

# Multiculturalism and the Possibility of Transcultural Educational and Philosophical Ideals

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## **Introduction: Can Educational and/or Philosophical Ideals Transcend Particular Cultures?**

Are educational and/or (other) philosophical ideals relevant only to the cultures in which they are acknowledged and embraced, or can their legitimacy extend beyond the bounds of those cultures? (By ‘*educational*’ ideals I intend to refer to those ideals which have been thought to characterize (ideally) educated persons and (ideal) educational arrangements and efforts: ideals such as growth, self-realization, creativity, rationality, caring, freedom, obedience, discipline, conscientious citizenship, democratic (or authoritarian) social organization of schools, and so on. By ‘*philosophical*’ ideals I intend to refer to moral and social/political ideals thought to characterize (ideally) moral persons and social/political arrangements, epistemic ideals such as those characterizing (ideal) knowers and believers, etc.) In what sense, if any, can such ideals be thought of as *transcultural*? What is their relevance to cultures which reject them in favour of alternative educational or philosophical ideals?

I hope, in what follows, to establish the legitimacy of regarding ideals such as these as genuinely transcultural. I will endeavour to do so by consideration of a notion which might at first glance be thought to point in the opposite direction—that of *multiculturalism*. I will argue that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, multiculturalism does not entail that educational and philosophical ideals are relative to culture; and that it is possible, and desirable, to embrace both the moral and political directives of multiculturalism and a ‘universalistic’ or culture-transcendent view of genuine educational and philosophical ideals.

## **What Is Multiculturalism?**

‘Multiculturalism’ is often used to refer to the contemporary ‘educational reform movement that aims to equalize educational opportu-

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nities for diverse racial and ethnic groups'<sup>1</sup>, which movement 'incorporates the idea that all students—regardless of their gender and social class, and their ethnic, racial or cultural characteristics—should have an equal opportunity to learn in school.'<sup>2</sup> It typically refers also to the more general ideas that schools, and people and institutions more generally, should acknowledge, value and respect cultural differences and the alternative experiences and perspectives of members of different cultures; and that members of 'minority' cultures should not be required to assimilate into, nor to adopt the alien cultural commitments or identities of, nor be marginalized, silenced or oppressed by, a dominant, hegemonic 'majority' culture.<sup>3</sup>

Even a cursory review of the literature reveals that the term is used in a wide range of ways, to pick out a variety of ideas and practices.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many different forms of multiculturalism—'conservative,' 'corporate,' 'critical,' 'difference,' 'liberal,' 'insurgent,' 'managed,' 'resistance,' 'weak,' etc.—have been identified and defended/criticized by various authors.<sup>5</sup> In view of these different

<sup>1</sup> A. I. Perez y Mena, 'Multiculturalism', *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*, J. J. Chambliss (ed.) (New York: Garland, 1996), 415.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Banks, (1992): 'Multicultural Education: Characteristics and Goals', *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, J. A. Banks and C. A. McGee Banks (eds) (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1992), 2.

<sup>3</sup> K. A. Appiah, 'Culture, Subculture, Multiculturalism: Educational Options', *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, R. K. Fullinwider (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 74; L. A. Blum, 'Antiracist Civic Education in the California History-Social Science Framework', in Fullinwider, op. cit., 24, 32-4; S. Khin Zaw, 'Locke and Multiculturalism: Toleration, Relativism, and Reason', in Fullinwider op. cit., 123; D. T. Goldberg, 'Introduction: Multicultural Conditions', *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, D. T. Goldberg (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 4-5, 30. R. K. Fullinwider, 'Multicultural Education: Concepts, Policies, and Controversies', in Fullinwider, op. cit., 3-22, is a very helpful guide to the literature and the issues concerning multicultural education.

<sup>4</sup> Concerning this range, see Chicago Cultural Studies Group, 'Critical Multiculturalism', reprinted in Goldberg, op. cit., 114 ff. Originally published in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Spring, 1992), 530-55.

<sup>5</sup> On these various sorts of multiculturalism, see especially Chicago Cultural Studies Group, op. cit.; H. A. Giroux, 'Insurgent Multiculturalism and the Promise of Pedagogy', in Goldberg, op. cit., 325-43; Goldberg, 'Introduction', op. cit.; and P. McLaren, McLaren, Peter (1994): 'White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism', in Goldberg, op. cit., 45-74. At the risk of oversimplification, while these versions of multiculturalism differ conceptually, in terms of how deeply they analyse existing patterns, conditions and presuppositions of domination, their main divergence is political, i.e. is a function of how explicitly and committedly they call for revising those patterns of domination and relationships of power/powerlessness. I will not explore the strengths and weaknesses of these various versions of multiculturalism here.

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meanings of 'multiculturalism,' and the different forms of it individuated in the literature, it is difficult to settle on a single conception; but my purposes here require that I do so. For better or worse, then, and in explicit recognition of the alternative conceptions of and distinctions among the various forms of it extant in contemporary discussions, in what follows I will understand 'multiculturalism' to refer to that movement in contemporary social/political/educational thought—and the claims, theses and values which characterize it—which celebrates cultural differences; insists upon the just, respectful treatment of members of all cultures, especially those which have historically been the victims of domination and oppression; and emphasizes the integrity of historically marginalized cultures.<sup>6</sup>

### Why Value Multiculturalism?

If we ask *why* we should embrace multiculturalism—why we should think that students with diverse cultural backgrounds should have equal educational opportunities; why students should (at a minimum) not be penalized for their cultural identities and commitments; and, more generally, why cultural differences ought to be acknowledged, valued and respected rather than denied, trivialized, ignored or decried, or the members of minority cultures oppressed by the hegemonic dominant culture—the answer given by advocates of multiculturalism is straightforward: it is *morally* required that we treat students with justice and respect, in ways which do not demean, marginalize, or silence them; and education which provides such opportunities—which respects cultural differences, and (minimally) does not penalize students for being culturally different—is the only sort of education which meets this requirement. Contemporary discussion of multiculturalism involves many other complex issues, of course. But that the justification of multiculturalism, in education and in general, is at bottom *moral*—in that hegemonic monoculturalism is in various ways morally problematic, and that a multiculturalism that respects cultural differences is in various ways morally superior to such monoculturalism—is widely presumed in the relevant literature.

For example, all the essays in Taylor's *Multiculturalism and 'The*

<sup>6</sup> I have said nothing here about the vexed questions of the meaning of 'culture' and the individuation of cultures. Like virtually all the authors cited herein, I am understanding 'culture' in a very general way, and taking for granted its intersection with other classificatory categories, especially those of race, gender and class.

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*Politics of Recognition*<sup>7</sup>—a highly visible and widely cited volume—take for granted that multiculturalism is justified on moral grounds. Charles Taylor's lead essay, which provides a penetrating historical and analytical discussion of 'the politics of recognition,' focuses on the complex character of the moral requirements, emphasized by 'liberal' social theory, to recognize and respect (members of) cultures other than one's own (and the moral complexities involved in determining failure to do so). Susan Wolf says of 'a conscientious recognition of cultural diversity' that 'justice requires it.'<sup>8</sup> Amy Gutmann asks whether it is 'morally troubling' when 'major institutions fail to take account of our particular identities?'<sup>9</sup> and criticizes 'hate speech' directed at those outside one's culture—and, presumably by extension, other ways of failing to live up to the demands of multiculturalism as characterized above—for 'violat[ing] the most elementary moral injunction to respect the dignity of all human beings.'<sup>10</sup> While the contributors to this volume differ on the exact character of the moral obligation to respect (members of) non-dominant cultures, and on the related issues of the cultural contribution to personal identity and the degree to which the maintenance of vibrant cultural identities might interfere with the health and well-being of the broader polity, they are agreed that the issues raised by the circumstances to which multiculturalism is the response are primarily moral (and morally charged political) ones, and that the primary reasons to embrace multiculturalism are moral reasons.

Similar remarks apply to the contributors to the collections edited by Arthur and Shapiro<sup>11</sup>, Fullinwider (op. cit.), and Goldberg (op. cit.). To mention just a couple of prominent examples, Henry Giroux emphasizes the centrality of 'the notion of social justice' and 'the primacy of the ethical' to an adequate consideration of the wide range of issues that multiculturalist initiatives seek to address.<sup>12</sup> Peter McLaren likewise stresses the (resistance) multiculturalist's 'commitment to social justice'<sup>13</sup>, and urges the struggle for 'a solidarity ... [that] develops out of the imperatives of freedom, liberation, democracy, and critical citizenship.'<sup>14</sup> He urges efforts 'to

<sup>7</sup> C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, with commentary by Amy Gutmann (ed.), Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf (Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> S. Wolf, 'Comment', in Taylor, op. cit., 75–85.

<sup>9</sup> A. Gutmann, 'Introduction', in Taylor, op. cit., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., 23.

<sup>11</sup> J. Arthur and A. Shapiro (eds.), *Campus Wars: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Giroux, op. cit., 332.

<sup>13</sup> McLaren, op. cit., 53.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., 57.

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change the material conditions that allow relations of domination to prevail over relations of equality and social justice' and that function to sustain 'oppression, injustice, and human suffering'<sup>15</sup> rather than 'emancipation.'<sup>16</sup> McLaren's emphasis on justice, freedom, democracy, equality, emancipation, the importance of 'liberation from oppression for all suffering peoples' and the ('contingent') 'universality of human rights'<sup>17</sup> clearly indicate the moral basis of his analyses and recommendations. Although Giroux and McLaren consistently and insistently position themselves at the 'radical' end of the political spectrum, and in that respect are not representative of multiculturalists generally, their resting the case for multiculturalism on moral considerations is entirely representative. In sum: it is the moral evil and political injustice of cultural oppression, marginalization and hegemony which are thought, by the advocates of multiculturalism, to justify multiculturalist conceptions and initiatives, in education and in general.<sup>18</sup>

### Does the Embrace of Multiculturalism Preclude Transcultural Ideals?

I accept the view just rehearsed; that is, I agree that cultural domination and oppression, when they occur, are morally noxious, and that multiculturalist initiatives in response to morally objectionable relationships among cultures are on such moral grounds justified. I have defended this view of multiculturalism and the moral arguments for it elsewhere<sup>19</sup>; I will not do so again here. The question I want to pursue in what follows, rather, is this: supposing that this

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., 58.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., 63.

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit., 66.

<sup>18</sup> Having just mentioned the controversy, within the community of advocates of multiculturalism, concerning the extent to which such advocacy requires the concomitant embrace of a radical political posture, I should note that this controversy does not undermine my characterization of the case for multiculturalism as primarily moral in nature. In particular, those authors who urge multiculturalists to embrace a radical political agenda also base that recommendation on the presupposition of ('universal') moral values, e.g. of dignity, freedom, and justice. There does not seem to be any other possible basis for their promulgation of that political agenda. For further discussion of this point, see H. Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?: Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 1997), ch. 10, and K. Howe, 'The Interpretive Turn and The New Debate in Education', *Educational Researcher* 27 (1998), 13–21.

<sup>19</sup> Siegel, op. cit., chs. 9–12.

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understanding of multiculturalism, and of the moral reasons for embracing it, is correct, what follows concerning the status of educational and philosophical ideals? Can they be coherently thought of as 'transcultural' or 'universal'<sup>20</sup> alongside the embrace of multiculturalism? Educational and philosophical advocates of multiculturalism—understood, as above, as the thesis that all cultures (and their members) enjoy a sort of integrity, deserve a sort of respect, and are not to be marginalized, silenced or otherwise oppressed by hegemonic, dominant cultures—often cast doubt upon the very possibility of transcultural ideals, i.e., ideals whose validity extends beyond the bounds of individual cultures. In their view, all ideals—of persons, societies, or whatever—are the ideals of particular cultures. Given a commitment to multiculturalism, and a recognition of the moral requirement to acknowledge and respect cultural differences—including, presumably, those which concern educational and philosophical ideals—such culturally specific ideals seem to have no relevance to other cultures, which have their own equally specific ideals: ideals which are legitimate within, but not beyond, the bounds of the particular culture in which they are acknowledged and embraced.

This challenge to transcultural ideals is trenchantly articulated (though not endorsed) by Susan Khin Zaw:

The ... cultural relativist argument runs as follows. Values are meaningful only within a particular culture. Therefore the conception of absolute, or culture-neutral, value is a contradiction in terms. It follows that the value-system of one culture cannot be rationally regarded as absolutely better than that of another, since no culture-neutral standpoint is philosophically available from which the values of different cultures are intelligible, let alone susceptible of impartial comparison and rational judgment by the standards of absolute value. But if reason cannot show why one value-system is absolutely better than another, imposition of monocultural value hegemony on other cultures cannot be morally justified. Reason therefore requires that each value system tolerate the others. Multiculturalism, understood as the acceptance of other cultures living by their own values, thus becomes ... a rational requirement.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> I have been treating these two terms as equivalent, but they are not: 'transcultural' refers to ideals, etc., which apply to more than one culture; 'universal' to those which apply to all. Since the arguments against transcultural/universal ideals are critical of both, it seems harmless enough to treat them this way here. Where the distinction matters, I have tried to use the appropriate term in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Khin Zaw, *op. cit.*, 128.

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Khin Zaw talks here about *values* rather than *ideals*, and values being *meaningful* rather than *applicable* or *relevant*, but the parallel is clear: just as cultures differ in their values, they differ in their ideals—which, after all, involve primarily those things which are held to be supremely valuable—and since they do so differ, and their differing ideals cannot be themselves ranked on some fair, absolute scale, multiculturalism seems to counsel that cultural ideals be regarded as relative to the cultures which recognize and embrace them. It seems equally to deny that such ideals can transcend individual cultures and have application to all. The argument, in a nutshell, then, is this:

1. Educational/philosophical ideals are meaningful, applicable, or relevant only within the particular cultures which acknowledge and embrace them.
2. Therefore, there can be no absolute, universal, or transcultural ideals.
3. There can be no culture-neutral standpoint—none is ‘philosophically available’— from which fairly and impartially to evaluate alternative, culturally-relative ideals.
4. Therefore, the imposition or hegemony of culturally specific ideals upon other cultures which do not recognize the legitimacy of those ideals cannot be morally justified.
5. Reason therefore requires that cultures tolerate, and recognize the culture-specific legitimacy of, the ideals of other cultures. This commitment to multiculturalism demands that all cultures accept the legitimacy of all other cultures living in accordance with their own, culturally-specific ideals.

There are several things worth noting about this argument. Most importantly for present purposes, the conclusion equivocates on two senses of ‘legitimacy.’ To say that

- (i) educational and philosophical ideals are necessarily culture-specific—legitimate only intra-culturally—in that the legitimacy or force of such ideals does not extend beyond the bounds of the cultures which embrace them

is one thing; to say that

- (ii) all cultures must accept the legitimacy of all other cultures living in accordance with their own, culturally-specific ideals

is quite another. The first denies the possibility of transcultural legitimacy, while the second propounds the transcultural duty to accept every culture’s right to live in accordance with its own ideals. That is, there are in play here both culture-specific and trans-

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cultural senses of 'legitimacy.' Despite this equivocation, though, the multiculturalist is strongly motivated by her own argument to embrace both (i) and (ii); understanding why will provide the key to reconciling commitments to both multiculturalism and trans-cultural ideals.

It is easy to see why the advocate of multiculturalism is inclined to embrace (i). After all, her advocacy flows from her moral outrage over the patent injustices perpetrated by indefensible cultural hegemony. Testing children from minority cultures with instruments biased against them, and deeming them failures when they test less well than their dominant culture counterparts; 'tracking' them in ways which effectively guarantee second class (or worse) economic status upon their entering the work force and adult life; failing to respect, or even to take seriously, alternative histories, values, and patterns and modes of speech, and denying the members of such cultures the opportunity to live in ways which honour those histories, values, and patterns; reflecting 'a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves' back to members of marginalized groups, and in that way undermining their self-respect and thereby oppressing them and imprisoning them in 'false, distorted, and reduced mode[s] of being'<sup>22</sup>; and, more generally, harming irrevocably whole ways of life and the peoples who live them: all these sins against the children and adult members of minority cultures—in schools and in general—lead her to conclude, naturally enough, that the basic problem here is that one culture is unjustifiably dictating the terms of cultural adequacy to all other cultures. In response, she says, in effect: 'Your (dominant, hegemonic) cultural values and ideals are no better than those of other cultures. Yours are perhaps legitimate in your own culture, but they should not be thought to constitute the only legitimate cultural values and ideals; they have no legitimacy in cultures which eschew them in favour of their own. This imposition of values and ideals is the root of objectionable hegemony. To avoid such hegemony, we must recognize that your cultural values have no legitimacy beyond the bounds of your own culture.' Hence (i).

As just articulated, the multiculturalist's response—which appears to be an argument for (i)—incorporates both (i) and (ii): it asserts both that cultural values and ideals have force only within the particular cultures in which they are recognized; and that all cultures—and in particular, the dominant one—must accept the legitimacy of all other cultures living in accordance with their own, culturally-specific ideals. As recently noted, however, these two claims do not sit happily with one another, since the second asserts

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

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a transcultural value—indeed, a universal moral obligation—the legitimacy of which the former denies, in principle. In this circumstance, what is the advocate of multiculturalism to do? Her choices are limited. She can give up (i), or (ii), or both, but she cannot embrace both. She cannot give up both if she wishes to remain an advocate of multiculturalism. So which should she give up? If she gives up (ii), she gives up the heart of her position. For if (ii) is rejected, there is no reason to be bothered by the sorts of cultural hegemony enumerated above—and in particular, there is nothing to underwrite the multiculturalist's sense of moral outrage over what she perceives to be the patent injustices perpetrated by an indefensible cultural hegemony. But to give up this claim to moral outrage is to give up multiculturalism. Thus the multiculturalist's only viable option is to maintain (ii), and reject (i).

Further reflection permits a deeper understanding of the multiculturalist's need to give up (i). We saw earlier that advocates of multiculturalism typically justify their position in moral terms. They hold—rightly, in my view—that the evils visited upon marginalized cultures and their members by a hegemonic dominant culture which marginalizes, silences, and devalues them, are genuine evils in which dominant cultures can engage only in violation of their moral obligations. As multiculturalists claim, all persons and cultures are morally obliged to treat cultures other than their own, and the members of those cultures, justly, with respect, in ways which do not silence, marginalize, or oppress. As educators, we are obliged to embrace multiculturalism—irrespective of the cultural context in which we find ourselves—simply because we are morally obliged to treat cultures other than our own, and the members of those cultures, justly and with respect.

It is significant, though, that this moral obligation is not itself limited to cultures which recognize it; it applies even to cultures which do not acknowledge that it does. That is why advocates of multiculturalism can coherently urge monoculturalists to embrace it. After all, if members of dominant, majority cultures were not erring in neglecting the views and interests of members of other cultures, there would be no reason for them to change their views, or their educational or social/political agendas, in order to respect and incorporate the views and interests of those other cultures. It is because those persons and cultures which fail to treat other cultures and their members properly are mistaken in their treatment—because, that is, there is something morally wrong with such treatment—that multiculturalists can compellingly make their case.

Moreover, that cultural domination is indeed a moral mistake is not something that can be claimed only from the perspective of

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some particular culture; it cannot be regarded as a culturally-relative truth that cultural domination, marginalization and oppression are wrong. If it were to be regarded in this way, the monoculturalist would have an obvious reply: 'perhaps this domination and marginalization is wrong from the perspective of *your* culture, but it is fine from the perspective of mine.' The multiculturalist has no response to this, *if* she sees the multiculturalist imperative as a legitimate imperative, a moral truth, only from the perspective of her own culture. Consequently, the advocate of multiculturalism must see the requirements of avoiding cultural domination and hegemony, and of treating cultures and their members justly and respectfully, as themselves *culturally-transcendent* or *transcultural* moral requirements. She must in fact see them as *universal* in the strong sense that they are applicable to all cultures, including those which do not recognize them as moral truths or imperatives. In this sense, multiculturalism (and its attendant rights and obligations) is *itself* a transcultural educational and philosophical ideal: it tells us how students, and persons generally, are ideally to be treated; and how cultures must and must not be treated in educational and other contexts.<sup>23</sup>

The multiculturalist, therefore, must embrace (ii) and give up (i); that is, she must reject the idea that cultural values and ideals have legitimacy only within cultures, and instead embrace the idea that certain values and ideals—in particular, those constitutive of multiculturalism itself—enjoy transcultural legitimacy. From this it follows further that (ii) must be reformulated somewhat in order to acknowledge this sort of transcultural legitimacy, and thereby to acknowledge that the advocate of multiculturalism need not (and ought not) regard as legitimate *all* culturally-specific ideals and practices, but only those which do not violate the multiculturalist ideal itself (and whatever other genuine transcultural ideals and imperatives there happen to be). Accordingly, (ii) must be reformulated as

(iii) all cultures must accept the legitimacy of all other cultures living in accordance with their own, culturally-specific ideals, in so far as those culturally-specific ideals and attendant practices are consistent with the moral imperatives of multiculturalism itself.

This reformulation is required because without it the commitment to a transcultural multiculturalist ideal is incoherent: one would be

<sup>23</sup> The preceding two paragraphs are taken (with changes and additions) from H. Siegel, 'Science Education: Multicultural *and* Universal', *Interchange* **28** (1997), 97–8.

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committed to the legitimacy of all culture-specific ideals and practices, including those which explicitly reject such legitimacy—in which case one is not committed to the ideal after all. (For example, if my embrace of the multiculturalist ideal requires me to regard as legitimate the specific ideals and practices of Culture *C*, which rejects as illegitimate the values and ideals of Culture *D* and acts in order to stamp out *D*'s values and ideals (or even *D* itself), then my acknowledgement of the legitimacy of *C*'s ideals forces me to accept as legitimate their rejection of their own obligation to apply the principles of multiculturalism to *D*—and thus my embrace of multiculturalism (as it applies to *C*) requires my rejection of multiculturalism (as it applies to *D*). Many real world examples, from notorious historical cases to a range of current cultural conflicts around the globe, could easily be supplied.) The reformulation of (ii) as (iii) is required simply in order to maintain the coherence of the multiculturalist ideal, when understood as a transcultural ideal—as the argument above shows it must. It is a necessary condition of the multiculturalist reply to the monoculturalist one paragraph back, without which the multiculturalist has no adequate reply.

My claim, then, is that multiculturalism is itself a culturally transcendent or universal moral, educational and social ideal in the sense that it is applicable to all cultures, even those which do not recognize or embrace it; and that it rests upon other, equally transcendent, moral imperatives and values.<sup>24</sup> It is important that this claim not be misunderstood, and so I close this section with the following clarification. By 'culturally transcendent' I do not mean 'can exist or be recognized apart from all culture.' I happily grant that, prior to culture and language, it would not be possible to conceive or articulate educational or philosophical ideals; nor can there in fact exist actual, flesh-and-blood people, capable of formulating and affirming such ideals, who are not in significant ways shaped by the culture(s) in which they are embedded. I mean rather to argue that such ideals can 'transcend culture' in the more modest sense that

<sup>24</sup> Of course this claim is not original with me. Robert K. Fullinwider, for example, notes well the ways in which multicultural education depends for its rationale upon transcultural values such as the fostering of critical judgment and of equality, justice, and human dignity (op. cit., 9, 13–16). Amy Gutmann, 'Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education', in Fullinwider op. cit., 162, argues for the rightful place in multiculturalist education of 'universalist values such as equal liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect among citizens.' Charles Taylor, op. cit., 38, relatedly notes the 'universalist basis' of the 'politics of difference' which is a key political expression of the multiculturalist ideal (for compelling analysis, see Taylor, op. cit., 38 ff.).

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they can be legitimately applied to (the members of) cultures other than those which explicitly recognize them, and even to those which explicitly reject them—and that multiculturalism is itself one such ideal.

### **‘With Friends Like This, Who Needs Enemies?’: Further Clarification and Defence**

I have been arguing that there are (values, obligations, and) ideals which may be legitimately applied to cultures (and their members) even when they *reject* those ideals as inapplicable to themselves. The reader might well react to this claim with horror—after all, isn’t this suggestion that cultures are subject to sanction in virtue of their failure to live up to the ideals of others the very essence of objectionable cultural hegemony? Moreover, how can someone be bound by an ideal that she doesn’t even understand—for example, one that can be expressed only with concepts alien to her and her culture—or for which she has no reason, limited as she is by the language and traditions of her culture (as we all are), to regard as justified?

These are important objections<sup>25</sup> which demand a direct response. There are three points to make, which I believe jointly suffice to reply to them, and which provide the opportunity for a further spelling out of the position defended thus far.

First, as argued above, it must be acknowledged that multiculturalism makes sense only when understood transculturally. When one *advocates* multiculturalism, one claims that it is right, indeed obligatory, to treat members of ‘minority’ cultures in accordance with the dictates of that ideal, and that it is wrong to fail to do so. To shy away from such claims—to be unwilling, for example, to criticize a majority culture which marginalizes or oppresses members of minority (sub)cultures within it—is in effect to give up one’s commitment to multiculturalism. Such unwillingness renders multiculturalism a toothless tiger, unable to criticize offensive cultural domination or to defend interventions aimed at ending such domination. No such toothless version of multiculturalism would suffice to accomplish the aims of its advocates. Taking the moral/political directives of multiculturalism seriously, in other

<sup>25</sup> Raised independently by Donald Arnstine and Denis Phillips. In this section I respond mainly to Phillips’ (D. C. Phillips, ‘Harvey Siegel’s Strengthening of Multiculturalism, or With Friends Like This You Don’t Need Enemies’, paper presented at Simon Fraser University, October 1997) incisive and detailed criticism, from which I have shamelessly adapted the title of this section.

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words, *requires* that it be understood transculturally, with teeth enough to criticize effectively objectionable cultural hegemony and to justify advocating and working towards the establishment of institutions which respect the integrity of all cultures (in so far as their ideals and practices are consistent with the multiculturalist ideal itself). Far from being 'the very essence of objectionable cultural hegemony,' regarding multiculturalism as itself a transcultural ideal is the only way in which that ideal can be seen as having the moral/political implications to which its advocates are committed. Advocates of multiculturalism are *taking a stand* which will undoubtedly be rejected by (members of) some cultures—in particular, by those which are dominant and exert hegemonic control over others. To say that it does not apply to such cultures is to give up that advocacy; to maintain it is to hold that it applies to those cultures, despite their rejection of it. This is simply what the advocacy of multiculturalism involves.<sup>26</sup>

Second, to say that an ideal is *applicable* to a given culture, as I am understanding that term, is not to say either that a member of that culture is morally *obliged* to accept it, or that such a person is necessarily *blameworthy* for failing to conduct herself in accordance with it. To illustrate with a trivial example: suppose that the best way to remove wallpaper of a certain sort from a wall of a certain sort is to steam it off, rather than to scrape it off or remove it with chemicals. (Steaming, let us suppose, approaches the ideal in that it is easier, leaves the wall ready to be painted or re-papered with minimal additional preparation, is environmentally friendly, requires an easier clean-up, etc.) Joe Apprentice-Wallpaper-Remover may well be found blameworthy by his supervisor, Janet Expert-Wallpaper-Remover, for attempting to remove it in one of those less-than-ideal ways. But Jane Novice-Wallpaper-Remover, who has no reason to think there is a better way of removing the offending wallpaper than by scraping it, and who may not even know of the existence of steamers and may have no idea that that is a possible way of removing wallpaper, is in no way obliged to use a steamer, or blameworthy

<sup>26</sup> I hope it is clear that my argument is not: the multiculturalist should embrace my proposed view of multiculturalism because it has the consequence of enabling her to defend herself from critics. It is rather: the version of multiculturalism which holds both that ideals have force only within the cultures that sanction them, *and* that certain cultural practices (i.e. those which dominate and oppress) are objectionable even when not seen to be so by the members of that culture, is self-inconsistent. The version of multiculturalism defended here is intended as the best way to remove the inconsistency while honouring the multiculturalist opposition to objectionable domination and oppression.

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for removing it with a scraper—even though it would have been better had she used a steamer. Ideally, she would have used a steamer; but failure to live up to the wallpaper-removal ideal is in no way blameworthy, since she had neither the knowledge or the concepts (e.g. that of ‘steaming’ wallpaper) necessary to understand and justify the ideal. Similarly, a person whose culture does not have the conceptual resources to articulate and justify the multiculturalist ideal, or whose culture explicitly rejects that ideal, may well not be blameworthy for failing to live up to it; nor, in those circumstances, can she be thought to be obliged to accept and act in accordance with the ideal. (‘Ought,’ as philosophers often put it, implies ‘can’; if a person cannot grasp or accept the ideal, she cannot be obliged to act in accordance with it.) Nevertheless, the advocate of multiculturalism must regard it as a *mistake* to so fail. Otherwise, her ‘advocacy’ is empty, and is clearly unable to ground the sorts of social changes which multiculturalists call for. In short: we must distinguish both the *belief in* or *acceptance of* a norm or ideal, and the *blameworthiness* of failure to live up to an ideal, from the *applicability* of that ideal. My claim is that the ideal must be understood by its advocates as transculturally applicable. Whether or not failure to live up to the ideal is blameworthy is another matter entirely: sometimes it will be, sometimes not.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I note in passing that often, perhaps typically, members of cultures which engage in objectionable cultural domination *do* have the requisite conceptual resources to recognize the objectionable character of their domination: Nazis *could* have seen their treatment of Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals as violating their own moral commitments; similar remarks apply to slaveowners in the U.S. South, and perhaps our own current treatment of minority inner-city residents in the public schools. Whether or not members of such dominating cultures do have the requisite conceptual resources—and, more generally, whether or not they should be deemed blameworthy for their failure to live up to the multiculturalist ideal—the point remains that multiculturalists must see such failure *as failure* (to live up to a *bona fide* ideal), whether blameworthy or not.

The same point applies to scientific claims: one cannot blame members of cultures with no access to or familiarity with Western science for not knowing that water molecules are composed of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Nevertheless, the claim that water molecules are so composed (is true of, and) applies to their water as much as it does to (is true of) ours.

Finally: I trust it is clear that I am not suggesting that removing wallpaper is akin in moral seriousness to objectionable cultural hegemony. The wallpaper example is meant simply to illustrate the distinction between *applicability*, on the one hand, and *obligation/blameworthiness*, on the other. Thanks here to audience members at the Ljubljana conference (see below, note 41), whose comments prompted this paragraph.

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Finally, we must clearly distinguish *genuine* from *putative* norms and ideals; both fallibilism and modesty are appropriately applied to our own judgments of the genuineness of ideals, including that of multiculturalism. Still, the advocate of that ideal is asserting its correctness and applicability, and the concomitant incorrectness and unjustifiability of those views and practices which countenance or exemplify what she deems to be oppressive cultural domination. How else could she understand her own condemnation of (e.g.) the marginalization or mistreatment of the members of minority cultures in schools?

I hope that these remarks are sufficient to quiet the complaint that regarding multiculturalism as a transcultural ideal is itself an instance of objectionable cultural hegemony. I turn now to another aspect of the transcultural character of that ideal.

### Transcultural Normative Reach

The multiculturalist argument we have been considering also presupposes another sort of transculturalism, which might be called 'transcultural normative reach.' It proceeds from premises to a conclusion which is said to follow from those premises. That it does so is not dependent on the cultural affiliation of the person contemplating the argument. The argument is taken to provide good reasons for embracing its conclusion, reasons which should be found compelling by any person who fair-mindedly considers it. In this sense the argument's force—the ability of its premises to justify its conclusion—is what it is, independently of the culture of either the arguer or her audience.

Such transcultural normative reach must be accepted by any advocate of multiculturalism who thinks that that advocacy is not only non-arbitrary, but *rational*—warranted by the reasons offered in its support. For an advocate who rejects such reach cannot regard herself as advancing reasons which ought to persuade a fair-minded opponent, e.g. an imagined rational monoculturalist. She cannot regard her embrace of multiculturalism as more rational than her opponent's embrace of monoculturalism. But this leaves her in a troubling position: if she can't offer such reasons, why should her opponent, or anyone else, agree with her? If she regards multiculturalism as in any way rationally preferable to its alternatives, she must accept that that view is supported by reasons that have force beyond the bounds of those who happen to share her cultural presuppositions and commitments. In short, the *rational* advocacy of and commitment to multiculturalism presupposes a further sort of

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transculturalism, that of transcultural normative reach. In particular, such advocacy presupposes the transcultural character of the normative force of arguments as such.

This point raises many deep questions concerning the nature of rationality which I cannot consider here.<sup>28</sup> But I do want to reply to a response often made to this line of argument. Many advocates of multiculturalism and related positions seem to reject the idea of transcultural normative reach, in concert with a rejection of the claim, developed above, that multiculturalism is itself a transcultural ideal justified in universal (moral) terms. Such thinkers offer, instead, accounts of multiculturalism which explicitly or implicitly reject the idea of a reason's 'normative reach' extending beyond communities and cultures, and which reject as well the case for transcultural ideals presented thus far. Let us turn, then, to a consideration of one such account; in considering it, we will be in position to appreciate further both the character of transcultural normative reach, and the character of transcultural ideals more generally.

The view I want to explore rejects the possibility of transcultural ideals on the grounds that such ideals are conceptually impossible, in that they necessarily are (or rely upon) culturally specific ideals, which are mistakenly regarded as universal. It holds, that is, that cultural ideals and values, and judgments concerning the goodness or normative force of reasons and arguments, are *necessarily* culture-specific. Perhaps the most visible systematic defence of this view, and denial of the possibility of transcultural ideals, is that developed by Richard Rorty. Rorty's favoured version of pragmatism famously rejects the search for 'an Archimedean point from which to survey culture'<sup>29</sup>, in favour of a frank embrace of ethnocentricity or 'solidarity,' according to which there is no non-circular or non-question-begging way to justify our own ideals, values and commitments to those who reject them in favour of their own, equally ethnocentric alternatives: 'We pragmatists ... should say that we must, in practice, privilege our own group, *even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so*.'<sup>30</sup> David Theo Goldberg helpfully summarizes and develops Rorty's view as follows:

The traditional historical commitment of philosophical liberalism to universal principles of reason and (moral) value presup-

<sup>28</sup> For extended discussion see Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?* (op. cit.) and references therein.

<sup>29</sup> R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 150.

<sup>30</sup> R. Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, M. Krausz (ed.) (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 44, emphasis added.

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poses universal ideas like intrinsic humanity, human dignity, and human rights—values, that is, that are thought to mark individuals in virtue of their very humanity. As Rorty insists, there is no transhistorical or supersocial Godly view on which such universal (moral) principles can be grounded or from which they can be derived. Axiological concepts and values are necessarily those of some historically specific community. ... Thus, any insistence on the universalism of values must be no more than the projected imposition of local values—those especially of some ethnoracial and gendered particularity—universalized. The supposed universalism of epistemological politics reduces to the political epistemology of an imposed universality.<sup>31</sup>

Is Goldberg correct that values cannot be universal, but only local; that any proposed universal value (such as that minority cultures ought to be respected rather than silenced) ‘must be no more than the projected imposition of local values ... universalized’? Must it be that any proclamation of universal value is in the end merely ‘the projection of local values as neutrally universal ones, the globalizing of ethnocentric values’<sup>32</sup>? I see three difficulties with this position.

First, it rests on a problematic ‘universal/local’ dichotomy. In claiming that some particular value or ideal is ‘universal’—like that of human dignity, or those constitutive of multiculturalism—the universalist need not, and ought not, reject the completely compatible claim that these ideals are also ‘local’ in the sense that they have been formulated and advanced in particular historical/cultural locations, and that they are recognized and endorsed only by some, but not all, cultures. In holding these ideals to be universal or transcultural, the universalist is completely free to acknowledge their locality/particularity. Goldberg here presumes that ‘local’ and ‘universal’ are contradictories, and so that ‘local’ entails ‘non-universal,’ but this is simply an error. The correct point Goldberg makes, with Rorty, is that all proclamations of universal principle emanate from and are championed in particular locations. It does not follow from this, though, that such principles have no legitimacy or force beyond the bounds of the locations from within which they are proclaimed. All principles, values and ideals—indeed, all beliefs, theories and judgments more generally—are conceived and embraced (if at all) only in particular locales; whether or not any of them enjoy legitimacy beyond the bounds of those locales is an independent matter. When such legitimacy extends across all local boundaries, they are both local *and* universal. This dichotomy is a false one—

<sup>31</sup> Goldberg, ‘Introduction: Multicultural Conditions’, op. cit., 17–18.

<sup>32</sup> Op. cit, 19.

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and so, one cannot reject universality on the grounds that all ideals are local, either in origin or in current acknowledgement and acceptance.<sup>33</sup>

Second, Goldberg's (and Rorty's) denial of universality relies upon the presupposition that values, in order to be 'universal' or 'transcultural,' must be grounded in some impossibly neutral perspective. He argues, in effect, as follows:

1. Universal (moral) principles and values must be grounded on, or derived from, a 'transhistorical or supersocial Godly' perspective.
2. There is no such perspective.
3. Therefore, there can be no universal principles or values.

If 'universal' is understood in this way, then I agree with Goldberg and Rorty that there can be no such universal values, principles or ideals. But we need not and should not understand the term in this way. Let us grant that there are no universal (or transcultural) values in the sense that they are grounded in, or derived from, a perspective outside of history and culture, for there simply is no such 'Godly' perspective available to us. This is not the sense of 'universal' relevant here. In the more modest sense noted above, according to which a principle, value or ideal is universal in so far as it has application across all cultural boundaries, the first premise is simply false—Godly perspectives or perspectives outside of history are not required in order for universal status to be achieved—and so this argument against the very possibility of universal principles or values fails.

Third, this argument fails because *it itself presupposes the viability of transcultural normative reach*. As noted above, the argument is presented by its proponents as one which is forceful, which establishes its conclusion concerning the impossibility of transcultural ideals, independently of the cultural location of the arguer or her audience. In so far, it presupposes just the sort of transcultural legitimacy it seeks to deny.

Goldberg attempts to defuse this last point by pointing to the formal, contentless character of logic:

Axiological relativism [i.e. the contrary of 'axiological universalism'] is bound to deny neither some basic formal principles of thinking—call them universal, if necessary—nor generalizable value judgments concerning especially pernicious social conditions and practices. So, owning up to formal principles of logical relation implies nothing about the assertive content of thought.

<sup>33</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?*, op. cit., pp. 174–8.

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... Logical formalism enables only that inconsistent and incoherent claims for the most part can be ruled out; it is thoroughly incapable of assertively promoting some coherent or consistent standard over another. It is equally incapable of fashioning rules for interpreting metaphors or of choosing one reasonable interpretation over another.<sup>34</sup>

Goldberg is right, I think, to acknowledge the universality of 'basic formal principles of thinking'; he is right as well that formal logic itself typically will not suffice to enable us to choose 'one reasonable interpretation over another.' But it is important to be clear here. First, if logical formalism can indeed enable us to rule out inconsistent and incoherent claims, that is no trivial matter. In particular, if it allows us to rule out, as inconsistent or incoherent, the joint assertion of 'all ought to endorse the values and ideals of multiculturalism' and 'no values or ideals have legitimacy for all,' this is an important result, since—assuming the success of the moral case for the first canvassed above—it establishes the transcultural status of multiculturalism itself. If the arguments presented above are successful, universalistic formal principles of logic contribute importantly to (even if they are not by themselves sufficient to establish) the case for choosing a transcultural view of multiculturalism over a culturally relative view of it.<sup>35</sup>

Second, and more importantly, Goldberg's argument here fails to acknowledge that it is itself resting on a stronger universality than that of logic. After all, his arguments defend and criticize a wide range of theses, concerning the status of various versions of multiculturalism; they rely on historical narratives and claims, political values and assessments, and scholarly analyses of various sorts. If logic won't make his case for these various claims and theses, something must—or else his case is not made. So his acceptance of the universality of logic, alongside his claim that logic is 'incapable of ... choosing one reasonable interpretation over another,' leaves it unclear why his interpretations and conclusions ought to be embraced by the fair-minded reader. The answer is of course clear: she ought to embrace those conclusions because he has made a compelling case for them; that is, he has provided reasons for them which are or should be found persuasive by a fair-minded consider-

<sup>34</sup> Goldberg, *op. cit.*, 16–7, note omitted.

<sup>35</sup> I note in passing that, even if Goldberg is right that 'logical formalism ... is thoroughly incapable of assertively promoting some coherent or consistent standard over another,' he fails here to acknowledge that logic, in enabling us to rule out inconsistent and incoherent claims, in fact *constitutes* just such a standard.

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ation of them. In other words, if we are rightly to regard Goldberg's case as having been made, then not just formal logic, but contentful reasons more generally, must be presumed to have transcultural force or reach. Otherwise, there is no reason to think that his case has been made—and indeed, the very point of his (or anyone) arguing for his/her favoured conclusions is lost. Transcultural normative reach, in other words, is not just a matter of formal logic, but of (contentful) reasons more generally.<sup>36</sup> Those who accept Rorty/Goldberg-like arguments against the possibility of transcultural ideals are themselves committed, by that acceptance, to the transcultural normative reach of reasons. The universality of argumentative force—what I have been calling 'transcultural normative reach'—involves, *contra* Goldberg, not just 'formal principles of logical relation' but 'the assertive content of thought' as well.

We can appreciate the importance of these several points intended to discredit the Goldberg/Rorty argument against universality by relating them to Goldberg's positive claims. Goldberg argues, for example, that 'multicultural pedagogy be concerned also self-critically with questioning the grounds of the knowledge claims and truth values being advanced, and with challenging the dominant interpretation and underlying structures of institutional and ideological power represented in prevailing pedagogical narratives.'<sup>37</sup> I think that Goldberg is importantly right here, that 'questioning the grounds of ... knowledge claims' and 'challenging the dominant interpretation and underlying structures of institutional and ideological power represented in prevailing pedagogical narratives' are important aspects of 'multicultural pedagogy'—and of education more generally. But how are we to understand such 'questioning' and 'challenging'? At a minimum, questioning and challenging requires the ability—fallible, to be sure—to distinguish successful questionings and challenges from unsuccessful ones. If it is thought not to be possible to so distinguish, there is no point to such questioning and challenging. And given that there is contention on such controversial matters which parallels alternative cultural allegiances, this ability of multicultural education presupposes a rich domain in which reasons—not just logic—can have force, which

<sup>36</sup> Here the growing literature in informal logic and argumentation theory is relevant. See H. Siegel and J. Biro, 'Epistemic Normativity, Argumentation, and Fallacies', *Argumentation* **11** (1997), 277–92, for discussion and references. The new-ish journals *Informal Logic* and *Argumentation* are important loci of discussion. On the limitations of logic and the need for a broader normativity of reasons, see Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?*, op. cit., ch. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Goldberg, op. cit., 17.

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domain cuts across the boundaries of those cultural allegiances. That is, multicultural education as Goldberg here envisions it requires the kind of transcultural normative reach for which I have been arguing. Without it, the vision of multicultural education offered by Goldberg (and Giroux, McLaren and the others cited above) collapses: there cannot, without it, be the sort of questioning of knowledge claims or challenges to institutional or ideological authority which gives that vision life.

Finally, it should be noted once again that the sort of universality or transculturalism defended here does not depend upon the legitimacy of any 'View From Nowhere,' beyond or outside of history. Rorty<sup>38</sup> emphasizes the *contingency* of language and value; nothing said here is incompatible with that contingency. But the contingency of a culture's beliefs, values and ideals does not entail that those beliefs, values and ideals have no legitimacy or force beyond the bounds of that culture. Humans cannot attain a View from Nowhere; Goldberg and Rorty are right that, as Goldberg says, 'there is no transhistorical or supersocial Godly view [available to us] on which such universal (moral) principles can be grounded or from which they can be derived' and that '[a]xiological concepts and values are necessarily those of some historically specific community.' But they are wrong to think that from this it follows that such values are relevant or applicable only to the historically specific community in which they contingently arise and flourish. That is, we can and should embrace both contingency and the possibility, and actuality, of transcultural and even universal values and ideals.

### Conclusion: On Valuing Transcultural Ideals

I have argued that multiculturalism, as a value informing and governing our educational and social/political endeavours, is rightly thought of as a transcultural educational and social/political ideal. If my arguments have succeeded, we may conclude not only that such transcultural ideals are possible, but that certain ideals are actual or genuine. Multiculturalism, and the principle of respect for persons and 'minority,' 'dominated' cultures intrinsic to it, is itself one such genuine, culturally transcendent ideal.

Embracing multiculturalism, therefore, is completely compatible with acknowledging the possibility of culturally transcendent philosophical and educational ideals. While as a matter of fact cultures do not converge on a universally held set of ideals, it is nevertheless the

<sup>38</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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case that some ideals are universal in the strong sense that they are applicable to all cultures, even to those cultures which do not recognize them as such. To say they are universal is not to say they are from God or from Nowhere, but only that they transcend individual cultures in that they are legitimately applicable, and have force, not only beyond the bounds of the particular cultures in which they are acknowledged, but beyond all such cultural boundaries.

I have endeavoured to establish the possibility and actuality of transcultural ideals, but not, I trust it is clear, at the expense of the commitment to multiculturalism. On the contrary, I have endorsed multiculturalism as a key moral and sociopolitical value, on grounds which are widely shared by its advocates.<sup>39</sup> I hope then to have offered a case for multiculturalism while at the same time rejecting the anti-universality with which it is often accompanied. My endorsement of universality extends beyond the ideal of multiculturalism, though; I hope to have indicated how other ideals can with equal legitimacy be regarded as universal. If so, my conclusion has implications beyond the context of multiculturalism, and establishes the legitimacy of both transcultural and universal educational and philosophical ideals generally.

In claiming this broad relevance of my conclusion—especially in light of my reliance on the viability of the notions of rationality, fair-mindedness, and the like at key junctures in my arguments—I may be accused of offering little more than an apologetic for ‘Western’ values and ideals. Haven’t my arguments for transcultural ideals simply begged the question against those who challenge those ideals? I have indeed tried to defend some of the traditional ideals which characterize Western, ‘Enlightenment’ thought; in so doing, I might be thought to have biased my case against those cultural traditions which do not embrace those ideals. But if my arguments have succeeded, I will have provided not *just* an apologetic. Rather, I will have pointed to features of the particular ideals in question, and to features of arguments for and against them, which establish the unavoidability of these ideals.<sup>40</sup> That is, I will have shown that these particular ideals, which are endorsed by some but

<sup>39</sup> That defence relies centrally, if sometimes implicitly, on the Kantian moral imperative of *respect*, here extended both to persons as individuals and to cultures more broadly. An important question is whether Kant’s insistence that all persons be treated with respect, as ends rather than mere means, can be applied to cultures in this direct way, since cultures, after all, are not persons and so are not obviously the sorts of entities to which Kant’s dictums apply. I regret that I cannot pursue this question here.

<sup>40</sup> For the argument concerning the unavoidability of the ideal of rationality, see Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?*, op. cit., ch. 5.

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by no means all extant cultures, can be justified to all who are inclined, in the name of multiculturalism, to call them into question, but who agree that their status as transcultural ideals is open to fair-minded assessment—as advocates of the culture-specificity of such ideals must.<sup>41</sup>

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