Liberal Egalitarianism, Impartiality and Multiculturalism: An Interview with Brian Barry

You are one of the best known and most staunch defenders of liberal egalitarianism on the contemporary scene. What led you to political philosophy, and liberal egalitarianism in particular? Are there any specific concerns you think of as animating all of your work?

If you look at my work as a whole, I think that it could best be described as a sustained attempt to think about politics. This has involved a rather disparate set of inquiries, unified if at all, by a sense that getting the right answers mattered. A good deal of it has turned around theories of democracy and power, and most of the ideas discussed have not been produced by political philosophers. There has usually been some normative bottom line, because important theoretical issues are unlikely not to have some implications for the justification or criticism of institutions. But the normative work involved has often consisted primarily of exposing the buried – and frequently implausible – normative premises underlying the theory in question. I have also, of course, written books that would be more conventionally described as political philosophy, but I regard Theories of Justice and Justice as Impartiality as only the first steps towards the critique of institutions. Culture and Equality diverted me from my intentions there, and (as usual) became a bigger book and a more time-consuming project than I originally envisaged. I felt, however, that it was a job that needed doing, and, since nobody else seemed to be doing it, I decided I had better do it myself. Most of it is devoted to the discussion of questions about the way in which the law should relate to cultural diversity and in that sense I regard it as one aspect of the project of drawing specific conclusions from egalitarian principles. Perhaps due to a lack of imagination, I cannot conceive of any alternative to egalitarian liberalism that is worth paying attention to, apart from cultural relativism of some kind. The core of Culture and Equality is a demonstration of the unrecognised pervasiveness of cultural relativism among contemporary political philosophers and its obnoxious consequences in providing aid and comfort to oppressors and exploiters all over the world.

You are well known for arguing that liberal institutions should not be defended using strategies which aim to remain neutral between different conceptions of the good (‘How not to defend liberal institutions’). Yet you have also argued that reasonable people ought to adopt a sceptical attitude towards their own beliefs, given that they cannot convince others to accept them through the free use of reason (‘Justice as Impartiality’). But it might be argued that the latter view makes a neutralist defence of liberal institutions the obvious option in political justification. Could you say something about each of these positions, and the relationship between them?

As I said in Culture and Equality, liberal institutions can indeed be supported by appealing to an ideal of autonomy. But I wish to maintain (as I argued there) that they can be justified independently as necessitated by some simple ideas about what equal treatment requires. To that extent, I repudiate the position taken in ‘How not to Defend Liberal Institutions’. For example, to say that people should not be punished for converting from the religious beliefs in which they were brought up can be based on an argument for the equal treatment of all religious (and non-religious) believers. It does not require any view

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about the desirability or otherwise of people accepting their religious beliefs as giving meaning to their lives without worrying too much about competing attractions. Of course, if you want to say that making alternatives available to people entails giving a value to autonomy, then liberal institutions must rest on the value of autonomy. But this seems to me a very weak sense of the word, since it really just means denying that preventing people from deviating from one single set of beliefs has priority over the demands of equal treatment.

You have recently argued that a commitment to equality should lead us to be suspicious of multiculturalism. What is your argument for this view? How do you respond to people, like Will Kymlicka, who argue that multiculturalism is demanded by our commitment to equality?

In many instances, equal treatment does have to take account of cultural diversity, as I argued in chapter 2 of *Culture and Equality*: indirect discrimination is precisely the imposition of requirements (about clothing or hairstyle, for example) that cannot be shown to be necessary. But Kymlicka’s view is that, as long as some group of people satisfy his criteria for a ‘nation’, they have an overriding right to do whatever they like. This clearly rests on the same premises as cultural relativism: the exaltation of culture over equality.

Given your suspicion of multiculturalism, how does your commitment to equality accommodate what might be termed the ‘new politics of identity’ as found in, for example, the women’s movement, black movement, gay movement, and disability movement? These movements affirm and celebrate the differences between people rather than the ways in which they are the same. Do you think such movements are attractive from an egalitarian perspective?

As long as they stick to celebrating, that is surely not incompatible with liberal institutions, which allow for all kinds of group activities as long as engaging in them is voluntary. Anti-discrimination measures should address direct and indirect discrimination against members of all the groups you mention, of course, and extra resources should go to those who suffer from disadvantages in the ability to achieve standard goals (my examples in chapter 4 of *Culture and Equality* were the disabled and inner-city African-Americans). However, if the ‘politics of identity’ is understood as requiring the political recognition of groups such as those you mention, it is liable to lead to inequity and oppression. Multiculturalists are quick enough to seize on the dangers of a politics of national identity, which presupposes a homogeneity of ideas and aspirations that does not exist and legitimates the imposition of some people’s notions of this identity on others. But the ‘politics of identity’ within countries has exactly the same potential for some people to claim to speak on behalf of the group as a whole and impose their own agenda.

In *Culture and Equality* you discuss the role of the family and education a great deal. These issues were bread-and-butter to the great political theorists of the past – Locke, Kant, Rousseau, Mill, etc. Why do you think these issues have been neglected for so long by contemporary liberal theorists – and what explains the sudden re-emergence of discussion about them?

There are no first-rate anglophone political philosophers between Mill and Rawls, and he was very well aware in *A Theory of Justice* of the relation between education and equality of opportunity. If Alan Ryan would like to insert Dewey between them, fine, but let me then point out that he was centrally concerned with education. Since 1971, I do not think that the issue raised by Rawls has been neglected. But multiculturalism has, of course, expanded the agenda, which accounts for chapter 6 of *Culture and Equality* and several books on the same theme. How far parents should be able to determine what their children learn is a crucial aspect of this. As far as I can tell, most American states do not even check on school-age children to see if they are attending a school, and still less do they ensure that private schools are educationally acceptable or that, if the children are not attending any school, ‘home schooling’ is meeting basic standards. I would like to see American political philosophers taking more interest in the issues that this raises for the future viability of their society, and spending less time obsessing about the content of the curriculum of the state schools.

Turning to politics and policy, some commentators think that Britain’s Labour government is pushing at the boundaries of the feasible set of egalitarian policies; others that it is pursuing Thatcherism with a human face. These two beliefs are, in fact, consistent, as long as you hold a sufficiently pessimistic view of what is feasible. Which, if either, do you
have more sympathy for, and if it is the latter what do you think a more egalitarian government could be doing differently?

The ratio between the income of (size-adjusted) households at the ninetieth percentile of the income distribution and the tenth percentile lies between 2.6 and 2.9 for the Nordic countries, and stands at 3.2 for Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. It is 3.5 for France and in Britain it is 4.6. Inequality in Britain has increased sharply in the last twenty years while it has increased only a little or not at all in these other countries. It has political causes such as the weakness of the unions, the low minimum wage and the miserably low levels of state cash benefits in relation to the median income. The other countries, which have per capita GDPs around that of Britain, also have better health care, better schools and better public services generally (including, needless to say, public transport). Their workers have shorter hours and more time off for family responsibilities. Coming to Britain from one of them feels a bit like going to a third world country — and this is hardly surprising since the economic path followed by Britain is much the same as that of an IMF ‘structural adjustment’ programme. There is really no question that Britain could be a far better country to live in for a majority of the population and especially for those below fifty per cent of median income — a category almost abolished in a number of other countries. When Blair was asked if it wasn’t odd that he had more in common with Berlusconi than with the leaders of other western European countries, he is reported as having responded with the usual garbage about left and right not making a difference any more. In fact, the difference between being pro-equality and anti-equality is exactly the same as it ever was. The point is simply that Blair is anti-equality, and in fact goes around boasting of it.

On a specifically policy-oriented front, you have changed your mind about the desirability of unconditional basic income from a liberal egalitarian perspective. In ‘Equality, Yes, Basic Income, No’ (1992) you argued that basic income should be eschewed by egalitarians, whereas in ‘The Attractions of Basic Income’ (1997) you offer a plethora of reasons for thinking that basic income is one of the ways forward for egalitarians. Could you explain what led to this change of mind, and why you have overcome your earlier reservations about basic income qua egalitarian policy?

I continue to believe that a basic income is not required by considerations of justice (as argued by Philippe Van Parijs in Real Freedom for All). But a basic income would give a boost to low incomes across the board and give people more control over their lives, among other advantages. These advantages could be obtained to some degree by a basic income well below subsistence level. As its level increased, it would be possible to see if it had any serious tendency to produce a significant number of people who engaged in neither paid employment, nor caring for children and elderly or infirm relatives, nor socially valuable unpaid work. Alternatively, basic income could be introduced (as Tony Atkinson has proposed) in the form of a ‘participation income’, which would make it conditional on some useful activity or other for the able-bodied not in paid employment. However, this would be open to a good deal of bureaucratic arbitrariness and corruption, so it seems to me unwise to get into it unless the scale of abuse of an unconditional basic income proves unacceptable.

How do you think liberal egalitarians should respond to the war in Afghanistan? Do you believe that political philosophers have a duty to construct theories fit to address problems found in the real world, such as that of how to establish a stable and just government in a country populated by different and conflicting ethnic groups, such as Afghanistan?

I believe that the importance of universalistic principles (for which human rights of the usual kind are a good shorthand) cannot be overestimated in third world countries. I gather that in Latin America, anyone who talks about abuses of human rights among indigenous peoples is liable to be told that that’s all out of date and has been refuted by Taylor and Kymlicka. Similar claptrap is already being talked in some circles about the impermissibility of international pressure to improve the position of women in rural Afghanistan.

Reflecting on the tone of your (famous) review of Nozick’s Anarchy, State and Utopia, you wrote that sometimes an ‘emotional’ response is the only honest ‘intellectual’ response. Since then you have become famous for your ‘robust’ comments on both friends (Jerry Cohen, Rawls,
etc.) and enemies (Gauthier, Walzer, recently Berlin and various multiculturalists). What drives your style? Is it intellectual outrage, a desire to say it as you see it, or is it more a preference for philosophy with a critical edge? Have you ever regretted anything you have written because of its tone?

Anarchy, State and Utopia still strikes me as the equivalent of the lucubrations of somebody who believes he is a poached egg and then draws from it conclusions such as that he should sit on slices of buttered toast. Jerry Cohen’s heart was in the right place in seeking to show that being a poached egg might have other implications. In the end, however, he simply pointed out that there was no reason for believing one was a poached egg in the first place, and I don’t see how (short of not reviewing the book – an option I have sometimes taken) I could not have said that I thought the ingenuity expended along the way could have been more fruitfully directed. As far as the other people you mention are concerned, I believe that their ideas have implications that lead directly to oppression and in a number of cases death (either by deprivation or violence) and that some of them probably have actually contributed to those results, though primarily by providing justification for things that governments, ethnic leaders and so on were inclined to do anyway rather than by directly instigating them. The only reason I can think of for not attacking them as effectively as possible is that it might be counterproductive by creating sympathy for them. I don’t know if I have ever done so, but I would certainly regret that.

What are you working on now?

I recently completed a response to a number of critics of Culture and Equality for a book, Multiculturalism Reconsidered, that Paul Kelly is editing and Polity Press is publishing. I am polishing up a short book for the same publishers entitled Why Social Justice Matters, which lays out the egalitarian liberal position presupposed but only incidentally argued for in Culture and Equality. I feel fairly confident that the word ‘multiculturalism’ does not appear in it, and it would be an understatement to say that I have no plans for returning to the topic. I suppose that I might be tempted if somebody found anything fundamentally new to say about it, but the books on the subject published since I finishes writing Culture and Equality in early 2000 do not suggest that there is any imminent threat of this happening. A quite different kind of project, which involves no normative political philosophy though it does have normative implications, is an essay about the kind of knowledge produced by political science and its usefulness as a basis for offering well-grounded advice. This is going to be the substance of a British Academy Centennial Lecture to be delivered in May 2002 at Glasgow University.