

Multiculturalism and diversity

The Cranky Professor

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Multiculturalism is a wonderful thing—something to enjoy for its own sake and something to protect and extend. Diversity, on the other hand, is something to which we should be indifferent. It is not something that should matter to us one way or the other.

Now I know that for many people the terms “multiculturalism” and “diversity” are synonymous. So let me explain the distinction I mean to mark by them.

A multicultural society is one in which people are free and able to live as members of the cultures with which they identify. To be multicultural, then, a society cannot place barriers between people and the ways of life they wish to live. It must be a society that respects wide freedoms of thought and expression and assembly, and it must respect freedom of movement, freedom of dress, and freedom of manners. But not only must a society, if it is to be multicultural, not interfere with people's choices how to live. It must also help people to live the lives they choose. That is, it must provide plenty of public space in which people can come together, it must support media such as newspapers and television programs through which the people of a culture can talk to each other and to people outside their groups, it must support minority tastes in food, dress, education, recreation, and the rest. Without such help, social, political, and economic pressures might well push a society toward cultural homogeneity.

Diversity, on the other hand, is about having in each public realm people from many of the different cultural groups present in the society at large. Diversity in the workplace, then, consists in white, brown, and black people, men and women, straights and gays, atheists and Christians, people of Lebanese heritage and people of Ecuadorian heritage, old and young working together in the same building or factory. Diversity in the university or in the classroom consists in people of lots of different types and cultures learning together.

A commitment to multiculturalism comes directly as an expression of a commitment to three fundamental values. Those of us who value respect for individuals as individuals, who value equality before the law and equality of opportunity, and who value decency must be strongly committed to multiculturalism. We express our respect for individuals as individuals by acknowledging that their ends are as significant to them as our ends are to us and, then, by refraining from manipulating them as they pursue their ends. We express our respect for equality of opportunity by requiring that all public positions be available to anyone on the basis of fair criteria alone. Decency has to do with allowing another person's hardship or pain to take precedence over one's mere inconvenience or discomfort. We are decent when we do not horde what others can use

to make their lives better or when rather than use our resources to indulge our small desires we contribute them to alleviating suffering. If we respect others, we will leave them free to pursue whatever way of life they will; if we are decent, we will happily contribute resources toward enabling each of us to live as he or she will.

That is why we value multiculturalism. We want people to live as they will and we want that they have what they need to live as they will.

So why, then, would one value diversity? What reason could one have for thinking diversity itself a worthy goal to pursue? I do not know. I have heard instrumental reasons for valuing diversity, though, reasons for valuing diversity that take it to be a tool useful in realizing other ends.

One is that diversity makes for a dynamic workplace, one able to respond well to challenges and opportunities. Likewise, diversity in the classroom leads to a better education for all through the clash of values and viewpoints. The evidence seems, though, to be that diversity costs businesses more money than it produces. And if the clash of viewpoints and values promotes education, then what is at work are the values and viewpoints themselves, not the differences in skin colour or manners. Whether these instrumental reasons for valuing diversity pan out or not, still, I am at a loss to see how diversity is valuable in itself.

Now a multicultural society will be, at least in most areas most of the time, a diverse society. A commitment to a multicultural society, because it is a commitment to respect, fairness, and decency, would lead to diverse workplaces and universities and other institutions. That a workplace or whatever does not reflect the cultures of the society as a whole can be taken, though only *prima facie*, as evidence of a lack of commitment to multiculturalism. But that through a commitment to multiculturalism each workplace and public institution became as diverse as the society as a whole would mean nothing one way or the other to those of us who value multiculturalism. What matters to us is that each person is making a life for him or herself as best as he or she can without interference and without surrendering her values or identity.

Maybe the difference can be brought out by supposing that a partisan of diversity for its own sake and a partisan of multiculturalism for its own sake are together at a gathering—a public lecture, for instance, or a political rally or a parade or a concert or a restaurant. Each notices that there are very few black people present. The partisan of diversity thinks “this gathering should be more diverse. There should be more black people here.” The partisan of multiculturalism, though, has a more complex thought. “Are there black people,” she wonders, “who would enjoy what is happening here or who would benefit from being here but who are not here? If so, what are the barriers preventing them from being here? Let us identify those barriers and bring them down. — But maybe,” she continues, “the people who aren’t here just don’t want to be here. In that case, are they able to gather to do what they want to do as easily as the people here are able to gather?” Her goal is that no one who wants to be somewhere be excluded from being there.

I said I can’t see why one would value diversity for its own sake, and I noted that instrumental reasons for caring about diversity are doubtful. Even more, though, I worry that valuing diversity has bad consequences. What’s at stake is whether we are to value people as individuals or to value them as representatives of a type. The multiculturalist is concerned about people as individuals. She understands that for many of us our individual flourishing is intimately dependent on the flourishing of the groups with which we identify. Nonetheless, it is your flourishing as the particular person you are that moves her. The partisan of diversity, on the other hand, looks at you and sees a representative of a group. It is the flourishing of your group that

moves her. You yourself don't matter.

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