In the introduction to this book, Matthew Festenstein echoes Wittgenstein’s praise of a line from King Lear: ‘I’ll teach you differences’ (1). Building on the diverse multiculturalisms of Kymlicka, Taylor, Kukathas, Barry and others, his aim is to explore the normativity of cultural diversity in a different way. More specifically, Festenstein’s main objectives, besides critically analysing existing lines of thought, are: (i) to defend the value and relevance of cultural identity to normative theorising, (ii) to criticise what he calls ‘pre-emptive’ approaches to cultural identity (those that deny its political revisability), and (iii) to argue for a deliberative model of public dialogue, as the best (or least worst) tool to manage claims of cultural recognition.

Festenstein begins from a ‘cultural thesis’ (11) that regards culture as an important factor in the constitution of identity. His aim is to decouple the cultural thesis from cultural essentialism, arguing that denying that cultural identity has an essential character does not mean discarding the overall importance of culture for normative theorising. How the thesis is interpreted, however, depends on how culture is conceptualised, and here three explanatory views are considered. According to the normative conception of culture, ‘the significance of culture [consists] in the constitution of practical identity as lying in a culture’s containing a set of shared beliefs or norms which are distinctive of a particular group’ (14). In a well-known liberal critique, Festenstein criticises this conception for being too essentialist and communitarian (14–17). According to Kymlicka’s more liberal societal conception, culture, distinguished by shared practices and embodied in social and political institutions, is a necessary medium for individuals to
exercise their autonomy. Here Festenstein joins Kymlicka’s critics who accuse him of reading into culture attributes more relevant to the contemporary liberal nation state (17–23). Festenstein does find inspiration, however, in the *semiotic* conception of culture, promoted by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz among others, where culture is a symbolic medium whose identity is always subject to renegotiation (23–25). This more constructivist approach to culture is promoted as a middle way between essentialism and postmodern contingency.

So much for the meaning of culture: for political purposes we also need to know its normative value. As Festenstein rightly observes, at the core of this debate lies the general question of whether to value diversity non-instrumentally or whether to judge culture only by the quality of its outcomes. Both instrumental and non-instrumental approaches to cultural value have controversial implications.¹ Valuing an undiversified culture non-instrumentally may entail giving normative endorsement to its social bads along with its social goods. On the other hand, the argument that culture is instrumentally valuable for individuals’ purposes may make it difficult to prevent assimilationist policies, justified on practical or pragmatic grounds. The question is how to value culture non-instrumentally and at the same time ensure that the principle of equal respect for individuals is not violated. The answer, according to Festenstein, is a conception of culture where is it valued non-instrumentally but where that value is perpetually re-formulated and re-negotiated according to cultural members’ changing perceptions. By contrast, any attempt to provide a fixed definition of culture and identity would amount to the potential hegemony and cruelty of Rortian re-description.²

Festenstein is explicit that he wants to defend a non-instrumental approach to the value of culture against the well known accusations that this is potentially illiberal, oppressive and even demagogic. His argument contains recognisable traces of individualistic, constructivist and other perspectives, and the result is that he tends to oscillate

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¹ As Festenstein points out what we actually value when we ascribe non-instrumental value to identity is in fact the diversity the existence of cultures enhances.