A Peircean Epistemic Argument for a Modest Multiculturalism

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Extending recent appropriations of Charles S. Peirce’s work in political theory, we argue that the same epistemic norms that justify democracy offer a plausible basis for justifying multiculturalist policies aimed at protecting at-risk cultural groups. Because this epistemic argument is compatible with a full range of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, it fully accommodates the fact of reasonable pluralism, thereby skirting the Rawlsian objection to which the multiculturalisms of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka fall prey.

Arguments aimed at justifying group-differential treatment generally fall into one of two broad categories – what we shall here call intrinsic arguments and instrumentalist arguments. The first type of argument contends that certain cultural groups deserve special consideration and treatment on the grounds that cultures are intrinsically valuable and therefore worthy of recognition or also protection. The second type of argument holds that group-differential treatment is justified not on the grounds that cultures are valuable in themselves, but because they are instrumental in securing some important basic good. In both cases, multiculturalists contend that group-differential treatment – whether in the form of special privileges, rights, or exemptions – can be justified in order to protect at-risk cultural groups.

In this article, we offer a kind of instrumentalist argument, one that provides an epistemic case for group-differential treatment. In order to position our own view within the multiculturalism debate, in section one we explain why we think an argument for group-differential treatment should: (1) be instrumentalist in nature; (2) show that cultural diversity, and not just culture as such, is valuable; and (3) accommodate the fact of reasonable pluralism. Next, following recent contributions in Peircean pragmatist democratic theory, in section two we argue that certain political arrangements can be justified on the basis of epistemic norms – norms that are, in fact, universally binding insofar as they are embedded in the very process of holding beliefs. Extending the work of Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse, we argue in sections three and four that these same epistemic norms provide the basis for an argument for group-differential
treatment in certain cases. We conclude by arguing that the fact that cultural diversity supports the conditions under which believers can best fulfill their epistemic responsibilities counts as a reason in favor of group-differential treatment.

1.

Charles Taylor (1995) is perhaps the most notable proponent of an intrinsic argument for multiculturalism. His reasoning seems to go as follows. There are certain goods that are “irreducibly social” in nature (1995, 127). By this Taylor means that there are certain goods that can only be sought or enjoyed collectively (137; cf. 1994, 59). Yet these social goods are not merely public goods like dams or armies. Whereas dams and armies might be provided collectively, the benefits are actually enjoyed by the individuals protected from flood or invasion. In this respect, these public goods are only instrumentally valuable. For, as Taylor says, “the dam itself is not good, only its effects are” (137). Yet social goods are intrinsically valuable and can only be sought or enjoyed by the collective whole. On Taylor’s view, a culture

is not a mere instrument of the individual goods. It can’t be distinguished from them as their merely contingent condition, something they could in principle exist without. That makes no sense. It is essentially linked to what we have identified as good. Consequently, it is hard to see how we could deny it the title of good, not just in some weakened, instrumental sense, like the dam, but as intrinsically good. To say that a certain kind of self-giving heroism is a good, or a certain quality of aesthetic experience, must be to judge the cultures in which this kind of heroism and that kind of experience are conceivable options as good cultures. If such virtue and experience are worth cultivating, then the cultures have to be worth fostering, not as contingent instruments, but for themselves. (137; emphasis added)

If Taylor is indeed correct in asserting that cultures are intrinsically valuable, then some form of group-differential treatment would be justified in cases where cultural groups are threatened with elimination or outside interference.

Of course, the force of this type of argument for multiculturalism pivots entirely on the rather hefty claim that cultures are intrinsically valuable. Accordingly, it is appropriate to ask: exactly what would it mean for a culture to be valuable in and of itself, aside from the value that it provides to its individual members? Unfortunately, it is not at all clear what Taylor offers in response to this sort of question and, sadly, his argument that cultures are intrinsically valuable is, at best, hard to decipher. To be sure, we have little difficulty appreciating a culture’s value when we consider the array of obstacles its members would likely face upon leaving their own cultural contexts. Chandran