

GRE Reading Comprehension

The premise with which the multiculturalists begin is unexceptional: that it is important to recognize and to celebrate the wide range of cultures that exist in the United States. In what sounds like a reflection of traditional American pluralism, the multiculturalists argue that we must recognize difference, that difference is legitimate; in its kindlier versions, multiculturalism represents the discovery on the part of minority groups that they can play a part in molding the larger culture even as they are molded by it. And on the campus multiculturalism, defined more locally as the need to recognize cultural variations among students, has tried with some success to talk about how a racially and ethnically diverse student body can enrich everyone's education. Phillip Green, a political scientist at Smith and a thoughtful proponent of multiculturalism, notes that for a significant portion of the students the politics of identity is all-consuming. Students he says "are unhappy with the thin gruel of rationalism. They require a therapeutic curriculum to overcome not straightforward racism but ignorant stereotyping."

But multiculturalism's hard-liners, who seem to make up the majority of the movement, damn as racism any attempt to draw the myriad of American groups into a common American culture. For these multiculturalists, differences are absolute, irreducible, intractable—occasions not for understanding but for separation. The multiculturalist, it turns out, is not especially interested in the great American hyphen, in the syncretistic (and therefore naturally tolerant) identities that allow Americans to belong to more than a single culture, to be both particularists and universalists.

The time-honored American mixture of assimilation and traditional allegiance is denounced as a danger to racial and gender authenticity. This is an extraordinary reversal of the traditional liberal commitment to a "truth" that transcends parochialisms. In the new race/class/gender formation, universality is replaced by, among other things, feminist science Nubian numerals (as part of an Afro-centric science), and what Marilyn Frankenstein of the University of Massachusetts-Boston describes as "ethno-mathematics," in which the cultural basis of counting comes to the fore.

The multiculturalists insist on seeing all perspectives as tainted by the perceiver's particular point of view. Impartial knowledge, they argue, is not possible, because ideas are simply the expression of individual identity, or of the unspoken but inescapable assumptions that are inscribed in a culture or a language. The problem, however, with this warmed-over Nietzscheanism is that it threatens to leave no ground for anybody to stand on. So the multi-culturalists make a leap, necessary for their own intellectual survival, and proceed to argue that there are some categories, such as race and gender, that do in fact embody an unmistakable knowledge of oppression. Victims are at least epistemologically lucky. Objectivity is a mask for oppression. And so an appalled former 1960s radical complained to me that self-proclaimed witches were teaching classes on witchcraft. "They're not teaching students how to think," she said, "they're telling them what to believe."

1. Which one of the following ideas would a multiculturalist NOT believe?
(A) That we should recognize and celebrate the differences among the many cultures in

the United States.

(B) That we can never know the “truth” because “truth” is always shaped by one’s culture.

(C) That “difference” is more important than “sameness.”

(D) That a school curriculum should be constructed to compensate for institutionalized racism.

(E) That different cultures should work to assimilate themselves into the mainstream culture so that eventually there will be no excuse for racism.

2. According to a hard-line multiculturalist, which one of the following groups is most likely to know the “truth” about political reality?
 - (A) Educated people who have learned how to see reality from many different perspectives.
 - (B) A minority group that has suffered oppression at the hands of the majority.
 - (C) High government officials who have privileged access to secret information.
 - (D) Minorities who through their education have risen above the socioeconomic position occupied by most members of their ethnic group.
 - (E) Political scientists who have thoroughly studied the problem.
3. The author states that in a “kindlier version” of multiculturalism, minorities discover “that they can play a part in molding the larger culture even as they are molded by it.” If no new ethnic groups were incorporated into the American culture for many centuries to come, which one of the following would be the most probable outcome of this “kindlier version”?
 - (A) At some point in the future, there would be only one culture with no observable ethnic differences.
 - (B) Eventually the dominant culture would overwhelm the minority cultures, who would then lose their ethnic identities.
 - (C) The multiplicity of ethnic groups would remain but the characteristics of the different ethnic groups would change.
 - (D) The smaller ethnic groups would remain, and they would retain their ethnic heritage.
 - (E) The minority cultures would eventually overwhelm the dominant culture, which would then lose its identity.
4. The author speaks about the “politics of identity” that Phillip Green, a political scientist at Smith, notes is all-consuming for many of the students. Considering the subject of the passage, which one of the following best describes what the author means by “the politics of identity”?
 - (A) The attempt to discover individual identities through political action
 - (B) The political agenda that aspires to create a new pride of identity for Americans
 - (C) The current obsession for therapy groups that help individuals discover their inner selves
 - (D) The trend among minority students to discover their identities in their ethnic groups

rather than in their individuality

(E) The increased political activism of minorities on college campuses

5. Which one of the following best describes the attitude of the writer toward the multicultural movement?
- (A) Tolerant. It may have some faults, but it is well-meaning overall.
- (B) Critical. A formerly admirable movement has been taken over by radical intellectuals.
- (C) Disinterested. He seems to be presenting an objective report.
- (D) Enthusiastic. The author embraces the multiculturalist movement and is trying to present it in a favorable light.
- (E) Ambivalent. Like a moth to a flame he is simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the movement.
6. “Multiculturalist relativism” is the notion that there is no such thing as impartial or objective knowledge. The author seems to be grounding his criticism of this notion on
- (A) the clear evidence that science has indeed discovered “truths” that have been independent of both language and culture.
- (B) the conclusion that relativism leaves one with no clear notions of any one thing that is true.
- (C) the absurdity of claiming that knowledge of oppression is more valid than knowledge of scientific facts.
- (D) the agreement among peoples of all cultures as to certain undeniable truths—e.g., when the sky is clear, day is warmer than night.
- (E) the fact that “truth” is not finitely definable and therefore that any discussion of impartial or objective truth is moot.