In recognition of our universal human condition: A response to Galit Caduri’s article ‘Universality plus difference’

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Abstract
In her commentary on my article, ‘A reformed Islamic education: Grounds for revisiting cosmopolitanism’ (Davids 2012), Caduri (2013) highlights three difficulties. The first one she describes as a conceptual ambiguity with regard to my use of the term ‘identity’, which leads to me contradicting myself. Her second difficulty relates to my argument for attaching more value to the other – which she interprets as an attempt to avoid a relationship of power, and then diagnoses as suffering from self-refutation. And her third difficulty lies with my claim to articulate a new cosmopolitanism which does not separate individuals from their culture, which Caduri dismisses as a resonance rather than an innovative theory. In responding to Caduri’s afore-mentioned difficulties, I will commence with what I consider to be her most problematic commentary – her concluding verdict that, ‘Davids swims against the current by challenging her roots as well as the widespread fundamentalist view of Islam in a very convincing way, allowing her personal voice to emerge. Thus, reading her article might change not just what people know, but also who they are.’

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, identity, misrecognition, acknowledgement

KNOWING TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE
To Caduri (2013), my article (Davids 2012) contains two agendas, which seemingly do not sit well together. The first is my call for Muslim women to construct their identity regardless of what people say, which to her, undermines the role of others in the formation of identity. The second is my idea that people should put the needs of others before their own, since ‘without the other, I hold no meaning’ (ibid., 399), which she questions, and assigns to my incoherent definition of the concept of identity. In Caduri’s opinion, my argument that identity be constructed independently of the assessment of others not only stands in contradiction to my contention that ‘without the other, I hold no meaning’, but that by pushing Muslim women to construct their self-recognition independently of the assessment of others, I reduce the role of others in this process. But, does the construction of the self, or self-recognition, independent of the assessment of others necessarily mean the undermining of the reduction of the role of others?
According to Taylor (1994, 30), who we are, is defined in terms of our race, our gender, our language, our ethnicity, and our religion, which we construct and re-construct into encoded images in an attempt to reach a particular concept of identity, which says that we belong. To have an understanding, and to make sense of who we are, he explains, we have to look at where we have come from, who and what shaped and influenced us – which involves looking at where we were born, our family lineage, our childhood, and our social spaces, which Taylor (1989, 28) describes as being oriented in a moral space. Our moral space, according to Taylor, is influenced by those who reared us (our parents), and those we share our lives with (significant other/s), and is constructed by what holds meaning to us, and what does not – our sense of good and bad. Essentially, we cannot have a sense of who we are, or who we have become, without reference to those who participated in our lives, and in whose lives we participated; we cannot have a sense of who we are in isolation from our moral space. Of course, we all need others, and the engagement of others – it is what gives shape to who we are, and what we value and do not value. But, as Taylor (1994, 33) says, while we need relationships to fulfil ourselves – such as a loving relationship with another human being, whether between lovers, or between parent and child – we do not need them to define who we are. Rather, who we become, and who we are, is encapsulated in how we choose to live our lives – as Taylor (ibid., 30) pronounces: ‘There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life.’ This means, that while significant others have the capacity to influence who we are, and what we believe, and while we might need them to bring a certain measure of meaning and significance to our lives, we do not need others to define or circumscribe who we are, and nor should we want to, which is why Taylor is emphatic about living our lives in truthfulness to only ourselves – an expression which he defines as a moral responsibility to the self. While this indeed might not always be possible, the point that Taylor is trying to make is that we should not allow certain negative influences, or forms of misrecognition to distort who we are, or who we become.

It is not difficult to see the value of Taylor’s argument – of its worth in terms of how we evolve as human beings, of its potential good, and bad. Consider how easy it would be to live our lives in truthfulness to others instead of to ourselves – to act and justify certain actions because we have been reared within a certain setting, or been taught to disregard others. Consider the child who has been subjected to verbal abuse, or raised to believe that people ought to be judged by the colour of their skin. By not re-considering what has given shape to who we are, we would simply perpetuate any bad that we might have been exposed to – justifying it under the guise of either an historical inheritance, or a muted acceptance of that we can only do what we know – when what we should be doing, is to do better. Indeed, in circumstances like these, while significant others have brought a certain measure of meaning and significance to our lives, it might be better for us not to allow it to define us, since it might not be a reflection of living our lives in truthfulness to ourselves, but in relation to the sometimes distorted views of others.
In blindly accepting the truths and views of others, we impose on ourselves a limited way of being, of seeing others and in seeing ourselves in relation to others. Ironically, it is an imposition I detect in Caduri’s (2013) commentary, especially when she assesses me as ‘challenging the fundamentalism of Islam’; or when she states: ‘that everyone stands to gain from her insights as well as from the critical approach that she bravely takes towards her own roots’, and it is re-emphasised in: ‘Nevertheless, Davids swims against the current by challenging her roots as well as the widespread fundamentalist view of Islam in a very convincing way, allowing her personal voice to emerge’. Caduri chooses to couch my essay as an anti-fundamentalist take on Islam, as a brave critical approach against my roots. She naturally assumes that I am a born Muslim (my roots), and that what I am writing is oppositional to fundamentalist Islam. That she deliberately reads my article as anti-fundamentalist, perhaps has to do with her decision to frame her commentary in terms of a concept of ‘universality’ (as evident in her title), which, in the absence of an explanation, is in itself problematic. While a concept of universality can be understood as an understanding of the world, which is indeed consistent throughout the world, it does, however, bring into contention concepts of difference, particularities and relativism, in much the same way that it problematises, certainly from a Taylorian perspective, a notion of universal truth. Taylor’s call for a truthfulness to one’s self calls into question a universalisable truthfulness – since that would imply a truth which is truthful for all times and places, and certainly for all people.

Moreover, from a Kantian viewpoint, while universal understandings and agreements may be possible and may exist, this universality may not preclude different individuals or cultures from interpreting these understandings or truths depending on their individuality and cultural influences. It is precisely this pluralist understanding of what it means to be truthful to one’s self, that makes Caduri’s (2013) allegation of anti-fundamentalism such an uncomfortable read. On the one hand, it brings into question my own location and identity – which Caduri could not possibly lay claim to knowing. Does being anti-fundamentalist mean that I would have to be a modernist? Does it mean that I am opposing the concept of a fundamentalist Islam? I ask these questions, because within a particularly defined discourse, most notably within a post 9/11 world, any concept of fundamentalism, and especially when preceded by the signifier of ‘Islamic’, has taken on a specifically disparaging, almost scornful association. Indeed, in Caduri’s assessment of me as being anti-fundamentalist, she is in fact, applying a particular set of values (moral or otherwise), which clearly gains her approval – whether truthful or not. On the other hand, her act of moral judgement is evocative of Taylor’s (1995, 25) notion of misrecognition, in which he asserts that:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.
So, while I might have a sense of who I am, where I have come from, and how I would like to present myself, this does necessarily mean that how I am perceived by others is how I imagine myself to be. Often who we think we present, is not how others receive us. And often we find ourselves in situations, where what we say is interpreted to mean who we are, and who we are, is very often interpreted to define who we cannot be. So if, for example, I say that I support the rights of gays to be recognised as equal to my own, then the assumption is that I would have to be gay. Or if I am a hijāb-wearing, Muslim woman, then I cannot possibly own the capacity to think for myself, since who I am precludes any notion of independent thought. So we assign our own meanings onto others before we even encounter the identity of the other. We think we know the other before being able to discern our own stereotypes, or myths from the truths of the other. When I speak about the role that Muslim women ought to assume in their own construction of identity within and in relation to a cosmopolitan society, Caduri (2013) interprets this to be an anti-fundamentalist stance – one which swims against the current of my roots. Yet, to me, my argument is essentially a fundamentalist one, since it speaks to the need for Muslim women to engage in the revealed texts of Islam, which constitute the fundamentals of Islam, so that they might position themselves in their rightful place as key participants in their own identity and roles as Muslim women. My call, therefore, for Muslim women, to take responsibility for how they construct themselves and to take responsibility for their involvement in the paradigmatic foundations of Qur’anic exegesis is not new or anti-anything. Islamic history and medieval Islam are profoundly rich with Muslim women, who played pivotal roles in the propagation and shaping of Islam (Ahmed 1992, 72; Afsaruddin 2005, 164). It is, however, a call, which needs to be understood in relation to a strong patriarchal agenda, initiated and perpetuated by Muslim men for their own purposes of hegemony, and unintentionally left unchallenged by Muslim women because of their silent inertia.

ATTACHING MORE VALUE TO THE OTHER AS THE ESSENCE OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Perhaps now, given my clarification of the ease with which misinterpretation and misrecognition can arise, especially when each and all of us bring who we are to each and every text we encounter, Caduri (2013) might better understand my contention that constructing who I am independently of others, and the views of others, in no way reduces their role, or undermines their role in my identity construction. It simply means that I should not allow the views of others to distort who I am. Caduri might also appreciate that Muslim women, as the more visible adherents of Islam by virtue of their dress, have become the easy targets of those societies, who deliberately misrecognise Muslim women, and unilaterally decide to ‘liberate’ them from the oppression of Islam. And so, perhaps, more than ever before, Muslim women need to have a clear sense of who they are, so that they are better equipped to more coherently present their visible identity as Muslims as just one of many diverse
identities in a pluralist society. Succumbing to the influence and views of others, in the absence of a clearly understood identity, bodes as badly for Muslim women, as it does for a concept of democratic citizenship. And so while Caduri views my call on Muslim women to construct their identity independently of the views of others as contradicting my contention that ‘without the other, I hold no meaning’ (Davids 2012, 399), I will respond that even when I refuse to accept the truths of others as my own (such as wearing the hijab is a form of patriarchal oppression), I will still maintain that I cannot be who I need to be in the absence of others. I can only understand who I am when I view and understand myself in relation to others, because that is when I reveal who I am.

In response, then, to Caduri’s (2013) second difficulty, relating to my argument for attaching more value to the other, which she interprets as an attempt to avoid a relationship of power, and then diagnoses as suffering from self-refutation. As human beings we are always in communal relations with others, hence Cavell’s (1979, 440) poignant observation that, ‘We are alone, and we are never alone’. By virtue of our shared humanity, we are always internally connected, and as such, we construct our humanity in relation to others, which, in turn, gives meaning to how we live our lives. And so we might be moved when we watch families on television – families we have never before encountered, and do not know, being displaced by the horrors of war – and we might choose to act, by way of humanitarian aid, because of a shared sense of responsibility towards others. By acting, we assign a particular meaning to our lives. The point I am trying to make here that we do not necessarily have to know the other in order for that other to have some sort of influence on our lives. In Cavellian (1979, 438) terms:

I accommodate myself to a human condition, or rather, a condition shared by all creatures endowed with sensuousness, a condition over which no one (possessing sensuousness) has a choice, save to be cautious. But the surmise that I have not acknowledged about others, hence about myself, the thing there is to acknowledge, that each of us is human, if not, first of all, the recognition of a universal human condition, but first of all a surmise about myself.

Certainly from an Islamic perspective, the needs and goals of the individual cannot be separated from the needs and goals of society (Hashim 2004, 33). The internal connection or unity amongst humanity, according to Al-Attas (2005, 33), has two facets – external unity, which discerns itself in the form of community and cohesion, and internal unity, which reveals itself in the form of spiritual lucidity, way beyond the confines of communal or national identities. In order for Muslims to realise the first facet of unity, Al-Attas (ibid.) argues, they need to have a real understanding of who they are spiritually and intellectually. To Wan Daud (2009), the commonality between individual is such that, ‘An individual is meaningless in isolation, because in such a context he is no longer an individual, he is everything’.

In attaching more value to the other, then, I am neither attempting to avoid a relationship of power, nor am I suffering from self-refutation. In Cavellian (1979,
428) terms the acknowledgement of another, calls for the recognition of the other’s specific relation to oneself. To Cavell, what matters in our relation to another is not knowing something special about him or her, such as his pain or his pleasure, what matters is what we do in the presence of the other, in relation to the other, and how we respond based on what we know. For Cavell (ibid., 429), attaching value to the other is how the other is acknowledged, ‘What, if anything, is a best case for the acknowledgement of others, a best placement in which to acknowledge another? – which must mean: in which to acknowledge my relation to the other’. This has nothing to do with power, or with the avoidance of a relationship of power, and even less to do with self-refutation, since, according to Foucault (1977, 220),

a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that the “other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up.

To this end, power is always constituted by a set of actions performed upon another person’s actions and reactions. To acknowledge the other, and to attach more value to the other, I am neither avoiding a particular action or reaction against me, nor am I attempting to assert my own action or reaction upon another. And I would not have any reason to avoid the other’s actions, as my identity would have been constructed independently of the assessment of the other. I, therefore, have nothing to fear of the other; the other’s actions or reactions cannot distort who I am, or harm me in any way, because I do not need the other to define who I am. By assigning more value to the other I am acknowledging the other; I am acknowledging my relation to the other; and I am stating that I am willing to engage with him or her from his or her perspective, which Cavell (1979, 440–441) describes as follows:

First: isn’t the wish for such a concept (empathic projection) really a persistence of the idea that the other is ‘like’ oneself, that whatever one can know about the other one first has to find on oneself and then read into the other (by analogy): whereas the essence of acknowledgement is that one conceive the other from the other’s point of view.

**COSMOPOLITANISM: A RESONANT INNOVATION**

Caduri (2013) argues that my attempt to articulate a new cosmopolitanism, which does not separate the individual from her culture, offers nothing innovative, and merely resonates the notion of a ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ – oriented in an acknowledgement that individuals cannot be delinked from their communities – which has already been argued for by Kwame Appiah (1997) and David Hollinger (2001). And here Caduri is correct – the concept of cosmopolitanism which I argue for is indeed one which
both recognises and responds to the individualisation of self-understandings that constitute a pluralist society. Indeed, this is not a new theory of cosmopolitanism. But what Caduri loses sight of is that in my call for a renewed cosmopolitanism, I include an attachment of more value to the other, so that I may engage from the perspective of the other, or in Cavellian terms, so that I conceive the other from the other’s point of view. To simply recognise that the construction of identity – as in Muslim women – is a multiple layer of culture, community and the influence of significant others is not enough to counter the misrecognition encountered when others are reduced or distorted by how they are seen and experienced by others, and it is certainly not enough to countenance the inhospitality suffered by those, who continue to stand on the periphery of acknowledged humanity.

In drawing upon Benhabib’s (2002) advocacy for both hospitality (i.e., exercising human rights in a world republic, without violating the rights of others) and hostipitality (i.e., evoking mutual suspicion about all forms dystopias), I extend my call beyond the mere recognition of the other and their differences. A renewed cosmopolitanism would also need to be free of the censure of difference – as an enactment of Cavell’s empathic projection that in order to know and recognise the other one firstly has to know oneself, but in order to know oneself, recognition and acknowledgement has to be given that meaning can only be created when in communal relations and dialogue with others – and hence my reiteration of a greater attachment of value to the other. A concept of cosmopolitanism cannot succeed only on the basis of the recognition of the other – whether as an individual or as collective, or whether in relation to the collective, if that recognition is not inclusive of a non-censure of all forms of difference. What I am arguing for is a cosmopolitanism, which not only recognises the other and difference, but is also in approval of that other and difference, and accepts that other and difference as a constitutive part of any community and society. Whatever position of restriction this renewed cosmopolitanism might hold, is not because it might violate the Islamic faith of Muslims, for example, but because injustices to diverse others might incur and that would be sufficient reason to constrain it. A renewed cosmopolitanism, therefore, would extend hospitality, and advocate hostipitality by according recognition to the other not only through mere acknowledgement, but through adopting an approach of tacit non-censure of all difference in as far as this non-censure does not incur injustices to others, since any form of injustice will be sufficient reason for constraint.

Much of Caduri’s criticism of my argument is what she describes as my neglect in providing a clear definition of the concept of identity. In resolving this ‘conceptual confusion’, Caduri attempts to situate my call for a renewed cosmopolitanism in Gee’s conceptual framework (2001, 103) of affinity-identity (A-Identity). In terms of Caduri’s understanding of Gee, the A-Identity framework means that we construct our identity with others, and that our traits may be achieved by us or attained by others – meaning that our human interaction is sustained by what we might share with others, our allegiance to specific groups, how we participate in specific practices, and that our identity is sustained by dialogue. To this end, Caduri (2013,
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page no.) explains that ‘Islamic identity might be an affinity-identity as what makes one to be recognised as Muslim (i.e., a certain kind of a person) is a commitment to a particular tradition of practice’. She continues that because I encourage Muslims (and Muslim women in particular) to form their identity separately of others’ assessments, I must be referring to the framework of an A-Identity, rather than a discourse-identity (D-Identity), which is constituted by the way we are recognised by others. Consequently, according to Caduri’s interpretation of Gee, while dialogue is substantive in the construction of a D-Identity, it is peripheral in an A-Identity.

However, I think Caduri (2013) misses the point of my argument. Firstly, in terms of a Taylorian concept of identity, who we are and who we become are shaped by significant others, who could refer to our parents, loved ones, or communities – this necessarily implies a particular form of discourse. And, as I have already argued, while I might have a sense of who I am, and how I would like to present myself, this does not necessarily mean that how I am perceived by others is how I imagine myself to be. Often, how others choose to perceive us is already constructed before a greeting has passed. We have no control over how others see us, how they choose to recognise us, and how they choose to treat us. But, the point is, whether in verbal conversation, or in a momentary passing, we are always in discourse with the other. This does not, however, mean that we ought to be stuck in that particular identity construction, since, as I have mentioned before, on occasion it might be necessary for us to re-assess how we have been shaped, and what values have laid the basis of our identity. Furthermore, as Taylor (1994, 33) stresses, while we need human interaction and dialogue to fulfil who we are, we do not need these dialogues and interactions to define us – even if they do define us. To this end, many people might opt to keep their interaction with others to the bare minimum, which in no way limits their identity formation. My argument, therefore, that Muslim women ought to construct their identities separate to the assessment of others, should not be confused with what Caduri misreads as an undermining of discourse-affinity in which the concept of discourse is foregrounded, since by virtue of our interconnectedness as humans, we are always in discourse with the other. In light of my argument for the attachment of greater value to the other, Caduri’s attempt to locate my argument as standing on the periphery of discourse, therefore, simply does not hold.

Of greater concern, perhaps, is that in terms of Gee’s (2001) A-Identity framework (in which Caduri is intent on categorising my argument), an affinity group is defined by what people share, by particular allegiances, and what they have in common, rather than recognising the otherness of the other. To my mind, the concept of an A-Identity stands in contradiction to a concept of cosmopolitanism that argues for a moral recognition of all humanity, regardless of what we might or might not share. And by Caduri insisting upon this framework, she is, on the one hand, disregarding my central argument of the multiplicity of Muslim identity, and on the other hand, ignoring my call for the recognition of the cosmopolitan nature of Muslim women, as well as their potential contribution to a pluralist and diverse society. My argument for the advocacy of both Benhabib’s (2002) hospitality (i.e., exercising human rights
in a world republic, without violating the rights of others) and hospitability (i.e., evoking mutual suspicion about all forms dystopias), would be irreconcilable with a concept of an A-Identity, defined as being constructed by ‘... allegiance to, access to, and participation is specific practices that provide each of the group’s members the requisite experience’ (Gee 2001, 105). I cannot extend hospitality to those I do not know if the affinity of my identity is aligned to only those with whom I have something in common. Likewise, it would be especially difficult to show hospitality to others, and those of other groups and communities, who might be experiencing oppression or marginalisation, if my own experiences and participation are limited to my specific group.

I will conclude with Caduri’s (2013) final sentence of her commentary, ‘Thus, reading her article might change not just what people know, but also who they are’. Cavell (1979, 385), in discerning between identity and relation, states that while relation necessarily involves two people or things, identity only involves one; however, he continues that:

To say that I am fated to stand to myself in relations in which I may or may not stand to others is to make the contrast between myself and others in a particular way: any other is one whom I may just not know, have no relation with; but I cannot just not know, or have no relation with, myself. Ignorance of myself is something I must work at; it is something studied, like a dead language.

To know who I am, is not only about knowing who I am in terms of my personal identity. So I can state that I am a Muslim, South African woman. But in isolation neither of the two identities or descriptors – Muslim or South African – means anything. Unless these identities or descriptors are understood in relation to others, who might or might not also be Muslim or South African, my sense of who I am is either all or nothing, because I cannot be somebody when there is nobody else. To this end, to know who we are, is to know who we are among, and in relation to others, and so who we are is given shape by those with whom we interact. Thus, while we might misunderstand and misrecognise others, and while others might misunderstand and misrecognise us, and while in Cavellian (1979, 440) terms, ‘the essence of acknowledgement is that one conceive[s] the other from the other’s point of view’, the essence of knowing who we are, is to be found in how willing we are to know the other. This is so even if we might never know them, and the extent to which we recognise that what constitutes our humanity is how we choose to live it in relation to others. Finally, to know who we are, is not only to recognise our universal humanity, but to also acknowledge our universal human condition, which means that while do not have to know others, we should be experiencing them.
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