

Ethnocentrism and Education in Judgment

Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted . . .

Acts 28:26-27

Our human condition . . . is always that of spiritual bondage within a cave-like horizon of moral, religious, and political presuppositions so deeply rooted they are almost imperceptible to the inhabitants of each cave-like age and culture. We all begin with our minds ordered and predisposed by terminologies, categorizations, beliefs, and prejudices that we mistake for the natural or necessary ordering of human existence. . . . How can we even begin to step outside our own souls, our own upbringings, our own deepest moral presuppositions?

Thomas Pangle

That we commonly hear and do not understand, see and do not perceive, is a pervasive human failing. We manifest it toward people and customs in our immediate neighborhood and, even more so, toward people and customs that are distant and unfamiliar. One form of this failing — *ethnocentrism* — preoccupies theorists of multicultural education. For them, the ethnocentrism that permeates textbooks, curriculum plans, teachers' assumptions, and students' interactions constitutes the main impediment to successful cultural pluralism and cross-cultural understanding.

But what is ethnocentrism? At least two definitions turn up in the literature. For Christine Bennett, author of a leading text on multicultural education, ethnocentrism is the habit of thought that prompts us to make judgments from "our own culturally biased viewpoint." This way of putting the matter tracks a common social science characterization of ethnocentrism as "the practice of judging another culture by the standards of our own culture." For Donna Gollnick and Philip Chinn, authors of another leading text, the essence of ethnocentrism lies in an assumption we make in judging from our viewpoint: that our culture

is *superior* to others. Ethnocentric judgment falls into error because this assumption of superiority is unwarranted. Avoiding ethnocentrism, Gollnick and Chinn explain, means recognizing "other cultures as equally viable means for organizing reality."

Several deep problems await these multiculturalist approaches to ethnocentrism. The first account suggests that the remedy for ethnocentrism is to judge matters not from our own viewpoint, but from someone else's. But it is not easy to make sense of this idea; are we required simply to *understand* another viewpoint, or to *endorse* any and all opinions and actions associated with it? The second account does not explain how we come by the conclusion that all cultures "are equally viable alternatives for organizing reality." If standards of appraisal lie *within* cultures, from where do we get the *external* yardstick along which we place our culture and others to discover their equality? The prospect of finding a neutral metric seems all the more doubtful given Gollnick and Chinn's assertion that our values "are determined *totally* by our culture." If this determinism is true, then how can any judgment of ours — any application of values — issue from a cultural perspective not our own? And how can this determinism be reconciled with the multiculturalists' claim that ethnocentrism is an *avoidable* bias — one remediable by a proper multicultural education?

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There are two further difficulties with the multiculturalists' argument. We know that individuals, groups, and institutions *within* cultures vary enormously in their ability to "organize reality." Not all individuals or groups succeed equally by any means. Yet the cultural equality thesis asserts that this ubiqui-

tous feature of life is somehow cancelled out when we move to yet larger groupings of persons, that is, to whole cultures. Moreover, the idea that all cultures are equal does not prove as much as its advocates might wish. The fact that one culture *overall* "organizes reality" as well as another by no means implies that it "organizes reality" as well in *each particular*. For this reason, judging a particular practice or custom in another culture as inferior to our own isn't actually foreclosed by the cultural equality thesis.

That their analysis of ethnocentrism begins to crumble at a touch doesn't mean we can't understand what the multiculturalists are getting at. Their warning us away from assuming our ways are superior makes plain, I believe, that they mean to identify and correct a moral failing. They want students to avoid *smug*, *arrogant* judgments of others. They want them to avoid the *obtuseness* of those who hear and do not understand, see and do not perceive, and who, in their obtuseness, unfairly *denigrate* or *disparage* other people's accomplishments and traditions.

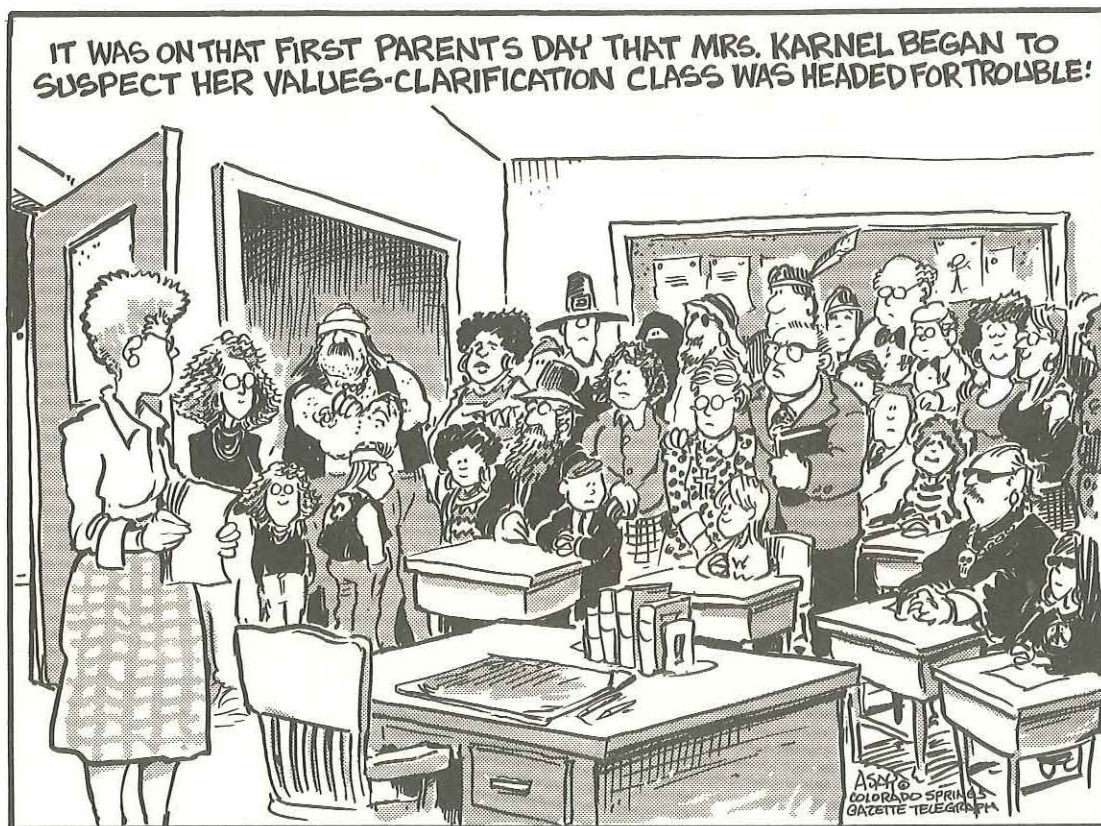
What multiculturalists need, then, is an appropriate moral language within which to state their essentially moral aims. Recourse to the quasi-anthropological

notion of ethnocentrism leads multiculturalists astray. It prompts them to recommend an uncritical attitude toward cultural difference when they should be describing instead the virtues of an open mind.

Form and Value

Crucial to understanding sympathetically any other culture is the distinction between *form* and *value*. The same value can be manifested or realized in many different forms. For example, the valued goal of safe and efficient driving is achieved in both the United States and Great Britain by their respective rules of the road, though those rules have us driving on the right side of the highway and the British driving on the left. Similarly, basic values having to do with personal intimacy, shared fate, and care of children give rise in various societies to different forms and conventions of family life. And so on for a range of basic values.

Sensitivity to the form/value distinction is important because it allows us to gauge how, and in what way, another society differs from our own. In some cases, it may well be that another culture differs from ours in the values it serves and promotes. For the most part, however, charitable interpretation of another



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culture proceeds on the assumption that it tries to realize the same deepest values we do, and that its outward differences are simply differences in form. A similar situation exists when we attempt to translate a strange language; we must assume that its speakers are making intelligible claims, and we modify and adjust our translations until we have rendered them intelligible in our language. If we took the strange language (and its speakers) not to obey the basic principles of logic, we would be at an utter loss how to translate it (and them).

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This point complicates the multiculturalists' admonition that we shouldn't judge others by "our standards." If the phrase "our standards" refers to *our forms* — our conventions, customs, rules, and routines — then the multiculturalist admonition is basically sound. But if "our standards" means *our basic values*, then the admonition is problematic.

Of course, we can easily fall into the error of conflating our forms with our values. We may think that, say, our particular family arrangements are the only possible means to realizing the values of intimacy, shared fate, and care of children. We may think that other forms must be signs of backwardness, ignorance, or even depravity. This suggests that our ability to judge other peoples charitably and accurately depends not so much on how extensively we know their culture but on how deeply we know our own. In order not to stack the deck against an alien group, we must describe putatively shared values in a way that abstracts from the details of our own practices. It is typically our failure to do so, and thus our failure to appreciate the meaning of our own basic values, that makes us uncritical of our social arrangements and hypercritical of other societies.

There is still the possibility that our abstract descriptions of our values will remain loaded, even though we think we have succeeded in making them neutral. For example, what if our most basic description of *rationality* — an attribute we ascribe to human nature as well as a value we prize in ourselves — actually incorporates features distinctive of our own social organization of goal-seeking and information-gathering? Then we will observe how much less rational than ourselves the alien group is; and the partiality of our judging — done with scrupulous care, we may

suppose — will remain wholly invisible to us. We will misjudge the other group while congratulating ourselves on our open-mindedness.

According to some culture critics, just this sort of problem generally characterizes the thought of the "West" as it perceives and acts toward communities in the non-Western world. The West projects its loaded descriptions onto the rest of the world as "universals" of human nature. It imposes its particularity as universality. Indeed, the critics locate the flaw in Western thinking in its very penchant to universalize, to offer abstract descriptions of value, to search for a true description of human nature. It is this penchant, the critics say, that is most deeply ethnocentric and oppressive. We Westerners must therefore stop (at least for a while) interpreting others by reference to general "truths" about human beings because our framework invariably distorts the reality of other ways of life.

The corrosive self-doubt this indictment of the West supports feeds off our contemporary general revulsion toward several centuries of Western imperialism and colonialism. We have too often in the past plainly and egregiously dismissed other ways of life as inferior to our own, and busily promoted the substitution of our superior customs for the indigenous ways of the "backward" peoples we took under our tutelage, assuming all the while a mantle of self-satisfaction at our objectivity and rationality. Looking at this unlovely picture in retrospect, we may succumb to doubt about our current ability to judge others fairly, seeing our present conceptions of universal human nature as just further pretenses for promoting our own disparagement and domination of others. And from our doubt may flow the resolve to defer or suspend judgment, or take our guidance from the authentic voices of culturally different communities. We may decide simply to shut up and listen.

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It is difficult to adjudicate between this extreme self-denial and other, less diffident views about when and how we should evaluate others. Certainly, though, we may believe that our abstract descriptions of values are not nearly so loaded as some culture critics suppose. Or we may believe that our suspicions of loaded descriptions should prompt us to yet further efforts to frame purely neutral ones. On either view, we would

want to press distinctions between proper humility in judgment and disabling self-doubt, between the avoidance of dogmatism in judgment and capitulation to the dogmatism of others. And on either view, we would retain some (greater or lesser) degree of confidence in our ability to be open-minded, while seeking the addition of new, previously dominated or silenced voices to the conversation about culture and human nature. The point is that the quarrel I've described here moves *within* the ambit of the concept of open-mindedness. The different parties divide on how deeply the impediments to open-mindedness go.

The Grounds of Tolerance and Generosity

"Instilling an open mind" is how multicultural education should characterize its basic project. An open mind is not the same as an uncritical mind, nor does it rest on or require dubious propositions of equality. Open-mindedness simply doesn't raise the issue of ranking persons or groups by some metric. I don't have to think my neighbor's taste in art or wine is as good as other people's, or even as good as mine, to exhibit toward him generosity, sensitivity, and curiosity. I don't have to think his children are as smart as all others, his occupation as challenging, his manners as engaging, his jokes as entertaining, his knowledge as penetrating, his accomplishments as edifying. I certainly don't have to believe he "organizes reality" as well as everyone else. I can be open-minded toward him and toward everyone else, from the lowliest to the most exalted, from the meanest to the most angelic, because open-mindedness doesn't force the issue of equality onto the table.

The multicultural educator's embrace of the cultural equality thesis is well-motivated: she wants to instill open-mindedness in students, and the generosity and tolerance that goes with it. Nevertheless, the embrace is unwise. Tolerance and generosity aren't functions of some equality of accomplishment, as Paul the Apostle's admonition to the Romans aptly illustrates. Paul reminds the Romans of the variability in people's beliefs and customs and advises against judgmentalism:

For one [person] believeth that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth. . . . One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

The advice not to despise alien beliefs or customs is not predicated on the assumption that all beliefs or customs are true:

I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Being persuaded by the Lord that nothing is unclean, Paul couldn't have greater certainty or assurance on this matter, yet he counsels forbearance and noninterference toward the person who believes a thing unclean. "To him it is unclean" means that the believer has as much invested in her belief as we have in ours — and that alone, *not the truth of her belief* (for it isn't true), is enough to require our caution about challenging or overriding it; that alone, *not the untruth of our belief* (for it is true), suffices to forbid our addressing her belief in a manner that "puts a stumbling-block" in her way.

When Paul counsels the Romans against judging one another, he is not recommending to them an uncritical attitude toward conduct and belief; he is warning them against certain moral failings attached to judging. He urges on his fellow Christians this policy: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Even in a matter as important as shoring up another's faith, we must not be *disputatious*. In your commitment to the truth, Paul advises, avoid being *contentious, quarrelsome, argumentative, bickering, querulous, fault-finding*.

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The fault in disputatiousness lies not in the fact that the disputatious person wants to be right in what he believes but in the fact that he wants always to be acknowledged to be right. He wants error openly to yield to his rightness. He cannot tolerate uncorrected error; he cannot abide weak faith. He is always picking a fight; he pushes too far; he lacks sensitivity to dimensions beyond the literal truth or falsity of the belief at issue; he lacks even the prudence to be canny and subtle in promoting that very belief he desires to be acknowledged by others. His adamancy reveals the self-importance he gains from defeating others in argument.

The antidote to disputatiousness is moral sensitivity to the less savory projects to which promoting belief and correcting error can be put.

The corrective, here, is not to stop believing in things. The antidote to disputatiousness is not critical flabbiness or intellectual indiscriminateness. The antidote is moral sensitivity to the less savory projects to which promoting belief and correcting error can be put. The antidote is the moral generosity enjoined by Paul.

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Against Judgmentalism

The same is true for a vice akin to disputatiousness, namely *judgmentalism*. The antidote to judgmentalism isn't to abandon judgment but to understand the moral complications and nuances associated with judging. In the case of cross-cultural judging, in particular, these moral complications and nuances are not clarified by the quasi-anthropological notion of ethnocentrism. On the contrary, invoking the notion of ethnocentrism misleadingly draws attention to the cultural *content* rather than the moral *manner* of judging. It prompts us to think that a certain content ("their culture") is an inappropriate object of judgment. But manner rather than content is the real object of multicultural education's concerns, properly understood. Just as Paul warns the Romans away not from believing the truth of their faith but from being *disputatious* about it, multicultural education properly warns students away not from judging but from being *judgmental* about culture.

Judgmentalism, according to Caroline Simon's felicitous characterization, "is the disposition to derive satisfaction from making negative moral assessments of others because one believes one's own moral worth is enhanced by the failures of others." Judgmentalism, then, fronts for an attitude of moral superiority. The judgmental person is quick to judge, draws blanket conclusions from slender evidence, always finds others less perfect than herself. No wonder that she invites being labeled as smug and sanctimonious. Professor Simon identifies the moral failing at the heart of judgmentalism:

The judgmental person . . . misconstrues the whole point of moral assessment. Moral worth does not work on a competitive point system, and the point of moral assessment is not the relative ranking of individuals. The ultimate point of thinking about ethics is practical. This suggests that the primary point of my making moral assessments is so that I can act well and do what I can toward being a better sort of person. First-person assessments are primary; third-person assessments are appropriate only to the extent they contribute to each person acting well.

Where assessing (silently, in our hearts) the faults of others doesn't bear upon or contribute to our own self-improvement, better to desist from judging others badly. Yet, as the nineteenth-century ethicist Francis Wayland observed, we commonly "dissect" other people's characters as if to demonstrate our "power of malignant acumen," as though "another's reputation were made for no other purpose than the gratification of the meanest and most unlovely attributes of the human heart!"

Such dissection is the stuff of our daily conversations, filled as they are with gossip and backbiting. We delight in tearing down others. Much of the ethnocentrism that multiculturalists worry about simply

extends the circle of our judgmentalism, from those familiar and nearby to those culturally different and distant. The proper antidote to this ethnocentrism lies not in some special cultural studies but in freeing ourselves from the general disposition to look for and pronounce upon faults in others. The proper antidote is sensitivity to the moral meanings of judgment.

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Dimensions of Moral Judgment

These meanings are complex and many-layered because judgment has at least two dimensions. One dimension has to do with *groundedness*: is a negative (or positive) judgment of something's worth well-founded in the facts? Does it interpret the thing in its best rather than its worst light?

A second dimension has to do with effects: publicly made judgments encourage, rebuke, chastise, honor, and vindicate; they can resolve disputes or they can perpetuate hostilities. Thus, the moral propriety of a judgment derives not only from its well-groundedness but also from the strength of the case for bringing about such effects.

An effective lesson in the moral meanings of judgment, thus, is a complex affair. It is not reducible to a simple formula or mechanical rule (e.g., "don't judge other cultures"). It means acquiring sensitivity to the way the dimensions of judgment interact in different cases. It means acquiring a vocabulary that enables discriminating the nosy from the properly concerned, the moralistic from the moral, the preachy from the instructive. It means learning when to judge, whom to judge, and how to judge; and it means realizing that the answers to the *when*, *whom*, and *how* don't automatically track cultural boundaries — boundaries which are, in any case, less determinate than multiculturalists generally suppose.

The elements of open-mindedness certainly seem teachable in school. We can rehearse students at waiting to make up their minds until they've heard the different sides of a case and we can train them how to follow and evaluate arguments and evidence. We can habituate them to inquire, ask questions, follow leads, seek more information, invite comment, and welcome different perspectives. We can impress upon them cautionary tales of the wrongs that flow from hasty, careless, reckless, and ill-considered judgments.

Of course, students will vary in how well they pick up and practice the attributes of open-mindedness.

Moreover, even when teachers and curriculum prove as good as we could expect, schooling won't by itself produce uniformly and successfully open-minded graduates. Still, schooling can plant the seed that further education may nourish. In many practical contexts, telling the difference between open and closed minds is not difficult, nor is there anything mysterious about the school routines needed to inculcate the habits that constitute open-mindedness.

Learning the *when* and the *how* — that is the task of a moral education in judgment, a task that belongs in the schools. Best that the schools begin the task with the right vocabulary and the right aims. Multicultural education is most usefully conceived as an extension and special application of the general moral education all students should have. For this reason, multicultural educators need a moral, not anthropological, language to make plain to themselves and to others the aims and means of multicultural education. Then we have some prospect that students really will become people who hear with their ears, and see with their eyes, and understand with their heart.

— Robert K. Fullinwider

Sources: Thomas Pangle, "Entering the Great Debate," *Academic Questions*, vol. 2 (Spring 1989); Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice* (Allyn and Bacon, 1986); Donna M. Golnick and Philip C. Chinn, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*, 2nd ed. (Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1986); Gerry Davis, "Strategies for Change," in R. K. Arora and C. G. Duncan, eds., *Multicultural Education: Towards Good Practice* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion, *Multicultural Classrooms: Perspectives for Teachers* (Croom Helm, 1983); Madan Sarup, *The Politics of Multicultural Education* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Sally Tomlinson, "The Origins of the Ethnocentric Curriculum," in Gajendra K. Verma, ed., *Education for All: A Landmark in Pluralism* (Falmer Press, 1989); Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Culturally Relevant Teaching: The Key to Making Multicultural Education Work," in Carl A. Grant, ed., *Research and Multicultural Education: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (Falmer Press, 1992); [New York State Education] Commissioner's Task Force on Minorities: Equity and Excellence, "A Curriculum of Inclusion" (New York State Department of Education, July 1989); W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960); Donald Davidson, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Clarendon Press, 1984); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990); Caroline J. Simon, "Judgmentalism," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 6 (July 1989); Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, ed. Joseph Blau (Harvard University Press, 1963; originally published in 1835).