

Multiculturalism

(Personal Reflection on Charles Taylor)

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Charles Taylor, author of *Multiculturalism*, states, “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence.” My understanding of that comment is that the author is saying that our identity is at least partially formed when our particularities as human beings are acknowledged. Societies choose to acknowledge the particularities of a dominant group, and simultaneously choose to disregard the particularities of a non-dominant group, then the non-dominant group is demeaned. Consequently, to validate the inherent worth of individuals, who are marginalized, requires acknowledging those particularities.

Yet much of the debate for this book is on how to do justice to truly and authentically acknowledging the particularities of a variety of cultures in a pluralistic, with a supposed dominant culture, society such as the United States. There is much that can be critiqued about this book. However, in the interest of brevity, I choose to focus on just one aspect of this book.

The idea on which I will focus is that we cannot demand people to see worth and value in other cultures (p. 69ff). As the author states, “one doesn’t, properly speaking, make judgments that can be right or wrong; one expresses liking or dislike, one endorses or rejects another culture.” He states that expecting a person to see value or worth when they do not is actually patronizing. Consequently, instead of offering the much-desired respect, they are actually inflicting more harm.

I agree with this author – a person, especially a person of a dominant culture, can’t be forced to give or show respect if it is not within them to give. Trying to do so will only do more harm than good to the recipient. In addition, I also believe that it will simply cause further dissension on the part of the “giver”.

The following is a perfect example of my point. A few weeks ago I received an email from my father in which he was obviously venting his frustrations over the cultural forces surrounding him. This email was somewhat long, but the following quote simply reflects the gist of his message:

I am sick of "Political Correctness." I know a lot of black people, and not a single one of them was born in Africa; so how can they be "African-Americans"? Besides, Africa is a continent. I don't go around saying I am a European-American because my great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather was from Europe. I am proud to be from America and nowhere else.

My father has a reputation for being blunt, insensitive and politically incorrect. In spite of this reputation, I was very horrified to read his ignorance and insensitivity. (Although, I must admit, he simply sounded like his own father.) However, I have encountered enough people to know that he was simply stating what many other people do feel inside, but are afraid to verbalize, for fear of being criticized. I believe his "venting" is probably rather representative of people who feel pressured into pretending to value people of other cultures when in fact they truly do not. What this quote demonstrates is that trying to force sensitivity on people who are not ready to learn it, will serve no other purpose than to add fuel to the fire. Therefore, I believe the author was very astute in clarifying that one can't simply demand recognition from someone who doesn't have it to give.

I have had enough education and life experience in multicultural settings to understand and appreciate why some marginalized people want to receive due respect. Personally, being fully aware of some of my own personal biases and prejudices, I believe in trying to find worth and value in all persons – regardless of their differences from me. Consequently, I understand and respect the author's viewpoints. However, as the author also indicates, finding a real-world workable solution is far more complicated than it is to simply name the problem.