

Actions, Consequences, and Community Boundaries¹

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In his engaging and provocative paper, John Covaleskie draws our attention to the question of how moral communities that value tolerance ought to respond when members of their own community commit an intolerable act. I am grateful for Covaleskie's emphasis on moral communities, instead of the more common focus on individual moral development, agency, virtues, or moral reasoning. In what follows, however, it will become clear that Covaleskie and I hold quite different views on the moral and educative worth of University of Oklahoma President David Boren's response to the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity members who had been filmed participating in racist chants.

ACTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

As Covaleskie recounts, the day after the video became public, Boren issued a statement in which he condemned the SAE fraternity members: "I have a message for you," he said. "You are disgraceful. You have violated all that we stand for. You should not have the privilege of calling yourselves 'Sooners.' Real Sooners are not racist. Real Sooners are not bigots..." and so on.² Boren swiftly expelled Levi Pettit and Parker Rice (the two members of the SAE fraternity who were easily identifiable on the video), disbanded the fraternity chapter, and ejected SAE members from their frat house. Covaleskie characterizes Boren's response as "public moral education," and argues that his actions were "not only justified, they were morally exemplary, and they provide us with an example of moral pedagogy."³

Obviously, as President of the University, Boren's words carry a lot of weight, and while I have no doubt that his intentions were honorable, I worry about the moral message the students and wider community received. Covaleskie describes Boren's words and actions as "an example of public shaming where the purpose is the moral formation of the *rest of the university community*, not the individuals guilty of the offense."⁴ But one cannot simply bracket Pettit and Rice out of the equation as if they were nothing more than object lessons for others. Indeed, what I think Boren's response taught both the students in question and the rest of the community is that when someone commits an intolerable act, they should be expelled from the moral community, permitting those who remain not only to reclaim their former (idealized) sense of community identity, but also to forgo further pedagogical or moral responsibility for the now ex-members.

Don't get me wrong. I do not think racist chants, or the sexist Facebook posts of Dalhousie University dentistry students,⁵ or other discriminatory acts on university campuses, are in any way acceptable or defensible by appeals to the right to free speech. But I also believe that educators and educational leaders have what Randy Curren calls "intergenerational constitutive responsibility," by which he means the formative responsibilities that adults bear for the way children come to be constituted.⁶ Admittedly, the university students in question were not children as such, but they

were students in an educational setting who, *qua* student, I would argue, are owed a moral education that goes beyond expulsion from the community.

On a related note, I am concerned that Boren's actions could have made matters worse rather than better. While reflecting on this situation, I was reminded of a conversation I had, years ago, with my former supervisor, Heesoon Bai. The details aren't important - I think I was cleaning out my office or residence room - but what stuck with me was that, when I casually mentioned I was throwing stuff away, she said, "Where's away?" Indeed. Where is away? When Boren expelled Pettit and Rice from the OU community, it is not as if they just dropped off the face of the earth. They ended up somewhere, and, in the aftermath of a public shaming and expulsion, it is entirely conceivable that they would seek comfort and community with those who would affirm, and potentially even fuel, the racist ideas they had chanted. Thankfully, that is not what happened. Pettit was welcomed into a moral community by Anastasia Pittman (Oklahoma Senator, Chair of the Oklahoma Black Caucus, and OU graduate), who, along with several members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and the pastor and members of a local Baptist church, engaged in conversations with Pettit, which resulted in him coming to see the effects of his actions that night on the bus very differently.⁷ Some weeks after the incident, accompanied by Pittman and others, Pettit issued a public apology for his actions. He explained that he had come to a new and deeper understanding of the harm his words and actions caused, and he pledged to work from then on towards preventing racism. "Meeting with a few people does not change what I did," he acknowledged, "but it has begun to change me."⁸

Admittedly, we have no guarantee that Pettit's apology was sincere, or that his heart and ideas were actually changed by his interactions with Pittman and others. But as Pittman put it: "[W]e have hope for our healing ... We're going to be proactive rather than reactive."⁹ Again, I am not saying that Pettit and Rice's actions were defensible or that they do not need to be held accountable. But, in my view, an important part of moral education is how our community responds when we transgress even the most deeply held community norms, as that response can go a long way toward shaping who we eventually become as individual moral agents and community members.¹⁰ In the space that remains, then, I want to turn to the question of moral communities themselves.

THE BOUNDARIES OF COMMUNITY

Toward the end of his paper, Covalieskie revisits the broader question of how a community ought to respond when one of its members commits an intolerable act. He paraphrases Boren's words - "We are not racists. You obviously are a racist. You are not one of us and you must go. We refuse you membership in this community, and we exile you from it"¹¹ - as one possible response. He then points to restorative justice, Deborah Meier's small schools approach, and Vivian Gussin Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play* as possible alternatives.¹² Covalieskie focuses this part of his discussion on the differences between discipline/rule-based approaches to moral education and community-based approaches, grouping Boren, Paley, and Meier together. But, in my view, the more interesting discussion is about the fundamental

differences between Boren's approach to community-based moral education, on the one hand, and the Paley, Meier, and restorative justice approaches, on the other hand.

I agree with Covaleskie's argument that, in order for a community to be a community, its members must share at least a minimal set of norms and an accompanying conception of what is tolerable and intolerable. In Nel Noddings' words: "A community has to stand for something. 'We' refers to a certain kind of person, a vision of the good life, and a way in which life should be lived."¹³ A key difference, however, is that in exclusive moral communities - such as the "real Sooners" at OU, the Marines, or fundamentalist religions - the ability to say 'we' is contingent, and membership can be revoked. In contrast, inclusive moral communities, such as those based on Noddings' ethic of care, the dialogical philosophies of Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, traditional Indigenous communities, and, we could add, Paley's and Meier's approaches, are grounded in conceptions of fundamental interrelatedness.¹⁴ One's membership in the community cannot be revoked, so transgressions of community norms - including intolerable acts - require a very different response from those in exclusive communities. Within a restorative justice framework, for example, intolerable acts are seen as the result of broken relationships within the community: "it is the responsibility of everyone in that society to bring the person back into a harmonious relationship with him/her 'self,' as well as with the rest of the community."¹⁵ Both kinds of moral community stand for something, but I would argue that it is only inclusive communities that can provide a framework for a pedagogy of welcome.¹⁶

1. I take my title from a chapter in Marion Smiley's *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

2. John Covaleskie, this volume.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. "Dalhousie Suspends 13 Dentistry Students From Clinic Amid Facebook Scandal," *CBC News*, last modified January 5, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/dalhousie-suspends-13-dentistry-students-from-clinic-amid-facebook-scandal-1.2889635>.

6. Randall Curren, "Academic Standards and Constitutive Luck," in eds R. Talise and M. Eckert, *A Teacher's Life: Essays for Steven M. Cahn* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2009), 13-32.

7. Melanie Eversley, "Expelled University of Oklahoma Student Offers Apology," *USA Today*, last modified March 25, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/03/25/levi-pettit-oklahoma-university/70448880/>.

8. Ibid. See also "Parker Rice Apology: 'Yes the Song Was Taught To Us, But That Too Doesn't Work as an Explanation'," *News9.com*, last modified March 11, 2015, <http://www.news9.com/story/28361906/yes-the-song-was-taught-to-us-but-that-too-doesnt-work-as-an-explanation-parker-rice-releases-apology>.

9. Eversley, "Expelled."

10. There is an important distinction between moral and legal culpability and consequences, but constraints of space preclude my taking up that discussion here.

11. Covaleskie, this volume.

12. Ibid.

13. Nel Noddings, "On Community," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 3 (1996): 245-267, 259.

14. Ibid., 261.

15. Melanie Achtenberg, "Understanding Restorative Justice Within the Aboriginal Context," in *Correctional Service of Canada: Forum on Corrections Research* 12, no. 1, <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/research/forum/e121/e121j-eng.shtml>

16. See also Claudia Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2015).