Interview

Multiculturalism in Theory and Practice

Professor Will Kymlicka on his life as a philosopher and his recent work on multiculturalism[1].

Professor Will Kymlicka is currently the Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy at Queen's University, and a visiting professor in the Nationalism Studies program at the Central European University in Budapest. He has authored and coauthored many books, including *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity*, and many articles. His works have been translated into 30 languages. He delivered the 2008 Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture at the LSE.

This interview is centred on three areas: (1) biographical ques-

tions (2) general philosophical questions, and (3) specific case study questions about how philosophical theories might be applied to solve practical problems of politics.

How did you become interested in studying philosophy?

Actually, I had initially enrolled in Political Science and Economics, primarily because I was interested in public policy questions, and because I had expected to spend my career as a bureaucrat – that was my life ambition as a teenager! However, when I started taking the Politics and Economics courses, I kept wanting to discuss whether the policies were fair or not. And, unfortunately, at that time, people in Politics and Economics were not terribly interested in the fairness of these policies. The introductory Philosophy course I took, however – by sheer good luck – was taught by someone who took justice to be the central issue for discussion. And so I ended up doing a joint Philosophy and Politics major. Philosophy, for me, was a place where people were willing to discuss normative questions. So it was not some grand

eye-opening discovery about the life of the mind or about the techniques of philosophy. I simply tried to find a place where the issues of justice and fairness that preoccupied me could be discussed.

Why did you decide to focus on issues of multiculturalism?

That is more complicated. The conception of justice that I found most appealing as a student was a broadly left liberal (Rawlsian, Dworkinian) view of justice, which I found to be very powerful in explaining my intuitions about what justice requires. I was at a talk that Charles Taylor gave in Oxford where he said that if you endorsed that left liberal view of justice, you couldn't defend minority rights for the Quebecois or for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. I had never thought about that question before. I had never thought about the potential conflict between the theory of justice that I philosophically found very powerful and the particular set of policies which, as a Canadian, I took for granted. It worried me that Taylor might be right, but I felt he was missing something. I wanted to be able to show that he was wrong, that you could be a consistent believer in left liberal egalitarian justice and still support those policies.

Speaking of policies, could you tell us a little bit about what it was like to work with the Canadian government?

Well, I have found it quite rewarding. The civil servants that I worked with are very interested in the big normative questions that their policies raise. They are aware that there is a debate in the public and in academia about issues such as individual and group rights, about the limits of tolerance, about the value of diversity, about the meaning of citizenship, and so on. They're aware of all those debates but they often don't have time to study them because they are extremely busy and they're dealing with everyday crises or deadlines in their work. But they are eager for opportunities to reflect on those issues. If I am able to bring political philosophy to bear on their policy questions, I have never gotten the reaction of people saying 'Oh, that is fine in an ivory tower' or 'that is too academic'. They don't have that kind of kneejerk reaction against theory or against political philosophy. They're actually quite interested in having an opportunity to discuss those issues.

Do you think on the other hand, that one can work in the field of political philosophy without becoming involved in politics?

Absolutely – but there is a separate question of whether you can do political philosophy well without having a good knowledge of some basic policy issues. I think that multiculturalism is one issue where philosophers, if they do not familiarise themselves with the real-world policy debates, have a tendency to jump to premature conclusions about what the real issues are. I've found this amongst my philosophical colleagues. If you mention the word 'multiculturalism' to them their immediate assumption is that the central philosophical issue is cultural relativism: Are there universal moral values, or is morality culturally relative? As you know, this is a 2000 year-old philosophical debate, and so many philosophers naturally try to fit multiculturalism into that debate. I think that this completely misses what is interesting about multiculturalism as a political phenomenon, which is not just a new stage in a 2000 year debate about cultural relativism. In my view, it's a new stage in a debate about democratic citizenship. And to understand this new debate, you have to situate multiculturalism in the context of the evolution of democratic citizenship. And to do that, you have to actually look at some real-world claims and cases.

Do you think that it is important for philosophers to try to find practical applications for their philosophy?

In the field of political philosophy, I think there is a natural inclination to want to do that anyway. Most people who go into political philosophy do so because of their interests in political life. I mean, it would be a bit strange for someone who had no interest in real-world politics to end up in political philosophy. Someone who is only interested in foundational issues about meta-ethics might not be interested in thinking through practical applications. But political philosophy is different, in topic and temperament from meta-ethics. Most of my political philosophy colleagues have the inclination to work things through to their practical implications.

Would you give us a sneak-peak into the basic premise of your forthcoming work *"Americanisation of political philosophy in Canada"***?**

That paper was commissioned as part of a journal symposium on the "Americanisation of the Humanities Around the World". I think the implicit assumption behind the symposium was that this sort of Americanisation is a bad thing – that it's part of a broader project of American

hegemony. My own views, however, are more ambivalent. A process of Americanisation of political philosophy has definitely taken place in Canada - indeed, you can measure it just by looking at reading lists over the decades. In the 1960, reading lists used to be composed primarily of British authors, but in the 1970s they were replaced by lists that were increasingly composed of American authors. The type of political philosophy that is being imported into Canada is basically the Rawls and post-Rawlsian political philosophy, which is a kind of rights-based liberalism. This is a distinctly American conception of liberalism, which emerged from the Civil Rights Movement. So this distinctly American rights-based liberalism replaced what was earlier a vaguely utilitarian British liberalism.

In my view, this was a decided improvement: I am a defender of rights-based liberalism over utilitarianism. I think it is not only philosophically more defensible, but it is politically more relevant for Canada – in particular on issues of minority rights. It is virtually impossible to address issues of minority rights in a satisfactory way within a utilitarian framework. And, although Americans themselves (such as Rawls and Dworkin) do not discuss minority rights, I think their ideas provide a foundation which Canadians can use

to think through our minority rights issues.

We would now like to shift to some more philosophical questions. How does philosophy contribute to the political debate on multiculturalism?

Empirically, it has had a huge impact. I used to think that academic philosophy was unlikely to affect public debates because just a handful of people read philosophy journals. But if you read works written by historians, anthropologists or sociologists who study multiculturalism, they all say that the writings by political philosophers have had a strong impact on multiculturalism. So, I think, empirically, there has been a philosophical contribution to the bigger debate.

It's an interesting question why philosophy has had this effect. Perhaps it is due to the clear limitations of what we could call the `folk rhetoric' around multiculturalism. In everyday discourse, people on the street often talk about multiculturalism as a commitment to the idea that 'diversity's good'; or as the belief that all cultural traditions need to be protected and preserved. That is the kind of everyday simplification of multiculturalism. But we all know that this rhetoric begs the real issues:

not all forms of diversity are intrinsically good, and not all traditions are worthy of protection. The everyday discourse of multiculturalism works okay when things are going well, but whenever hard issues arise, then it becomes clear that we need new ways of thinking about multiculturalism. The folk rhetoric doesn't give us the tools we need to figure out what we are really trying to do with multiculturalism or to figure out what are good or bad forms of multiculturalism. As it happens, some of the first systematic attempts to find an alternative vocabulary for discussing the role of multiculturalism were done by political philosophers. That may just be accidental, but as a result, a lot of the language that has now come to have a role in the public debate on multiculturalism actually started from philosophy.

During your lecture, you mentioned that while sometimes theories of multiculturalism correspond to real world applications of their contents, other times they are just lousy rationalisations of what is practiced. What separates the good theories from the bad ones?

If you look at the development of the multiculturalism literature in philosophy it used to be assumed that there's a majority group which is liberal and individualistic, and the question is how should such a majority, or a state governed by such a majority, deal with minorities who are assumed to be non-liberal or non-individualistic. And so that's what I call the first wave of multicultural theorising, which was based on the premise that multiculturalism is about liberal majorities and communitarian minorities. There are of course some real-world cases of that, and we need to think through them philosophically, but I don't think that's the standard case of the relationship between states and ethnic minorities. In many cases, minorities are as liberal if not more liberal as the dominant group, and they invoke liberal arguments for their claims for recognition and accommodation by the state – arguments that were essentially just ignored or distorted in the first wave of the philosophical literature. And so that's one case in which philosophers imposed their assumptions about what the real issue is on the cases – and that was actually a distortion of the normative bases on which these groups were making claims.

With reference to multicultural policies in the Netherlands, you said that there are elementary ways of testing hypotheses of political theories. Would you elaborate on

these basic ways of testing social hypotheses with regard to multiculturalism?

I did not mean to say that there were easy ways of providing definitive evidence about the effects of multiculturalism. But there are some obvious ways of trying to test one's speculations about these effects. The particular claim that I am interested in is that multiculturalism worsens levels of prejudices and stereotyping. This is a very common claim in the critiques of multiculturalism. It's a claim made by some philosophical critics as well as by critics from other disciplines. As it happens, there has been a lot of empirical research on levels and forms of prejudice cross-nationally and over time. And so this is one area in which it doesn't take a lot of work to dig up the statistics about whether prejudice is going up or down or whether it is higher in this country or that country. And if we do that, I think it is clear that there's no evidence that the adoption of multicultural policies leads to higher levels of prejudice and stereotyping than in the absence of those policies. That still leaves all sorts of more difficult questions about whether this or that particular way of implementing multiculturalism may have some stereotyping effects. It also doesn't tell us how things will develop in the future.

But I think that many critics of multiculturalism, for whatever reason, feel free to make some very sweeping empirical claims about the effects of multiculturalism that I think could be easily tested. There are some easily available facts that contradict some of those sweeping critiques.

How can we determine the most significant causes of a particular social phenomenon? For example, when explaining the transformation of Quebec during the Quite Revolution, how can we be sure of what social factors were responsible for its liberalisation?

The Quebec case is an important one for me – it's one of my prime examples where the demand for greater recognition and minority rights went hand in hand with greater liberalization. During Quebec's "Quiet Revolution", Quebec society became both more nationalist and more liberal, and used its enhanced national autonomy to advance a liberal agenda. In my view, this illustrates the possibility of a truly liberal multiculturalism, in which minority rights and liberal values are mutually reinforcing. However, as you say, there are other ways of interpreting the liberalization of Quebec society. How do we "prove" that accommodating Quebec's national aspirations con-

tributed to the liberalisation process?

I don't think there is any way to prove this. But here's the crux of my argument: the liberalising elite in Quebec – that is the political force or political movement that embarked on the project of liberalisation – was the same political elite and political movement that embarked on the project of demanding enhanced autonomy and official language status. And so, politically speaking, it's the same force that embarked on both, and the leaders viewed those two projects as mutually compatible. Moreover, I think we can give a philosophical account of why those two claims are mutually compatible and mutually reinforcing. So, minimally, we can say that there's this link: that it was the same political elite that embarked on both projects, and did so with the belief that they did go together. I think that puts the burden of proof on those who would dispute that liberalism and minority rights worked together in this case.

You referred in your lecture to the slogan 'freedom within groups, and equality between groups'. Would you explain what you mean by it and why this distinction is important for you?

Let me start with 'freedom within'.

It's foundational to my approach that every individual, whatever their ethnic heritage or religious background, should be free to reflect on their conception of the good, to be able to think about the worth of the ways of life that they've inherited or that have been passed down to them, and to be able to think about them in a rational and reflective way and to judge what's worth maintaining and what's not. It's central to my conception of liberalism that every individual should have not just the legal right to engage in that sort of reflection, but also to be equipped to do it. So I think an education system should educate people such that they have the appropriate cognitive abilities and knowledge. The effect would be that the ways of life that people are socialised into would survive if and insofar as the individuals who grow up within them come to judge that they're worth maintaining. So that's what I mean by freedom within. I'm against any form of multiculturalism that would restrict or inhibit the ability of individual members to engage in that kind of rational reflection on the value of the ways of life they've inherited. What I want to do is to enable that freedom within – the freedom of individual members within groups to challenge and contest, to question and revise and sometimes to reject and subvert

the ways of life they've inherited. And I want to do that in a political context in which there are no hierarchies between groups; no hierarchies in terms of significant economic inequalities, in life chances, but also no hierarchies in terms of political dominance or political subordination, or between cultural respect for the dominant group and cultural disrespect and stigmatization for other groups. And that's what I mean by 'equality between'. The problem is that in all Western democracies, we have a history of those hierarchies. And so against that historical background of hierarchies, how can we create policies that help to create greater equality between groups while still protecting and nurturing the freedom of individuals within them?

We'd like to talk about the idea that minority rights are both inspired and restricted by human rights. How much room is there for minorities to have rights that go beyond the general human rights that are shared by everyone without coming into conflict with the rights of non-minorities?

Actually, the conflict isn't necessarily between the rights of minorities and the rights of non-minorities; it's often perceived to be a conflict between minorities and the rights of their own members. In the standard literature on minority rights and human rights, the way that it's usually presented is that minority rights are assumed to be "group rights", and that group rights are a threat to individual rights, but usually the individual rights of their own members, not necessarily the rights of members of the majority. Here's another context where I think it helps to look at the empirical cases. There's an extraordinary variety of laws and policies across the Western democracies, or indeed around the world, which go beyond the core set of human rights (as they are listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, say, or within liberal democratic theory), and which have been adopted to accommodate ethno-cultural diversity. There is a long list of such "group rights" – a wide range of language rights, of political representation rights, of religious accommodation rights, of (in the case of indigenous peoples) land rights and treaty rights, and so on. These have emerged in countries which have liberal-democratic constitutions, and which affirm and uphold human rights and basic liberal civil and political rights. And so we have a large body of experience that tells us how these `multicultural' laws and policies fit within a broader human rights framework. This is not a question that we can re-

solve by sitting in our armchair; we need to go out and look at the actual track record. In countries that have adopted these laws, how often do they run into conflict with human rights legislation or international human rights requirements? And the answer is that in the vast majority of cases, they fit very comfortably – minority rights and human rights comfortably co-exist, and indeed reinforce each other.

Of course there are the hard cases where some group leaders want to exercise powers in ways that restrict individual human rights. But, first of all, I agree with Anne Philips (one of LSE's leading experts on the issue) that these cases are much less common than the literature implies. Philosophers often take that as the sole or primary issue, when in fact it's empirically uncommon. And I think that in those rare cases where there is a conflict, the right response is to uphold the international human rights norms, and that's of course precisely what liberal democracies do.

Verena Risse & Martin Vezér.