

Diversity

Talking with a fellow academic, I commented that I thought support for diversity in the sense in which the term is usually used in the academic context — having students or faculty from particular groups, in particular blacks but also, in some contexts, gays, perhaps hispanics, perhaps women — anticorrelated with support for the sort of diversity that ought to matter to a university, diversity of ideas. While students or faculty with a different racial or gender background might bring a usefully different viewpoint, the people and departments most inclined to favor diversity in that sense are among those least likely to want to hire professors whose viewpoints differ from the consensus. What they want are people of the desired gender or skin color who agree with them.

I offered my standard example. Imagine that a university department has an opening and is down to two or three well qualified candidates. They learn that one of them is an articulate supporter of South African Apartheid. Does the chance of hiring him go up or down? If the university is committed to intellectual diversity, the chance should go up — it is, after all, a position that neither faculty nor students are likely to have been exposed to. In fact, in any university I am familiar with, it would go sharply down.

His response was that that he considered himself very open minded, getting along with people across the political spectrum, but that that position was so obviously beyond the bounds of reasonable discourse that refusing to hire the candidate was the correct response, that since there are no intelligent supporters of apartheid the additional information shows that there must be something wrong with the prospective hire.

I took his response as evidence in favor of my thesis. He was unlikely to have ever had the opportunity to argue apartheid with a sophisticated supporter, probably never met anyone who would admit to supporting it at all. He knew, if he thought about it, that if there was someone he knew who supported apartheid, he would probably have concealed the fact. Yet we know that millions of white South Africans did support it for quite a long period. It is a considerable stretch to claim that none of them could have been intelligent and thoughtful. And, in my thought experiment, the supporter of apartheid has already demonstrated sufficient ability in the field he is being hired in to make him a strong candidate before his unfortunate political beliefs are discovered. The confident belief that no reasonable person could support a position that many otherwise reasonable people did support is evidence of the failure to be exposed to a sufficiently diverse range of views.

A question I might have put to him but, I think, didn't, was whether he could make the argument for apartheid about as well as a competent defender of that system could. That, I think, is a pretty good test of whether one has an adequate basis to reject a position; if you don't know the arguments for it, you probably don't know whether those arguments are wrong. I doubt that he could have. My experience, when I have been a supporter of the less popular side of a political controversy, is that those on the other side overestimate their knowledge of the arguments they reject.

Which reminds me of something that happened to me more than fifty years ago, in 1964, when Barry Goldwater was running for President. I got into a friendly conversation with a stranger, probably set off by my wearing a Goldwater pin and his curiosity as to how someone could possibly support that position. We ran through a series of issues. In each case, it was clear that he had never heard the arguments I was offering in defense of Goldwater's position and had no

immediate rebuttal. At the end he asked me, in a don't-want-to-offend-you tone of voice, whether I was taking all of these positions as a joke.

I interpreted it, and still do, as the intellectual equivalent of "what is a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" How could I be intelligent enough to make what seemed like convincing arguments for positions he knew were wrong and yet stupid enough to believe them?

Academic hiring is not the only example of hostility to diversity by people who claim to favor it. Consider the issues of home schooling and education vouchers. One of the most common objections to both is that they make it possible for parents with the wrong views — in particular fundamentalist Christians — to indoctrinate their children.¹ The clear implication is that it is desirable to make sure that all children get taught the views currently in fashion, as they will be in the public schools. If one believes that fundamentalists are wrong and the current consensus correct, it is natural enough to want to reduce diversity of beliefs by stamping out, so far as possible, those particular dissenting views.

Sometimes the hostility to diversity is explicit; the argument is precisely that it is desirable to have a society whose members share a common set of beliefs. As Justice H. Walter Croskey put it, in an opinion holding that California parents did not have a right to home school their children.²

“A primary purpose of the educational system is to train school children in good citizenship, patriotism and loyalty to the state and the nation as a means of protecting the public welfare.”

That is not a comfortable position for people who claim to consider intellectual diversity a desirable objective.³

Academic Tabu

"The Black-White Test Score Gap Through Third Grade," an article by Roland Fryer and Steven Levitt in the *American Law and Economics Review*, is interesting in part for what it tells us about race and education but more for what it tells us about the present state of academic discourse. The authors observe that, while black students enter the school system substantially behind white students as judged by tests of reading and mathematics, the difference vanishes if you control for a small number of environment variables such as socio-economic status of parents and number of books in the home (the authors are not entirely clear about which variables are used where, but those are two of the ones they mention). That result appears to support, or at least be consistent with, the conventional belief that racial differences in outcome are due to environment, not to innate differences.⁴

¹ An example, from a comment on my blog: “It defies common sense that parents should be able to restrict children's experience to the indoctrination by the parents. Parents should not be allowed to deform the social and intellectual development of their children any more than they are allowed to physically deform their children.”

² The decision was reversed on appeal, in an opinion also by Croskey holding that as long as parents declared their home to be a private school they could continue to homeschool their children — as we did and did.

³ In “Public Schooling, Indoctrination, and Totalitarianism,” ([Journal of Political Economy Vol. 107, No. S6 \(December 1999\), pp. S127-S157](#)), John Lott conjectured that the reason schooling was so widely provided by governments was in order to reduce the cost of controlling their populations, and offered statistical evidence in support.

⁴ More precisely, the result is consistent with that belief but also with the alternative. If there is an innate difference in the distribution of ability by race, then differences in the environment of children reflect in part differences in the

As the children move through the first few grades of school, however, that situation changes. Black students fall behind white students at about a tenth of a standard deviation a year; that remains true even after controlling for the environmental variables that eliminated the initial difference.

The article is in large part about the authors' search for an explanation. In an earlier piece they had conjectured that the difference was in school quality; in this one, with more data, they are able to reject that explanation. The pattern exists for black and white students in the same school, even in the same classroom. It does not exist for Hispanic and white students and it reverses for Asian and white students. After exploring a variety of alternative explanations, the authors conclude that they cannot explain the data.

Having eliminated all of the possible environmental causes that they can think of, one might expect them to next consider the obvious alternative explanation: Innate differences between the races. That is not the only possibility, of course; I can think of a few more environmental explanations, such as different treatment of blacks and whites by schoolteachers or differences in peer group pressures — as children move through the grades, one would expect the influence of their peers to increase relative to that of their parents. Nonetheless, insofar as the results are evidence in the controversy over racial differences, they are evidence in favor of such differences, since they are the results one would expect if blacks were on average innately worse and East Asians innately better at certain things than whites.

That explanation is not on the authors' list of conjectures to be tested. They try every environmental explanation they can think of a way to test, are unable to explain the data, and, instead of considering a non-environmental explanation throw up their hands. Their discussion of the omitted possibility is limited to a single footnote, which reads:

"This theory, if true, also re-introduces the possibility that genetics could play a role. Because we have little evidence on this either way, we choose to exclude it while noting that it is a possibility."

Including that footnote marks the authors as more courageous than most academics. Nonetheless, it translates as "our results support a view not to be discussed in polite society, so we won't discuss it." Which tells us something about to what degree the beliefs, at least the stated beliefs, of polite academic society are based on open enquiry, to what degree on prejudice.

The one discussion of the issue of innate racial differences I have read that provided evidence against them, as opposed to possible ways of explaining away evidence for them, was by Thomas Sowell in *Ethnic America: A History*. It was possible only because Sowell, being more courageous still, was willing to seriously consider the possibility that different racial outcomes might reflect genetic differences. He offered the economic performance of West Indian immigrants as evidence that the poor economic performance of American blacks is due to neither genetics nor prejudice. West Indians are blacker than Afro-Americans in both genetics and appearance, yet their family income reaches the U.S. average in a single generation. Readers curious about his explanation of the difference are invited to read his (very interesting, for many other reasons as well) book.

innate ability of their parents, hence controlling for those differences means comparing a white child at the fiftieth percentile of the white distribution with a black child at, say, the sixtieth percentile of the black distribution.

A Record for the University of Virginia?

According to a [story](#) that appeared after the death of Ronald Coase, both Coase and James Buchanan were deliberately pushed out of the University of Virginia for political reasons.

In 1994, Coase told this reporter how one of his UVA colleagues accidentally received a copy of a secret dossier compiled by then Dean of the Faculty Robert Harris in which Harris outlined a plan to change the economics faculty. Under then President Edgar Shannon, Harris allegedly used non-promotion and non-offer-matching to force Jefferson Center scholars to disperse. Coase left UVA for Chicago in 1964; Buchanan departed four years later.

"I think [the report] was very damning because it makes quite clear what their attitude was and there was actually a policy to get rid of us," Coase said. "My wife once heard someone at a cocktail party describe me as someone to the right of the John Birch society. It wasn't true. You know, I'm English and have a completely different history from most of the other people and am not really much involved at all in American politics."

According to one of the accounts I read,⁵ part of the incentive for UVA to try to get rid of Coase and Buchanan was an implied threat by the Ford Foundation not to fund them unless they did. Both Coase and Buchanan later received Nobel Prizes for their work. According to one commenter on the Coase/UVA story:

UVA also ran off Dr. Barry Marshall, who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2005 for his discovery that H. Pylori causes gastric ulcers. He did the majority of his work — and published his seminal papers— while he was at UVA. The good ole' boys running internal medicine at UVA didn't think much of his work.

The University of Chicago is said to hold the record for the largest number of Nobel Prizes won by its faculty. Judging by these account, UVA may hold the record for the largest number of (future) Nobel Prizes lost.

Better Late than Never

While I was working on this chapter, I received an email from the University of Virginia:

A new center that applies economics to the study of law and politics has been established at the University of Virginia School of Law. The [Center for Public Law and Political Economy](#) is led by Professor [Michael D. Gilbert](#).

The email goes on to report:

UVA as a whole has been a leader in the political economy discussion since the 1950s and '60s, when James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock wrote "The Calculus of Consent," and Ronald Coase wrote "The Problem of Social Cost." Buchanan and Coase, who later each won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, wrote those seminal works while on the UVA faculty.

⁵ "‘Almost Wholly Negative’: The Ford Foundation’s Appraisal of the Virginia School,” David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart.

Chutzpah: The attitude exhibited by a man who, having killed his father and mother, asks the court to be merciful to him because he is an orphan.