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BHIKHU PAREKH'S MULTICULTURALIST CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

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Abstract
Bhikhu Parekh argues that we must look beyond liberal democracy to a process of ‘intercultural dialogue’ in order to accommodate the legitimate claims of multiculturalism. He gives two main reasons: first, liberalism is too ‘ethnocentric’ to be an adequate framework for multiculturalism, because it necessarily depends on values that are distinctively European or Western; second, liberalism is too ‘monistic’ – that is, it expresses a particular way of life that is said to be superior to others, a claim that is at odds with the reality of moral pluralism. I show that these arguments are significantly mistaken. In particular, Parekh’s own views frequently depend on the liberal values he relativises.

All multiculturalists believe that the presence of multiple cultural groups within a single political society is valuable and ought to be accorded positive political recognition. Among multiculturalists, however, there is a major division of opinion between those who think that liberal democracy provides an appropriate framework for such a society, and those who argue that liberalism is itself no more than one cultural artefact among others. On this second view, liberalism cannot be a legitimate framework for multicultural diversity, but rather, at best, one contributing factor, its claims on a moral par with those of other views.

Bhikhu Parekh is an interesting figure in this debate, because he has sympathies with both sides. In such writings as Rethinking Multiculturalism (2nd edition 2006) and the recent A New Politics of Identity (2008), he defends a number of specifically liberal ‘principles and institutions’ and allows that his theory as a whole ‘has a strong liberal orientation’ (Parekh 2006: 14).1 But he also argues, that liberalism, although culturally accommodating to a degree, is too culturally specific to embrace all the legitimate requirements of multiculturalism. We do need universal principles to regulate multicultural societies and relationships, but these should be more genuinely universal than the principles of liberalism. We should look for them at ‘a higher level of philosophical abstraction’, in a ‘dialogue between cultures’ within which liberal ideas must be represented, but only on the same level as others.

Why is liberalism too culturally specific for multiculturalism? In Parekh’s earlier work in this area he seemed to embrace the view, popular among postcolonialist theorists, that the liberal tradition is deeply implicated in colonialism and imperialism.2 This line of argument suffers from a number of obvious problems: no reputable contemporary theorist of liberalism defends colonialism, even among the ‘classical’ liberal thinkers of the 17th-19th centuries there were many anti-imperialists, and much of the contemporary case against imperialism turns out to rest on distinctively liberal values.3 Parekh has not pursued the alleged link between liberalism and imperialism in his recent work, and I shall not consider it here.

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1 Henceforth Parekh 2006 and 2008 will be referenced in-text as RM and NPI respectively.
2 See in particular Parekh 1994.
Rather, I shall focus on two main lines of argument that Parekh has maintained more consistently. The first is that liberalism is too ‘ethnocentric’ to be an adequate framework for multiculturalism, because it necessarily depends on values that are distinctively European or Western. The second is that even if liberalism isn’t ethnocentric, it’s still too ‘monistic’ to be a framework for multiculturalism. That is, even if the central values of liberalism are not distinctively Western or European, they still add up to a particular way of life that is said to be superior to others. This is at odds with the reality of human morality, which is pluralist: there are many equally valid ways of life, all of which ought to be accepted and accommodated.

I shall argue that although Parekh makes several important points, his view of the status of liberalism in relation to multiculturalism is significantly mistaken. Although I shall not attempt to construct a complete case for liberalism as a legitimate container for multiculturalism, I hope to move in that direction by pointing to weaknesses in Parkeh’s arguments to the contrary. I shall deal with the allegations of ethnocentricity and monism in turn.

Is liberalism ethnocentric?

According to Parekh,

to insist on the universality of liberal democracy is to deny the west’s own historical experiences and to betray the liberal principles of mutual respect and love of cultural diversity. It imposes on other countries systems of government unsuited to their talents and skills, destroys the coherence and integrity of their ways of life, and reduces them to mimics, unable and unwilling to be true either to their traditions or to the imported norms’ (Parekh 1992: 169)

This passage contains at least three separate arguments. The first is that the values of liberalism are inappropriate for societies other than those of ‘the west’ because those values originated historically in the west. Thus, says Parekh, ‘liberal democracy is a product of, and designed to cope with, the political problems thrown up by the post-seventeenth-century individualist society’ (Parekh 1992: 169).

This kind of argument is very common, but it is clearly defective and can be rejected straight away. It is a classic example of the ‘generative fallacy’, the mistaken belief that it’s enough to impugn the validity of an idea merely by pointing to where it came from. Liberal values (or any other) cannot be judged invalid or inapplicable in one cultural context simply because they were formulated first (if that’s true) in another. That would be like saying that paper or fireworks are inappropriate for the west because they were invented in China. If an idea is good, then it’s good wherever it comes from.

A second argument in the passage seems to be that liberalism ‘betrays’ its own principles when it universalises them. This claim has, to say the least, a paradoxical feel about it. Would liberals be more consistent if they held that mutual respect and love of cultural diversity are values only for certain kinds of society rather than others? In particular, the suggestion seems to be that to avoid the charge of ethnocentrism liberals ought to propose these values as appropriate only for ‘western’ or European societies. Yet when Mill makes this kind of claim with respect to individual autonomy, Parekh is among the many people who chide him for his alleged ethnocentric sense of superiority (Parekh 1994, 1996: 40-47). It’s more plausible to
argue that liberals would betray their own values if they did not defend them universally.  

The third argument in the passage is the strongest. This is that liberalism is ethnocentric not because of its historical origins or its universalism alone, but because its values are in some sense specific and appropriate to certain cultures rather than others. Thus, according to Parekh, to universalise liberal values is to ‘impose’ them on (non-western) countries whose talents and skills are ‘unsuited’ to such views, and which would fail to ‘be true either to their traditions or to the imported norms’. Some societies – here Parekh implicitly labels them ‘non-Western’ – are just not cut out, culturally, for liberalism.

Which liberal values are supposed to be ethnocentric in this sense? Parekh proposes various candidates: concern for ‘the isolated individual’, ‘aggressive self-assertion’ and ‘scientific reason’ (Parekh 1992: 173), an instrumental and rational approach to the value of a culture (RM 98), secularism and insufficient respect for religion, and the defence of freedom of speech that permits disrespectful comments on religious sensibilities (NPI 111-112). Gender equality is also ‘resisted by some’ non-liberal societies (NPI 110). Capitalism, however, Parekh seems to regard as crossing cultural lines, since ‘many’ non-liberal societies ‘welcome’ it (Parekh 1992: 172).

This list immediately raises questions. Are liberals necessarily committed to the celebration of aggressive self-assertion? Few liberals would see the individual rights and liberties they defend in quite these terms. How far are liberals either united or distinguished by a dedication to ‘scientific reason’? Few would reject it altogether, but many would see science as having cognitive and moral limits, and those who value it most would not differ in that respect from some non-liberals, such as Marxists.  

To simplify matters, however, I want to focus on the value that probably has the best claim to being definitive of the liberal outlook, and that is most insistently linked to ethnocentrism by Parekh. This is individual autonomy, understood as individual self-direction as a result of critical reflection, including the critical assessment and sometimes revision of one’s own way of life. If any commitment is distinctive of liberalism, this is it, since it is endorsed by all or most liberals in a sense and to an extent that distinguishes their view from others.

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1 Mill supposes only that certain societies are not yet ready for a fully-fledged commitment to individual autonomy, not that they are not capable of this at all. On the contrary, he looks forward to a time when that value is realised universally. Mill can be faulted for his assumptions about the role of the colonial powers in bringing about that goal, and about the best methods for achieving it. But in the end it prescribes, Mill’s position is less patronising than that which is content with ‘liberalism for the liberals; cannibalism for the cannibals’ (Lukes 2003: 27).

5 Among liberal critics of scientism, see Berlin 1978.

6 This claim is controversial, because some liberals reject strong individual autonomy as a central ideal, arguing for alternatives such as ‘toleration’: see, e.g., Rawls 1993; Galston 2002; Kukathas 2003. However, I accept the view of those liberals who argue that such alternatives tend implicitly to rely on the valuing of autonomy after all: see, e.g., Kymlicka 1995: chap. 8.
At any rate, it is individual autonomy that is most frequently cited by Parekh as an example of the ethnocentrism of liberal values. He insists that this is true even of those liberals most strongly devoted, on the face of things, to social diversity. Thus, Mill 'exaggerated the importance of such values as autonomy', which he supposed (wrongly) to be a distinctively European achievement, in contrast with the stationary, tradition-bound outlook of 'the East' (Parekh 1994: 12). In so doing he 'ruled out a wide variety of ways of life, such as the traditional, the community-centred and the religious', all of which have their own value (RM 44).

Similarly, Joseph Raz explicitly defends multiculturalism but within a liberal framework that emphasises the central value of autonomy. According to Parekh, Raz 'associates autonomy with the Western way of life' (Parekh 1994: 12), whereas 'groups such as immigrants, indigenous peoples and religious communities ... do not set much store [by autonomy]' (RM 93).

Again, Will Kymlicka argues for the value of cultural membership as instrumental to the underlying good of individual autonomy, for which cultural patterns provide a necessary context. Kymlicka's support for cultural recognition ceases at the point where a give culture or practice opposes his mastery-value of autonomy. Yet that line of argument 'is unlikely to convince nonliberals' who regard their culture not as a useful instrument but as 'a sacred trust' (RM 107). Indeed, Kymlicka's guiding 'idea of living life from the inside' - being prepared always to question and revise one's life commitments - 'is essentially Protestant', involving an interiorisation of morality that is missing from other cultures (RM 106).

In short, Parekh alleges that even the best-intentioned, most diversity-friendly liberal theories rest on a commitment to individual autonomy that carries with it an ethical outlook that is distinctive of certain modern European cultures. That outlook excludes and denigrates the legitimate values of other -- non-liberal or non-western -- cultures. From the perspective of these latter, liberal autonomy is an alien imposition.

The universality of autonomy
The basic liberal reply to this charge is that individual autonomy is not 'alien' to any society, since it is present in all at least to some degree (Kymlicka 1995: 94). Parekh makes this point himself - 'autonomy is a matter of degree, and ... no human community can dispense with it altogether' - when he criticises Raz and Mill for claiming autonomy as a uniquely European achievement (Parekh 1994: 12). He gives the example of 'the Hindu', who can 'choose his gods', borrow from other religions, and 'make up his own religion without ceasing to be a Hindu'.

But Parekh adds the qualification, 'this is not at all to say that all ways of life are equally autonomous, only that none is wholly devoid of that quality' (Parekh 1994: 12). So presumably his argument is that some cultures are inherently more apt than others to emphasise individual autonomy or value it highly.

It's true that autonomy is at present more developed and more highly valued in some cultures rather than others, but that does not show that it's out of place entirely.
or that it cannot or should not be encouraged in those cultures where it has not yet flourished more fully. Those societies Parekh describes as liberal were not always as hospitable to autonomy as they are now, and even now they could go further in that direction: their current support for autonomy is the product of a process of development, and one that may be continuing. How do we know that a similar process of development is not possible and desirable for so-called ‘non-liberal’ societies? Parekh seems to accept this point when he’s criticising Mill and Raz, but to forget it when he’s insisting on that liberal arguments for autonomy are parochial.

Perhaps Parekh may respond that the ‘autonomy’ that he conceives to be present in all ways of life is not the same thing as full-blown autonomy in the liberal sense. So, for example, when he speaks of the religious autonomy of Hindus he means their freedom to make choices within a Hindu framework that is itself unquestioned, rather than a stronger capacity to question the whole Hindu way of life. More generally, it might be argued that while critical thinking is universal, critical reflection on one’s own conception of the good – the core of liberal autonomy – is not (RM 177).

To this, liberals could reply that wherever there is critical thinking, there we already have at least the seeds of critical reflection, hence the roots of autonomy. It’s true that traditions of critical thinking are often circumscribed by unquestioned assumptions, such as the acceptance of certain texts as sacred. In such cases, critical thought tends to be limited to argument over rival interpretations of the text. But where questions can be raised about the meaning of texts, questions can and will eventually be raised about the authority of the text itself. Critical thinking leads naturally to critical reflection, although this may take some time. In this connection, Parekh observes that ‘Muslims do have a problem with a critical and historical study of the Qur’an, and it is likely to take decades before they become used to it’ (NPI 112). Here he is emphasising current Muslim resistance to more radical forms of critical reflection, but at the same time holding out the prospect of change, and of change emerging from a process with roots in current practices.

Another objection to this liberal line of defence may be that when liberals emphasise the pro-autonomy (or critical reflection) aspects of world cultures, they are being unduly selective. Even if we concede that there are such strands in all cultures, we should recognise that there are also strands of heteronomy, faith and unreflective allegiance. The pro-autonomy strand doesn’t necessarily represent the true face of the culture. The truth is that all cultures contain both aspects – indeed, that on balance most are arguably more hostile to critical reflection than accepting of it (Miller and Fabre 2003: 13).

But the point of the liberal argument here is not to claim that all human cultures are ‘truly’ or ‘really’ or ‘essentially’ committed to critical reflection and autonomy. On the contrary, the point is to deny that cultures have any such essence one way or the other. Liberals’ immediate purpose in this connection is just to keep open the possibility that any culture may evolve or develop in the direction of

7 Although on Parekh’s own account Hindu beliefs are so malleable that it’s uncertain what a Hindu ‘framework’ would be: see NPI 150-1.
8 See, e.g., the account of this process in Hegel 1956.
individual autonomy – that such an evolution or development is not ‘alien’ to some cultures.

It’s the opponents of autonomy as a universal ideal, like Parekh, who tend to justify their view by appeal, often implicit, to a background understanding of certain cultures as having essential identities or fixed characters that exclude the possibility or desirability of autonomy. After all, it’s not much to the point for critics of liberalism simply to show that, as a matter of fact, autonomy is not highly valued in a given culture at present. That’s agreed – indeed, the whole purpose of the liberal case is to argue that autonomy ought to be more widely or consistently respected than it is.

The anti-liberal reply, typified by Parekh, is not just that autonomy is not highly valued in some cultures at present, but that liberal claims that it ought to be more highly valued are inappropriate, that there’s something about such claims that is out of place or inauthentic in the relevant cultural context. Societies that try to satisfy such claims fail to be, in Parekh’s phrase, ‘true to their traditions’. It’s hard to see how such a critique can avoid depending on essentialist assumptions – for example, that essentially ‘liberal’ cultures can be distinguished from ‘non-liberal’ cultures, or that ‘western’ cultures are inherently distinct from ‘non-western’, or that, more generally, cultures have essences. It’s only given assumptions such as these that Parekh can assert that individual autonomy is an alien imposition in the context of ‘non-liberal’ or ‘non-western’ cultures.

In fact Parekh oscillates between relying on these essentialist assumptions when he’s relativising liberalism, and (rightly) rejecting them when he believes he’s detected them in the thinking of others. For example, he chastises liberals like Mill and Raz for ‘absolutising’ liberalism – that is, for making liberalism the central point of reference in a way that cruelly divides the world into societies that are either liberal or non-liberal (RM 110). Yet Parekh himself continually generalises about ‘non-liberal’ societies, especially when he wants to argue that the value of autonomy is alien to them.

Further, the ‘non-liberal’ societies whose integrity concerns Parekh turn out to fit the familiar ‘non-western’ stereotype – his examples include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, ‘Middle eastern and African polities’, Bangladesh, ‘traditional Muslim society’ (Parekh 1992: 169-70). This implies a reliance on the old east-west division Parekh condemns when he claims to find it in Mill and Raz.

Similarly, Parekh takes Samuel Huntington (1996) to task for the latter’s blunt distinction between ‘Western’ and other cultures as part of his ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis (NPI, chap. 8). ‘Western civilisation’, Parekh points out, is neither as internally homogeneous nor as clearly bounded and distinct from other cultural groupings as Huntington supposes. Rather, it is the product of many different and conflicting strands of thought, many of which cross east-west boundaries, and of which the Christian and Graeco-Roman traditions stressed by Huntington are only two. Moreover, ‘Western civilization has influenced all others so deeply that it has become a powerful presence in their lives, and is no longer confined to the West’ (NPI 158).

Conversely, those civilizations Huntington regards by implication as ‘non-Western’ – e.g. ‘the Indian, Islamic and Sinic’ – all have rationalist and liberal strands
as well as religious and anti-modern, just like ‘Western’ civilizations (NPI 162). The fundamentalist strand within Islam, for example,

Clashes not only with Western liberalism, but also with its own liberal tradition, and finds its echo in the Christian fundamentalism of the West. This means that civilizations do not clash, only their opposite strands or interpretations do. And the clash is as much within civilizations as between them. It is therefore deeply misleading to talk of an inherent clash between Islam and the West (NPI 162)

Quite true, but this undermines Parekh’s own pronouncements about the suitability, or lack of it, of liberal or democratic values for ‘non-western’ societies (Parekh 1992: 172-3). Surely it is just as misleading to talk of an inherent clash between those societies that are suited to individual autonomy and those that are not.

Finally, Parekh’s whole tendency to declare ‘non-liberal’ or ‘non-Western’ societies off-limits to autonomy rests on an essentialist view of culture in general that, again, he rightly rejects elsewhere. ‘A culture has no essence’, he writes. ‘It includes different strands of thought, and reformers are right to highlight those that have been marginalized, suppressed or misconstrued by the dominant interpretations of their tradition’ (RM 175). In that case reformers are right to protest when dominant cultural views have marginalized, suppressed or misconstrued the claims of individual autonomy and critical thinking.

Parekh’s rejection of cultural essentialism is especially strong in his discussion of modern globalisation (NPI: chap. 9), and again this has significant implications for the validity of personal autonomy as a universal ideal. Globalisation has not only economic, technological and political dimensions but also a moral aspect under which certain values and assumptions are increasingly shared on a global scale. The value of individual autonomy is arguably one such commitment. Joseph Raz makes this case when he argues that under the fluid and changeable conditions of modern industrial life, the value of personal autonomy, which enables people to be flexible and adjust to change, becomes inescapable (Raz 1986: 369-370, 394). Having rightly emphasised the dynamism of culture, especially modern culture, Parekh is hardly in a position to insist that certain values, such as autonomy, should be seen as inherently Western and inappropriate for non-Western cultures.

Once we get beyond the idea that there are essentially liberal and non-liberal, Western and non-Western cultures, the way is clear to embrace the view that liberal values such as individual autonomy can be found, at least in embryo, in many cultures, including those whose currently dominant values are non-liberal or ‘non-Western’, and that in all such cultures there is a legitimate potential for autonomy to be promoted further. Of course, the converse also holds: that non-liberal tendencies and potentialities are also to be found in liberal and Western societies. From this more cosmopolitan perspective, the debate over the place of individual autonomy appears less as a contest between inherently liberal or Western (pro-autonomy) societies and inherently non-liberal or non-Western (anti-autonomy) societies as between the proponents and opponents of autonomy wherever they are found. On this
view the contemporary liberal commendation of individual autonomy may be controversial but it is not ethnocentric.9

Is liberalism monistic?
The second of Parekh’s main lines of objection to liberalism as a framework for multiculturalism is that liberalism is too close to ‘moral monism’. This he defines as ‘the view that only one way of life is fully human, true, or the best’, and that others are correspondingly defective and inferior (RM 16). Moral monism is to be contrasted with moral pluralism, according to which many ways of living are, within very wide limits, equally legitimate. Although Parekh sees strengths and weaknesses in past versions of both monism and pluralism, it’s clear that he tends more towards the side of pluralism.

Monist views, Parekh notes, have been advanced in various forms and in varying degrees of strength throughout the history of Western thought. Liberals are not as strongly monistic as earlier thinkers, such as the Greeks or medieval Christians, and they clearly try to make room for a degree of diversity, especially in the fields of religious belief and personal development. Nevertheless, Parekh argues, all liberals insist on the universality of certain claims about human nature and human good, in particular the dignity of the individual and the desirability of individual autonomy. These attitudes are not universally accepted; rather, they are characteristic of a certain range of cultures, namely the individualistic cultures of the modern West in contrast with non-individualistic and non-Western cultures. Consequently, liberalism effectively asserts that one kind of culture is superior to another. That flies in the face of the pluralist reality that human values and virtues are too various to be wholly contained by any single way of life. Many different ways of life are equally valid.

We have already seen a partial reply to this charge: the values characteristic of liberalism are not the exclusive property of any one particular culture or range of cultures. But consistently with this it could still be argued that the liberal package of values is the less a selective subset of the full range of human goods, and one that excludes or downgrades other legitimate and valuable alternatives. Liberalism may not be ethnocentric, but it’s still too monistic.

Before seeing how liberals might respond to this criticism, it’s important to consider some matters of definition. Parekh’s concept of monism (and therefore pluralism) clearly owes a great deal to Isaiah Berlin, although Parekh notes that his definition is ‘narrower’ than Berlin’s (RM 346, note 1). He doesn’t explain what he means by this, but one respect in which this does seem to be true is that on Berlin’s view monism refers to overriding claims made on behalf not only of ways of life but also of ethical theories (e.g. utilitarianism), ethical ideals (e.g. Plato’s Form of the Good), and ideological goals (e.g. Marx’s full communism).10

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9 This view also suggests a partial defence of Mill’s position too, since it fits with his vision of a liberalising mission not only to ‘backward’ societies but also to Europeans – of whatever class.
Berlin’s broader understanding of the kinds of ideal that monists can uphold also suggests a significantly different primary focus. Compared with Parekh’s definition of pluralism as concerned primarily with multiple ways of life, Berlin’s view focuses primarily on the plurality of values. This is an important distinction, because whether one is more concerned to respect the multiplicity of ways of life or the diversity of values can make a great difference to the general cast of one’s politics. A world in which people pursue a greater range of goods is not necessarily the same as one in which there is a greater range of ways of life, since some ways of life permit a lesser range of goods to be pursued than do others. A world in which all ways of life are internally plural, allowing and encouraging the seeking of many different values, will arguably be more diverse, in terms of values or goods, than one in which only some ways of life are internally plural and others are authoritarian or internally monistic.\textsuperscript{11}

Parekh’s definition of monism appears to commit him to a pluralism of ways of life or cultures rather than a pluralism of values or goods, but the latter is actually more in keeping with his general outlook than the former. The reason is that pluralism of cultures is indistinguishable from cultural relativism, which is a view Parekh consistently and rightly rejects. To say that cultures are plural in the sense intended here is to say that they are incommensurable with one another, or so distinct that each culture has its own totally unique outlook and constitutes its own moral universe. Ethically incommensurable cultures cannot be compared and criticised from outside, since their incommensurability means that there is no common ground from which such comparison and criticism can be mounted. This is a strong form of relativism.

But Parekh is clear that cultures are not wholly incommensurable (RM 172-173). Rather, they can be compared, at least to some extent, and criticised in accordance with cross-cultural criteria – or values that are shared by all cultures. For example, some cultures are clearly more egalitarian than others, while some may do better than their rivals on the score of individual liberty. This view is clearly distinct from cultural relativism, but it is in line with a Berlinian pluralism of values, in which incommensurability is a relation among goods rather than whole ways of life.

Of course, even if we understand pluralism as being primarily about the deep plurality of values rather than cultures, it will still be true that many ways of life are legitimate and deserve respect. If human goods are incommensurable, then each carries its own unique ethical weight and no single ranking will apply in all cases. Rather, many different rankings will be valid, depending on the circumstances. This suggests that many different value-rankings embodied by cultures will be valid: value pluralism implies the legitimacy of a wide range of cultures. Pluralism in this sense is a natural ally of multiculturalism.

\textsuperscript{11} Parekh seems to appreciate this point when he is criticising the cultural pluralism of Herder. There he distinguishes between ‘diversity of cultures’ and diversity ‘within’ them, complaining that Herder’s pluralism is inadequately sensitive to the latter (RM 73). But he fails to see the significance of this insight for his own treatment of liberalism.
The question is, within what limits? More specifically, can the full range of goods and ways of life that must be accepted as legitimate from a pluralist perspective be adequately accommodated within the political framework of liberalism?

Parekh says no: liberalism is just one possible package of goods among others. The liberal emphasis on liberty, equality and toleration makes this an exceptionally wide, embracing package, but it can’t in the nature of things embrace all the various goods and ways of life that pluralists must respect. A greater emphasis on individual liberty will diminish solidarity, equality will be bought at the expense of excellence, toleration will undermine certainty. No single moral or political scheme can accommodate all values equally, since some inevitably collide with others, and liberalism is no exception to that rule. Liberalism cannot be an adequate political container for a multiculturalism informed by value pluralism.

How might liberals respond? One possibility is to reject value pluralism, but I shall not pursue this. The obvious weakness of the monist position is that the relevant appearances are on the side of pluralism. Consequently, the onus of proof falls on monists to explain how these appearances are misleading. That task has not yet been achieved in two and a half millennia of Western philosophy. Of course, the monist can always reply that just because no such solution has yet been agreed upon doesn’t mean that it’s not possible. But at this point one would have to say the monist consummation is unlikely. If so, a persuasive monist defence of liberalism is even more unlikely.

**Liberalism is compatible with pluralism**

Another reply to Parekh would accept that value pluralism is true but argue that pluralism and liberalism are compatible. There are two ways in which that might be so. One is John Gray’s view that although value pluralism rules out the possibility of the characteristically liberal ranking of goods being valid universally, the liberal order may still be authoritative within some local context – for example, where a pre-existing liberal culture endorses that kind of politics (Gray 1995a, 1995b, 2000).

There are problems with Gray’s approach from both a liberal and a pluralist perspective. From a liberal perspective this kind of contextualism or particularism is better than nothing, but falls short of the traditional liberal ambition to address humanity, not just those people who happen to be liberals already. From a pluralist perspective Gray’s particularism amounts in each case to awarding moral authority to a local culture, whose particular value-ranking is only one possibility among others and one that may well be challengeable both from outside the culture and from within.  

Alternatively, liberalism may be compatible with pluralism in a more universal sense. Parekh concedes that liberalism is ‘the most hospitable of all political doctrines to cultural diversity’ (RM 11). (The same claim can be made about liberalism’s capacity to accommodate value diversity.) Of course, he also believes that liberalism is nevertheless too ‘substantive’ a doctrine adequately to accommodate or ‘conceptualise other cultures’ (RM 14). For Parekh, liberalism cannot be an

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12 For a more detailed critical discussion of Gray, see [...].
adequate framework for multiculturalism because it cannot embrace all the values and value-combinations endorsed by the multitude of existing ways of life.

But to insist that liberalism (or any political doctrine) cannot be a legitimate framework for multiculturalism unless it accommodates every existing way of life is too demanding a test. For one thing, Parekh himself allows that 'although all cultures have worth and deserve basic respect, they are not equally worthy and do not merit equal respect' (RM 177). Indeed, some existing cultures are gravely defective from a moral perspective, and even broadly legitimate cultures often harbour particular practices that are 'grossly outrageous' and 'obviously need to be changed' (Parekh 1992: 171). Such cultures and practices clearly need not be accommodated by a legitimate multiculturalism.

Further, even if liberalism cannot accommodate all acceptable cultures and practices, that objection is not fatal. The accommodation it does provide may be the best we can do. Whatever the full range of actual and potential goods and ways of life in the abstract, in practical terms any political community needs some framework of basic values and principles. The most a pluralist can ask is that the framework respect the plurality of legitimate goods and cultures to the greatest extent possible. That liberalism passes this more reasonable test is effectively conceded by Parekh when he allows that liberalism is 'the most hospitable' of political doctrines.

The same concession is more or less explicit in Parekh's work at several other points. For example, during a critical analysis of religious literalism he notes that literalists are always members of a wider political community, and that they ought to consider the interests and rights of other members too.

This means that they all need to agree on a form of association that respects their equal rights and is acceptable to them all. A liberal democracy meets this requirement. It is just because it treats all its members equally. It does not impose particular religious beliefs on them, and thus respects their integrity. And it is the only form of association capable of commanding general acceptance. (NPI 139) The only form of political association capable of commanding the acceptance of rival religious groups – the case for liberal universalism couldn’t be put more strongly by its most ardent supporter. Indeed, liberals needn’t go that far. They only have to show that liberal democracy does better in this respect than the alternatives.

Perhaps Parekh would respond that although liberal democracy is indeed the best practicable political framework for religious and cultural difference, we should recognise that for many societies this is not a current reality but a future goal to be approached gradually and warily rather than imposed by force. The proper means by which the goal should be approached is 'intercultural dialogue', in which liberalism is an equal partner with other views (RM 14-15, chap. 9).

Few liberals would disagree with the need for dialogue. Moreover, they may well regard Parekh’s account of dialogue as a model of fairness. But they may also point out that the kind of dialogue he describes is as attractive as it is only because it is circumscribed by assumptions and norms that are distinctively liberal.

Take for example Parekh’s construction of a model intercultural dialogue on polygamy – in particular, the Muslim practice of polygyny, where a man can have
multiple wives. Parekh imagines that the conversation will include a recurring objection to this practice to the effect that it ‘violates the principle of the equality of the sexes’ (RM 284). He is obviously sympathetic with the objection, adding that this is ‘not just a western or liberal but a rationally defensible universal moral value’. But the principle of sexual equality is rejected by many existing cultures, and was uniformly absent from pre-liberal societies, including those of the ‘West’. Sexual equality seems to be an ideal that has emerged out of a distinctively liberal (and modern) sensibility, whether one wishes to see this as Western or not. To conclude that such a principle should override the sexist practices and norms of certain traditional forms of Islam is surely to side ultimately with the liberal outlook. So much, one might think, for treating liberalism as just one culturally conditioned political view among others.

Moreover, one might suspect that liberal values are smuggled into Parekh’s account of dialogue at a deeper level. He assumes that the dialogue he describes will include as participants all those affected by the outcome. Even if this is understood in group rather than individual terms, this would seem to mean that true intercultural dialogue must include groups such as women and internal dissenters. But why should dialogue include such groups unless it’s framed by something like the distinctive liberal commitments to sexual equality and freedom of speech? If liberalism is not a framework but just one view among others, on a par with traditional cultures in which women and dissenters have no right to speak, then the inclusion of these groups may be legitimately challenged at the start.

To sum up: the claims of liberalism to be compatible with a value-pluralist approach to multiculturalism are not defeated by saying that a liberal political order cannot accommodate every existing culture or cultural practice, or even every morally acceptable culture or cultural practice. One of the basic insights of pluralism is that human goods often come into conflict and we have to make choices that carry losses of genuine value. Nevertheless, politics is the art of the practicable, and we have to do the best we can. Liberal democracy has a strong claim to being the best we can do in these circumstances. Despite Parekh’s view that liberalism ultimately expresses just one cultural perspective among others, he seems sometimes to see quite explicitly that it’s more than that, and at other times to rely on that fact implicitly.

**Pluralism and autonomy**

Parekh claims that value pluralism rules out liberalism as an adequate political container for multiculturalism. So far, I’ve argued that liberals can reply by arguing that liberalism and pluralism are compatible. Another reply I want to consider goes further still: pluralism entails a case for liberalism. I have made this case more fully elsewhere […], but here would like to emphasise one strand within it because this reinforces my earlier case for the universality of individual autonomy. My claim is that a case for special attention to be paid to the value of individual autonomy as a matter of public policy flows from a commitment to pluralism itself.

The opening step in this argument connects pluralism with practical reasoning. If pluralism is true, then there are multiple goods, each of which contributes objectively and uniquely to human well-being. Each of these goods must be valued for itself – or for the unique contribution it makes. Each must be respected equally in that sense. Prima facie that means that each of these goods has an equal claim on us,
such that we ought to realise them all equally if that were possible. But of course that is never possible. In particular cases some goods will conflict with others and we shall have to choose among them or trade them off against one another. The key point is that when we choose against a genuine good we must do so for a good reason. To choose arbitrarily or with indifference is to fail to respect the distinct values at stake. I can resolve an ethical choice by simply ignoring the force of one of the options, but to do that is to blind myself to the plurality of value. To respect that plurality is to open myself to the force of all relevant ethical considerations until I have reason, with regard to the particular circumstances, to decide on one option in preference to others.

What counts as a good reason to choose – that is, a reason that shows adequate respect for value plurality? Appeal to first-order rules, such as ‘do not steal’, may be part of the story; similarly, appeal to moral philosophies like utilitarianism or Kantianism, or to the moral code of a religion or culture or way of life. Here the key point is that, from a pluralist perspective, none of these can be conclusive. Each of these approaches may be relevant, since each emphasises the claims of a particular good or package of goods. But in every case the plurality of goods invites us to ask why that particular set of claims should have precedence over others.

Consequently, to do justice to pluralism, we have to be prepared to arbitrate between these off-the-peg criteria: to inquire into their relevance in the situation we are facing, to weigh their respective claims when they come into conflict, perhaps even to look behind them to assess their validity and soundness. That is, to respect the plurality of values we have to think for ourselves. Pluralism obliges us to be autonomous.

If this argument holds, it reinforces the reasons given earlier – some of which are endorsed by Parekh himself – for regarding individual autonomy as not just a culture-specific prejudice of ‘Western’ ways of life, but a universal good. As Parekh supposes, pluralism, if true, is part of the deep structure of human moral experience. If a capacity for personal autonomy is necessary in order to choose well against a pluralist background, then the value of autonomy is implicit in that same universal condition.

Of course, one can use one’s autonomy to identify with a particular religion or culture, including religions or cultures that do not themselves place a high value on personal autonomy. This complements Kymlicka’s argument that culture is valuable because it provides a context for autonomous choice. It’s also true that cultural affiliation can be to some extent the product of autonomous choice (Levey 1997; Gill 2001, chap. 3). In this sense culture can be placed in a context of autonomy.

The political implication is that, from a pluralist perspective, it is entirely appropriate that multiculturalism be framed by principles that include a special concern for individual autonomy. Cultural choices include choices among human goods, some of which are deeply distinct or incommensurable. To navigate such choices in a way that does justice to what is at stake, people need a capacity for autonomous judgement. This is not just what the world looks like from a ‘Western’ point of view. It’s not even a view that all liberals agree with, since some retain a monist approach. Rather, this what things look like from the perspective of value pluralism.
Conclusion
Parekh’s rejection of liberalism as a container for multiculturalism is unjustified. First, his claim that liberalism is ethnocentric is not demonstrated simply by asserting that the central liberal value, individual autonomy, is not equally valued by every existing culture. Critical reflection is a significant element in most cultures, and its public encouragement is a legitimate direction in which such cultures can develop.

Second, Parekh’s claim that liberalism is monistic or anti-pluralist is not established merely by showing that a liberal framework cannot accommodate every existing culture or culturally-endorsed practice. No political system can do that; some values must always be emphasised at the expense of others. The best a political framework can do is to be as accommodating as possible, consistently with the basic values of the framework, and with that qualification to be more accommodating than the alternatives. That liberalism fits that more reasonable bill is conceded by Parekh himself.

Indeed, there are many points at which Parekh relies implicitly on liberal values, not least in his account of the intercultural dialogue that is supposed to take us beyond liberalism to a higher level of abstraction. Purporting to treat liberalism as just one cultural system among others, he in fact relies on liberal universals to make his conclusions palatable. I believe this pattern of explicit rejection along with implicit reliance is widespread among anti-liberal multiculturalists, but to show that would require another paper.

References