Race & Racism (F14)
November 19, 2014

Equality and Respect

Reading: Christopher LeBron, 2014. "Equality from a Human Point of View." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2(2).

[Sorry I gave you another long, difficult article on short notice in the same week at this busy point in the term!]

1. Method and starting points

We've considered several different approaches to racism. Some suggest the primary site of racism is in the individual, others in ideology, still others in structures or institutions. As I read Lebron, he is developing an individualist approach but wants to situate it within a broad socio-cultural context. One way of seeing it is to reconsider the claim of universal respect:

Principle of Universal Respect:

(UH): "We should treat human beings, because they are human beings, humanely," i.e., with respect. (Lucas, 106)

As it stands, this principle appears to be an ethical principle, one that is universalizable: it applies to all of us, regardless of our social context. However, we noted that it was quite unclear what counted as treating others with respect. Don't different cultures, even different individuals, for example, count different sorts of actions, practices, etc, as respectful? Lebron considers the specific context of US democracy. He says:

> Here, Baldwin is used as an analyst of democratic ethics....I distill two complaints raised by Baldwin: the complaints of democratic [distance] and of democratic [disaffection]. In my view, Baldwin's project is centrally concerned with the pre-requisites of a democracy marked by moral integrity that in America's case crucially depends on a reconstructed ethical disposition towards blacks rather than a demand for a redistribution of goods or for specific legal reform. (126-7)

He describes his view as follows:

> I argue that racial egalitarianism depends first on identifying key aspects of blacks' experiential discontent in a racially unjust liberal democracy. Subsequently, the proper philosophical response to this discontent is to conceive of equality as attending to aspects of shared humanity that can best...enliven our ethical sensibilities, and to imaginatively ask ourselves: what is it like to be a person who experiences racial inequality as a pervasive social, political, and economic problem? (126)

One way to read Lebron is to see him as claiming that there is a particular form of mutual respect that is required for a true democracy. This respect is something we owe to each other, but the state is also responsible for creating a climate where such respect is fostered. Among blacks in the US, we find a broad distrust of whites. This distrust arises from distance and disaffection:

Democratic distance: "The signal relationship I have marked out involves white supremacist democracy and experiences that shaped Americans so deep down as countrymen that sharing the space of America did not entail sharing the idea or reality of America. For whites that idea represented the rightness of their ascendancy." (129)

Democratic disaffection: "The outcome [of democratic distance] is blacks' reasonable and rational hesitation in coming to terms with the idea of sharing the American project with whites." (129)

Lebron argues that racism, at least in America, should be understood in terms of these experiences, and the kind of equality required for justice, at least in our democracy, is an equality that addresses this form of mistrust. The account of equality must be

> ...attentive to issues regarding obstacles to the social bond (the problem of democratic distance) and the possibility of alienation and [distrust] (the problem of democratic [disaffection]). Thus a properly political egalitarianism must present a vision of equality wherein political life makes manifest blacks' moral value alongside that of their white counterparts. (134)

2. Liberalism

Lebron goes on to critique three forms of liberal egalitarianism: equality as resource allocation (Dworkin), as welfare facilitation (Arneson and Cohen), and democratic equality (Anderson). Given that this is not a course in political philosophy and we haven't gone through the various accounts of liberal equality, I will only recap the critique of Anderson.

Lebron takes Anderson's view to be the closest to his own. He recognizes that she is aiming not only for a fair distribution of stuff (resources, welfare, etc), but to establish the conditions necessary for a genuine democracy. "So [Anderson's] democratic equality presents a vision of equality wherein people are enabled to not merely have goods or have their preferences met, but are enabled to form, articulate, and be part author of their society's political will." (145) This would seem to be exactly the sort of equality that would address democratic distance and disaffection. However, Lebron disagrees.

As I understand his complaint, Lebron is concerned that although Anderson understands the goal of a democratic equality, she addresses it institutionally or structurally, rather than at the human level, i.e., at the level of blacks' experience. Moreover, he contends that she fails to hold individuals within the dominant group responsible for their wrongdoing. We might capture these two complaints as follows:

Site of wrong/harm: political v. ethical/social: "...whenever she herself presses forward with examples of the capabilities necessary for standing as a democratic equal, they ultimately are presented as discrete rights or resources, such as the right to vote or literacy." (146)

Responsibility for change: individuals within dominant group v. subordinate group: "Democratic equality is certain the right kind of idea, but her egalitarianism is hamstrung by committed to a view that seems resistant to arguing for the inculcation of the appropriate civic virtues *within and among* citizens who benefit from others' marginalization." (147) On her view, he suggests, "...the disadvantaged are positioned as recipients while leaving the beneficiaries of injustice un-redeemed, untouched by critical ethical reflection (outside whatever reflection may be incidental to giving up the relevant goods in question." (147)

3. Lebron's Alternative

Lebron is concerned in his positive account to begin by characterizing in more detail what's lacking in whites' regard for blacks. What is the unjust attitude fostered in American democracy, and what is the attitude of mutual respect that a true democracy requires?

Lebron takes Bernard Williams' work to be a resource for such an account for Williams "realizes that social and political arrangements do not merely, then, distribute goods unequally. Rather, a source of inequality is located within those arrangements that fail to recognize that people equally possess these capacities which importantly define how well one's life may be going." (150) Williams recommends that we consider equality "from a human point of view." Lebron takes this in three steps. In order to stand in a relation of equality to another, one must:

Step one: recognize that we share a "common humanity with respect to the capacity for sentiment, affection, and the ability to feel physical, psychic and emotional pain, and...a desire for self-respect." (15)

Step two: recognize that we are not just abstract moral agents, but are each subject to the contingencies of life that make a difference to how well or badly things go for us. (151)

Step three: empathize with the other: "what is important here is an act of imagination, which is to say, a way of extending one's perceptual capacities on behalf of someone else while being one's own person." (152)

Applying this to an example of a failed grass-roots organizer, he says:

> ...when we take a human point of view of equality, we try to take the standpoint of the failed grassroots organizer not merely from her viewpoint...but we take into deep consideration the facts of her project as she understood them, the facts of her efforts, the facts of her near victory and the facts of her ultimate failure – all of these will likely invite a range of internal experience from hope, to joy, to despair, to indecisiveness about the future. Should the organizer now seek to make some claim of equality (i.e., the funding for inner-city organizations...), the conversation from a human point of view will take into account not merely the quantitative fact that an imbalanced distribution of public funds is unfair but that it is a source of civic hurt and resentment, that introduces into the citizen's deliberative capacities a sense of despair and causes her to question the nature of her co-participants' character as they seem to be hoarding resources without good reason. (154-5)

Although Lebron does not develop the implications of this approach to equality fully, it seems that on his view, a democratic society fulfills its obligations to equality if and only if its members regard each other as equals in the Williams' sense. And it is the responsibility of a truly democratic state to create the conditions under which all persons are viewed and treated as equals in this sense.

Questions:

1. In what sense is Lebron's account of equality specific to democratic contexts? Is this a moral imperative or a socio-political one?

2. How should we distinguish the wrong of injustice and the effects of injustice. Lebron takes the wrong of injustice to be revealed in the experiences of the individuals: blacks are hurt and mistrustful because they experience a lack of recognition as equals. Therefore the wrong is the lack of recognition and the solution is to establish the basis for recognition. But even if this is a site of harm, does it show that it is an adequate analysis of racism? Perhaps it is a side effect of injustice, not the central wrong of injustice.

24.236 / 24.636 Topics in Social Theory and Practice: Race and Racism
Fall 2014