

Equality and Diversity: Value Incommensurability and the Politics of Recognition

Sreelekha Mishra

Steven R. Smith (2011). *Equality and Diversity: Value Incommensurability and the Politics of Recognition*. The Policy Press: Great Britain. Price: Rs. 6000, Pages 192, ISBN: 9781847426079.

In philosophy of science, two theories are said to be incommensurable if there is no common theoretical language that can be used to compare them. Similarly in science when two scientific theories are incommensurable, there is no way in which one can compare them to each other in order to determine which is better. In ethics, two values (or norms, reasons, or goods) are incommensurable when they don't share a common standard of measurement.

Values worth promoting across communities, even those associated with equality and diversity are often conflicting and incommensurable. Values such as liberty and equality are sometimes said to be incommensurable as their value cannot be reduced to a common measure. The possibility of value incommensurability is thought to raise deep question about practical reason and rational choice. Also it raises related questions concerning diverse moral dilemmas, the plausibility of utilitarianism, and the foundation of liberalism. Smith claimed that "difference should be celebrated".

In the first chapter, while defending radical political position, Smith clarifies that universalism and particularism and the associated values of equality and diversity are in profound conflict. He emphasizes on incommensurability of values. If two values are not equal but one is better than the other the conflict arising from accepting both these values cannot be solved by comparing and ranking them. The focus should be on celebrating difference and reciprocity of justice. It is not reconciling the diverse values as these are frequently incommensurable but to recognize the often not always incomparable character of people's life. Rawls famously

argued that reciprocity is the central egalitarian notion of justice and fairness. It is important how people are with others, not just what they produce for others - which defines and shapes reciprocal relations.

In the second chapter, the claim is that understanding individual attachments opens up conceptual and normative space for promoting value incommensurability. This is based on the assumption that individuals will attach themselves to a range of specific valued objects that are often incommensurable. The author rejects fixing of particular identities and promoting these identities in what might be termed 'ideals' and 'pure' forms found in cultural pluralism. He instead promotes multiculturalism and diversity in part as a political arena for expressing what McLennan calls the '... capacity for collective reinvention' (McLennan, 2008, p. 103). However, it is important to acknowledge that this reinvention will happen as a matter of degree and will considerably differ between persons and particular group members.

Diversity is who we are and can be measured quantitatively. Most obviously it is determined by race, gender, and culture. We define our self through diversity. Diversity exists in spite of and sometimes because of the actions that we take. Multiculturalism is an evolving process. It is also quantitative. It is a shift that occurs when we stop defining everyone by one cultural norm and move to an understanding of multiple norms. Person's identity is continually created and recreated through various subjective commitments that change over time. The point here is that whether commitments are seen as individually chosen, socially caused or

mixture of both, personal identity is in various states shifts or displaces the way valued objects are viewed and responded to. The new attachments are not necessarily commensurable with those made previously. Incommensurable valued objects can be committed to by any one person across his/her life, giving a certain freedom or permission to pursue a new life, whatever it turns out to be. Multiculturalism exists when we are committed to change and reinvention. Smith's rejection of particular identity and accepting diversity and multiculturalism for reinvention is appropriate.

Referring to Rawls and Nussbaum in the third chapter, Smith explores empathetic imagination and its limits. Empathetic imagination is the ability to emotionally identify with the plight of others experience and circumstances. In this context Nussbaum as well Rawls stated that there is immutable separateness between persons. There is always an incomplete transferability of pain and suffering in empathetic imagination. We can be aware of others pain and suffering but difficult to experience them. So, our sympathetic feelings for the 'suffering other' are frequently misplaced and inappropriate. Acknowledging these positive subjective responses to disadvantageous conditions and characteristics unsettles any liberal egalitarian teleology that seeks to define objectively the notions of well-being; with a view to increasing well-being for disadvantage groups via egalitarian policies and practices. In this chapter a question has also been raised whether value incommensurability results in value relativism? Smith's answer is not necessarily, but provided incommensurable attachments are assumed to matter to all persons, as part of their basic interests. The subsequent diversity of plural and often incommensurable choices and identities both within and between lives is also worth mentioning. It might be said that subjective and objective character of value are not either-or corollaries but are two sides of the same coin of human experience.

In the fourth chapter, Smith has tried to focus on compassion and pity. He argues that some people don't want to be pitied or don't want us to feel sorry for them. The reflective self-creative capacities of the person who is pitied can positively incorporate his/her experience

and conditions into his/her personal narrative. In this chapter Smith has also mentioned about liberal egalitarian teleology and well being. Liberal egalitarian teleology promotes equality not because equality is regarded as an as intrinsically valuable goal, but to promote some other good, such as human well-being. In this chapter Smith refers to Richard Arneson (2000). He defends a version of prioritarianism that he calls a form of liberal 'egalitarian teleology' (Arneson, 2000). In this context Smith argues attention should be paid not only to how people are not responsible for their bad fate as emphasized by Arneson: so leading to institutional responses that compensate or alleviate these conditions; but also to how individuals are responsible agents who often subjectively and positively engage with these same conditions.

The Fifth chapter deals with disability and monistic ideals. The claims are that physical impairment may or may not lead to disability. They may have other talents which shouldn't be ignored. Smith recommends individual imagination and identity with the other; who are self creative, responsible agents, engaging with their existing, subjectively lived-out experience in a highly unpredictable and positive ways. Monistic ideas such as independence are therefore rejected not because as disvalue but other incommensurable forms of life are dependent or are inter-related. It could be a source of value for particular person. Values are many and often conflicting. So Smith suggests for value pluralism and no monistic solution to value conflict. Value pluralism defends the existence of a multiplicity of the heterogeneous values that cannot be reduced to a single value not to a permanent and universal order of priority for all individuals and for all cases.

In the sixth chapter, he explores equality, identity and disability. DRM (Disability Rights Movements) stands for both Kantian -Universal moral rules and rights and Nietzschean anti-Universalist conception of self creation and empowerment. There cannot be rational commitment to both as based on different assumptions concerning the relation between values and persons. Trade-off is not possible between these two as one value is not lexically prior to other. They cannot be ranked either-if they are incommensurable. Rather it asserts

that recognizing this conflict as incommensurable produces irresolvable philosophical and political tensions but accepting this resolvability leads to better understanding of DRM's position as well as of the wider debates about the conflict between equality and diversity.

Arguing for celebration of differences also implies for reciprocity which allows recognition of equal status hence for differences between individuals to be celebrated, anticipating the possibilities of increased reciprocity. Establishing these kinds of reciprocal relations accommodates a philosophically coherent, politically plausible response to conflicts between values of equality and diversity when promoting radical causes. The author says combining the Kantian and existentialist claims provides a more robust form of Rawls 'Justice of Reciprocity' (Rawls, 1973, pp. 54-5, 60-1). This is based on that persons not only share each others fate relating to their personal conditions and characteristics but also learn from each other as separate agents who may positively respond to their different fated condition.

This fully recognizes that there is no rational or complete answer to the various paradoxes of human experience and agency, the unpredictable and nuanced ways in which individual becomes attached to value objects and the subsequent development and shaping their identities.

In the last chapter, Smith gave his final remarks that the philosophical underpinning of the 'politics of recognition' must also acknowledge the limitations of liberalism, and, among other things, emphasise the importance of establishing and fostering a certain kind of community-that is, a community not based on a formalized, abstract liberal impartiality, but rather on reciprocity of principles born out of encounters with others who are often attached to incommensurable value objects.

Promoting value pluralism accommodates the right to pursue values that are often incommensurable and incomparable both between persons, and within and across a person's life. There are unfathomable aspects of human experiences that cannot be explained via reason or moral theory. There has to be universal acknowledgement and celebration of incommensurable forms of life-anticipating that human beings are often enriched by their surprising encounters with others who are radically different.

This book provides a clear idea about the values of equality and diversity. Drawing on various political and social philosophies as well on the plurality and incommensurability of the values, the book provides an alternate view to those who want to explore the values of equality & diversity.

Sreelekha Mishra is a Doctoral candidate at Indian Institute of Technology Indore. Her research work is related to cultural diversity, tolerance and multiculturalism.