

THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNITY

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In this paper I will discuss the problem of creating and maintaining communities in modernity. The motivation for exploring this problem is the recognition that ethical agency is informed by values which are embodied in the institutions and practices of communities. I will draw on work in feminist philosophy and on work by Jürgen Habermas. Feminist scholarship is especially relevant because a central issue has been the investigation of common elements of women's experiences. Work on this issue provides insights into the experiential basis of communities.

In modernity our concrete ways of life are informed by plurality of conflicting traditions. There is not a single clear tradition which is reflected in our practices which might inform choice in an uncontroversial or even controversial way. Furthermore, persons from different parts of a country or the world live together in interacting "communities." New pieces of diverse ways of life reflecting diverse and conflicting traditions and value schemes are continually being incorporated into the pool of meaning and practice from which individuals must act and interact. To further complicate matters, concrete patterns of living and socializing children are dramatically and rapidly changing as married women with small children enter the workforce in increasing numbers.¹ Thus, appeals to "traditional wisdom" and "traditional ways of life" are becoming increasingly unintelligible and romantic. All of this suggests that it is almost meaningless to refer to a body of concrete practices as the basis for community and agency. To whom does the phrase "members of a community" refer and for how long? This question and the above comments underscore the problem of agency. In a rapidly changing world it is increasingly difficult to find a coherent backdrop of meaning to refer to in the making and justifying of ethical decisions.

The minimal requirement for community is the sharing of experience, values or problems. We generally think of a community in terms of geographical proximity. Persons who interact on a regular basis tend to come to share those elements necessary for a sense of community. However,

geographical proximity need not provide an experiential basis for community in the contemporary Western world. The mobility of contemporary persons and the likelihood that neighbors do not know one another suggests that geographical proximity is not a good indicator of community. Members of a geographical community may find themselves with little in common as regards what they would claim as their historical tradition and lifestyle. However, members of diverse geographical communities who would not consider themselves as sharing a historical tradition or way of life might, in some situations, identify themselves as belonging to the same community. An example of this last description is the coalition of women and men who consider themselves members of the pro-choice "community." It might make very little sense to claim that some members of the pro-choice movement share a tradition or way of life. Nevertheless, they share a common goal and concern. They might well recognize themselves as members of a single community *galvanized around this issue*. These considerations indicate the need for a rethinking of the conception of what a community is in the contemporary world and what other elements might provide the basis for community in the modern world.

Once we abandon geographical proximity as the basis of community, many other possible bases for community are apparent. Feminist scholarship into the common experiences of women provides grounds for considering women as an existing or potential community. Feminists point out that most women have shared the experience of motherhood or the experience of the possibility of motherhood. Even those women who are biologically incapable of motherhood or who do not become mothers for other reasons have been impacted by the association of womanhood and motherhood.

While the association of motherhood and womanhood might seem to provide the basis for the sharing of values which might inform ethical agency, the disagreements about the issue of motherhood even within feminist scholarship suggest how difficult it may be to develop and sustain communities even where there is shared experience. Indeed, issues concerning motherhood are paradigmatic of these problems. Consider the following range of attitudes about motherhood. Some feminists claim that motherhood ought to

be boycotted entirely as a protest against inequality in gender roles which crystallize around childbirth and parenting.² This claim might be defended by appeal to the liberal tradition which supports claims to equality, and as part of the tradition of the political practice of boycott which establishes ties between reproductive workers, that is, mothers, and other oppressed workers. This argument clearly seeks to construct motherhood as a kind of work and thus include mothers in the community of workers. The delimiting of the community of workers in this way suggests that the formation of community is inherently involved in self-identification and in the legitimizing of appeals to values in ethical arguments. Such an argument can have social effects only if the implied community is in fact accepted widely as a legitimate community. That this construction is out of step with the popular conception of motherhood is suggested by the humor evoked by the image of Teamsters striking in solidarity with mothers disgruntled over long working hours.

The complexity of the disagreement in feminist scholarship concerning motherhood is evidenced in the disagreement over the very appeal to the liberal conception of equality. Some feminists claim that appeals to equality should be rejected or subjected to criticism because they mask forms of domination. The argument is that the claimants wish to be equal with only a very narrow range of the population: white, upper-middle class men.³ Notice that this argument does not strictly reject the value of equality, but indicates the questions of racism and classism should not be separated from questions concerning the economic and social equality of men and women. Again, the issue of community and one's self-identification with a community are raised here. Is my community the community of those who share my race and class aspirations?

I would like to introduce work by Jürgen Habermas and Alasdair MacIntyre into the discussion. Both thinkers provide diagnoses of the causes of the problems of modern agency which involve consideration of modern forms of community. MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment project "of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed; and from henceforward the morality of our predecessor culture—and subsequently our own—lacked any public, shared

rationale or justification."⁴ In the new modern forms of social organization, the self is separated from modes of thought and practice which could provide a shared background and foundation for moral discourse and action. Since MacIntyre associates modernity with the Enlightenment and debilitating forms of social organization, he rejects modernity. From the point of view of Habermas, MacIntyre has only described the crisis initiated by modern decentering and disenchantment. What MacIntyre does not recognize is that the potential for coherent agency in modernity still exists. Modernity is not itself an insurmountable obstacle to agency. However, Habermas argues that as the background consensus provided by shared tradition disintegrates, collective decisions will be made either by a consensus achieved by the participants in something approximating the ideal speech situation or, alternatively, by money or power. I would like to provide a brief explanation of the notion of the ideal speech situation before continuing the discussion.

There is no point in engaging in argumentation or discourse, if one does not assume that the best reasons win the day. It is presupposed in any instance of argumentation that the presentation and effect of good reasons will not be distorted, excluded or repressed.⁵ The ideal speech situation is that situation in which this presupposition is met. Any instance of actual discourse can be criticized in terms of its deviation from the ideal speech situation. Since what will count as a good reason cannot be prejudged, one implication of the notion of the ideal speech situation is that all competent communicators be allowed to take part in discourse.⁶

I would like to clarify two alternative proposals for establishing conditions for coherent agency which are indicated in the above discussion: (1) It is suggested that coherent agency requires a community defined in terms of a shared concrete life situation, for example, lifestyle practices or economic status, and/or a tradition. (2) It is suggested that a community may be made up of members who do not share a lifestyle or a tradition, but instead share a procedure for arriving at collective decisions which impact members of the community. The community is thus defined as all those members who might participate in decisions which could affect any of the members. What is shared in this community is an

orientation to the ideal speech situation as the norm by which decision-making occurs. These alternatives seem to present a dichotomy. The first alternative suggests the necessity for a totalized society as the condition for coherent agency and may be recognized as a caricature of MacIntyre's position; the second alternative lacks a robust sense of the impact of concrete practices and tradition and may be recognized as a caricature of Habermas's position. I argue that these alternatives present a false dichotomy.

It may be useful to recall why we would like to identify communities. Membership in a community provides members the condition for coherent agency. Thus, our standpoint is that of those confronted by ethical decision situations. I would like to demonstrate that from this standpoint the alternatives described above emerge as existing in a dialectical relationship. Let me turn to the example of an employee caught in an ethical dilemma because of her employer's order to illegally dispose of toxic waste. The employee's dilemma can be described as resulting precisely from participation in several different ethical communities at once. As a member of a family of which she is the sole wage-earner, she has the obligation of support of her family. As a member of a geographical region, she is a member of the ethical community of those who might impact the physical environment of one another and thus be directly or indirectly responsible for another's health. This is a community of reciprocal responsibility. The key to "solving" this personal *moral* dilemma is to redraw it as an intercommunity *ethical* dilemma.⁸ In this case, the key is to reconstruct it in terms of a community which has not yet been mentioned. The employee's individual moral dilemma needs to be recast as a problem suffered by a group of workers, all of whom have been placed in this situation or may potentially be placed in this situation. This group is the group of workers who may have their employment threatened if they refuse to perform some task which they perceive to be illegal or contrary to the common good. The intrusion of money and power is apparent here. The group I am referring to here may be called 'whistle-blowers' or 'potential whistle-blowers'. Recognition of this commonality might be used to organize action to resolve this problem. The resolution of this dilemma might be determined

to include legislation to protect whistle-blowers and a nationwide policy which makes it easier for companies to dispose of toxic waste properly. We might well call potential whistle-blowers a community because of their sharing of a problem situation. It is by consciously recognizing this community that its members can take the first steps toward resolution of the ethical problem. In their efforts toward resolution, they will need to recognize and bring to consciousness their relationships with other communities, for example, the community of all those who might be harmed by improper disposal of toxic waste.

The first step to a real resolution of this employee's personal dilemma is to recognize that it is *not* a personal dilemma. The problem is a product of inadequate social structures and unequal relationships to money and power. The ideal speech situation can here be invoked counterfactually to expose the inequities which exist between employee, employer and the community of environmental reciprocal responsibility. If all of these persons had equal access to voicing their interests and positions in regard to this matter, then the problems might be reconstructed so that they might be dealt with and the moral/ethical dilemma resolved. This discussion illustrates the dialectical relationship of the two definitions of a community in the following way. There must be some basis in terms of concrete practice in order for a community to exist, but in a setting in which such communities collide and such a collision produces ethical problems, an *ethical* resolution can only be the result of a practice which can be criticized in terms of its deviation from the ideal speech situation.

Habermas's work suggests a discourse ethics which is useful precisely because it can enable the reinterpretation of moral problems which present themselves as the problems of isolated individuals. Critique in terms of the ideal speech situation enables the removal of distortions which impede the recognition by persons that in fact they are members of a community. Thus, a discourse ethics draws attention to the need to attend to the level of language, in particular, the way in which problems are described. Nancy Fraser describes this feature of a discourse ethics in a useful way.

Thus, a discourse ethic permits the thematization and critique of interpretations of needs, of definitions of situations and of the social conditions of dialogue, instead of establishing a privileged model of moral deliberation which effectively shields such matters from scrutiny.⁹

A discourse ethic indicates a way of understanding autonomy which recognizes both that individuals belong to concrete communities and that an individual is not simply a product of his or her community, but is also a set of competencies which enable him or her to acquire a distance from particular communities. Given that individuals encounter problems and act in particular situations, the notion of autonomy must accommodate the particularity of individuals' settings. Furthermore, as we have seen above, resolution of problems may well require that an individual come to a new understanding of what communities he or she belongs to and may require participation with the other members of those communities in reformulating the definition of the problem situation. Furthermore, such recognition and reformulation may be itself the condition for coherent action. The process of removing distortions which impede resolution of ethical problems is not a process for individuals to accomplish on their own. By engaging with others in consensual problem resolution, participants rework their self-conceptions in such a way that problems can be seen in ways that may suggest new forms of community, new community alignments, solidarities and action possibilities. Thus, *self-determination* must include the engagement of others. Fraser suggests a meaning for autonomy which resounds these considerations.

. . . to be autonomous here would mean to be a member of a group or groups which have achieved a means of interpretation and communication sufficient to enable one to participate on a par with members of other groups in moral and political deliberation; that is, to speak and be heard, to tell one's own life-story, to press one's claims and point of view in one's own voice.¹⁰

Two problems face anyone who goes hunting for commonalities which could be the basis of communities. One is that pseudo-communities may be described which in fact mask important differences. An example of such an occurrence was the practice in some feminist writing, especially in the 1960's and 1970's, to refer to "women's oppression" and explore the common experiences of women without attending to the experiential and objective impact of race and class differences.

While it is evident that many women suffer from sexist tyranny, there is little indication that this forges "a common bond among all women." There is much evidence substantiating the reality that race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that take precedence over the common experience women share—differences which are rarely transcended.¹¹

The construction of the object 'women' has been severely criticized by some women of color as classist and racist because "the women's movement" in the 60's and 70's was really the expression of middle and upper-middle class white women who took it upon themselves to generalize from their experiences to the experience of women who were not included nor consulted. Furthermore, such generalizing participates in the strategy of falsely universalizing your own case. This strategy has the double effect of bolstering your case by cloaking it in the greater legitimacy that broadening one's base achieves, *and* silencing and excluding those standpoints that one pretends to include, but may in fact be divergent and even counter to the articulated aims.

It was a mark of race and class privilege, as well as the expression of freedom from the many constraints sexism places on working class women, that middle class white women were able to make their interests the primary focus of the feminist movement and employ a rhetoric of commonality that made their condition synonymous with "oppression." Who was there to demand a change in vocabulary? What other

group of women in the United States had the same access to universities, publishing houses, mass media, money?¹²

Notice that the middle class white women of the 60's and 70's who dominated feminist discourse *had access to the means of defining their situation as they chose*. That access itself was a mark of privilege, not oppression, in comparison to the inability of poor women and women of color to gain access to means of defining their situation as they saw it and pursuing their own goals. What is most important to notice here is that the appeal to a pseudo-commonality participated in a practice which was exclusionary because it masked a difference in aims which could not be tolerated. One of the differences I am referring to here is that while middle class white women were campaigning for wage work, poor women and women of color were eager to escape from wage work. This difference can be articulated in terms of class and the access to different kinds of wage work which class differences entail. Middle class white women wanted wage work because the kind of work they could get was interesting and paid well. Poor women had access only to work which was demeaning, exhausting and poorly paid. So an immediate point of disagreement concerned the issue of wage work itself. While the issues of class and race were suppressed by an over-zealous appeal to gender only, it was impossible to thematize this difference and devise a common strategy to confront it. Furthermore, it was not in the interest of the "feminists" to confront this issue because in fact their aims were aims which reflected their class. Of course, I am not claiming that individual women had anything but the best intentions, and I am aware of my own generalizations in telling this story. Nevertheless, an important lesson can be gleaned from this tale and is currently being incorporated into the feminist movement: beware of claims of commonality, as they often mask class and race interest. Elaboration of the lesson: well-intentioned efforts to construct or reconstruct communities or traditions need to be sensitive to the possibility of unintentionally participating in exclusionary practices. The norm of the ideal speech situation can be useful as a tool of critique. The exclusion of poor women and women of color in the "women's movement" can be criticized in terms

of the ideal speech situation. hooks obviously did not require this tool to perform her critique, but if we are to avoid rediscovering the wheel in each situation, critical tools are necessary.

The first problem is the problem of avoiding pseudo-commonalities. The second problem is related, but may be articulated more precisely as the fear of difference. It is well expressed in a recent essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Constructive multiculturalism draws ideas, customs, and historical contributions from all our variegated groups and heritages into a unified curriculum that everyone studies. Properly done, this produces educational content as rich and full—and evolving—as the heterogeneous society we inhabit. It shows the differences but emphasizes the commonalities—the ideas, institutions, and norms that we share, whatever the color of our skins or birthplace of our grandparents.¹³

The author expresses the evaluation that a good course on multiculturalism would be one which stressed commonality, not difference. What would happen if we stressed difference?

Destructive multicultural education yields a hundred different curricula, each designed to tell the members of a particular group about themselves, their ancestors, their unique qualities, how superior they are, how oppressed they have been, and how suspicious they should be of people unlike themselves.¹⁴

Stressing difference might produce persons who are suspicious of one another and, Finn suggests, might even lead eventually to conditions similar to those in countries like Lebanon, Iran, Northern Ireland, "and other lands where tribalism is strong."¹⁵ Finn expresses well the concern that what our society does *not* need is an inflaming of the consciousness of difference. What we need is to focus away from difference and toward our commonalities. My response to

this often-stated concern is that if differences exist which shape experience and opportunity, then to suggest deemphasizing these differences is to render difference invisible at a time when it needs to be uncovered, not covered over.¹⁶

Of particular concern is Finn's claim that we ought to emphasize "the commonalities—the ideas, institutions, and norms that we share, whatever the color of our skins or birthplace of our grandparents." That sentiment sounds noble, but Finn refrains from telling us exactly what those common ideas, institutions and norms are which we all share. Here it is clear that the fear of difference is intimately linked to the construction of pseudo-commonalities. I assume that Finn means by "we" anyone who might attend a college in the United States or teach at one, since he is discussing curriculum reform. Finn assumes that "we" have common ideas, institutions and norms, *but it is just this assumption which is challenged by investigation into multiculturalism*. Finn's fears have led him to the strategy of remaining ignorant and encouraging others to render difference invisible. Are those fears well-founded?

An agent cannot act coherently if he or she is mystified about his or her own experience. Many persons interpret their experience as a function of their own personality quirks, when, in fact, that experience is a function of the group to which that individual belongs or is perceived to belong to. Only when individuals come to understand their experience in terms of the group identity which shapes that experience, can they usefully understand and coherently respond to it. What is interesting here is that suppression of the recognition of difference impedes the discovery that one is a member of a group with experiences and objectives in common. While one's experience is mystified by suppression of difference, that experience adds to a feeling of separateness which participation in pseudo-communities cannot entirely suppress. Recognition of difference, in a pluralistic society, is the true basis of real communities. If the suppression of the recognition of difference enables discrimination, prejudice and inequality of opportunity, then it cannot be supported. Recognition of difference can be an opportunity for persons who are members of very different groups to use that recognition to

stop assuming that they understand one another. This can be the basis for an effort to be open to the experience of the other for the first time. Such openness can be an opportunity, not for annihilation of difference, but for the coordination of action, communication and mutual redefinition. Once such an opening is developed, the possibility for ethical, collective action exists despite dramatic and continuing differences.

Once difference is no longer suppressed, a discourse ethic is possible which can be the basis of coherent individual and collective action. This possibility is premised on the recognition of group membership and the ability of the group and the individuals who belong to the group to communicate their standpoint successfully on a par with other groups.

NOTES

¹ Edward L. Kain, *The Myth of Family Decline* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 97–99.

² Jeffner Allen, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," in *Women and Values: Readings in Recent Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1986), 91–101.

³ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 17–31.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 50.

⁵ Thomas McCarthy, "Translator's Introduction," in *Legitimation Crisis*, Jürgen Habermas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), xvi.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on Philosophical Justification," in *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 86.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "A Philosophico-Political Profile," *New Left Review* 151 (1985): 101–2.

⁸I am invoking Hegel's distinction between the moral and the ethical here. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁹Nancy Fraser, "Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity," *Praxis International* 5, no. 4 (January 1986): 426.

¹⁰Fraser, 428.

¹¹Hooks, 4.

¹²Hooks, 6.

¹³Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Why Can't Colleges Convey Our Diverse Culture's Unifying Themes?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 13, 1990): A40.

¹⁴Finn, A40.

¹⁵Finn, A40.

¹⁶See Paula Rothenberg's excellent article, "The Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction of Difference," *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 42-57.