What is Pluralism? Some Philosophical and Historical Reflections
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Some Philosophical Distinctions
Pluralism would be beside the point in a time or place – if such a time or place ever existed – when societies did not consist of plural points of view, when there was uniformity of opinion on all important matters, in a word, when there was a cultural homogeneity. But in the modern period plural points of view are present in virtually all societies we know of, generated initially by conquest or migration from outside a society and later often due to increasing consciousness of new forms of identity emerging from within a society such as, to take just one relatively recent example, gender identity in the last half-century or more.

Pluralism, however, is not to be conflated with the fact of such plurality of cultures in a society. It is a normative doctrine, an ideal not a fact. It is an ideal of respect relevant in societies that contain plural cultures and points of view.

How shall we understand the special kind of respect that defines the pluralist ideal?

Each person knows someone (perhaps many others) whom she recognises to be as wise and good and knowledgeable as she is, but with whom she deeply differs on one or other matter of importance whether it be moral or religious or political. Despite the depth of difference, however, she may have great respect for his (their) wisdom, goodness, and knowledge and therefore, in turn, for the point of view with which she differs. Respect of this kind can define not just such relations between individual persons but relations between whole cultures. When it does so, it is properly called ‘pluralism’.

So understood, as a form of respect, the ideal of pluralism is to be distinguished from the liberal ideal of toleration. The very term ‘toleration’ suggests that one is putting up with something for which one might not have any respect. If toleration entails respect it is only of a very abstract kind – respect for a citizen’s autonomy to hold whatever views she wishes, even if one does not specifically respect her for her views. Pluralism, by contrast, respects difference, not merely the autonomy of citizens to be different.

At the same time, as a doctrine about cultural difference, pluralism is to be distinguished along different lines from cultural relativism. Relativism holds that there are values that are true (or false) only relative to particular cultures and so such truth (or falsity) as they have does not speak at all to
other cultures. They are incommensurate with the values of other cultures. One culture may recognise that another culture adheres to certain values but that recognition is purely detached and disengaged, it is merely an academic or ethnographic comprehension of another. There is no engagement of one culture by another. At best, one can go to another culture and get converted by ‘going native’, a form of defection rather than transformation via influence or dialogue or persuasion. By contrast, pluralism, despite acknowledging genuine difference between the values of different cultures, does not consider values across cultures to be incommensurate in this way. That is to say, difference does not engender detachment and indifference; rather it leaves it completely open that one may learn from other cultures and seek to influence other cultures, in turn, through mutual engagement.

This distinctness from cultural relativism makes it clear that nothing in pluralism requires one to stamp every commitment of every culture as true or right simply because of the fact that it is avowed by a culture. Respect for cultures does not concede to them that automatic form of self-validation. One may certainly find some values of another culture (as indeed of one’s own culture) to be wrong and indeed that is precisely why one, unlike as with relativism, often seeks to engage with that culture – seeking to change its mind and thereby overcome the disagreement over values and practices. So long as such engagement is done with the respect that defines the pluralist ideal, as I have expounded it, pluralism may insist that differing cultures are commensurate and can find each other to be wrong without giving up on the pluralism. So a question then arises: what is it to engage with respect with a culture with which one disagrees and moreover, crucially, to do so with a more specific form of respect than merely the general and abstract form of respect that liberalism grants, the respect for all persons’ autonomy and right to an opinion, however false? This is the hard question. Hard because without a good answer to it, we cannot firmly claim to have established what I have insisted on – that pluralism is distinct both from liberal toleration and from cultural relativism.

The specific form of respect that is the hallmark of pluralism bestows on the engagement with another culture with which one disagrees a very specific quality. The engagement must take the form of attempting to persuade another culture by appealing to some grounds or reasons that are internal to the commitments of the other culture. That displays a respect for the other culture that goes beyond, that is more specific than, the respect that owes to the abstract recognition of all to have their opinions, however wrong. It respects their substantive moral and psychological economies rather than merely their autonomy and seeks to reason with them within the detail of their worldview, taking its particular substantive values seriously and engaging with them so as to persuade it to change its mind or practice on the matter on which there is disagreement. Without such substantive and specific engagement, the pluralist ideal would be indistinguishable from liberal toleration.

It is really because the unique and specific form of respect that defines pluralism allows engagements of this sort – engagements which may result in the overcoming of disagreements and the converging upon certain values and practices – that pluralism often takes a syncretic cultural form where two or more cultures may blend to form common ways of life, even as they remain distinct in genealogical pedigree and leave distinct communities within the society intact. In the realm of religion in particular, syncretic forms of pluralism are far more frequent in popular and folk religiosity than in orthodox and institutionalised religion where such mutual engagement that characterises pluralism is discouraged.

Some Historical Distinctions

Wherever pluralism withers, two starkly opposed cultural attitudes, each in its different way dangerous or repugnant, prevail: one of saying ‘You must be my brother!’, the other of saying ‘You can never be my brother!’ The former is familiar from the religious intolerance of proselytising religions, the latter is familiar from exclusionary forms of hierarchy such as, for instance, the Hindu caste system.

In some ways the former attitude is morally more attractive than the latter because it wishes to share the truth (as it conceives it) with others, thereby showing that it cares enough for others to want them to partake in the truth. But it may often be the more dangerous attitude because it is susceptible to the use of force and violence to enforce the ‘must’ in ‘You must be my brother’.

There are, however, distinctions and points of historical qualification to be observed about this. For centuries the relations between two proselytising religious cultures, Christendom and Islam, were characterised by extreme vilification and violence towards one another both in word and deed. This was partly at least because of the doctrinal proximity of the two religions. Islam posed a threat to Christianity not because it was vastly different – in fact it is hard to imagine such internecine relations between Christianity...
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and Buddhism, say, or Hinduism, which were not only more geographically distant, but remote in concept and outlook. In fact it may be said, with only the merest exaggeration, that the Crusades were fought not because Islam seemed to Christianity to be some wholesale alien worldview to be destroyed, but rather to put down a heresy that had emerged in the Arabian lands. The point of immediate relevance, however, is that throughout this period of the Crusades, these two civilisations, for all the violence they perpetrated against each other, learnt from and influenced each other in the sciences, art, literature and philosophy, and they traded with each other in a wide variety of goods. Indeed, Islamic thought and culture often became a hospice for heterodox ideas within Christianity that were threatened with internal persecution. There was, it might be said – perversely as this may sound – health in the hostility. It was the health of contradictory relations that often exist between two robustly equal foes. Pluralism, even a syncretic coalescence, existed in the world of ideas and culture and commerce, while there was a protracted conflict on the military and propaganda battleground. To put it in Huntington’s term, this was a genuine clash of civilisations, proving that clash – however undesirable in its own terms – is not always incompatible with mutual engagement and the respect that characterises pluralism.

All of this changed with Napoleon’s campaigns in Egypt and the British conquest of India, which gave rise to a quite different set of relations between Christendom and Islam, now no longer a conflict between equal sides, but rather defined by feelings of superiority and condescension on the one side and felt to be so by the other, breeding resentment and alienation and dehumanisation rather than a robust sense of conflict. Huntington was not talking of the period of the Crusades so much as this modern period. He was thus really insidiously passing off a conquest as a clash. There is real significance in this distinction. Pluralism as I have defined it is almost entirely missing in the ‘clash’ of civilisations of our time, proving that pluralism is only compatible with a clash, that is to say with hostility, even violence, so long as the hostility and violence does not take the form of conquests that define the colonialism of the modern period down to the indirect imperialisations of our own day. Huntington’s omnibus term ‘clash’ glosses over this distinction and the history within which pluralism first flourished and then withered.

A further good question to ask is how the concept of ‘pluralism’ relates to the recent currency of the term ‘multiculturalism’. There is no answering this question without looking again to history, in particular to the political history of European modernity and its evolving doctrines in the passage from pluralism, through nationalism and secularism, to multiculturalism.

In the seventeenth century, power, which was hitherto relatively scattered, first began to be integrated in increasingly centralised states and, as a result of ideas that had emerged with the new science, it was thought that this state power could no longer rest on a legitimacy that appealed to the divine right of the monarch who personified the state. It now required a quite different justification and this was sought no longer in theology but in political psychology. What do I mean by psychology? A feeling had to be created in the populace. But it was not a feeling directly for the state. It was rather to be a feeling for a new kind of entity that had emerged around then, after the Westphalian peace, an entity with which the state was indis- solubly fused. Later this fusion would come to be described with a hyphen: the nation-state. The idea was to create a feeling for the first half of the hyphenated conjunction, which because it was inseparable from the second half (an inseparability expressed by the hyphen) would legitimise the state and its exercise of power over the territory that was the ‘nation’. ‘Nationalism’ was subsequently the term used to describe this feeling, this political psychology.

In many parts of the main belt of Europe such a feeling was generated by a standard ploy; by identifying an ‘external’ enemy within the territory (the Jews, the Irish, the Catholics in Protestant countries, the Protestants in Catholic countries…) and despising it and subjugating it as the ‘Other’, declaring that the nation was ‘ours’ not theirs. Later, when numerical and statistical forms of discourse were introduced in the study of politics, such categories as majorities and minorities were introduced and this ploy would be called ‘majoritarianism’. And so it was that these European nation-building exercises destroyed the relatively unselfconscious pluralism that prevailed prior to modern nationalism, creating entrenched divisions – and often the basis of the majoritarianism was religious. Naturally, there were (often violent) religious minoritarian backlashes against this form of majoritarian nationalism, and the damage done by the civil strife that followed gave rise to the conviction that religion itself was responsible for the damage and the damage could only be repaired if religion was kept out of the orbit of the polity. And thus, a new doctrine called ‘secularism’ emerged – basically to correct the politically divisive fallout of these nationalisms – and was extensively consolidated as the frameworking form of governance of the European modern state.
It was only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that it began to be felt that this entrenched secularism was insufficient as a political framework. In the decades after 1945, European economies were reconstructing their war-torn economies that had suffered serious loss of manpower during the war. To deal with this, they permitted large-scale immigration from erstwhile colonies for the first time, more often than not to do the most menial forms of labour. Over the next decades these migrant populations grew to be substantial minorities, often alienated in their new setting, coping with racialist attitudes that they faced with uneasy assimilation and, as a result, they frequently turned to their own religions as a source of dignity and autonomy. Ironically, secularism, which, as the narrative above makes clear, was introduced to repair a damage that had started first with religious majoritarianism, seemed to them quite inadequate as a way of addressing their feelings of helplessness as dislocated minorities. Secularism, because it opposes both religious majorities and minorities, did not speak conversely enough to them as minorities with their own religion and culture. It came off as secular majoritarianism, an improvement perhaps on religious majoritarianism, but irrelevant to their predicament. It was to address this dissatisfaction with secularism that the ideal of multiculturalism was formulated, essentially a post-migratory phenomenon in Europe and other countries with increasing immigrant populations, such as Canada and Australia. Multiculturalism, unlike secularism, was intended not simply to lay down the law with indifference to majorities and minorities; it would treat all cultures as minorities, acknowledging each of their customs and their protocols for living and local self-governance.

What this potted intellectual and social history reveals is that ‘multiculturalism’ is a self-conscious revivalist version of a pluralism that was a widely pervasive and unconscious phenomenon prior to its being undermined by nationalisms based on majoritarianism and the secularism that was brought in later to repair that. Multiculturalism restores pluralism in a more explicitly articulated ideal because the initial pluralist ideal could not be taken for granted in the centuries-long trajectory that followed upon the rise of modern nations along with the political psychology on which they were based. And to this day multiculturalism, our own contemporary self-conscious version of an earlier pluralism, is constantly harassed not only by the sinister right-wing majoritarian nationalisms that have resurfaced but also to some extent by liberal secularists who resist the pressures put on their abstract universalist claims about citizenship by the particularist demands of diversity coming from minorities after a half-century of migrations.

Pluralism: Science and Culture
I have restricted my remarks so far to issues of culture and values. It is frequently thought that plurality is much more prevalent and, therefore, pluralism is much more relevant in the realm of culture and value rather than in the realm of science. On the face of it, this is true, but one should proceed with caution in making the distinction too starkly binary.

On the face of it, one thinks this: science formulates laws that govern all of the phenomena that science studies – whether they be in Manhattan or the Malabar – and so there cannot be the kind of difference we find in the phenomena that we study when we study culture.

But now consider the science of medicine.

Ever since the development of modern medicine in Europe, there has been some accomplished sneering, dismissive of older traditions in more distant lands, whether Ayurveda or Unani or traditional Chinese medicine … denying their claims to effective treatment of a variety of affictions. But in more recent years, there has been a slow and somewhat grudging recognition, even among the established institutions of medical science, of the success of a variety of treatments in a range of indigenous traditions. This in itself does nothing to undermine the modernist outlook of science. The outlook does not need to deny the empirical facts about the efficacies of traditional medicine, but what it needs to insist on rather is this: the efficacies of both traditional medicine and modern ‘allopathic’ medicine are to be accounted for by a common underlying explanatory theoretical framework of science. Such an explanation would retain the universality of scope that – as I said, on the face of it – is uniquely demanded of science but is missing in culture.

But this point may be convincing only because we are looking in the wrong place for plurality in the matter of medicine. The plurality does not lie most deeply in the fact of there being relatively effective medical traditions outside of western modernity; it does not consist in baldly and simply denying that the curative success of both modern and traditional medicine must be explained by the same underlying physical theory; it consists rather in denying this latter claim by making a prior claim: that there is a plurality of conceptions of the very idea of success, of what counts as cure.

Many traditional cultures simply do not see the body as a self-standing target of treatment. For them, the body is shot through with meaning and value and emotions, it is never merely the body, never merely a physical...
thing. Thus medical cure is not just a repair of physical functions and health, it is a restoration just as much of meaning and emotional equilibrium. To think that one simply treats a tooth or an organ as a physical thing by a pill or surgery is to miss the entire point about what a body is or what health itself is. And it won’t even do to say that one can cure the body first with a pill or with surgery and that then causes a restoration of emotional equilibrium. It is not a causal relation between body and the more rarified phenomena of meaning and emotions. The body, as I put it above, is itself shot through with meaning and emotions. So it is not a causal conjunction of body and something loftier. There is no separability of the two. And so the plurality lies in there being entirely different conceptions of what a body is: modern medicine simply has a different idea of the body and therefore of health. Hence, to insist that there is a common underlying scientific theory that explains the efficacies of modern and traditional medicine literally makes no sense because these systems of medicine are seeking different efficacies. There is no common phenomenon to be explained by a single underlying theory. That is where the plurality lies.

To deny this would be to refuse the idea that there are different conceptions of the body, to refuse the body as conceived in broader terms than the merely physical, as possessed of meaning, say, and properties of feeling and emotion. To draw an analogy with theatre, that would be like seeing a stage prop – a table on a stage, say – as merely a swarm of molecules, with none of the meaning that it has in the performance of the play, as a site of conviviality, perhaps, or of tense family negotiation. That would be to fail to understand the nature of theatre and similarly, by the lights of tradition, modern medicine fails to understand the nature of health and of cure.

A genuine pluralism would recognise, then, that modern science and traditional medicine have different conceptions of health itself, not just different efficacious paths to a commonly understood notion of health which can then be given a common underlying explanation in science.

The relevance of this to architecture should perhaps now be obvious. Like the body, it is not as if a building is two different things (a physical construction and a contextually meaningful percept) that can be the targets of separate understandings. It is one thing, there is no physical building that is not shot through with meaning. From the point of view of the architect, engineering itself is a cultural discipline.

The 2014 Nobel Prize in Medicine recognised an important finding by two neuroscientists, namely their discovery of ‘how we know where we are in space’. In identifying the critical role of ‘place cells’ – our own inner GPS – the scientists illuminated how we position ourselves in the world and how we navigate our way through the complexities of our environment.

These neurobiological insights indicate not only how we engage with our natural and built environment, but also, more crucially, how our innate sense of place is a kind of compass intertwining aspects of culture, identity, memory and well-being.

In view of our current state of knowledge, it is too early to speculate about the specific relevance these findings might have for architecture. Nevertheless, we have now been given an evidence-based lens through which to grasp the multidimensional nature of our total environment and the need for deep intelligence in addressing its complexities. This understanding encourages us to value plurality and diversity as inescapable facts and to resist the drive to homogenise and normalise the ways in which we create place.

Through its history and its evolving intent, the Award has shown us why it is so important to recover this relationship between our sense of place and the plurality of experience – here specifically the experience, past and present, of Muslim societies and communities, wherever they are in the world. In the jury citation for the 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize, awarded to the Chilean architect, Alejandro Aravena, we find an echo and reinforcement of this same appreciation for ‘a new generation of architects that has a holistic understanding of the built environment and has clearly demonstrated the ability to connect social responsibility, economic demands, design of human habitat and the city.’

The multiplicity of economies and cultures in our times threatens to create a disequilibrium that sets the local and the global on a collision path. Perhaps the task of ‘building’ can offer narratives that sustain the hope of creating a better future in the spirit of pluralism.