

Caring as an Undemocratic Virtue

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In what follows, I raise four objections to Maughn Gregory's analyses and conclusions. I do so in the spirit of collaborative inquiry and in sympathy with his concern for the rights of public school students. I hope to show that, not only does Gregory fail to demonstrate that the principle of nonintervention requires public schools to refrain from promoting the ethic of care, his own analysis of democratic dispositions suggests that an active concern for others in their particularity is a necessary corollary of the liberal commitment to personal liberty.

BEHAVIORS, ACTIONS, AND VIRTUES

My first objection concerns Gregory's characterization of virtues as behavioral dispositions. My objection turns upon my understanding of what distinguishes a behavior from an action and what makes a virtue a virtue. In my terms, *behaviors* can be described by an external observer without reference to anyone's particular intentions or convictions, whereas *actions* cannot be characterized independently of an agent's objectives and background beliefs. For example, shaking hands is a behavior. That specific behavior could represent many different actions, such as extending a welcome, sealing a contract, or concluding an interview.

Precisely because the same behavior can represent very different actions, we can never arrive at a strictly behaviorist account of a virtue. That is to say, we can only characterize actions and not behaviors as virtuous, because to be virtuous is to act with the right motivation and for the right reasons. Consider, for example, how Aristotle describes liberality, the virtue of spending or giving money in ways that avoid prodigality and miserliness.

Virtuous actions are fine, and are done for a fine end; so the liberal man too will give with a fine end in view, and in the right way; because he will give to the right people, and the right amounts, and at the right time, and will observe all the other conditions that accompany right giving. And he will have pleasure, or at least no pain, in doing this; because a virtuous act is pleasant, or painless, but certainly not painful. The man who gives to the wrong people, or not for a fine end but for some other reason, must be called not liberal but some other name; and so must the man whom it hurts to give, because he would rather keep his money than do a fine deed, and that is not the way of the liberal man.¹

If virtues are understood in this way, then we cannot judge from behaviors alone whether or not people are genuinely caring or genuinely committed to democratic principles.

Aristotle's is not, of course, the only account of the virtues. But surely a virtue is more than simply a habitual tendency to exhibit certain behaviors.² If so, then any comparison between caring and democratic virtues in strictly behaviorist terms is suspect — even if we agree that both Carol Gilligan's ethic of care and democracy are properly interpreted as virtue ethics, which itself is questionable. In short, my first objection is that Gregory provides no answer to the important question: In what sense is care a *virtue*?

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MORALITIES

To my first objection, Gregory might reply that, whether described in terms of behaviors or actions, caring virtues still constitute a private morality with no place in public schools. This brings me to my second objection, which concerns the public-private distinction. Following Richard Rorty, Gregory defines a public morality as “the way one justifies using social power to coerce others.” In other words, public moralities are sets of moral values and associated beliefs that defend norms and procedures enforced by a state. Private moralities, in contrast, are sets of moral values and associated beliefs that define the “visions of perfection” and other goals that people freely pursue as “individuals, clubs, congregations, or entire cultures,” but *not* as citizens.

Now, it seems fair to characterize liberalism as the tradition that justifies political norms and procedures with reference to individual liberty as the primary moral value. Liberalism designates personal freedom as a public moral value while considering other goods as private on the basis of a number of substantive empirical and normative commitments. For example, in Gregory’s account, both Rorty and John Dewey appear to embrace the principle of political nonintervention because both take individual self-realization to be the purpose of social life and both recognize no authoritative standard for self-realization. My point here is to remind us that there is nothing about the particular moral values of liberalism that automatically qualifies them as public, and nothing about the particular moral values of other political, cultural, or religious traditions that automatically qualifies them as private. Against liberalism, members of competing political, cultural, or religious traditions would argue on the basis of rival empirical and normative commitments that other sets of moral values than those of personal liberty should take priority in public policy.

A related point is that there is no necessary connection between liberalism as a moral and political tradition and democratic systems of government: Liberal states need not be democracies, and democracies need not be liberal.³ Liberal democracies are *not* neutral with respect either to competing public moralities or to competing views of democracy. My second objection to Gregory’s analysis, then, is that he often says *democracy* when he is referring to *liberal democracy*, as if we should take liberal moral values and associated interpretations of democracy for granted. If Gregory wishes to demonstrate that public schools should refrain from promoting the ethic of care, then he must show not only that such restraint is necessary to preserve the liberal value of nonintervention, but also that the moral values of liberalism are the ones we should apply to public education. I see no reason to assume that, when their implications are in conflict, liberalism should inspire revisions to the ethic of care rather than the reverse.

GILLIGAN’S ETHIC OF CARE

Gregory might respond to my second objection by presenting a more qualified, conditional argument: if you are committed to liberal democracy — specifically, its principle of nonintervention, and its associated distinction between public and private moralities — then you must object to public schools promoting the ethic of

care. The basis of his argument would be that, from the liberal point of view, programs promoting “altruism, sacrifice, compassion, and love” clearly represent private visions of perfection. My third objection is that Gregory provides little evidence that Gilligan’s ethic of care requires or even recommends these ideals, which are more easily associated with Christian characterizations of *agapé*. In his own analysis of Gilligan’s ethic, Gregory cites her as rejecting the opposition between selfishness and selflessness, and as calling for a balance between “the conflicting claims of ‘compassion and autonomy.’” Perhaps most significantly, Gregory states that to be caring does *not* entail that we achieve solidarity with others, only that we try. On his own account, then, what the ethic of care requires and supports is not a universal solidarity of conscience and private purposes, but the disposition to choose persuasion over force — the very democratic virtue of non-interference that Gregory wishes to preserve. A commitment to liberal democracy provides no grounds for excluding the ethic of care from public schools, because helping students become willing and able to attempt solidarity no more violates liberal neutrality than does helping students become willing and able to participate in projects of Deweyan social cooperation.

FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY, AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To my third objection, Gregory might reply that advocates of *some* ethics of care *do* advocate solidarity as a public virtue. My fourth objection is that Gregory provides no indication of the extent or the nature of these educational initiatives. I suspect there are much more serious threats to the rights and freedoms of public school children than programs promoting sympathy, altruism, sacrifice, and love. In saying this, I am assuming that the advocates to whom Gregory refers are engaged in education, not indoctrination. I would join him in opposing the imposition of moral values, whether inside or outside public schools. At the same time, I do not believe that the thought of schools promoting sympathy and compassion should cause us to lose much sleep, so long as no coercion is involved. I think we should be much more concerned with systemic discrimination in schools based upon socially constructed differences such as race, class, and gender; with the negative effects of corporate advertising in schools desperate for resources due to chronic under-funding; and with threats to the emotional and physical safety of students arising from our culture of violence and from lack of proper sex education in school curricula. In its distance from the economic and political context of public schooling, Gregory’s opposition to the ethics of care in the name of value-neutrality appears to resemble the over-emphasis upon abstract principles of justice that the ethic of care is intended to redress.

CARING, SOLIDARITY, AND JUSTICE

To conclude, I want to recall Gregory’s remark that “to notice coercion and object to it” is a democratic disposition. I would agree that commitment to the moral value of individual liberty is also a commitment to oppose injustice, discrimination, and oppression. I would also agree that opposing injustice requires a willingness to care. Gregory cites Judith N. Shklar on this very point: “The difference between misfortune and injustice frequently involves our willingness and our capacity to act

or not to act on behalf of the victims, to blame or absolve, to help, mitigate, and compensate, or to just turn away.” Finally, I would agree that our willingness to care for others sufficiently to act on their behalf is enhanced by solidarity: “the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.” Contrary to his conclusion, then, I think Gregory himself provides good reasons for considering solidarity a liberal democratic ideal. I suspect his opposition to promoting solidarity in public schools rests on the assumption that, where liberal democracy becomes a public morality, its ideals will be enforced by the power of the state. This does not follow, however, because public institutions can celebrate democratic ideals such as solidarity and social cooperation while leaving us free to pursue them or not. To minimize the chances that coercive forms of moral education will be justified in the name of caring or democracy, we might observe that excellences of character, both moral and intellectual, are interdependent. On this view, solidarity without tolerance is not a genuine virtue, either of liberal democracy or the ethic of care.

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1120a20-30.

2. For example, I find it odd to think that people paying attention to my needs and interests are exhibiting a *caring* virtue independently of their motivation. Surely it makes a difference whether they have my well-being in mind or simply want to understand how they might sell me a vacuum cleaner, life insurance policy, or political ideology.

3. C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1-22.