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## DOES MULTICULTURALISM NEED A RELATIVISTIC BASIS?

### Abstract

The fact of multiculturalism, i.e., the cohabitation of diverse cultural groups or communities, is a distinctive mark of the twenty-first century. In the face of this fact, various theories have been developed. Multiculturalism is one of them. Multiculturalism is an answer to the fact of multiculturalism. Claiming to rest on the respect for diversity, the right of difference, the protection of freedom, and the search for peaceful cohabitation, multiculturalism has often been promoted with the use of highly relativistic arguments and principles.

The present paper, however, aims at criticising this understanding of multiculturalism as a mere (*laissez – faire*) celebration of differences, by arguing that true multiculturalism needs not be relativistic, but ought to be articulated mainly with regard to the universal demands of the human person. Such a theory replaces “blind tolerance” with a “measured and firm sense of responsibility”, and “inauthentic recognition of cultural equal worth” with a “qualitative assessment of cultures.” It is a theory that has as its underpinning criterion to assess cultural differences their compatibility with justice, human dignity and human rights.

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### Keywords

Multiculturalism, relativism, moral realism, human dignity, human rights, Kymlicka-Parekh, Barry



“Es gibt ...einige Parameter zu berücksichtigen, um weder einer rücksichtslosen Form des Universalismus Noch einer gleichgültigen Variante des kulturellen Relativismus anheim zu fallen.” (Kaufmann 2007: 17)

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[“There are... some parameters to be taken into account in order not to fall to either a regardless form of universalism or to a trivial variant of cultural relativism.”]

Multiculturalism has become a catchall concept, misunderstood by some people, made complex by some scholars, and overused by some politicians. What is meant to be an answer to diversity, or rather, a forward-looking theory that should “not just say how to treat existing groups, but also specify the rules under which new groups may enter the society” (Kymlicka 2001: 59) has become, at least in the field of philosophy and political theory, a prosperous ground for various ideological trends. Whereas some conceptions of multiculturalism insist on its compatibility with liberal principles (Kymlicka, Parekh), some doctrinaire liberals like Brian Barry (2001: 12) take multiculturalism to be regressive and “anti-egalitarian.” For the majority of communitarians, however, equal recognition is the appropriate answer to diversity within society (Taylor: 1994: 36.)

The rejection of multiculturalism has often been articulated around the argument that it is a conceptual stronghold of relativism by making (cultural) diversity the very criterion and norm according to which acts should be judged. In some versions of multiculturalism, like Parekh’s (2006), lie certain relativistic premises and arguments. In this paper, our purpose is to distinguish, in the first place, the fact of multiculturalism from the normative theory of multiculturalism. Then, we will explore the parallel between multiculturalism and relativism by going through some criticisms of Parekh’s theory of operative public values. Finally, we’ll provide justifications and arguments why multiculturalism, as a theory that seeks ways to accommodate diversity, needs not have a relativistic basis.

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## I

A society is multicultural when it contains various groups that have different cultural backgrounds and customs. Those groups could be constituted by either individual legal/naturalized immigrants or national minorities<sup>1</sup>, but they can also be composed of illegal immigrants

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<sup>1</sup> Kymlicka (2001: 50) does not deny the existence of the third group constituted by illegal immigrants. For the sake of his discussion about rights, he made this important point:

“I say ‘legal and naturalized’ to emphasize that I am talking about immigrants who enter the country legally with the right to become citizens, and indeed who are expected by the receiving government to take out citizenship. These sorts of immigrants are very different from illegal immigrants or guest-workers who are not expected to naturalize, and indeed have no right to do so, and who not even have a right to work or to permanent residence. I discuss immigrants with the right to naturalize, unless otherwise specified.”

who, for good or bad, do actually enter the social picture. The claims and expectations of these three groups are, however, different. While the naturalized immigrants claim the right to maintain the core of their cultures within the mainstream society, the national minorities, in spite of being a fundamental part of the leading culture, still claim certain auto-determination or self-government. The illegal immigrants, on the other hand, although not openly uttering their claims, nourish the hope to enter the group of naturalized immigrants and claim the same rights.

A multicultural society is a *context* characterized by *diversity*, but not by any kind of diversity. Bhikhu Parekh makes a crucial distinction between three kinds of diversity. A *subcultural diversity*, in which people don't represent an alternative culture but seek to *pluralize* the existing one (for example, Lesbians, Gays, etc.); a *perspectival diversity*, in which people are highly critical of some of the central principles or values of the prevailing culture and seek to *reconstitute* it along appropriate lines (for example, feminists, environmentalists, etc.); and a *communal diversity displayed by*, self-conscious and more or less well-organized communities entertaining and living by their own different systems of beliefs and practices (for example, newly arrived immigrants, communities like Jews, Amish, etc.).<sup>2</sup> Although there is a certain overlapping between these three kinds of diversity, a society is really genuinely multicultural when it is characterized by communal diversity.

In order to be genuinely multicultural, a society needs to contain minority groups that are identifiable (for being well-organized), and that have cultural practices and beliefs qualitatively different than those of the dominant culture. The mere presence of various cultural groups does not really make a society multicultural, when, for example, the cultural differences are only peripheral or meaningless. Multicultural societies are also characterized by an oscillation of power and domination between the dominant culture and the minority groups. A society's claim to being multicultural is possible and plausible only when it presents this communal diversity brought in by the presence of minorities (of a different cultural origin than that of the "dominant-culture"), and by their claims to self-government for the one (national minorities), and institutionalised cultural exception for the other (immigrant groups).

Multiculturalism is descriptive: it gives account of a given, a reality, but at the same time, this given presents us with a specific type of

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<sup>2</sup> Parekh (2006: 3). Later, Parekh makes this claim more clearly in the following passage: "the term 'multicultural' refers to the fact of cultural diversity, the term 'multiculturalism' to the normative answer to that fact" (ibid.: 6).

challenge, that is, “what to do about it?” How to address the issues posed by this fact of pluralism which creates what can be called “circumstances of multiculturalism” (Kelly 2005: 3). At the point where thoughts about how to go about the fact of pluralism emerge, we slide from descriptivism to normativism, from the description of a (multi-cultural) society to politics or a normative agenda of a (multiculturalist) society. Multiculturalism is, indeed, nothing but philosophical, political, ideological, or social answers given to multicultural societies. *Multiculturalism is a pro-ject that addresses a pro-blem*. Multiculturality is a fact, whereas multiculturalism is an idea (theory).

Amy Gutmann (1993: 171) insufficiently defines multiculturalism as “the state of a society or the world containing many cultures that interact in some significant way with each other.” Cultural diversity is not the definitional element of multiculturalism. If it was, multiculturalism would simply be the synonym for multiculturalism. Although an actual diversity is always there when we talk about multiculturalism, the latter is more than that. The same remark about the confusion of multiculturalism with multiculturality applies also to Tzvetan Todorov (2012: 197, 201) who defines multiculturalism as a “state of affairs,” referring to a “coexistence of many cultures in a society.”

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Others, like Delanty (2007: 94) define multiculturalism as “any major strategy aiming at managing cultural community, in particular insofar as this is defined in largely cultural terms.” Although it is a strategy, the object of multiculturalism is not one, but more than one cultural community. Otherwise, almost all societies would be multiculturalist since they are often constituted at least by one cultural community which they always manage, for bad or worse. Delanty pursues his general definition to count monoculturalism as a form of multiculturalism. But, later, in his treatment of the typology of multiculturalism, he finally rectifies his conception of multiculturalism: “the models of multiculturalism discussed in the previous section [among which the monoculturalist model], are all based on the refusal to recognize cultural difference. In this sense they are not strictly speaking models of multiculturalism since they regard cultural difference as something that needs to be eliminated” (ibid.: 100). Monoculturalism, indeed, by proposing to eliminate cultural differences and promoting cultural homogeneity and monotony, is clearly the opposite of multiculturalism. The policies and strategies used in monoculturalist societies differ, though, in both their scope and results.

Monoculturalism, which implies the existence of a culturally homogenous society, is largely based on a classical Republican idea of society in which the ethno-cultural minorities, as well as national mi-

norities, are not given rights to fully express their cultural identity. The monoculturalist project is sustained by some political standards, such as assimilation and acculturation which impose upon foreign cultural groups living in another society according to the rules of the leading culture (*Leitkultur*). Where there is assimilation, there is absorption of the members of an ethno-cultural group, often immigrants, or of other minority groups, by the established and dominant culture.

Multiculturalism makes a positive and a negative claim. The former is that people living in pluralistic societies should have equal chance to live the kind of life that their culture prescribes, while the latter says that those people should not be made subjects to legal or other kinds of requirements that would force them to violate those commitments. Because it is caricatured, this description of multiculturalism does leave open many questions that have to do with the actual contents of the claims made by minorities and their effects on the general political and axiological framework of a given society.

Multiculturalism is a project, a politics, a construct, a movement and a philosophy that ponders up ways to face the challenges of a society composed of different cultural groups and members from different cultural backgrounds. Parekh (2006: 4) is completely right when he says that multiculturalism is not concerned with all kinds of diversity, but mainly with communal diversity. Multiculturalism is *not* cultural diversity, but is *about* cultural diversity. A multiculturalist society is a society that has a specific project for ethnocultural minorities living within its boundaries. It is a reflection upon the ways to accommodate cultural differences and anticipate problems that could result from them. The project can be conducted at different levels: political, economical, philosophical, etc., and it takes inspiration from the need to have healthy and sustainable societies characterized by diversity.

Multiculturalism is also a social and cultural movement which aims at “respect[ing] a multiplicity of diverging perspectives outside of dominant traditions” (Willet 1998: 1). This movement can be initiated by social groups that are aware of the importance of accommodating cultural diversity and of potential positive results of the equilibrated expression of various cultural sensibilities. The multiculturalist movement proposes to de-centre a society’s focus on the leading culture, mainstream culture, by encouraging minorities to take an active part in public life. This cultural empowerment is possible in a society in which a certain room is left in the public sphere to make the voices of cultural minorities heard.

Multiculturalism is a politics, “the way to describe how social structures create and maintain different cultures in a society” (Geuijen

1998: 44), which is deeply connected with the historic development of a society. Large waves of immigrants as well as the formation of national minorities in some nation-states, have contributed to the elaboration of political agenda that turned mainly around these three schemes and policies: 1. “We recognize the cultural minorities, but we don’t provide them with any political rights” (that is, the public sphere should be neutral), 2. “We not only recognize the cultural minorities, but also grant them with political and other kinds of rights, and to the national minorities, we attribute rights of self-government”; 3. “We are indifferent towards the cultural minorities, therefore, multiculturalism is not a theme for us.” Multiculturalism is, therefore, a normative discourse about a fact, multiculturality.<sup>3</sup>

Advocates of multiculturalism often argue that *diversity is a positive force* for a society’s nationhood or cultural identity, whereas its detractors often point at the risk of falling ineluctably into a kind of relativism that would justify and even legalize all practices, even those that are against universal human rights, and create cultural islands within one society (ghettoization.) The multiculturalist project, at least in the form in which has been developed by some of its proponents, contains a variety of relativistic premises and principles.

## II

Bhikhu Parekh, one of the main proponents of multiculturalism within the liberal tradition, has elaborated on the role and function of values in multiculturalism. His idea of “operative public values” (Parekh 2006: 264–94, 363–5) represents an important step in multiculturalist debates in general, and in those answering the question of how values are encrusted in the multicultural project in particular. Yet, it has come under heavy criticisms. Those criticisms are articulated around the argument that Parekh promotes a certain kind of relativism that is incompatible with genuine liberal principles (Barry 2001), or trumpets the old relativistic saying that “this is how we do things around here” (Kelly 2001).

Operative public values are here for Parekh, to regulate the public life and the problems that occur therein. Disagreements, even in liberal

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<sup>3</sup> Parekh (ibid.: 2–3) makes also this point clear in what follows: “Multiculturalism is not about difference and identity per se but about those that are embedded in and sustained by culture; that is, a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organize their individual and collective lives [...] Multiculturalism, then, is about cultural diversity or culturally embedded differences.”

societies, can never be eliminated but just reduced. And the operative public values, since they “represent the shared moral structure of society’s public life”, “provide”, for Parekh (2006: 270) “the only widely acceptable starting point for a debate on minority practices.” To gain a clear understanding of the operative public values, let us try to see why they are called in this way.

Parekh characterizes his operative public values in the following way: “They are *values* because society cherishes them, endeavours to live by them, and judges its members’ behaviour in terms of them. They are *public* because they are embodied in its constitutional, legal and civic institutions and practices and regulate the public conduct of its citizens. And the values are *operative* because they are not abstract ideals but are generally observed and constitute a lived social and moral reality. The operative public values of a society constitute the primary moral structure of its public life” (ibid.: 269).

Furthermore, these values “are not sacrosanct and non-negotiable, and may themselves be questioned” (ibid.: 267). Operative public values are “not static, not beyond criticism, not rigid” (ibid.: 269). As an example of an operative public value, Parekh gives liberty in a liberal society, not without pointing at the broadness of the concept of liberty which can lead to different understandings and interpretations. Operative public values are no static principles. They are to solve pragmatic and practical issues that people are confronted with in their public lives. But operative public values are not exempt of criticisms.

The following criticisms do not concern the operative public values as such, but rather the way Parekh elaborates them and the reasons he gave to discard, for example, the conception of universal moral values. Any society, in order to normally function, needs operative public values. But those operative public values must have a certain history which informs about the society’s moral inclinations and structural rules of its ethical forum. Operative public values are not *ex-nihilo* products, but derive from a particular context that sets priorities and grants to some values more weight than to others. The operative public values are, then, a society’s choices of guiding principles arrived at through definite guidelines that each society had adopted. Those guidelines can be loose or rigid, inclusive or exclusive, dogmatic or conciliatory.

The theory of operative public values has been attacked by Paul Kelly (2001; 2004) who thinks that Parekh is trumpeting the old relativist saying: “this is how we do things around here,” meaning that what is agreed – no matter how its qualitative assessment is – in a given society, will be *de facto* the sole authority. The question here is:

“what grants authority to the operative public values?” Is it the mere fact of agreement and consensus or do the operative public values appeal to some higher, transcendental, and cross-cultural standards? Or is it, as Parekh seems to defend it, because “members of a society have good reasons to adopt it”? Parekh appears to hold that the source of moral authority is “the fact of having good reasons to adopt it.”

What Kelly reproaches to Parekh are the old criticisms that were made to the all kinds of consensus theories as they relate to truth and moral values. Parekh seems, as a matter of fact, to go along the relativistic lines by making the operative public values rest on the agreement among people. Now, his attempt to indicate that the operative public values can be put into question, reformulated, and maybe rejected altogether, does not constitute in itself a valid argument to answer this main criticism. For the central point here is not how to go about the operative public values, but rather what confers the operative public values their authority. The rightness of an action is therefore conferred, following the logic of Parekh, not by any extra-cultural or transcendental standard, but rather by the principles that are incrustated and entrusted in a particular culture (Kelly 2001: 433). This is an internalist approach that Parekh tries to cover up by bringing in the existence of an active dialogue and the possibility of revising the operative public values. But even if we would agree with Parekh that one relies on good reasons as a criterion to evaluate moral values, our intuition tells us that there is something wrong with this. Praising the virtues of dialogue is one thing; quite another is considering a dialogue and the resulting consensus as criteria for rightness and ultimately truth.

Beyond the operative public values, an important issue emerges as to what establishes moral principles and judgments. Parekh seems to rely here on good reasons, saying that a society should be able to provide coherent, plausible, and understandable reasons for its practices. Yet although constituting part of the evaluation of moral argumentation, good reasons alone are not sufficient. A particular society can well have good reasons for adopting a practice, without that very practice being morally right. When the Eskimos, for example, kill their elderly and sick people, evoking the reasons of survival, this does not give to the act of “killing elderly people” a moral seal. We may well understand the situation and the motives of those Eskimos, but we are not obliged to agree with them that “killing the elderly people” is morally good, even under the conditions they live in. Moral reasoning and argumentation need further criteria, including impartiality and discernment coupled with a high sense of the value of the human person. In the case of operative public values, despite the fact that they are always

under discussion and can be put into question, I believe that their authority needs not rely only on good reasons and consensus alone.

Parekh keeps on calling for the virtue of dialogue to resolve conflicts that occur when different cultural backgrounds enter into contact. As much as dialogue can be the clue to reach an agreement and live in peace, there are some other considerations to be taken into account. Again let us hear what Parekh has to say:

Since we are prone to the human frailty of assuming our values to be self-evident and defining reasons in an ethnocentric manner, we should be extremely wary about accusing others of unreasonableness. We should make every effort to enter into their world of thought and give them every opportunity to show why they hold the views they do. If they offer no reasons or ones that are flimsy, self-serving, based on crude prejudices or ignorance of relevant facts, they are being unreasonable and have in effect opted out of the dialogue (Parekh 2006: 129).

I agree with Parekh that ethnocentrism is not the attitude that could get us far when dealing with diversity and that good reasons play an important role in the argumentation about moral values. Given that societies and cultures have specific structures within which moral values arise, we can get to understand those moral values, along with the customs and expressions that derive from them only when we take into account the whole system. But it seems to be a mistake to equate the understanding of something and its adoption. When I try to enter the world of thought of my interlocutor, it is for the sole purpose of understanding as best I can the message he conveys. In order to get that I need to listen to the reasons and explanations he is providing me with. But this is only one step of a long way. Understanding is not the ultimate end of a dialogue. It is only one of its important stages. The final goal of a dialogue, in my opinion, is the walking together towards the open horizon of truth, and ultimately the discovery of truth.

Furthermore, I have problem seeing to what Parekh refers with his term “crude prejudices.” For one cannot even talk about prejudices without having already postulated a scheme of truth and falsity. Either Parekh reckons that the call for dialogue is to be subordinated to a certain presupposition of the existence of truth and falsity whose criteria have to be transcendent and a-cultural, or he can give up on the talk about prejudice. Even in a value-neutral (free) system, it is impossible not to start from somewhere. If we agree that moral values exist and that they shape throughout the interpersonal relations; if we agree also that human beings are deeply impregnated by moral values – even if we assume that the latter are products of a cultural conditioning

– we cannot act as if right and wrong were just volatile categories, present only in our respective minds.

Parekh, without denying the existence of universal moral values, struggles with their actual efficiency when it comes to settling issues related to differences (cultural ones mainly). Parekh's dilemma, I believe, resides in his reluctance to fully support the "non-negotiable" consequences of universalism. By failing to set limits of toleration, he risks opening the door for some abuses on human dignity, rights, and values that make possible community life: "Parekh's form of universalism is so hospitable to violations of basic rights that he can quite properly be regarded as belonging to the school that backs national autonomy as a way of escaping liberal constraints" (Barry 2005: 209).

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Universalism, by being based on a minimal morality, can be open-minded, but not open-ended, nor can it be tolerant of everything. Criticisms we might make as universalists of some traditions and cultural practices can be solely based on the issue whether a local practice is *compatible* with a universal principle. Against some scepticism about the moral authority of universalism as in Parekh and Walzer (2002), I would claim that the colour of a true universal principle originates from the colourless and neutral facts of "being a human being" and "sustaining the life of the human being." It does not stem from any parochial and biased understanding of the human being. A second approach to criticising cultures and practices is to propose alternatives (Pace Walzer, *ibid.*: 10–1). I think that the fact of proposing alternatives is less a problem than the very nature of the proposed alternatives. As a matter of fact, and following the example of Walzer about "criticizing tyranny by defending the values of social democracy", we can face a practical example in which two alternatives (or more) can be both in compliance and compatible with the demands of the human person. In such cases wanting to impose one(s) alternative can be as inefficient to conflict resolution as it is pernicious to some basic human and collective rights.

Moving back to Parekh, it is worthwhile noting an interesting further move in his idea of operative public values. He acknowledges the importance of universal moral values in public debates<sup>4</sup> to which one can also appeal to challenge the operative public values. Again, Parekh's problem is that universal moral values are "vague and ab-

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<sup>4</sup> Parekh (2006: 128f, 293–4). Parekh maintains also that appeals to universal moral values "transcend the restrictive framework of the operative public values, liberate moral imagination from local prejudices, have a radical potential, and link up the political struggle in one society with others elsewhere." (*ibid.*: 364).

stract and lack interpretive clarity.” He names the problem of intelligibility of the principles of common humanity and equality in caste-divided or hierarchical societies with their deeply internalized notions of natural inequality (Parekh 2006: 364). The dilemma Parekh struggles with expresses the problem of compatibility of the claim of universality with the reality of differences. That is, how can a universalist allow all cultural differences to be expressed?

When Parekh confesses that “it’s difficult to think of a single universal value which is ‘absolute’ or inherently inviolable and may never be overridden” (ibid.: 136), he is trumpeting the classical error of mixing up the connection that there is between the *nature* of a value, the *cognition* of it, and its *actualisation* through human deeds. The universality of a value does not necessarily *involve* either its cognition or actualization by all, but it *recommends* and ultimately “*forces*” them. As a matter of fact, “ein Wert kann bestehen, ohne daß wir ihn als solchen kennen, beurteilen.”<sup>5</sup> A value like justice or honesty needs not be known and ultimately recognized by all as such in order to be universal, or at least to carry on a certain moral weight or authority. The universality of a value does not lie in its actual practising by all people, but rather in its nature and in the ultimate good reasons and coherence with the demands of what it means to be a human person. We can end up with *aporia* or dead ends in explaining metaphysically or ontologically the nature of some fundamental moral values, but our incapacity to pierce some mysteries of the human condition should not make us lean towards a simplified and uncritical culturalist version of morality according to which,

die Rechtfertigung für das, was man tut, liegt nicht darin, rationale [oder anders], das heißt von anderen nachvollziehbare Gründe zu geben. Der einzige Grund, den Kulturalisten geben, ist schlicht der Verweis auf die eigene Kultur; man tut, was man tut, weil man es in der eigenen Lebensgemeinschaft immer so tut (Früchtl 2010: 8).

[The justification of one’s act does not lay in the fact of giving rational (or other) reasons or other comprehensible reasons. The only reason culturalists give is simply the reference to one’s own culture; one does what one does, because it has always been done so in one’s own community-life.]

We need to hang on to universal moral values in order not to fall into culturalism which suffers from a kind of internalism that makes any cross-evaluation impossible, and from a very narrow understanding of culture as a self-sufficient windowless monad. Furthermore, may it

<sup>5</sup> Hans Cornelius (1911: 338f): [A value can exist without us knowing and assessing it as such.]

be with Parekh's theory of operative public values or any other theoretical construct that points at ways to regulate the relations between society members,<sup>6</sup> it is necessary to build such a theory upon the argument that formal and structural procedures require an objective conception of truth and a perfect adequacy of their principles with the demands of the human person. Absent this, we might end up in a vicious circle where our concerns would be superficial and antagonistic to the values incorporated in the human person. And in no way should all kinds of acts be tolerated, not even in the name of multiculturalism. And as Barry (2001: 133) rightly put it: "a remarkably hardy fallacy is the idea that moral relativism can be invoked as a basis for religious and other forms of toleration."

### III

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Multiculturalism is a theory that elaborates on ways to accommodate diversity within a community. Diversity can be cultural, religious, political, etc. As we have said earlier, the very project of multiculturalism is at the outset easily assimilated to relativism. This is not just an observation; it lies deep in the ideas of several multiculturalist theoreticians who can hardly make the distinction between, for example, the fact of diversity and the normative approach regarding that very fact. If multiculturalism favours the expression of all present cultural identities within a given community, does this make it necessarily a relativistic theory? Should multiculturalism necessarily embrace cultural and moral relativism? My answers to these two questions are clearly "no". Multiculturalism does not need relativistic basis, neither in its conception (theory) nor in its practice.

In order to provide an argument for our position, it is crucial to start with the question as to whether diversity per se is a universal value. For most of the proponents of multiculturalism use the umbrella of diversity to justify the claim that states ought to be tolerant of everything as long as cultural diversity recommends it. It is true that diversity is a fact. And the configuration of our present world makes this fact even more visible and widespread. But where some relativistic trends of multiculturalism fail is in the equation they make of a fact with a value. As a matter of fact, the sociological and human reality of differences and diversity among men (in their cultures, religions, political

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<sup>6</sup> Parekh himself assimilates his theory of operative public values to John Rawls' "basic principles of constitutional democracy," Michael Walzer's shared self-understanding," and David Miller's shared way of life which serves as a source of ethical standards." See Parekh (2006: 363).

settings, etc.) is no moral justification or criterion for neither individual attitude nor state policy making. It is legitimate to record and take into account the fact of diversity; but diversity per se can be relevant to morality only when it is itself qualified.

Absent the qualification of diversity, any act can be tolerated in a society as long as it is the expression of some cultural tradition or belief. We can clearly see the danger of such an approach in a multicultural society which is, by definition, a constellation of different cultures. This approach also uses another kind of argument about the freedom of exercising one's culture. Again, this does not say anything about the nature of the culture in question, but takes culture as a self-contained entity that is sovereign and "inviolable" regardless of the nature and quality of the values that constitute its foundation.

Cultures, contrary to the claim of moral and cultural relativism, are not hermetically sealed worlds, nor are they "windowless monads" closed off from one another, within which everyone is trapped into a moral consensus, inaccessible to arguments from outside" (Appiah 2005: 248). This idea of cultures as hermetically closed entities is erroneous, since it overlooks the very necessary dynamic process accompanying every culture. Habermas (1994: 131) makes this capacity of cultures to undergo changes a matter of survival of those cultures and "even a majority culture that does not consider itself threatened preserves its vitality only through an unrestrained revisionism, by sketching out alternatives to the status quo or by integrating alien impulses—even to the point of breaking with its own traditions." Since cultures are no windowless monads and are themselves subject to errors, they should not be made an ultimate source of our moral judgments and conducts.

A consideration of culture that ignores the quality and nature of its content does not qualify for a reasonable and justifiable approach. But the kind of multiculturalism that does tolerate everything in the name of cultural diversity is as dangerous and counterproductive as the kind of universalism that wipes straight out diversity and differences. One needs to look into the nature of diversity and the other needs to discover the universal in the particular in order to rightly appreciate the value of "being different."

Multiculturalism does not need to be grounded on relativistic premises because such approach would necessarily lead to an anarchy that is pernicious to the individual and to a society at large. The point here is that there ought to be an overarching basis and values that transcend mere contextual and cultural traditions. The true foundation should be sought in the human person: their demands (respect for the human person and for human life) and their sustainability (satisfaction

of her needs, rejection of harm, pursuit of genuine goals). Having this minimal and universal structure can help to avoid the reproach of imperialism that is attached to human rights. For far from being dependent on or attached to any human civilization, human rights are the true, legitimate, and justifiable measure of what it means to be a human being. It may be, though, that human rights are more present and respected in some civilizations than in others; but this fact does not make them an exclusive invention of those civilizations.

Hence if multiculturalism is thought to be an answer to cultural imperialism, then we need to clearly define what cultural imperialism is. For cultural imperialism cannot be related to human rights since these are universal and have to do with the human person, and not with particular beings, or singular cultural traditions. I take it even to be beyond the point to want to address the unfounded reproach that the one who promotes human rights is exercising a sort of cultural imperialism. If multiculturalism is to have solid grounds and a promising future, it has to overcome this reductionist and false approach that confines human rights in some civilizations. Imposing principles of human rights can never be taken as a kind of imperialism exercised by a group of people or deriving from a given culture or civilization. The rejection of imperialism can be justified only if the principles imposed have nothing to do with those of human rights, but are based on the fulfilment of purely egoistic goals.

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By way of concluding, *we claim that if multiculturalism is based on relativistic grounds, it will represent its own enemy and produce the seeds for its own destruction.* The absence or rejection of overarching norms and principles based on humanity *tout court* would inevitably lead to an endless partition of communities which would, in the end, have nothing to do with each other.

It may be a paradoxical claim, but we believe that a true multiculturalist project should start with setting limits to toleration. It should envisage a bundle of principles and norms based on our common shared experience of humanity and which should not be violated, not alone in the name of cultural diversity. This kind of multiculturalism is a theory that takes seriously into account cultural diversity through a qualitative assessment of its contents. A euphoric and romantic celebration of differences can at best convey a superficial feeling of justice and freedom, but it never can lead to the implementation of sustainable multicultural societies. The future of multiculturalism, both in theory and practice, lies without doubt in the replacement of the human person at the heart of our concerns, plans, and projects. We can have “epistemological grounds” for valuing “cultural diversity and pluralism”

as Parekh (1998: 207) claims liberals have, but this should not lead us to embrace either cultural or moral relativism.

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## Streszczenie

*Czy wielokulturowość potrzebuje podstawy relatywistycznej?*

Wielokulturowość, czyli współistnienie różnych grup kulturowych oraz wspólnot, to znak rozpoznawczy XXI wieku. Istnienie tego zjawiska doprowadziło do powstania wielu teorii. Jedną z nich jest multikulturalizm, będący odpowiedzią na fakt istnienia wielokulturowości. Przyjmując, iż doktryna ta polega na poszanowaniu różnic, prawie do odmienności, ochronie wolności i dążeniu do pokojowego współistnienia, często propaguje się ją przy użyciu mocno relatywistycznych argumentów i zasad.

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Niniejsza praca ma na celu krytykę rozumienia multikulturalizmu wyłącznie jako celebrowania różnic. Multikulturalizm nie musi być relatywistyczny i powinien być omawiany głównie w odniesieniu do uniwersalnych potrzeb człowieka. Teoria ta zastępuje „ślepa tolerancję” – „przemyślanym i stanowczym poczuciem odpowiedzialności”, a „nieautentyczne uznanie jednakowych wartości różnych kultur” – „jakościową oceną kultur”. Podstawą multikulturalizmu jest ocenianie różnic kulturowych na podstawie ich zgodności ze sprawiedliwością, godnością ludzką i prawami człowieka.

## Słowa kluczowe

Multikulturalizm, relatywizm, relatywizm moralny, ludzka godność, prawa człowieka,