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No positive discrimination [1]

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I spoke at the Oxford Union on Thursday against the idea of positive discrimination or affirmative action. I rested my argument on three pillars. The first was that to discriminate in favour of some inevitably involves discriminating against others. Those who have worked to qualify for university or to gain a job are rightly affronted if the place goes to someone with lower qualifications but who happens to belong to an approved group.

My second point was that to treat people in groups rather than as individuals diminishes them a little, even dehumanizes them to a small degree. We should not be concerned with what groups people come from, but with where they might go. It is somewhat patronizing to demand high standards generally, but to lower the standards for people from certain groups.

The third pillar of my argument was that those who lose out when others receive positive discrimination have done nothing to deserve it. Why should people be punished for deeds which some of their ancestors might have been involved in? None of mine were likely to have owned or traded slaves. Indeed, in ancient times they quite possibly were slaves themselves. I doubt if any joined the redcoats in conquering continents. And even if any of our Roman ancestors might have mistreated Gauls or Carthaginians, is that a reason why less qualified Gauls and Carthaginians should be given favoured treatment today.

To my surprise and pleasure, positive discrimination was voted down by a large majority.

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