

The Diversity Rationale: The Intellectual Roots of an Ideal

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Introduction

The ideal of diversity retains its salience, even outside of civil rights circles. President George W. Bush has said that he “strongly support[s] diversity of all kinds, including racial diversity in higher education.” *How*, and even *whether*, diversity in higher education is to be implemented has been contentious. In the ground-breaking 1978 case, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the Supreme Court held that, while race could be one of the factors considered in choosing a diverse student body in university admissions decisions, the use of quotas was impermissible. When the Supreme Court declined to review the 1996 lower court case, *Hopwood v. Texas*, in which race was not to be used as a factor in deciding which applicants to admit to the University of Texas School of Law in order to achieve a diverse student body, some were convinced that diversity would no longer be valued. Spurred by *Hopwood*, researchers produced credible evidence that supported and explained the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body to universities, students, and the public. In the far-reaching 2003 Supreme Court ruling, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court cited the research that found educational benefit in diversity and affirmed the constitutionality of affirmative action—what is called the “diversity rationale”—for race-conscious education policies. Heard in conjunction with *Grutter v. Bollinger*, was *Gratz v. Bollinger*, also involving the University of Michigan, and in which the Court struck down the school’s point-based undergraduate admission policy, considered essentially a quota system.

As is often the case with divisive public policy issues, the diversity rationale and its foundation, the ideal of diversity itself, have been critiqued with renewed fervor. Following the Michigan cases especially, critics of the diversity rationale proceeded to disparage the democratic ideal of diversity as an invented, empty intellectual concept. The current effort in Michigan to abolish affirmative action, spearheaded by the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI), rests on these critiques, among others. MCRI is the first ballot

initiative since *Gratz* and *Grutter* to be put on a state ballot by affirmative action opponents such as Ward Connerly and the American Civil Rights Institute. Slated for popular vote in November 2006, if approved, it will serve to eliminate affirmative action in higher education admissions in Michigan as well as in state-supported programs. In a sense, the concept of diversity is being put to a public test; what the voting public ultimately decides will either underscore or repudiate critics of the ideal diversity.

The Ideal of Diversity Challenged

Even critics of the ideal of diversity acknowledge that diversity has become a very visible cultural ideal in the United States, one that holds “a special, almost sacrosanct place in our public discourse.” And recent empirical research has found that racial diversity among college students stimulates them to think in more complex ways than they would in the absence of that diversity. Some critics support the ideal of diversity, but object to using it to justify affirmative action in higher education admissions. These critics are concerned that an emphasis on diversity excludes or negates other, more compelling reasons to support affirmative action, such as remedying the present effects of past discrimination or fostering racial integration and social justice. Such issues deserve consideration; but first it is important to examine the notion of diversity and address critics who question its existence or relevance.

The Supreme Court’s recognition of the educational value of diversity has prompted skeptics to call for a justification of how the diversity fostered by affirmative action and related policies benefits white students in particular. One skeptic, anthropologist Peter Wood, objects to such formal mechanisms as affirmative action that attempt to ensure enough student diversity to broaden student horizons. Questioning whether institutions of higher learning are the best place for this broadening, Wood argues that persons can expand their horizons informally, just as may happen in everyday life. One might respond that institutions of higher learn-

ing prepare students for democratic and global citizenship, furthering the goals of equality of educational opportunity, liberty, and self-determination, as well as of the public good. Yet Wood's argument uncovers a weakness in explanations of the diversity rationale. When the ideal of diversity is invoked in a simplistic, ahistorical way, one cannot fully appreciate its educational and democratic benefits.

Certainly, the term "diversity" itself is contested; it can have various meanings and is quite controversial in that those on both sides of the affirmative action debate may support "diversity." At the most basic level, diversity means variety or heterogeneity. In discussions centering on affirmative action, people tend to think of race/ethnicity first. In this context, diversity

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is characterized by a variety of races, ethnicities, colors, cultures, ages, religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, sexual orientations, sexes and gender identities, abilities, languages, etc. These are qualities persons hold that cannot easily be changed. In the context of educational benefits, diversity also includes things that can be changed, such as values, beliefs, moral ideals, intellectual understandings, political ideologies, etc. Critics such as Wood make two serious charges.

Diversity as Invented and Rootless. Wood is concerned that the diversity championed and sought on college campuses is imagined—conjured, even. He sees diversity as a concept that has ascended in importance to match the concepts of equality and liberty, even though it has no intellectual justification. Wood especially lauds the ideal of liberty and is concerned that the ideal of diversity not overshadow liberty or individual equality.

A particular worry for Wood is that diversity in the United States has been "a source of difficulty and insecurity" since colonial times. However, misunderstanding what proponents of contemporary diversity believe to be real equality, he wrongly asserts that

[real] equality, according to diversicrats, consists of parity among groups, and to achieve it, social goods must be measured out in ethnic quotas, purveyed by group preferences, or otherwise filtered according to the will of social factions.

In actuality, egalitarian proponents of the ideal of diversity—historically and now—understand real equality to be characterized by treatment of people as equals. Although some commentators may support quotas, quotas are not part of the diversity rationale as promoted by the Supreme Court.

Diversity as Damaging to Unity. The fear that diver-

sity and difference will damage social unity can be found as long ago as in Plato's times. According to Wood, the ideas that bolster the diversity rationale have trumped what he calls old diversity, which emphasized unity forged from multiple identities and assimilation. By contrast, the contemporary diversity rationale stresses particularity for its own sake, highlighting the group at the expense of the whole. Wood is concerned that the diversity rationale is founded on the untenable "belief that the portion of our individual identity that derives from our ancestry is the most important part, and a feeling that group identity is somehow more substantial and powerful than either our individuality or our common humanity." To critics such as Wood, the central criticism of the diversity ideal is that racial and ethnic groups then receive special—largely unearned—privileges.

To begin to repel such charges as that the diversity ideal is an empty, rootless concept that, further, hinders or destroys social unity—one must take the time to dig deeper to find that the ideal of diversity *has* followed a decisive intellectual trajectory. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of diversity as an educational and democratic idea allows one to see that unity and common humanity can actually be fostered by diversity. It need not be assimilationist; indeed individual and group diversity that is sustained over time can contribute to greater mutual human understanding and respect. Too often the unity for which Wood and similar critics are nostalgic served to suppress the very diversity from which it came.

Philosophical Origins of the Ideal of Diversity

One can trace the evolution of the concept of diversity itself and of diversity as a democratic ideal as far back as the ancient Greeks, to the nineteenth century Utilitarian thinker John Stuart Mill, to the early twentieth century sociologist and writer W.E.B. DuBois, to the contemporary philosopher and legal theorist Martha Nussbaum. These theorists provide foundational historical-philosophical evidence for the diversity rationale in use today.

It is John Stuart Mill's work, in particular, that shows that the ideal of diversity has a long intellectual and historical tradition. For instance, Mill begins *On Liberty* with the following quote by William von Humboldt: "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity."

Mill's Marketplace of Ideas. Mill believed in the importance of diverse perspectives. As an early proponent of diversity, broadly defined, he provided perhaps the clearest and strongest foundation for the contemporary ideal of diversity. Mill's concept of the

"marketplace of ideas," primarily used to justify free speech, served also to underscore one of the key points he made in *On Liberty*: in social and political affairs, it is crucial to think through issues carefully and discuss all opposing ideas. He had in mind religious and even class differences of opinion and perspective, rather than racial and ethnic differences, but his point supports the use of the diversity rationale:

There are many truths of which the full meaning *cannot* be realized until personal experience has brought it home. But much more of the meaning even of these would have been understood, and what was understood would have been far more deeply impressed on the mind, if the man had been accustomed to hear it argued *pro* and *con* by people who did understand it.

This is, at bottom, a strong argument for the value of diversity in classrooms, campuses, political deliberation, and public life, for persons cannot understand opposing viewpoints fully if they are never exposed to those who hold different views.

Mill emphasized human development of important capacities (e.g., intellectual, moral) and individual autonomy as characteristics central to a worthwhile human life. Because it stimulated the development of such capacities, Mill valued diversity, particularly diversity of character, lifestyle, and preference. According to Mill, "unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good." He specifically was interested in the complexity and diversity within human nature, arguing that there were different, tenable ways to live the good life and that each could learn from the other.

Mill's individualism was prescient in many ways. He worried that the strong emphasis on social uniformity and assimilation prevalent during the nineteenth century would actually serve to threaten individualism. Consequently, Mill warned of "the tyranny of the majority" in politics, a problem the contemporary diversity rationale aims to mitigate.

The diversity of ideas that Mill championed can be linked strongly with diversity of race and culture. Contemporary critics who question the value of diversity contend that diverse races and cultures provide no guarantee of diverse ideas and opinions. That is certainly true. However, several studies have found that increasing racial diversity on college and university campuses provides a better chance of both diversity of perspective and cross-cultural understandings than does racial homogeneity. As Mill said: "the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions."

W.E.B. DuBois. Like Mill, W.E.B. DuBois's ideas related to diversity are complicated. His work never dealt explicitly with the ideal of diversity, but it has interesting implications for the ideal and the use of the diversity rationale for race-conscious education policy. In particular, DuBois saw race as crucial to identity, as

"a source of individual and group definition." Here, as in the ideas underlying the diversity rationale, the assumption is not that people of different races and ethnicities *always* have different views, but that they do have different experiences of the world that they then bring to bear in educational settings, which was Justice Powell's primary emphasis when he invoked the diversity rationale in *Bakke*. As a result, because of the way DuBois understood race as an important conduit of individual and group identity, he likely would have agreed that racial diversity brings invaluable resources to educational endeavors. As his chief biographer, David Levering Lewis, pointed out, for DuBois, "the ideal American society was one that would draw strength from the interaction and interdependence of its heterogeneous groups."

In an oft-quoted passage from *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois discussed his idea of "double-consciousness" or "second sight," which he said black persons acquire by living in a racist society:

This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.

Through the idea of double-consciousness, DuBois advanced the notion that multicultural knowledge broadens perspective. He also lamented that such double-consciousness can cause a fragmented identity, but commented that the formation of a coherent social whole requires the strengths of both black and white people. For example, he championed "the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, . . . in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack."

As such, DuBois criticized the Booker T. Washington-influenced accommodationist school of thought regarding the education of black people. He argued that education served not only as preparation for employment, but also as preparation for citizenship and should therefore be much broader and deeper than a vocational education would allow. According to Burks, DuBois advocated for full equality for black people (as well as other marginalized groups), but not to the detriment of American unity. This was part of his disagreement with Washington, who accepted the idea of separate facilities for African Americans. DuBois felt that continued segregation and separation of black people from other groups would diminish democracy.

As with the other scholars examined here, DuBois's ideas on racial issues were complex and fluid. In fact, later in his life, discouraged by the lack of progress in racial integration and social conditions, DuBois reconsidered his ideas, coming to support black unity and

black self-sufficiency. These ideas need to be understood in addition to DuBois's earlier calls for increased interaction between different racial groups. He never denied that integration was the ultimate goal: "Doubtless, and in the long run, the greatest human development is going to take place under the widest individual contact."

Returning to DuBois's early thinking, he observed, "despite much physical contact and daily intermingling, there is almost no community or intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other." He saw education as a hopeful institution, where, indeed, the thoughts and feelings of one race could come into direct contact and sympathy with the other. This exemplifies DuBois's view on how racial diversity can serve to enhance educational experiences, learning, and, ultimately, social relations and understanding between the races, which is an idea importantly invoked by the contemporary diversity rationale.

Nussbaum's Humanity. In a contemporary context and with a broader notion of cultural diversity, Martha Nussbaum argued that diversity is crucial for the proper education of global citizens. As she explained:

Many of our most pressing problems require for their intelligent, cooperative solution a dialogue that brings together people from many different national and cultural and religious backgrounds . . . A graduate of a US university or college ought to be the sort of citizen who can become an intelligent participant in debates involving these differences, whether professionally or simply as a voter, a juror, a friend.

Drawing on the ideas of Socrates and the Stoics, Nussbaum defended the ideal of diversity most prominently in *Cultivating Humanity*. She used the classics and philosophy to make connections between higher education and preparing democratic citizens. Her emphasis was on the development of critical thinking; critical examination of oneself and one's own history, culture, background and beliefs; and critical understanding of non-Western cultures, American people of color, sex, and sexuality. Students, Nussbaum argued, need to be able to reflect on themselves, their culture, community, and nation—critically—in order to achieve an education for democracy and world citizenship.

As such, Nussbaum articulated three primary values of a liberal education: (1) the ability to conduct critical self-examination; (2) the ability to participate as a citizen of the world; and (3) the ability to develop narrative imagination. She focused on how university curricula can foster these core abilities among students, calling for a re-envisioning of the central aims of higher education and its content as well. Peter Wood, critic of the diversity ideal, has argued that "as valuable as it is to get to know people of many different backgrounds, doing so is ultimately of less importance than such things as learning how to write well, how to

speak and read a foreign language, and how to use calculus." I contend that Nussbaum would disagree, positing instead that the "new emphasis on 'diversity' in college and university curricula is above all a way of grappling with the altered requirements of citizenship, an attempt to produce adults who can function as citizens of a complex interlocking world." This is arguably just as important as learning to write and use calculus, perhaps more so. Nussbaum's notion of cultural diversity is closest to the notion invoked in the contemporary diversity rationale: "We do not fully respect the humanity of our fellow citizens—or cultivate our own—if we do not wish to learn about them, to understand their history, to appreciate the differences between their lives and ours." What Nussbaum called the "new" emphasis on the ideal of diversity has its roots in a long and distinguished tradition of philosophical thought.

Concluding Thoughts

This brief examination of Mill, DuBois, and Nussbaum's ideas related to the ideal of diversity shows that—though there exist tensions and complexities in their thinking and each viewed the ideal of diversity differently and assigned it a different social priority—for all three the ideal of diversity played an important part in a democratic society. Taken together, they argued that the ideal of diversity is worth wanting because it enriches a democratic society and cultivates adults who can function more effectively as citizens of a complex, connected world. Even Justice O'Connor, in her majority opinion in *Grutter*, noted that widening access to higher education through affirmative action is justified in part by a commitment to democracy. In this sense, the diversity rationale is rooted to a philosophical foundation in the virtues of diversity.

Although this is important, the diversity rationale remains an incomplete justification for affirmative action and related policies. Other important rationales include remedying the present effects of past discrimination, fostering an expanded social context of choice and individual self-determination, and promoting social justice. The diversity rationale is one particularly viable justification for policy, but is also an insufficient justificatory concept. At its best it is a strategic and reasonable political compromise, founded on the ideal of diversity; at its worst it allows people to ignore rationales for race-conscious policies based on equality and social justice. As such, scholars would do well to integrate analyses of diversity with considerations of social justice. An integrated rationale would provide a more appropriate framing of issues to inform the public about race-conscious education policies, which is especially important in this era of initiatives such as the

Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, seeking voter approval.

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Action Is Poor Public Policy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 May 2003, B10; diversity leading to more complex thinking occurs in Anthony Antonio et al., "Effects of Racial Diversity on Complex Thinking in College Students," *Psychological Science* 15, no. 8 (2004): 507–510; Michele S. Moses, *Embracing Race: Why We Need Race-Conscious Education Policy* (NY: Teachers College Press, 2002); Michele S. Moses, "Affirmative Action and the Creation of More Favorable Contexts of Choice," *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 1 (2001). By invoking these scholars' ideas on diversity, I am not trying to mitigate the problematic nature of how they handled real racial issues. Here I am most concerned with their intellectual ideas related to diversity as a democratic ideal. Very different versions of the sections on Mill and Nussbaum appear in, "Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Diversity Rationale," with Mitchell Chang, forthcoming in *Educational Researcher*. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. (London: Penguin Books, 1974/1859); Bikhu Parekh *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Mitchell J. Chang, "The Positive Educational Effects of Racial Diversity on Campus," in *Diversity Challenged*, 175–186; Patricia Gurin, "Selections from the Compelling Need for Diversity in Higher Education: Expert Report of Patricia Gurin," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 32, no. 2 (1999); Richard King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963*, (NY: Henry Holt, 2001); W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (NY: Gramercy, 1994/1903); Benjamin Burks, "Unity and Diversity through Education: A Comparison of the Thought of W.E.B. Dubois and John Dewey," *Journal of Thought*, 32, no. 1 (1997); DuBois' shortcomings include failing to include women in his vision of talented Black people (see chapter 6 of *Souls*, "On the Training of Black Men") and what some call the elitism of his notion of the "Talented Tenth"; Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); the idea of whether something is "worth wanting" is borrowed from Kenneth Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy, and Schooling* (NY: Teachers College Press, 1997); Walter Feinberg, *On Higher Ground: Education and the Case for Affirmative Action* (NY: Teachers College Press, 1998).