilated to an expensive taste. And someone who freely embraces a religious belief that prohibits certain activities will rightly deny the imputation that this is to be seen as analogous to the unwelcome burden of a physical disability.’ (Brian Barry, Culture and Equality, p.37)
Criticisms of Kymlicka and Barry:
- There seems reason to be unsympathetic towards Kymlicka. His position seems to assume a kind of luck egalitarianism, so (some would argue) it is perhaps not surprising that his treatment of cultural identity is offensive and patronising (See Elizabeth Anderson, ‘What is the Point of Equality?’).
- There seems reason to be unsympathetic towards Barry. He may be right to say that religious people would be rightly offended by having their beliefs compared to a disability, but would they be any less offended by being told that their religious beliefs are comparable to other expensive tastes?
- Contra both Barry and Kymlicka, is it right to think about culture through the lens of distributive justice?

2. Legal exemptions

Barry argues that while a case could be made for a particular legal exemption, in practice there is extremely little scope for it. This is because:

‘either the case for a law (or some version of it) is strong enough to rule out exemptions, or the case that can be made for exemptions is strong enough to suggest that there should be no law anyway.’ (Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality*)

He explores several examples. One is the exemption for Sikhs from wearing motorcycle helmets. He points out that there is nothing particularly distinctive about Sikhs; many people are prevented from doing things that they might not want to do because of their beliefs:

‘Those who believe that, even with a crash helmet, riding a motorcycle is too dangerous to be a rational undertaking are (in exactly the same, misleading, sense) ‘precluded’ from riding one.’ (Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p.45)

So a special exemption for Sikhs is not justified. While it may be possible to offer an anti-paternalism argument against forcing Sikhs to wear helmets, this justifies repealing the law for everyone rather than granting a specific exemption. (See: Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p.47).

Criticisms
- The argument relies on the thought that religious beliefs and preferences are comparable to any other beliefs and preferences. This is contestable. Barry could respond by saying that a general law requiring helmets to be worn does not preclude anyone from believing or practicing Sikhism, it just precludes them from practicing their religion and riding a motorcycle. However this doesn’t apply to other cases (e.g. Rastafarians are prevented from practicing their religion if they cannot smoke cannabis).
- Some have argued that Barry’s case studies are misleading – even on his own terms there is quite a lot of scope for the rule and exemption approach (see, for instance, Simon Caney, ‘Equal Treatment, Exemptions and Cultural Diversity’ in Kelly ed., *Multiculturalism Reconsidered*).

3. Benign neglect

Some (e.g. Kukathas) argue that the state should neither try to foster nor undermine cultural identity, it should simply ignore culture as a category.
‘the state should not interfere with the cultural market place, and should neither promote nor inhibit the maintenance of any particular culture.’ (Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago*, p.14)

Kukathas argues that the state should be a neutral arbiter of different values and views of the good life, rather than as an entity whose job is to try to promote a particular set of values or view of the good life:

‘The purpose of the state is not to promote or foster liberal equality; to serve as a cultural architect or guardian of society. Its role is to serve as an umpire, who attends to questions that inevitably arise in society, composed as it is of many communities and associations, and attempts to preserve the order in which these groups can co-exist… It is not part of its duty to make society more healthy, or noble, or equal or more just. It is not for it to decide which ways of life are to survive and which are to die out; which traditions are to prevail and which to disappear.’ (Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago*, p.213)

Very roughly, Kukathas’s argument for this is starts from the claim that freedom of conscience should be absolutely central to liberal theory:

‘If there are any basic human interests, that interest is at minimum, an interest in living in accordance with the demands of conscience. For among the worst fates that a person might have to endure is that he is unable to avoid acting against his conscience – that he is unable to do what he thinks is right.’ (Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago*, p.55)

Freedom of conscience implies a commitment to freedom of association:

‘freedom of association exists when individuals are free to leave the group or community or enterprise of which they are a part. This is because, ultimately, what matters is that they not be required to live in or be part of ways they think wrong, or to participate in practices which (morally) they cannot abide.’ (Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago*, p.95)

And freedom of association implies that the state should be a neutral arbiter between groups with difference values rather than an advocate of any one set of values.

**Criticisms**

- Why think that freedom of conscience is especially important? Is moral integrity more important than having food to eat?
- Why think that freedom of association is necessary for freedom of conscience? Why isn’t freedom of disassociation sufficient? If we only advocate freedom of disassociation, however, it is unclear why we are committed to a neutral state, rather than just a state allows people to live as undisturbed hermits.
- The ‘umpire’ view of the state assumes that, in some important sense, it is possible and desirable for the state to be neutral. However, this is contestable. Kymlicka argues that an attitude of ‘benign neglect’, which tries to be neutral between different cultural groups, is incoherent. The argument, in summary, is that the government has to make certain decisions which unavoidably promote certain cultural beliefs and practices above others, so whatever decision it makes it cannot be neutral with respect to different cultures. It is simply not possible, therefore, to adopt a position of benign neglect. In his own words:
‘The idea of responding to cultural differences with “benign neglect” makes no sense. Government decisions on languages, internal boundaries, public holidays, and state symbols unavoidably involve recognizing, accommodating, and supporting the needs and identities of particular ethnic and national groups. The state unavoidably promotes certain cultural identities and disadvantages others.’ (Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p.108)

Kukathas responds to this argument by saying that there is a distinction between (a) being neutral between cultures with respect to outcome (i.e. pursuing policies which will have a neutral impact on different cultural groups) and (b) being neutral between cultures with respect to justification and deliberation (i.e. the decision was taken without any consideration for which cultures, if any, would be helped or hindered). It is perfectly correct (the argument goes) to think that neutrality is impossible in the former sense; but it is perfectly possible in the latter sense. Benign neglect concerns neutrality of justification, not neutrality of impact. (See Chandran Kukathas, The Liberal Archipelago, p.237)

Now, it is true that the way Kymlicka presents his argument is ambiguous between neutrality of outcome and neutrality of justification. But is it possible to read (or reconstruct) his argument in terms of neutrality of justification?