

TOWARD A DISCOURSE ETHIC OF SOLIDARITY

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I approach Seyla Benhabib's paper as someone with a longstanding interest in Habermas and in the possible implications of a "discourse ethic" for the collective, political struggles of social movements, including but not limited to the feminist movement. Let me introduce my comments by explaining very generally how I understand these implications.

Suppose it were the case that dominant groups within society – here I include class and race dominance as well as gender dominance – had a privileged relation to what I shall call "the socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication." By socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication I mean things like: the officially recognized vocabularies in which one can press claims; the idioms available for interpreting and communicating one's needs; the established narrative conventions available for constructing the individual and collective histories which are constitutive of social identity; the paradigms of argumentation accepted as authoritative in adjudicating conflicting claims; the ways in which various discourses constitute their respective subject matters as specific sorts of objects; the repertory of available rhetorical devices; the bodily and gestural dimensions of speech which are associated in a given society with authority and conviction. Suppose it were the case that by and large such socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication expressed the point of view of dominant groups in society. Suppose that they were especially well-suited for giving voice to the experience, claims, interests and self-interpretations of members of such groups. Thus, for example, Nancy Hartsock, Virginia Held, Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding and Seyla Benhabib have argued that the dominant moral and political vocabularies we have inherited articulate what Hartsock calls "the standpoint of exchange." That is, these vocabularies generally constitute people as rational, self-interested monads who transact with one another in transient, utility-maximizing encounters. It seems plausible that this standpoint reflects the experience and point of view of white European or European-descended male bourgeois property owners. A moral or political vocabulary which articulates this standpoint would hardly be able to give easy voice to experiences and relationships involving ongoing dependency, such as mother-child relations in the modern restricted nuclear family. Nor would it work well for experiences and forms of connectedness in more extended networks of community and solidarity, such as in subcultures of subordinated racial and ethnic groups. Thus, in sexist, racist and class societies, women, persons of color, the poor and other dominated persons would have a disadvantaged position with respect to the socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication. They would be structurally hindered from

participating on a par with members of dominant groups in processes of communicative interaction. Unless they were to contest this situation and organize to win a greater measure of collective control over the means of interpretation and communication, it would appear that members of subordinated groups would have only two options: they could either adopt the dominant point of view and see their own experiences repressed and distorted; or they could develop idiolects capable of voicing their experience and see these marginalized, disqualified and excluded from the central discursive institutions and arenas of society. Or they could do both at once.

As I see it, then, the potential advantage of a discourse or dialogical ethic over what Benhabib has called a “universalist-formal” or monological ethic consists in the fact that the former, but not the latter, can allow for the situation I have been describing. That is, a discourse ethic could take into account that dominant and subordinated groups stand in different and unequal relations to the means of interpretation and communication. It could do this by maintaining a kind of suspicion or distance from any given vocabulary for interpreting needs, defining situations and pressing claims. It could keep open the possibility that it could come to pass that biases might become apparent in even what have been thought to be relatively neutral forms of discourse; that such forms could themselves become stakes in political deliberation; that subordinated groups could contest such forms and propose alternatives, and thereby gain a greater measure of collective control over the means of interpretation and communication. This, I take it, is the *political* point of Benhabib’s arguments for the superiority of a discourse ethic over Rawls and Kohlberg. The former allows for the possibility that social divisions may run so deep as to permeate even the means of discourse themselves. 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.

Given this general perspective of sympathy with the project of a discourse or dialogical ethic, I find Benhabib’s attempt to connect it to Carol Gilligan’s work extremely important and interesting. I am especially intrigued by Benhabib’s attempt to appropriate arguments for it for a justification of Gilligan’s model of postconventional contextual moral reasoning and a new nonrepressive concept of moral and ego autonomy. On the other hand, I either have not understood or am not fully persuaded by the precise way in which Benhabib makes these connections.

As I understand her, Benhabib argues that in order to meet its own criteria of universalizability and reversibility, “universalist-formal moral theory” must abandon the monological model of moral deliberation in favor of a dialogical model. Moreover, it must also abandon the standpoint of the generalized other in favor of the standpoint of the concrete other. Thus, the discourse ethic is seen as the “truth” (in Hegel’s sense) of universalist-formal moral theory. That is, it fulfills the latter’s aims and resolves the latter’s paradoxes and aporias. I presume that this entails that a discourse ethic can and should replace the latter; that it can and should handle the questions

concerning political, collective institutions which Rawls handles, as *well as* the questions which Benhabib claims he does not. On the other hand, Benhabib's account of the *content* of the standpoint of the concrete other – *as* opposed to her account of its dialogical form – is presented in terms drawn largely from intimate relationships, and thus does not on the surface seem adequate for political contexts in which relationships are not intimate. So I am not clear how she gets from her arguments for the discourse-dialogical model of moral deliberation to a defense of the standpoint of the concrete other in the precise form in which she elaborates it, namely, as an ethic of care.

As I read her, the connecting link is the concept of the “relational-interactive model of identity.” I want to look briefly at that concept and to sketch an alternative account of the content of the standpoint of the concrete other and an alternative concept of autonomy. I shall claim that these alternatives may be more useful in thinking about a feminist *political* ethic than the ones Benhabib has proposed.

Benhabib presents what she calls a relational-interactive model of identity. I do not mean to refer here to an empirical experience of oneself as connected in a web of relationships or as having permeable ego boundaries. I mean rather a general theoretical account of the concept of identity which applies to both sexes. Benhabib endorses a concept of identity in which one's emotional constitution, needs, motivations and desires are not simply private, inner and individual; but are rather intertwined with the history and culture of the collectivity in relation to which one individuates. For example, one's needs are interpreted in light of the available vocabularies elaborated within the collectivity. Similarly, the self is not a thing or substrate, but rather the protagonist of a life-story which must be constructed from the culturally specific narrative resources available within the collectivity. What strikes me as very important and right about this view is the careful tension and balance it maintains between individual and collective identity.

Now I want to suggest that in elaborating the ethical and interactive *content* (as opposed to the dialogical form) of the standpoint of the concrete other, there are two possibilities. One of these focalizes the dimension of individuality in the relational theory of identity, while the other focalizes the dimension of collectivity. As I read it, Benhabib's account of the ethical and interactive content of the standpoint of the concrete other focalizes the dimension of individuality. Thus, she emphasizes that in adopting this standpoint one attends to the specificity of a unique individual, with a unique affective-emotional constitution and life history. Similarly, she stresses that the moral demand which arises when one adopts this standpoint is the demand for confirmation of one's individuality. Likewise, she stresses that the norms and feelings which govern interactions undertaken from this standpoint are those of love, care and friendship, and she designates these as (usually) private, noninstitutional norms and feelings. From now on, I am going to call this elaboration of the content of the standpoint of the concrete other “the standpoint of the *individualized concrete other*.”

I want to contrast the standpoint of the individualized concrete other with another possibility which focalizes the collective dimension of the relational

concept of identity. I shall call this version “the standpoint of the *collective concrete other*.” Here the stress is on the specificity of a collectivity: on the specificity of the vocabularies available to individuals and groups for the interpretation of their needs and for the definitions of situations in which they encounter one another. The stress is on the cultural specificity of the narrative resources available to individuals and groups for the construction of individual life-stories or group identities and solidarities. I hope it is clear that the stress on shared cultural vocabularies and narrative forms (as opposed to individual uniqueness) is not a return to the standpoint of the generalized other. There is no question here of orientation to some putative universal, atemporal, aspatial, acultural humanity. There is no bracketing of specificity, nor any exclusion of needs, motivations and desires. There is no projection of one’s own perspective onto the place where another should be. There is dialogic interaction with actual others, although these are encountered less as unique individuals than as members of groups or collectivities with culturally specific identities, solidarities and forms of life. In short, the standpoint of the collective concrete other is contextual and hermeneutical, not “formal-universalist.” It is flexible and nonrepressive with respect to emotions. And it acknowledges connectedness to specific human groups, though these are not restricted to intimate ones comprising family, lovers and friends.

If the elaboration of the standpoint of the individual concrete other eventuates in an ethic of care and responsibility, then perhaps the elaboration of the standpoint of the collective concrete other leads to an *ethic of solidarity*. As I envision it, this standpoint would require one to relate to people as members of collectivities or social groups with specific cultures, histories, social practices, values, habits, forms of life, vocabularies of self-interpretation and narrative traditions. Here one would abstract *both* from unique individuality *and* from universal humanity to focalize the intermediate zone of group identity. The most general ethical force of this orientation would be something like this: we owe each other behavior such that each is confirmed as a being with specific collective identifications and solidarities. The norms governing these interactions would be neither norms of intimacy such as love and care, nor those of formal institutions such as rights and entitlements. Rather they would be norms of collective solidarities as expressed in shared but non-universal social practices. The privileged moral feeling would be neither dignity nor love, but social solidarity. Finally, and most important, to be autonomous here would mean to be a member of a group or groups which have achieved a degree of collective control over the 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.

I claim that such an ethic of solidarity is superior to an ethic of care as a *political* ethic. It is the sort of ethic which is attuned to the contestatory activities of social movements struggling to forge narrative resources and vocabularies adequate to the expression of their self-interpreted needs. It is attuned also to collective struggles to deconstruct narrative forms and

vocabularies of dominant groups and collectivities so as to show these are partial rather than genuinely shared and are incapable of giving voice to the needs and hopes of subordinated groups. In short, an ethic of solidarity elaborated from the standpoint of the collective concrete other is more appropriate than an ethic of care for a feminist ethic, if we think of a feminist ethic as the ethic of a social and political movement.

But here I do not see how I can avoid the conclusion that it is just as appropriate as a political ethic for movements of lesbians, gays, blacks, hispanics, other peoples of color and subordinated classes. In fact, it seems to me that when one develops the standpoint of the concrete other in this more collective dimension, as I believe one should, then the sense that it is tied specifically to women becomes attenuated. Or rather, women's specificity enters at a different level. It enters at the level of the concrete forms of solidarity among women which *may* develop *if* we are successful in building a movement inclusive of women of many different cultural, ethnic and class identities, a movement which, through dialogue and collective struggle, forges new vocabularies and narrative forms capable of giving voice to many different kinds of women. I think we need frankly to admit that such a specifically women's solidarity exists only in the most incipient, let us say prefigurative, form today. And its further and full flowering is by no means assured. It is a specific solidarity which must be achieved politically, not one that is simply given. In a society as complex as ours, it does not seem to me wise or even possible to extrapolate the specific content of such a solidarity from the current, prepoliticized experiences and idiolects of women, especially since it is likely, in my view, that these will turn out to be the current prepoliticized experiences and idiolects only *of some* women.*

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See also: Solidarity, by Andy Blunden