CORRESPONDENCE

Defeating Multiculturalism

Thomas Klingenstein’s essay “Patriotism vs. Multiculturalism,” focused as it is on the contrast between what makes America a good nation and the multiculturalism that attacks that goodness, does not sufficiently explain multiculturalism (Spring 2019). Although the comments that follow the essay contribute to an explanation, they leave the reader without a schematic view of the phenomenon.

Multiculturalism is anything but “an insane exercise in self-flagellation.” Today’s multiculturalists, unlike medieval flagellants, neither confess their own sins nor flagellate themselves. Their self-purification and virtue certification consist of confessing your original sins and mine, and flagellating us!

Nor is there anything “multi” about multiculturalism. Unlike the version in Samuel Huntington’s time, it is no longer “a progressive cultural cosmopolitanism distinguished by superior sensitivity to the downtrodden.” There is zero cosmopolitanism about it; it is peculiar to a narrow class of latter-day Westerners. Having almost abolished the study of foreign languages and literature in universities, multiculturalists are aggressively ignorant about any and all foreign cultures. They neither know nor care about Confucius, Leibnitz, or Cervantes, any more than they do about Aristotle, Descartes, or Dostoyevsky.

Klingenstein rightly reminds us that human beings are “justice-demanding beings.” Although multiculturalists are intellectually and morally distinct from every culture that has ever existed—peculiar and incomprehensible in any terms but their own—they do not have a set of judgments about what is good or just, about how to live life. Rather, multiculturalists define themselves solely in negative terms—in terms of what they hate. Their perversion of justice consists of vengeance—not for violations of some standard of justice but for what they allege to be wrongs done to their own constituent groups.

In fact, the “multi” in “multiculturalism” must be understood in light of the key concept “intersectionality” that David Azer rad mentions in his response to Klingenstein’s essay. In a nutshell, it means concurrence in revolutionary hate and vengeance.

Beginning circa 1969 the rising movement for “black power” sought no longer to integrate blacks into American society, but rather to make war against it. “Chicano” groups did the same. By the same token, some of the feminist movement abandoned the goal of improving women’s lives and sought to harness sex-based resentment for revolutionary political purposes. Many homosexuals soon began to translate their resentment as American society’s outsiders into revolutionary hate. As ever, lumpen-intellectuals hate those who don’t give them the obedience they think they deserve. Each of an increasing number of identity groups is driven by the desire for revenge for its peculiar grievance. But in theory they concur—and in practice they unite—in making Western civilization in general, and America in particular, the object of their revolutionary hate.

Their unity is more revealing of what they are about than is their grievances’ diversity. For example, though the issue of global warming is irrelevant to blacks as blacks and women as women, each of these identity groups has taken up that issue as part of their own revolutionary rationale. Formally, and often more than formally, every multicultural identity group has taken up every other’s grievance as its own. Effectively, the rest of us are faced by a front—indeed by a party. It should escape no one that this party is merging with, influencing, and may be remaking the Democratic Party into an instrument of revolution.

Angelo M. Codevilla
Plymouth, CA

Thomas Klingenstein has identified multiculturalism as the “central issue and threat— the Communism or slavery, as it were—of our time.” All thoughtful discussion of this evil must observe his logic that “We are most in need of arguments from justice (and other aspects of Lincolnian thinking) where the problem is most intractable: education, in particular, elite higher education.”

I believe Klingenstein is calling for a new Reconstruction to finish the work of the American Civil War. Lincoln intended the 13th Amendment to restore the Declaration of Independence in the Constitution—that is, to reaffirm the American Founding.

But note how Lincoln had to argue for this end, as exemplified in his June 25, 1857, speech on the newly announced Dred Scott v. Sandford decision:

Now I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone. In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.

The passage reflects how easy it is to collapse from a false understanding of freedom (e.g., Francis Fukuyama’s) into tyranny. Lincoln’s comparison (with its context) shows most poignantly the necessity of establishing justice before sharing a common public space.

In his debates with Stephen Douglas and his quarrels with Frederick Douglass, Lincoln had first to defend the justice of recognizing the natural right of liberty by denying he meant a multicultural America, even to the point of advocating colonization for freed slaves. Our error today is to proceed as though we can identify multiculturalism with justice. The root of that blunder, the banishing of both self-interest and the self, or soul, from politics, will lead to tyranny, as all class-based political solutions do.

Although the tyrannical mindset easily imputes racism to President Trump—a red-blooded American patriot who has the courage to stand up to the times,” as Klingenstein calls him—it is the egalitarian Trump, not the multicultural, biracial Obama who acts in the Lincolnian spirit.

Ken Masugi
Rockville, MD

What Ought We to Do?

We’re grateful for Mark Blitz’s thoughtful review of our book, Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality (“Morality and Happiness,” Winter 2018/19). On key points, however, he has missed the mark. He takes us on for not presenting a positive account of morality, and for not distinguishing the moral
from the merely ethical within the realm of ethics, broadly considered. These are worthwhile pursuits, but neither is a concern of our book. The fact is that hundreds of millions of dollars and extraordinary scholarly effort have been given to the false and destructive promises of the new moral science. The overarching argument of our book is meant as a caution to those headed off this cliff rather than a positive account of morality and, thus, a roadmap to an alternative consensus.

We do agree that there are genuine distinctions between the ethical, narrowly construed (e.g., the good, values) and the moral (e.g., rights, irreducible duties), yet for the argument we were making, they’re just not relevant. The important distinction in our argument is between the ethical, broadly speaking, and the non-ethical. It is because moral science typically fails to make this distinction that it is implicitly committed to David Hume’s fallacy—committed to the viability of deriving “oughts” from non-“oughts.” The distinction between ethics and morality is otiose for our argument, and making it would have been mere pedantry.

“To see what we can discover about happiness through the methods of modern natural science,” Blitz claims, “we must first consider carefully what the human good and morality are on their own terms. This will also clarify the limits of the scientific effort.... Hunter and Nedelisky insufficiently explore this problem.” But, as we explain, ethics must be taken to include legitimately action-guiding goods and “oughts.” Because empirical science can only study the non-ethical, it cannot deliver knowledge of those goods. Not only is this a formally precise account of the limits of science, but asserting any additional positive ethical content would only muddle the picture and make it less broadly acceptable.

Blitz suggests we employ a double standard here in demanding a definition from moral science while not offering one ourselves. But as should be clear, this is not so. The failure to grasp the distinction between the ethical and non-ethical, we argue, goes to the heart of the “challenge of definition” the new moral science fails to meet. When moral scientists employ ethical concepts that in fact have no ethical content, then they aren’t really talking about ethics at all. We provide the important distinction: ethical concepts must appeal to putative genuinely goods or “oughts.” So, there is no double-standard here.

Finally, Blitz claims that the moral scientists are not, contrary to our book’s subtitle, “tragic” figures, but rather “earnest.” Surely these are not mutually exclusive. As we show, the quest for a science of morality began as an attempt to end the violence of deep moral disagreement via the consensus-generating methods of empirical science, but has now become a morally nihilistic attempt to baptize as “scientific” whatever social consensus wants. That its practitioners are mostly earnest participants in this foreboding quest strikes us as tragic in the extreme.

James Davison Hunter
Paul Nedelisky
Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture
Charlottesville, VA

Mark Blitz replies:

As I said in my review, Science and the Good “is a serious work” that brings “to light important matters.” I also say that the authors do not explore sufficiently questions that are relevant for their topic such as the connections among happiness, morality, and what is good. Considering these phenomena in their own terms is important if we are to judge what we can know (and not merely assert) about them. The true limits of natural science are in illuminating them, and to what degree the distinction between “oughts” and “non-oughts” on which the authors rest much of their discussion is valid. Nothing they say in their reply would lead me to change either my questions about their book or my praise of it.

Anywheres & Somewheres

Christopher DeMuth’s essay “Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism” skillfully delineates the real and critical battle between the two ideal-types he calls “Anywheres” and “Somewheres” (Winter 2018/19). The former are “cosmopolitan, educated, mobile, and networked,” while the latter “are rooted in...their families, neighborhoods, clubs, and religious.” Well done. But, reading his analysis, I would note that while DeMuth, CRB editor Charles Kesler, and I unanimously favor the Somewhere viewpoint, we don’t exactly fit its mold:

• DeMuth: One degree each from The Lawrenceville School, Harvard, and the University of Chicago; instructor at Harvard; lawyer at Sidley Austin; White House aide; Reagan’s “deregulation czar”; president of the American Enterprise Institute.

• Kesler: Three degrees from Harvard, Dengler-Dykema Distinguished Professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College, recipient of the Bradley Prize, vice chairman of a congressional commission.

• Pipes: Learned French in Swiss boarding school, two Harvard degrees, instructor at the University of Chicago and Harvard, frequent New York Times author, two presidential appointments, invited to audit the World Economic Forum.

In short, we are three quintessential Anywheres who share Somewhere views. Conversely, former bartender Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and former welfare recipient Rashida Tlaib spout Anywhere-ism. Each of us makes up his own mind. Ideal-types have their limitations.

Daniel Pipes
Middle East Forum
Philadelphia, PA
Subscribe to the Claremont Review of Books

“The Claremont Review of Books applies the principles of Western civilization to an astute analysis of current affairs. This unique synthesis of theory and political reporting keeps those foundational principles alive, while providing deeper insight into the turbulence of our present era than any Beltway-obsessed publication can hope to achieve.”

—Heather Mac Donald

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25% off the newsstand price. A one-year subscription is only $19.95.

To begin receiving America’s premier conservative book review, visit www.clairemont.org/crb or call (909) 981-2200.