

## THE ONE AND THE MANY IN POLITICS AND EDUCATION

Alven Neiman

*University of Notre Dame*

As I was reading and thinking about Professor Williams' paper, I was reminded of one of the very first philosophy courses I ever took, a survey of Ancient Greek Philosophy. As a budding young epistemologist, I was very interested in Socrates' and Plato's attempts to respond to the various sceptical and proto-Nietzschean relativists found within the Platonic dialogues. I was at that time much less interested in Greek metaphysics, with problems of change and permanence, diversity and unity, the many and the one. Today, however, as a grizzled old pragmatist, I find myself willing and able to look at metaphysics from an anthropological perspective. And from such a perspective, I am tempted to see the problem of the one and the many as central to the debates over community discussed and evoked by Professor Williams. In these remarks I want to use the lens provided by anthropology and metaphysics to express my feelings and raise some questions about community as it is discussed by Williams and those writers with whom she's concerned.

The anthropologist Ernest Becker, in his *The Denial of Death* discusses two 'ontological motives', two primordial urges that exist in creatures that know themselves to be created, i.e. dependent upon powers outside of themselves. On the one hand, every child, according to Becker, instinctively strives "...to be unique, to stand out as something different and apart." On the other, each of us seems compelled, perhaps in response to the feeling of isolation evoked by our striving for uniqueness, to "...identify with the cosmic process, to merge oneself with the rest of nature." For Becker, reconciling these twin motives in the face of our explicit or implicit awareness of our contingency is the basic problem of human life. The problem, in other words, is to allow each of these motives expression that is adequate without engulfing the other.<sup>1</sup>

I am not suggesting that we accept without reservation (i.e. literally) Becker's anthropological metanarrative. Yet it does seem to me that the dialectic of community and difference discussed by Williams, as well as by Lynda Stone in her "Disavowing Community," reflects the anthropological tension stressed by Becker.<sup>2</sup> I found Professor Williams' paper especially valuable for its illumination of Becker's urge for unity and its many rationales. Several manifestations of that urge are crucial to Williams' project. Her paper, first of all, reminded me of my past interest in Hannah Arendt's discussion, in her book *The Human Condition*, of what she calls 'the common world.' Jonathan Schell, in *The Fate of the Earth*, refers to Arendt's conception in order to remind us, in good Burkean fashion, of both our links and our debts to those who precede us and to those who come after us. For Schell, for Arendt, for Burke, for Professor Williams, no man (or woman!) is an island; language, custom and tradition bind us for better or for worse to our parents and to our children. Williams' reference to community in the context of our current ecological crisis reminds me of Schell's use of Arendt's and Burke's 'common world' to emphasize our obligation to pass on a liveable planet to our children and to theirs.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond our links to a shared social world one finds in Williams, as in Schell, a reference to an even deeper level of desire. In the writings of poets of the Romantic school, of our new 'deep ecologists,' of mystics of all persuasions, an even more basic level of community is evoked. Romantic nature, James Lovelock's Gaia principle, the Agape of Meister Eckardt and the Tao of Chuang-Tsu, each of

these marks a unity beneath that found within Arendt's social 'common world.' Even John Dewey, according to Stephen C. Rockefeller's recent discussion, is motivated in his quest for a rationale for democracy to seek this level of infinite meaning somehow found in even the most mundane of human activities.<sup>4</sup> As Williams reminds us, the urge that forces us to recognize, or at least seek, such a unity is basic. Surely in our current ecological and social difficulties it must be taken account of both practically and philosophically.

Yet as Lynda Stone in "Disavowing Community" points out, difference and diversity today make an equally strong claim upon us. Stone's remarks reminded me most of all, of the criticisms William James made so forcefully of the pretensions of the philosophical, scientific intellect in attempting to reduce objects to aspects of an abstract classification. Her remarks reinforced for me the truth of James' comment that "...any object that is infinitely important to us and awakens our devotion feels to us as if it must be *sui generis* and unique."<sup>5</sup> Her post modernist point of view, moreover, blends well with James' antipathy towards any political system that fails to acknowledge such uniqueness. It seems to me that James' struggle against a certain manifestation of the urge to unity, the urge embodied in the imperialism of McKinley and Roosevelt, can be usefully evoked in Stone's own struggle for the recognition of difference and cultural diversity in the practical realm.<sup>6</sup>

To struggle with the concerns of Stone and Williams is (to the extent Becker is right, at least) to engage in a perennial human endeavor. To attempt to make room for both the uniqueness of the individual and the truths of community within a theoretically defensible and practically acceptable social and political realm. But the problem of the one and the many takes many forms; it is itself subject to the diffraction of the one into the many that it itself refers to. Currently the debate between proponents of the one and the many is (I believe) muddled by the use of writers such as Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, rather than James, as theoreticians of difference. They, as opposed to James, are more likely to reify difference, to reject Monism only to worship some other metaphysics, e.g. the power ontology of Nietzsche or Derrida's multiple selves. The value of James' brand of liberalism, embodied within his radical empiricism, is that it for the most part remains ironic about its own evocation of difference. It endorses no metaphysics taken in a non-anthropological vein, and instead provides us with the outlines of a phenomenology of human desire that is sensitive to the infinity of possible manifestations, both in theory and practice, of each of Becker's urges.<sup>7</sup>

What would a Jamesian politics look like? How would it embody the concerns for individual expression as well as common need described with such passion and eloquence by Professors Williams and Stone? How might a Jamesian approach allow us to transcend the old modern dichotomies of self and community criticized by professor Stone? What would a democratic education look like within such a context? I hope that these remarks will stimulate a further discussion of these questions.

Here I can only note that I am *not* convinced that useful answers to such questions *cannot* be found in the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty. It is fashionable to define Rorty, as Stone does, as an old style individualist. Of concern here, for example, is Rorty's seemingly outdated, pre-pragmatist use of the public/private dichotomy. Yet Rorty can, I believe, be read as expressing quite well the primacy of the urges towards unity *and* diversity that I have been discussing. To reject, as Rorty does, the quest of philosophers since Plato for a final, metaphysical resolution of the battle between the twin ontological motives is not to despair of *any* reconciliation at all. Rather, it is to insist upon the need for continued, piecemeal, fine-grained and context-dependent resolutions to conflicts between these urges, conflicts that have and will continue to express themselves in endless ways as long as people continue to yearn in ways similar to us. In *this* context I believe that Rorty is right to endorse the work of Michael Waltzer, in his book *Spheres of Justice*, as appropriate to a politics beyond *reified, non-contextual* unity and diversity. In this vein I wonder if Waltzer's work doesn't present us with just the sort of careful discussion of community and difference necessary to avoid the often gratuitous generalities found both in contemporary monists and pluralists.<sup>8</sup>

Professor Williams, as well as Professor Stone, is to be congratulated for helping us to focus on the way that some of our most basic desires are now playing themselves out in our ongoing debates over community. Her remarks remind us, finally, that as we debate these issues today we find ourselves to be members of an ongoing community concerned with providing an education that meets our most basic needs, that addresses our hearts' desires, that places us within the immediacy of our need. My hope is that these remarks somehow in some little way, help underline the shared interest of both Williams and Stone in making such an education a reality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 151ff.

<sup>2</sup> Lynda Stone, "Disavowing Community," in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed by H. A. Alexander (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society), 93-107.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982). Schell discusses both Arendt and Burke in the context of a defense of community in response to the dangers inherent in an ecologically fragile, nuclear age, pp. 121ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Rockefeller's John Dewey: *Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) for an interesting attempt to coopt Dewey's work in this regard. This book, along with Robert Westbrook's equally fascinating *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), provide a reading of Dewey the communitarian, in contrast to earlier readings of him as a liberal individualist.

<sup>5</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 9. As always, James finds just the right irony to express an idea that might otherwise be taken literally, i.e. metaphysically in the old, non-anthropological sense. He notes, immediately after the quoted passage, how: "Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean and then dispose of it. 'I am no such thing,' it would say, 'I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone.'"

<sup>6</sup> For James' explicit recognition of the connection between the urge for diversity, expressed in his "pluralistic-individualistic philosophy" and the fight against political imperialism see his preface to *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on some of Life's Ideals* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958), 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> The ambiguity of James' "radical empiricism" as either a traditional metaphysical thesis, versus monism, or a rebellion against the very idea of philosophy as a right description of the world has been well discussed in Richard Rorty's "The Pragmatist," a review of *A Stroll with William James*, by Jacques Bargun, *The New Republic* 9 May 1983, 32-34. I am aware that my James, like Rorty's is something of a rational reconstruction.

<sup>8</sup> Rorty's infamous discussion of the public and private can be found in his *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Michael Waltzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). Rorty endorses Waltzer's project as a profitable redescription of Rawls' project in his paper, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," which can be found in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 279-302.

---

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED