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Cultural Relativism or Covert Universalism? The Metaethics of Multiculturalism

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CULTURAL RELATIVISM OR COVERT UNIVERSALISM?  
THE METAETHICS OF MULTICULTURALISM

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If the power of thought is universal among mankind, so likewise is the possession of reason, making us rational creatures. It follows, therefore, that this reason speaks no less universally to us all with its 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not.' So then there is a world-law; which in turn means that we are all fellow-citizens and share a common citizenship, and that the world is a single city.

—Marcus Aurelius  
Meditations 4.4 (167 CE)

Claims to moral universality are basic to conceptions of human rights, the concept of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and our understanding of international law and justice. Moral universals are taken to be a consequence of our common "power of thought," as illustrated in the above passage from Marcus Aurelius. The implications of universal rationality are at once moral and political, extending immediately to the entire world. We get much the same idea in Kant some sixteen centuries later, and this idea is not much different from certain human rights theories today. Moral universalism aims at global politics: the world is a single city.

Moral universalism is also, as I argue, the tacitly assumed standpoint of multiculturalism, but the implied universality of its moral commitments goes largely unrecognized. On the contrary, academic discourse about multiculturalism, pluralism, and diversity usually professes some variety of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism, as I use the term, is a theory about how and to what extent ethical judgments can be sustained or justified—what moral philosophers call a metaethics. And while I generally support this agenda, I take multiculturalism to be advancing—more inclusion of and regard for other cultures, races, and religions in the curriculum—I seriously question its metaethics, both its presuppositions and conclusions.
Cultural relativism generally maintains that we should not criticize or pass judgment on the values, beliefs, and practices of other cultures, since we would be judging according to our own culturally bound customs and norms. Different cultures can be evaluated, it is said, only by their own standards; if they think something is right, then for them it is right. It is supposed to be sheer ethnocentric bias to suppose our culture's standards to be the standards. The cultural relativist's basic question is, who are we to judge?

But such claims about the cultural limits of moral judgment are inconsistent with other values most multiculturalists would affirm as priorities: gender equality and religious tolerance, ethnic diversity and acceptance of other cultures, freedom from persecution or oppression and respect for basic human rights, and care and concern for the environment and other forms of life on earth. Surely these are not just good "in our culture," whatever that means. If you oppose apartheid and genocide, you are heading in the direction of moral universalism.

Closer analysis of this tension between professed cultural relativism and implicit or covert universalism reveals some basic inconsistencies. Multiculturalists want to have it both ways: they are often highly critical, for example of imperialism or racism or sexism, in different times and at other places in the world (as well as "right here at home")—which implies that they think their view is objectively right, better, and not just their interpretation. But moral relativists are not entitled to such indignation and outrage. They are not supposed to be able to judge. If they maintain such a position only as a matter of preference—versus claiming to be objectively right—then they may be able to reasonably act for themselves according to such preferences. But they will have no basis to criticize others who may be said to prefer (e.g.) racism or sexism.

However initially plausible and appealing, the claims of cultural relativism need to be sorted out and separated from the primary values of multiculturalism. The underlying tensions between competing moral intuitions need to be brought forward if they are to be reconciled. Relativism does not work with multiculturalism, either in support of it or as a consequence of it. Multiculturalists should abandon the relativist position, to be honest and consistent about what they are advocating. In the end, I would argue, they cannot be relativists if they want to criticize others—which, by all appearances, they do.

Against cultural relativism, but on behalf of genuine multiculturalism, I offer considerations for an explicitly affirmed universalism.
(albeit one considerably reduced from traditional moral metaphysics). No longer "grounded" transcendentally, not dependent upon theology or other high-level metaphysical propositions, the universality which can realistically sustain the globalization of human rights is derived from the declared international consensus of human beings. For my purposes it is less a matter of the specific rights in question, and more about the foundation upon which these rights may be said to derive their legitimacy. If this turns out to be nothing more than convention, well, it is also nothing less—a coming together. This is, in all likelihood, as much as we are going to get. And yet it suffices—provided that our effort is as inclusive, as widespread, and as truly multicultural as possible.

Schools of Thought

Multiculturalism is a prevalent movement in the academy, and particularly in the liberal arts its priorities set the tone for educational policy, curriculum requirements, new classes and programs, hiring and promotion, research and publication agendas, textbook development and sales, and a major amount of campus resources. It has become both an ideology and big business. But of course, multiculturalism does not present one monolithic view, any more than cultural relativism does, so we should not expect a very precise definition. What I am referring to is not a particular set of doctrines so much as a school of thought—a phrase which is meant to capture not only the idea of a unifying tradition of belief, but also the possibility of contention and debate within that tradition.

It further suggests the academic origins of such theoretical discourse. Universalism, relativism, and postmodernism, these are all schools of thought in this sense. None of these requires complete unanimity, with all subscribers affirming identical propositions. There is no definitive set of necessary and sufficient conditions to determine e.g. who is and who isn't a multiculturalist. But there is a framework of belief within which a school of thought functions. On any number of particular judgments there may not be complete, nor perhaps even widespread, agreement, but consensus on the basic framework is general and sufficient to warrant the use of one label or name for the school of thought (what we could call an '-ism').

There are -isms within -isms. Multiculturalism is a subset of postmodernism, which tends in general toward relativism (especially with respect to theories of normativity). One sees it particularly in that related subset of postcolonialism: the old myths of European superiority
need to be repudiated again and again, the old propaganda deconstructed across the curriculum, wherever culture and value are concerned: in history, literature, anthropology, sociology, critical theory, cultural studies, the arts and humanities generally.

Though I will be using the term throughout this discussion, even the idea of "culture" itself is problematic, particularly as the unit of analysis for cultural relativism. Is there really such a thing as culture? As somebody in the social sciences coolly corrected me recently: "Oh, we don't say culture any more." (This made me wonder about the adjectival form—are we not to say cultural either?) I think most of us can and do use the term appropriately enough, but I am sure that it can also be misapplied. This is not to say that determining what is and is not a culture, or where a culture begins and ends, will be easy or unproblematic in every case—but that is exactly the point. Culture could mean "more than just nature," or "whatever goes on beyond biology." It can be local, regional, or national culture; it could include subculture. But it is one thing to try to define the idea of culture in a philosophical sense, and quite another to pick out a culture as a discrete entity in the social-scientific sense.

Perhaps culture, too, may be considered as a "school of thought" because cultures are not univocal or unanimous. The multivalence within a putatively single culture poses a problem for the cultural relativist, for it complicates the neat distinctions between (all of) them and (all of) us upon which the theory depends. It is not as though an entire culture (if there is such a thing) is in complete accord as to what is "our view" versus "their view." There may be general agreement, but empirically difference and diversity are also part of any "real culture," as Martha Nussbaum puts it: "Real cultures are plural, not single;" "Real cultures contain argument, resistance, and contestation of norms;" "Real cultures have a present as well as a past."

The boundaries between cultures, if they exist, are not clearly demarcated. Cultures as single entities, if they exist, do not speak with one voice. But the claim that we cannot judge other cultures presupposes that there are really such fundamental entities as separate cultures, whose identities and values are distinct and determinable, whose differences are ultimately insuperable. This assumption is problematic, to say the least; we might add to Nussbaum's list that Real cultures are situated and connected; Real cultures overlap and intersect. Cultural groups bear family resemblances to each other; but relativism seems to imply that they are totally incommensurate, with no common basis for mutu-
Cultural Relativism

Just as the term *culture* proves hard to define, but not impossible to use meaningfully, so too the term cultural relativism. There are no exact specifications for this metaethic, but some general features may be identified. Relativism as such can refer to a broad variety of views about truth, knowledge, and morality. Epistemological relativism basically denies that objective or certain or absolute truth is possible and can be known. Most commonly encountered in practice and for the purposes of this discussion is the relativism with respect to morality and values, which may be relative either to the individual or to the culture.

Cultural relativism denies the possibility of objective or universal standards by which cross-cultural ethical and normative conclusions could be drawn. It is more than just an emphasis on empirical differences between cultures and evident lack of universal or cross-cultural standards. It is the view that cultural groups determine these things in their own ways, so what may be right for one culture may be wrong for another. It entails the further claim that beyond these differences between cultures there is nothing more to ethics, that moral argumentation has nothing more to say.

Cultural relativism, crudely put, says that no one culture can claim its values or views are better than that of another culture. Rather, they are just different ways of doing things. Who can say which is right or wrong, better or worse? The comparison seems highly subjective, as one says, and open to interpretation. Whose standards are we judging by? Neither side is right or wrong. There is no objective right or wrong.

This kind of judgment is at the core of cultural relativism, something to the effect that every culture has a right to its own standards, beliefs and traditions, so we should not (as one says) force our views on others. But notice that this claim purports to hold for *all cultures*. This *all* is important, for logically it determines a universal affirmative proposition. That is not relativism—it is a right being asserted (already a heavily loaded term), and a moral imperative (viz., not to force one's views on others). Both of these are evidently intended to hold objectively across cultures, though how that is supposed to happen is never made clear.

Most propositions of cultural relativism are logical universals in the negative form. No one cultural group is entitled to judge another according to its own set of standards. No culture ought to assert its own
viewpoint and values to the exclusion or marginalization of others. There are no trans-cultural universal norms, values, or standards, any more than there is any one universal worldview. Indeed, it is this very lack of consensus that is supposed to prove cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism is like individual relativism writ large. It depends upon the same central (and, I think, deeply incoherent) intuition—that no view or value or interpretation can be shown to be better than any other, since there are supposed to be no criteria by which to judge. It implies, although fewer relativists would directly affirm it, that in the absence of any objective (non-relative) standard, anybody’s view or value or interpretation is just as good (or right or true) as any other. These things are relative to the individual, and everyone has an opinion.

The same kinds of claims are made when comparing cultures. No culture is supposed to be able to make objective claims over another, since there are no trans-cultural standards or principles by which to adjudicate among competing claims. Whatever standards we might appeal to would themselves be culturally relative. Purported universals or absolutes posture as “meta-narratives” governing all history or all human beings, but these have been deconstructed. There are not supposed to be any meta-narratives.

The appeal of cultural relativism is understandable in the light of 20th-century history, in reaction to the horrors we have seen on behalf of the supposed absolutes people have set up for themselves: racism, imperialism, fascism, totalitarianism, religious extremism. Myths of superiority need to be repudiated again and again. This kind of relativism developed, according to Abdullahi An-Na‘im: “as a reaction against cultural evolutionism,” the idea that cultures progress “from primitive or savage to modern ... Cultural relativism was introduced to combat these Eurocentric and racist notions of progress.”

An-Na‘im, who has written extensively on human rights, is certainly no cultural relativist himself: “the basic premise of international efforts to protect and promote human rights is the belief that there are limits on cultural relativism.” Yet he recognizes the practical value of a limited version of this view: “as a manifestation of the right to self-determination and as a safeguard against the dangers of ethnocentrism, the theory of cultural relativism provides a good approach to cross-cultural evaluations without necessarily undermining our ability to criticize and condemn repressive or morally abhorrent practices.” (How this limited relativism is still able to maintain moral judgment and criticism is a problem An-Na‘im devotes a good deal of effort to working out.)
Kwasi Wiredu also sees a reactive movement in relativism and its reluctance to universalize:

By a kind of (not necessarily explicit) self-critical recoiling from the earlier intellectual self-aggrandizement of the West, some very articulate movements of thought therein—notably, but not only, postmodernism—are displaying extreme abstemiousness with respect to claims of universality.

This is the irony of it: cultural relativists try to avoid making universal ethical and metaethical claims—on the basis of other universal ethical and metaethical claims. Part of the problem is the paradox raised by self-referential propositions that seem to undo themselves, like "the only absolute is that there are no absolutes." But it is more than a linguistic loop we get tied up in. These are often outright errors in metaethical reasoning.

Since all values are obviously not universal, relativists mistakenly infer that no values are universal—so all values must be relative and subjective. This totalizing, all-or-nothing theory does not square well with practice and experience, and it does not follow logically. It is not necessarily the case that either no values are trans-cultural, or all of them must be. And universality, whether in the form of a priori categorical propositions or strong inductive generalizations, does not have to mean literally every single case with no possible exceptions whatsoever. By using more specific language and adding or implying certain clauses and disclaimers, we can affirm some well-established paradigms of (let us say) very nearly universal human values. Exceptions must always be considered, but this will be another case of judgment according to universal principles, seeking an overriding good reason that could serve others as well in relevantly similar circumstances.

Even relativists, then, end up making claims that are supposed to be objective and hold universally. The supposed postmodern ethical condition of radical relativism involves claims which themselves purport to be objective statements of what is the case where truth and value are concerned, e.g. that no one view or value can claim superiority. And this metaethical judgment is taken to entail the concomitant ethical judgment that one culture should not force its views on others. But then these are claims to normative objectivity, attempts at prescription, not just description. These judgments propose to speak for both sides. If this metaethical view is objective, and if there really is an ethical imperative
to regard and treat other cultures in a certain way—then neither ethics nor metaethics is entirely culturally relative, since at least these determinations are evidently taken to be justifiable across cultures. If we are able to make at least these judgments, then any number of claims to normative objectivity may be determined along similar lines. The possibility of any trans-cultural, global or universal value is enough to open the way for any number of others. If we are committed to these claims—that no one cultural worldview can claim privilege or priority, that no culture should force its views on others, and so on—then we must be committed to their logical implications as universal propositions.

Human Universals
Currently fashionable theories of social constructionism seem perversely bent on denying any human universals. Any such pretended universal—human nature, for example—is said to be merely a construct. But the very notion of social construction presupposes the human universal of society: whose construct is that? And there are some natural universals conditioning all human life, which can hardly be said to have been socially constructed: birth, sex, and death. (This is not to say, of course, that there have not been social constructions of these natural universals, but the limiting conditions themselves are biological as well as cultural universals.) Notice too how another human universal, religion, enters into the picture with each of these three, in all cultures.

Arguing that culture depends upon language, communication, and interaction, Kwasi Wiredu notes in a book on *Cultural Universals and Particulars* that “the fact of language itself, i.e. the possession of one language or another by all human societies, is the cultural universal par excellence.”9 There are indeed other general facts about human nature, and probably more than we might think, not less. These limit and determine a good deal of what is and what is not morally possible, what is and what is not a possible morality. Given the facts of human nature and culture, not anything or everything goes, or has been attempted or will be attempted.10

It may be useful to try and think up exceptions to whatever general statements we are considering; this helps us refine our propositions and restate our universals in more carefully articulated terms. There are empirical exceptions to nearly every human universal we try to assert. Some group somewhere doesn’t do this, isn’t like that, whatever this or that may be. Still, generosity seems to be appreciated just about everywhere. Care and concern for one’s loved ones is important in much the
same way, whatever one's culture. Causing needless harm to others in one's community, the wanton destruction of life or limb, will hardly be encouraged or deemed acceptable, wherever one may be. And respect and good will are very likely the most appropriate attitude to take towards other human beings everywhere, those of our own cultural group and those from other cultures and parts of the world.

Some universal values can obviously be demonstrated in relation to human biology and physiology, but they do not in themselves suggest concrete moral applications. We know air and water and food and sex are good, but these values are not specific enough to generate particular judgments governing sexual behavior or how to distribute resources or regulate trade and industry. When we compare specific attitudes, expectations, rules and practices, many of the particulars do appear to be mere customs, relative to the culture and appropriate perhaps only to that culture. But these seem more like culturally relative stylings of what are overarching and cross-cultural universal human values.

Life, liberty, property, posterity, and happiness, for example, do appear to be universal values—fundamental goods grounded not in mere biology but in the complex natural and cultural world in which human beings live. But of course property relations will be differently conceived, and liberty constrained for different reasons and purposes, and life itself given and taken, shaped and sustained according to different rules, depending on the cultural context.

The point is that the values of diversity and pluralism that multiculturalism affirms are meant to include all cultures, and so to apply universally. Indeed, universalism appears the most direct route and appropriate corollary to cultural pluralism. For pluralism does not entail relativism: not if it is genuine pluralism conceived according to principles of equality, mutuality, reciprocity and respect for the rights and dignity of all human beings. What follows from such principles is by its very nature more than culturally relative; these are commitments governing relations between all cultural groups.

If multiculturalists really want to apply standards and principles of respect, reciprocity, and recognition around the world, the way to those values lies in our common humanity—or is that just another construct? Cultural relativists and most contemporary social theorists would suppose that it is. Nowadays one is likely to encounter arguments against "rationality" as anything objective or trans-cultural; what "reason" is depends on culture and social construction. And "universal human nature" is not even considered a possibility, in most postmodernist the-
In thinking about human rights, however, human nature is both a legitimate and necessary area of inquiry. There is something to the idea of traditional moral universalism, that human beings are endowed by nature with rationality, and therefore reasonable moral arguments ought to be able to cross cultures and appeal universally. An-Na’im suggests the “universal rational principle to the effect that strong evidence of a contrary view should induce a person to reexamine her or his position.” Likewise he identifies “the basis of universal cultural legitimacy” for human rights in “the universal principle of reciprocity:”

... the principle that one should concede to the other person whatever one claims for oneself. Otherwise, one would not be entitled to claim against the other person what one demands for oneself. According to this principle, human rights are those that a person would claim for herself or himself and must therefore be conceded to all other human beings.\(^{16}\)

The “moral and logical force” of the principle of reciprocity, he writes elsewhere, “can easily be appreciated by all human beings of whatever cultural tradition or philosophical persuasion.”\(^ {17}\) When the other is construed so as to include all other human beings, we have a basis for rational and moral principles that is scalable from local to global.

This is just the way things are, as far as I see it: some values are relative to the individual, some to the culture, and some are universal. I think Hegel gets it right: these are his spheres of the subjective, the objective, and the absolute.\(^ {18}\) Hegel’s subsumption of relativism into universalism seems more useful in this connection than the Kantian metaphysical justification (“deduction”) of universal moral law. What Hegel means by absolute is in many ways what I have been calling universal: the limiting horizon is humanity and the context of world history, with nothing transcendent. It is not meant to encompass the entire universe, but it applies to all human beings.

To suggest that values may be individual, cultural, or universal—subjective, objective or absolute—is perhaps to throw the question back at us: how are we to tell? Which values and principles are to be regarded as trans-cultural, absolute in Hegel’s sense, and which ones may be seen as regional, local, variable and relative to the culture? An-Na’im has made some suggestions. And certain values always present them-
selves as basic. Clearly, harming other people is bad and to be avoided, in the absence of an overriding good reason. But then what counts as harm to others will vary at least somewhat between cultures, as will what counts as an overriding good reason. As Wiredu writes:

Any custom that leads to needless suffering, for example, is bad wherever and whenever it exists. True, it may not be easy to show that a particular instance of suffering is needless, for the issue may be entangled in the web of a complex system of cosmological beliefs. But it is a fact of history that even the most entrenched belief-systems can change under the pressure of recalcitrant facts.19

It is another fact of history that we are living in an increasingly global civilization. This is the very direction that, if applied consistently, multiculturalism itself would have us take. The egalitarian logic of multiculturalism leads to a new kind of internationalism, a democratic globalism, a universalism not unlike the Kantian tradition in moral philosophy—ironically toward the very sort of meta-narrative that postmodernism fears and forbids, as another apparent attempt at the Absolute, which we have come to associate with totalitarianism or fascism.20 That it happens to be a morally good meta-narrative is, as it were, metaethically irrelevant. Could human rights, for instance, be just a new kind of moral imperialism, asserted across the world in the “clash of civilizations?”

The universalist claims of cultural diversity and human rights could be seen as a kind of colonialist ideology all over again: the very antithesis of multiculturalist political consciousness. In order not to appear as moral imperialism, human rights will have to be renegotiated, rechecked, and reconfirmed. And this is indeed happening: the most explicit affirmation of cultural rights has come from the contemporary United Nations, in the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, closely modeled on the UN’s original Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their declaratory nature shows that such rights are grounded in international and intercultural consensus. What UNESCO declares is not arbitrary or one-sided, even if its collective assertions should be made as it were by fiat: “Cultural rights are an integral part of human rights,” affirms Article Five, “which are universal, indivisible and interdependent.”

But when we say that the redefinition and reaffirmation of these rights includes non-Western cultures, we still appear to be dividing the
world in two: into those spreading the civilization of human rights, and those receiving it. Myths of European superiority need to be repudiated again and again. Is it any coincidence that when it comes to global moral consciousness the West again fares the best, that again the white tend to be right? That is what multiculturalism ironically implies, at any rate. If we wish to see civil rights and socioeconomic needs addressed around the world, if we look at women's issues and gender equality, reproductive freedom, religious tolerance, surely we have to notice that these have not readily obtained apart from the modern Western liberalist tradition. And surely we must see these spreading in the track of the global market, world trade, world health, the World Bank, the World Wide Web. It is not at all on the same moral level as the literal conquest of the old imperialism, but it is still a kind of movement into and settling in someone else's territory. Colonizers have typically had pretensions to being civilizers. But then there has often been a grain of truth in that, too.

**Inconsistencies**

I do not pretend that the problem of cultural relativism is solved and that the post-Kantian universalist position is obvious. But some variant of that position seems to be most compatible with what I take multiculturalism to really be about. At least the most glaring inconsistencies can thereby be avoided. Multiculturalists should affirm that some moral judgments ought to be regarded as holding across cultures, and that this represents not hegemony, but legitimate moral authority rooted in trans-cultural consensus. In proportion to the seriousness of the issue in question, local relativism must yield to universal principles, which trump all difference of race, religion, gender or geography. Whatever multiculturalists may profess, thankfully they too know it when they see it, that no cultural reasons will ever provide moral justification for genocide or slavery.

As we have seen, once some values are recognized as non-relative, the way is opened for others—but it does not mean all of them must be. The question then becomes a matter of how we determine which are which. But multiculturalists have apparently worked this out already, to know that (for example) racism or imperialism is bad. In practice, multiculturalism tends not to regard its own moral judgments as relative. Consider for example the program (largely successful) to diversify the curriculum: multiculturalists, like the "deconstructionists" Amy Guttmann describes, "do not act as if they believed that common stan-
dards are impossible. They act, and often speak, as if they believed that the university curriculum should include works by and about disadvantaged groups.”

Historian Wilfred McClay observes similarly that a prevailing relativist view about history is inconsistent and “disingenuous”:

It is disingenuous because if you scratch a relativist or a postmodernist, you invariably find something else underneath—someone who operates with a full panoply of unacknowledged absolutes, such as belief in universal human rights ... Generally, too, there is an assumption that history is a tale of unjust exploitation, oppression, and domination—though just where one derives those pesky concepts of injustice, oppression, et al., which in turn presume concepts of justice and equity, is not stated. Indeed, because those absolutes are never acknowledged as such, they are rendered peculiarly nonnegotiable.

Affirmative of difference in taste, in language, in dress, cuisine, the arts and crafts, multiculturalism nevertheless maintains its moral commitments across the board, which is to separate the ethical from the rest of culture. But then the values of pluralism, inclusiveness, tolerance and diversity which underlie the critique of imperialism cannot be supported and sustained by cultural relativism. Contemporary demands for justice, fairness, equality, cultural integrity, the right to sovereignty and self-determination, the basic rights and fundamental dignity of human beings regardless of race, gender or religion—if these core commitments make sense at all, it could be only on a non-relative basis, transcultural, global in nature, “universal” not literally in the sense of applying to the entire universe, but ranging across all human beings.

It bears noting that we are rarely relativists in practice when it comes to any perceived injury to ourselves or our loved ones. There are all kinds of categories and levels and ways in which we think harm or injury or suffering may be inflicted. When we believe something is genuinely harmful in some way—to the environment, let us say, or to the children—this is not taken to be a subjective and relative value judgment, but an objective determination with a required course of action, that must trump other interests (financial, and proprietary). And while appropriate interdiction and punishment may vary, it seems everywhere that a basic principle of justice would dictate that the punishment fit the crime, and in no case would it be justice for persons to be punished for
crimes they did not commit. These are the kinds of judgments any reasonable person should be able to agree upon.

Just as there are not many consistent relativists in action, so too is genuine multiculturalism not what is practiced in the American academy, whatever may be preached. One of the most telling deficiencies of American multiculturalism is our students' (and increasingly our own) overwhelming monolingualism. Language is the most appropriate means for the transmission of culture, a natural language other than English, and especially not the vernacular of American academic theory—language, not discourse. We in cultural studies especially should be teaching and studying more language and less politics. How many of our multiculturally educated university students are reading other cultures' works in the original? How many more end up reading somebody else writing in English—or worse, a translation from postmodern French—about those works, rather than the original authors themselves?

There is one sense in which I want to agree that we should not say culture any more, when it is used as a euphemism for race. Multicultural can mean multi-racial, and that is the real number that is tracked, along with gender, in academic politics. It is not always culture per se that we're looking for: Lithuanian culture, Irish culture, Icelandic, Czech, or Corsican culture. These are all sufficiently diverse, but what we really mean is race, and we want to boost the numbers, of racial diversity. I understand that, and in large measure I approve of it as an American social and educational policy. But then we should not be calling it something else. Culture is in many ways related to race, it may in part be a function of it—but the one should not serve as a more politic surrogate for the other.  

Just as it is not really culture that is meant in multiculturalism, so too is tolerance not very tolerant in practice. What may be called Confederate culture (the romantic attachment to the pre-Civil War South), for example, may not be mainstream American civilization, but it is certainly regionally significant, with an identifiable cultural group. That it represents a marginalized or minority culture ought to win support from multiculturalists. Yet the civic expressions of this culture are not tolerated, but openly opposed and sometimes blatantly mocked in mainstream cultural typecasting (as ignorant, inbred, redneck, or racist). As a northerner, I would say that probably no group (other than smokers, perhaps) faces such open bias, discrimination and negative stereotypes across the rest of the country as white southerners. Thus it would
appear that only approved cultures and practices are to be admitted to the table—which no longer sounds like diversity, pluralism and tolerance, but rather more like one-party politics. Multiculturalism must not become academic totalitarianism.

Likewise human rights must not become moral imperialism. The origination and implementation of universal human rights, embodied in universal human values, must be genuinely global, inclusive and collaborative, not merely Western. This is an ongoing process, already underway. If the universalism of human rights must be regarded as another attempt at the Absolute, then at least let it be (in Hegel scholar H.S. Harris’s phrase) “one that is more truly Absolute,” that is, more representative of all cultures, more inclusive of all human beings.

NOTES

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1. Staniforth translation.

2. See the philosopher Richard Rorty on traditional moral universalism: “Universalism presupposes that the discovery of traits shared by all human beings suffices to show why, and perhaps how, all human beings should organize themselves into a cosmopolis. It proposes a scientific or metaphysical foundation for global politics. Following the model of religious claims that human beings are made in the image of God, philosophical universalism claims that the presence of common traits testifies to a common purpose. It says that the form of the ideal human community can be determined by reference to a universal human nature.” Richard Rorty, “Moral Universalism and Economic Triage,” The Second UNESCO Philosophy Forum, 1996 <www.unesco.org>.

3. See Martha Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education (Harvard 1997), p. 137, on students’ cultural relativism: “They are likely to say, ‘Well, that is their culture, and who are we to speak?’... The hands-off attitude to criticism runs so deep in today’s students that they will sometimes try to take this
position even towards actions that strike them intuitively as paradigms of evil.”

4. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 127. Emphasis in the original as paragraph headings. See her discussions e.g. of “female genital mutilation” as a case in point against cultural relativism.

5. See Nussbaum’s “Judging Other Cultures: The Case of Genital Mutilation,” in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford 1999), where she describes “general cultural relativists” as “holding that it is always inappropriate to criticize the practices of another culture, and that cultures can be appropriately judged only by their own internal norms.”


10. See Bernard Williams’s discussion in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Canto 1993), p. 74: “For suppose one introduces a reference to the content of the moral and says (for instance) that moral views essentially refer to human well-being, where ‘well-being’ has itself some content and does not merely mean ‘whatever one thinks ought to happen to human beings’: then the range of possible moral views is seriously limited by facts and by logic, contrary to the fact/value distinction.”

11. See e.g. Kai Nielsen’s discussion of ethical relativism in *Social Theory* vol. 33 (1967), pp. 35-49.

12. Wiredu writes: “At best, what the contingencies of culture may do is to introduce variations of detail in the definition of some of these values.” See *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 30.

13. See Article 2 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity: “cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultur-
al pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.” This is predicated on explicit universalism, not relativism. Article 5 states clearly: “Cultural rights are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent.”

14. Compare, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre’s conception of “competing rationalities,” in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

15. An-Na’im, “Problems of Universal Cultural Legitimacy for Human Rights,” p. 341. He gives the wonderful illustration from his own culture of northern Sudan, that “if two people tell you that your head is missing, you better check to see that it is still there.”


18. This triadic division runs throughout Hegel’s work; see e.g. the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or the *Encyclopedia*.


20. I am thinking especially of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, but this is a prevalent theme in postmodernism generally.

21. I say, “readily obtained,” because there have been some interesting (though mostly limited and small-scale) anthropological exceptions. Even in these cases, though, the consciousness of global human rights did not always figure centrally, as it does in contemporary universalism.

22. See the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, Article 4: “No one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor to limit their scope.”


24. Wilfred McClay, “Steering Between History’s Two Fallacies,” from *A
In the multiculturalist call for expanding the curriculum to include, for instance, Islamic or Buddhist culture, it may be objected that these are not issues of race. But in origin, character, and as empirical phenomena, these are overwhelmingly non-white cultural groups, and thus still appear to be construed in racial terms.

This is not to say, of course, that all white southerners are 'Confederates'—though this too may be a common cultural stereotype across the rest of the country.

H. S. Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System* (Hackett 1995), p. 107. Noting Hegel's own misconstruction of the non-Christian world, Harris finds the corrective mechanism within the *Phenomenology* itself: "the perfect development of the concept of Recognition in his book is the proper key for the overturning of his systematic 'realization' of Absolute Spirit in favour of one that is more truly Absolute."