Against Equality and Diversity

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A favourite saying in political discourse is that being in favour of certain taken-for-granted social goods, like liberty or justice, is like being in favour of motherhood and apple pie. Indeed, this idiom has become law in Virginia, whose State Code of 1989, [section 2.2-3303](#), decrees that 26th January shall be observed as Motherhood and Apple Pie Day, 'in recognition of the need to prevent infant mortality'. Equality and diversity have become principles that it is as hard to imagine anyone being against as it is to imagine people being in favour of increased infant mortality.

So it is something of a surprise to me to find that I am in fact against equality and diversity. By this I do not mean that I am in favour neither of equality nor of diversity. I mean I am against 'Equality and Diversity'. I want to discourage 'E&D', the coupling of the two ideas. I dislike this coupling because it encourages us to think that equality and diversity are the same kind of thing, or are even interchangeable. They are not. And because they are not, one cannot reasonably be in favour of both of them, or not at the same time, or not in the same way.

I am very strongly for equality, in particular when it comes to forms of assay and the distribution of rights and resources. And I have nothing against diversity, just as I have nothing against luck or beauty, in the sense that I appreciate it where it seems pleasing or useful. Diversity has come to be a kind of compliment, since diversity now almost always means desirable variety. When I say I enjoy some form of diversity, as I quite often do, I am giving it a little cheer, a tick in the margin, or a 'like', as signified by the little thumbs-up icon one often sees nowadays. Yes, I heart diversity. And I must admit that, in a certain sense, I have no choice but to be for this kind of diversity, because favouring it is actually a sort of tautology: how could I not desire something I found to be a desirable kind of variety? One can even be so much for certain kinds of diversity that one seeks to promote them. There are kinds of species diversity that strike us as hugely more desirable than the reduction of diversity, even as we must recognise that this will always be a doctored or managed diversity-for-us rather than diversity-*an-sich*, since we are no more

keen on the unrestricted flourishing of smallpox and syphilis than we have ever been.

But this is precisely why I cannot be for diversity in general, in the way in which I am for equality, because there are obviously so many circumstances in which diversity represents *un*desirable variation. Diverse levels of wealth or access to health care do not seem at all desirable to me, nor does diversity in electronic connector-plugs, the application of rules of evidence, the number-bases used to count votes from different constituencies, the languages used by air traffic controllers, and the life-chances available to women, or persons held to belong to the groupings of humans held to constitute *ethnoi*. I have to deprecate all these forms of diversity because I regard them as undesirable, as I hope it must be obvious many others would too. But this can be hard to keep in focus because of the fuzzy pink light-pollution nowadays given off by the word diversity. Some of the work done by the word involves a suggestion of the good feelings associated with the word 'variety', which is plainly a comfy sort of 'variation', in the same way as 'diversity' is at the amiable end of 'divergence'. And the tango-pair twinning of equality and diversity also makes it hard to acknowledge that I have often to find this kind of diversity undesirable precisely to the degree that I am in favour of equality.

So diversity can never be diversity-in-general. Diversity can only ever be a local and contingent phenomenon. I cannot really be in favour of diversity in principle, or see diversity as itself supplying any kind of principle, because there are, it seems to me, many more forms of undesirable variation than there are of desirable variety. Absolute diversity would no longer be diverse, because it would not diverge from any norm, though the current use of diversity to mean something like 'ordered according to expected or desired ratio' is in fact approaching this oxymoronic condition. Equality, by contrast can only ever be a general and absolute principle. If two numbers are approximately equal they must in fact be completely unequal.

Another reason that we cannot rationally be in favour of diversity in the same way as we are in favour of equality is that they relate to different kinds of thing, occurring as they do at different stages of deliberation. Equality applies to possibilities, that have different, but as yet unknown, chances of happening: diversity applies to known outcomes. This is why we have the phrase 'equal opportunities', and

why 'diverse opportunities' would be so strange and even suspicious. Equality is therefore always at the beginning of things, while diversity comes at the end. Equality is indeterminate; indeed the aim of equality is to increase indetermination to the maximum. Diversity is determinate, both in the sense that it relates to outcomes that have been determined, and also in the sense that it tends to value those outcomes in relation to a norm from which the degree of divergence has itself been abstractly determined. Equality aims to maximise our ignorance: diversity cashes in what we think we know. I agree with MIT geneticist Eric Lander when he says 'I am a big fan of … ignorance-based techniques, because humans have a lot of ignorance, and we want to play to our strong suit' (Knight 2000).

The reason that equality and diversity are so commonly coupled is that we are confident that diverse outcomes, or rather, outcomes showing a desiderated profile of 'diversity', are a measure of the equity of the processes used to produce them. It is indeed very encouraging to find, as egalitarians like me expect to find, that the differences which can seem so important to human beings are in fact in so many cases entirely insignificant, once one has taken away sources of inequality. But it is still risky to assume that desiderated patterns of diversity are the natural and inevitable results of equality. One of the reasons why egalitarian, or ignorance-based assayings of things have proved so powerful is that they help immunise us from our misplaced confidence in what we think we already know. But assuming that equalised initial conditions will never disclose any unexpected asymmetries, or that asymmetrical outcomes are necessarily the proof of skewed or biased procedures of assay, is dogmatic and foolish, quite apart from the fact that it makes experimental enquiry pointless. An examination system may produce a discrepancy in performance between different groups because it is an unfair examination system, but may also be an accurate disclosure of other kinds of inequality. Indeed, the most valuable thing about equality is that it is so good at disclosing divergences, which is one of the reasons that human beings are as interested in dice-games and decathlons as they are in science. As things currently stand, if Kenyans started suddenly turning in only average performances in distance-running events, or winning only in ratio to their representation in competitive fields, you would be well advised to suspect some kind of fix was in operation. Similarly, an embezzler aiming to produce a convincing set of accounts by generating at random values equally spread across numbers beginning with 1-9

would be well advised to read up on Benford's Law if they wish to stay out of jail.

It is hard to ensure equality, precisely because negativity is infinite: there is no limit to the forms of bias that we may come to realise we should work to exclude. So the ruling out of unfairness is always a work in progress. The attractiveness of the idea of turning diversity from a virtue, which we may applaud, to a value, by which we should be regulated, is that we know what we like, more or less, and so it can seem so much more obvious what diversity outcomes we should be aiming for. We may indeed value certain kinds of desirable variation enough to decide we want to make quite sure we achieve them, for example through imposing quotas. This amounts to decoupling diversity from equality by deciding that we value diversity over equality. This might be uncomfortable, but it is coherent. I happen to find the incoherent yoking of equality and diversity even more uncomfortable. I would be much happier with the arbitrary but honest adoption of quotas than with treating the achievement or not of particular distributions as a measure of the equity of the process used to produce them.

It has become obvious since I first began writing this that, perhaps because of a dim discomfort about just the kind of tension I have been articulating, equality is in fact quietly being retired from the E&D partnership in many areas of discourse, like a soft-hearted business associate dumped by the clear-sighted, conquering tycoon. I would however prefer a decoupling of equality and diversity that asserted the priority of the former over the latter. Equality is a value, like freedom, truth or justice. Diversity, I have said, is not a value but a virtue, like beauty, faith, or prosperity. Virtues encourage propensities, while values provide principles. Virtues may *have* value, but, not being regulative principles, are not values *themselves*. To compromise a virtue like diversity in the interests of a value like equality might often be disagreeable. But to compromise a value like equality in the interests of a virtue like diversity must always be disreputable. With the replacement of the principle of equality by the imperative to diversity, understood almost always as the bullying demand for the adjustment of representation 0f various social groups in the direction of known and necessary proportions (the word *race* very likely derives from Latin *ratio*), we are seeing a debasement of moral awareness and sensitivity.

Equality is one of the best ideas about human beings that human beings have ever almost succeeded in having. Unreasonably promoted from a virtue into a value, diversity, at least in its current standalone form as the malignant ugly sister of discrimination, is among the worst. Diversity depends on the forcible reduction of human qualities and potentials to fixated, because phantasmatic, systems of kinship and affiliation. As such, diversity is unashamedly racist, or, to kiss awake a word that has slumbered since the 1960s, racialist, and indeed, one must suspect, is currently attractive in proportion to the snow-white indemnity if offers from the imputation of dirty thoughts. Promoting diversity from a local felicity into a governing principle batters the fertile and generous intuition that there are many different types of people into the bitter and pinched conviction that there are *only types* of people. Diversity may obviously sometimes be a desirable condition: but as a theoretical programme for the distribution of opportunity, approval, power and resources, on the basis of such feebly putative forms of group membership, it is as mendacious and morally maladjusted a view of the nature of human beings, and the possibilities of human being, as any racism could ever be.

References

Knight, Jonathan (2000). 'Ignorance is Bliss.' *New Scientist*, 2234 (15 April). Online at https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg16622349-600-ignorance-is-bliss