

THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY

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Contemporary issues in ethics and political theory share the assumption that the purpose of philosophy must be to discover the general rules whereby individual and social conduct can be rationally assessed. The emphasis in contemporary philosophy falls upon questions of ethics. It is very common to see major sections of introductory philosophy texts take up issues of individual conduct without even acknowledging that there may be a dimension of philosophy which looks at problems of social conduct as a whole. The political dimension, if it is acknowledged, seems an addendum or afterthought. When it is addressed, the issues in social or political philosophy usually seem to ask for the same kinds of formal rules which were sought in ethics. It is as if we were asking the student to choose which rules to live by, and that the rules of ethics are easier for her to choose because, frankly, there is not too much we can do individually about our political world. The agenda seems to be: let's get individuals to act rationally and get their principles straight and then we can have a basis for rational social conduct.

The issue becomes even more perplexing when we focus on the way ethics is approached in our philosophy textbooks. The tendency is to force the student to an awareness that there are two serious candidates for articulating ethical principles: deontological ethics of some sort and utilitarian ethics of some sort. Indeed, I have seen an entire textbook devoted to a systematic look at a range of ethical issues in which there were articles on each debate presented from these two and only these two standpoints. The result here is no doubt similar to the effect that Protagoras's famous work "Throw-holds" must have had. Protagoras, recall, was able to give for any selected issue equally plausible arguments pro and con upon request.

I find the above considerations disturbing for several reasons. First, one but need think of the classical philosophers to see that the division between ethics and political theory is one they would not have understood in the least; nor would they really be able to comprehend, granting that division, the

priority of individual conduct over political. Plato's *Republic* is a marvelously sustained analysis which shuttles back and forth between the problems of justice in the individual and justice writ large in the character of the state. The foundation between the two emerges as *paideia*, the education of new members of the community. Aristotle reminds us in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that we have in fact embarked upon the study of *politike*. Insofar as the life of happiness must be realized under very specific conditions whereby one can be secure, moderately prosperous, partake in community affairs, establish friendships and enjoy stable family relationships, and, above all, pursue rational inquiry without hindrance, political questions really become quite paramount. The ethical life was first and foremost entirely contingent upon the context one was born into, whereby ethical habits could be established. Here, too, *paideia* assumes the role of a vital bond between the individual and his social environment.

The modern approach, then, seems to assume a radical distinction between the ethical life and the political life, resting upon an abstract focus on "the" individual and then upon another abstraction, "the" state. The course for determining rational conduct for either is then left to a search for formal rules, of which the utilitarian and deontological are most popular. It is not my desire here to critique either of these ethical schools, though I believe both to be essentially fruitless ways of illuminating conduct, resolving disputes, or even of assessing benefits and burdens. Both theories presuppose some sort of bloodless fictional entity, either a master calculator of infinite consequences or a rational being whose goodness lies in not being of this world. We might as well try working out an ethics for mermaids, centaurs, or two-dimensional beings.

I would rather explore the possibility of an alternative approach, one based upon a more reliable description of the kinds of beings we are and the kind of world we live in. Before doing so, let me articulate what I will hold as the guiding theses of this view. First, as beings who live in social contexts, neither the concept of "the" individual nor that of "the" state is adequate. We are not individuals first and then members of groups, nor are we faceless members of mystical collective

wholes who get a sense of self-fulfillment by playing the role of the little toe in the great social organism. We are members of locally extended social groups or "communities" which have a complex internal organization and range of gradations of meaning and importance. Both state and individual are articulations of communities and it is with this idea that our "ethical" and "political" theories should begin.

Second, instead of looking for fruitless formal rules, we need to see ethical deliberation as related to the practical wisdom, the traditions and cultures, of communities. Our actual moral reasoning is conducted in light of our communal background, our available practical lines of communal conduct, and, above all, through discussion and communication. Our emphasis should thus be in developing the rich background of contextual intelligence whereby communities can be established and flourish and where communication can seek out successful resolution of conflicts and general courses of action.

What case can be made for the fact that we are communal beings rather than individual calculators or rational intellects? The only fruitful approach to this question seems to be empirical: How in fact do we exist? As newborns we are thrown into a world in which we cannot survive without help. Others must care for us, nurture us, teach us, and gradually assist us to become fully participating members of the social group. Presupposed in our very biological existence at the moment of birth is the necessity of an organized community which has the social cooperation to allow for the care and rearing of the young; this in turn presupposes a world of communication, values, and practices, in short, culture. From the beginning, then, we are cultural beings, members of a community, involved in a web of actions and emotions which shapes who we will become. From the immediate through the extended family, to the members beyond the family (perhaps a clan) to the functioning community at large, our existence is tied. Without this context of the community, in the most literal sense, we would not exist.

I think, moreover, there is another dimension of our being which must be acknowledged. Our desire is not merely to subsist but to live with a pervasive sense of our lives being imbued with meaning and value. We desire the love and

attention of our parents and friends; later, we seek out love in erotic relationships and in our children. We need to sense that we contribute to the well-being of those important to us. We need to sense that we can make reasonable predictions about our world, social and natural, whereby we can make intelligent choices. We desire, in other words, to believe that our understanding of the world provides for a coherent pattern of living whereby our lives can be consciously directed toward fulfilling ends. This involves not merely a sense that we understand the world but that it is a world in which positive alternatives and meaningful choices are open to us. If these things are denied us, we die. To rob a human life of its possibility for living with this sense of meaning and value is to destroy it; the act of biological death merely follows this human death. Individuals struggling with a sense of isolation, failure, and insignificance suffer as much as a human being can.

A society which cannot provide the rudimentary conditions whereby people can achieve lives of meaning and value is a society of despair, at the threshold of collapse, destruction, or fanatic transformation. Many of the fanatic movements in societies are traceable to crises which have threatened the basic cultural fabric whereby human beings have been able to construct meaningful lives. This, then, I take as the primary function of communities: to secure and develop the necessary conditions whereby each of the members of the community can sustain an existence throughout life in which there is a sensed fulfillment of meaning and value and which contributes to the self-renewal and vitality of the community itself.

Archaic communities and tribal cultures have managed to secure this through a high degree of conformity of social practice woven together with a complex order of technical skills and religious beliefs. Indeed, for tribal cultures it is almost impossible for them to draw a distinction between custom and law or between culture and religion. Binding the culture together, above all, are the stories which give the members cultural identity and which locate the central values of the world-view. Mircea Eliade sought to locate the distinction between secular stories and sacred myth in the fact that the latter dealt with "beginnings" which continue to give power to important practices if they are ritually approached. I

would tend to argue that those stories become "sacred" which deal with the fundamental issues which constitute the basis of a communal identity and which, not surprisingly, for that reason deal with origins. These stories try to address the questions of "Who are we?" "Where have we come from?" "Why do we do what we do?" "What values are good?" and so on.

As long as the culture remains isolated and the environment fairly stable, this manner of communal organization functions fairly well, even though it may often manifest rather strong degrees of distribution of rights and duties. Of course, once the culture is faced either with the need to cooperate with another group with different beliefs and practices or internal tensions arising from its own practices, or if it faces a catastrophic disaster in the environment beyond its technological resources, the seamless bubble of tribal coherence is burst. The conflict of so many Native Americans today lies in being caught between the rigid conformity of tribal custom demanded by the elders and the need to interact with a culture of radically different values which has engulfed their own. This conflict, to which I can only allude, has been eloquently portrayed in a tragic literature from N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* to Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, perhaps most sensitively by Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Silko, at least, has urged the radical step that "the ceremonies must be changed."

At the opposite extreme from the monolithic unity of tribal culture we might look at modern secular industrial society. Here technology and private enterprise have become so powerful that constant transformation of practices becomes the pervasive, almost unconsciously accepted fact. As Marx described it in the *Communist Manifesto*, "All that is solid melts into air." Society can only be understood as an artificial aggregate, and so one looks for some common denominator among the members. Here arise those sacred myths of this kind of society: the beneficial consequences of competition, the ubiquitousness of self-interest, the ultimate value of mere difference denoting individuality, the importance of novelty over custom, the ideal of the social "rebel," the rugged individualist who outwits "the system," and so on. We can also see in such a society why "religion" should become radically

opposed to the "secular" domain and the virtue of tolerance to be central, even to the point where one finds fairly commonly the notion that all beliefs, as long as someone holds them dear, must be true. The practical results, sadly, for such a culture seem to be unstable relationships, short-sighted selfishness, a dedication to the pursuit of wealth and power with no understanding of what to do with them, and, instead of genuine tolerance, a closed-minded dogmatism of subjective truth (one which says, "If everyone's beliefs are true, mine must really be true since they're *mine*").

Needless to say, such a society probably is doomed to fail in securing the basic conditions for community, including those of decent level of food, shelter, and care for all of its members as well as the need for a sense of fulfillment in life. Certainly it seems pervaded by a sense of inner confusion and despair, at least by those who are in touch with the deep needs of a fulfilling existence—those who succeed in pursuing robust careers of zestful selfishness seem to be having a good time. This sort of crisis in modern society is a very serious one, if my central claim is true, that above all we need to live with a pervasive sense of meaning and value and that this requires the existence of functioning communities. It is this problem which has led to a series of critiques from Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, a rather cranky instance, to Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, a more incisive look at the importance of cultural coherence, or "traditions," for the functioning of practical reason. Whatever one may think of Bloom's or MacIntyre's alternatives, they have posed serious questions.

What then does an approach beginning with the theory of community have to offer? First, communities require the fundamental conditions of *communication*. Even securing the basic necessities of life presupposes that members can achieve a coordinated action through a mediating system of communication. A theory of communication is prior to any theory of language or meaning. Communication in turn is implicated in the idea of a cultural world. Communication is less an affair of "transmitting information" than it is an imaginative capacity to engage in the envisagement of extended social activity. A complex body of habits and learned practices is required. In other words, the lengthy process of

learning, the process whereby the fragile biological life of the newborn steadily becomes transmuted into the fully articulate life of a personality which identifies itself within the whole world-view of a culture, is a fundamental feature of who and what we are. Each member of a culture has acquired an individual identity through a process which is intrinsically bound up with the *teacher-learner* relationship. Though the culture may entertain the belief that its practices do not change, each individual comes to experience the world and himself as the result of a process of development which has a *narrative structure*. In short, our human consciousness is essentially constituted by having a memory in which we have developed our present state through learning to participate in the world of the culture. Though this theme cannot be further developed here, if reflected upon, I think this fact does serious damage to any theory attempting to reduce our self-understanding to the functions of a digital computer, at least until computers come to have childhoods.

Communities, like individuals, have memories, that is, history which constitutes a basis for self-identity. One function of traditions is to have such structures available for coming to acquire a human identity. This opens up the dimension of human temporality of the past, which is no mere "past" of prior chronological movements, but prior *dramatic* events which have *led* in narrative fashion to who and where we are today. Likewise, a community has dramatic anticipation of the future. As Kierkegaard said, we live forward even if we think backward, and this is true of our individual nature because of our communal nature. We only come to anticipate the future in a meaningful, dramatic fashion because we have come to appropriate it through possible projected activities and these are available to us because we have *learned* to anticipate the future *symbolically* through the traditions, beliefs, and values of our culture.

The symbols which exercise a central or core significance in a culture's self-interpretation for the future are those ideals which often are accepted with religious conviction. If we take "religious" to denote those meanings which have been taken to secure the identity of the culture, a sacred repetition of those ideals in ritual fashion helps continue to stress them, especially for the newer members of

the community. This is why ritual behavior is often so tied up with the functioning of limited communities and is regarded by its members as a way of "restoring" or reinvigorating the community's well-being. Communities which are not capable of articulating ideals which can continue to integrate human activity and give it a shared sense of purpose and meaning must face the confusion and gradual disintegration to which I have already alluded. I should add that this use of "religious" can apply to "scientific" communities as well as those practicing more traditional forms of religion. Scientific culture is practice carried on in light of certain very well articulated ideals, and it has its own history of self-identification as well as initiatory practices.

Thus, to recapitulate, communities are webs of cultural communication which can symbolically, dramatically, and narratively appropriate the structures of past and future for the sake of transforming the social present into a continuous process of meaning which provides the pervasive sense of fulfillment and purpose which is essential to every human life. The final question which I wish to raise is whether it is possible to have a community based on the ideal of self-critical transformation. Technology has given us a world in which we must experience deep change and in which isolation is virtually impossible. The tribal solution to the problem of human meaning is no longer viable. Nor, I contend, is the mythology of economic divine providence created by classical liberalism adequate to create the stable kinds of human relationships and sense of human fulfillment which are desperately needed to endure.

It is possible, I believe, to see that the ends of technology must always be to serve the possibility of creating the necessary conditions whereby local communities can flourish. That is, we need to be able to have functional, integrated settlements in which communication above and beyond that needed for protection and barter is possible, where stable lives can be planned and in which lives can be directed toward the direct enrichment of the *immediate* social environment. In a tribal community, it is possible to see the direct consequences of one's actions—those who are helped or harmed by one's bravery, theft, and so on. In a faceless crowd society, it becomes much easier to negate those so

affected, one result of which is a sense of the insignificance of one's actions to affect one's environment in any positive manner or in a way which contributes toward self-esteem. Thus one of the primary conditions for the retrieval of a sense of community must be a stress in our educational procedures to make individuals aware of *specific* groups and how individuals are affected by actions of a certain sort. This also involves making our members of a community sophisticated in knowing about the various groups and sub-groups which constitute the human environment. Certainly one of the primary values of ethnic literature is that it develops the ability to exercise our cultural imagination and understanding in communicating with people from groups of different origin than our own. A pluralistic society can have pluralistic communities if it fosters this cultural imagination. Instead of a selfish indifference to others, which is what "toleration" often means today, we need to be actively disposed to listen and understand with those "others" who are also "us." As long as the "other" also wishes to understand us, and is willing to meet social conflict in the spirit of compromise and communication, a sustaining ideal of community can be fostered.

Not only can a community be based upon the ideal of a pluralistic communication of cultures, but it can be based upon the ideal of self-critical transformation. I have already indicated that I think that the institution of scientific inquiry constitutes one such instance. A culture which is founded upon the idea of inquiry and development obviously also requires the skills of active communication rather than mutual indifference. To apply this to the human world would mean stressing in education the importance of human beings articulating to *each other* possibilities of their shared existence. In other words, by trying to reconstruct the present in light of more integrative and fulfilling ideals, we may be able to transform social conflicts into cooperative efforts. This is no guarantee, of course, that some, perhaps most, conflicts will be happily resolved. But a group experiencing conflict which is predisposed and trained to look for solutions which satisfy the needs of the conflicting parties is far more likely to resolve its difference peacefully than a culture in which each side believes that it must only look out for itself.

To conclude, I think that we can and should explore a

theory of the community which stresses the ultimate aim of securing the conditions whereby human beings can lead meaningful lives and that this means, in the contemporary world, exploring the values of a *pluralistic social imagination* and of a *reconstructive intelligence* which aims at an imaginative exploration of inclusive social ends and the means to attain them in order to transform social conflict and technological disruption into active means for the construction of stable communities. Thus, by beginning with thinking about communities, we may be led toward a more fruitful approach to the questions of ethics and general political theory.