SYMPOSIUM ON CARE AND JUSTICE

Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations On Rights and Care Discourses

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I point to a colonial care discourse that enabled colonizers to define themselves in relationship to "inferior" colonized subjects. The colonized, however, had very different accounts of this relationship. While contemporary care discourse correctly insists on acknowledging human needs and relationships, it needs to worry about who defines these often contested terms. I conclude that improvements along dimensions of care and of justice often provide "enabling conditions" for each other.

I wish to think about certain aspects of the roles played by rights and care discourses in colonial times. I shall start with the following question: How did the vast majority of people in the colonizing countries motivate themselves to participate in the large-scale phenomena of slavery and colonialism, not only embracing the idea that distant lands and peoples should be subjugated, but managing to conceive of imperialism as an *obligation*, an obligation taken so seriously that by 1914 Europe "held a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths"? (Said 1993, 8).

The answer to this question forces us to attend to the self-serving collaboration between elements of colonial rights discourse and care discourse. Pervasive racist stereotypes about the negative and inferior status of enslaved or colonized Others were used both to justify denial of the rights enjoyed by the colonizers, and to construct the colonized as childish and inferior subjects, in need of the paternalistic guidance and rule of their superiors (see Said 1993). In general terms, the colonizing project was seen as being *in the interests of, for the good of,* and as *promoting the welfare of* the colonized—notions that draw our

attention to the existence of a *colonialist* care discourse whose terms have some resonance with those of some contemporary strands of the ethic of care. Particular colonial practices were seen as concrete attempts to achieve these paternalistic ends. Coercive religious conversion was seen as promoting the *spiritual* welfare of the "heathen." Inducting the colonized into the economic infrastructures of colonialism was seen as conferring the *material* benefits of western science, technology and economic progress, the *cultural* benefits of western education, and the *moral* benefits of the work ethic. There were often marked gender dimensions to these projects—colonial attempts to get "native women" to conform to Victorian/Christian norms of respectable dress, sexuality, and family life were regarded as in the moral interests of the women (see Chauduri and Strobel 1992).

I am not denying there were powerful economic motivations underlying colonialism and slavery. However, justifications for colonialism and slavery in terms of crude self-interest alone seem to have been rare. These enterprises were made morally palatable by the rhetoric of responsibility and care for enslaved and colonized Others. Though such justifications have often been seen as attempts to convince the dominated of the appropriateness of their domination, I would argue that the central purpose of such arguments often is to make domination morally palatable to those engaged in the infliction of domination. While much of the contemporary discourse on an ethics of care focuses on the import of one's relationships to *particular others*, thinking about care-discourse in the colonial context highlights, in contrast, the roles it has historically played in justifying relationships of power and domination between *groups of people*, such as colonizers and colonized. The paternalistic moral vision of colonialism was sustained by the discourses of religion, philosophy, science, and art—cultural practices that collaborated to make a sense of western superiority part of the collective world view of people in the colonizing countries. (A large segment of western women's movements and working class movements of the time, such as those in England, were pro-empire.)

Colonial stereotypes about the hierarchy of races had similarities to existing theories of the hierarchy of gender—where attributes such as physical "weakness," smaller craniums, deficient rationality, and moral frailty were ascribed to western women, constructing them as the "weaker sex" in need of the care, support, and guidance of western men, not unlike the colonized. However, while western women's care-taking labor, namely domestic work and child-care responsibilities, were often rendered invisible qua work by being depicted as expressions of love and care for their families, the toil and labor of exploited slaves and colonized workers were often effaced instead by depicting their products as results of the efforts of colonial capitalists. John Stuart Mill provides a vivid example in *Principles of Political Economy*:

> These [outlying possessions of ours] are hardly to be looked upon
> as countries, but more properly as outlying agricultural or man-
> ufacturing estates. . . . Our West Indian colonies, for example,
> cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of
> their own, . . . [but are rather] the place where England finds it
> convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and a few
> other tropical commodities. All the capital employed is English
> capital. (Mill 1965, 693)

What does attending to the colonial context teach us about discourses of rights
and care? Among the more obvious lessons is that rights discourse was only
seemingly universal, not extending to the colonized, among others. Another
lesson is that care discourse can sometimes function ideologically, to justify or
conceal relationships of power and domination. While it has been pointed out
that much of the responsibility for informal as well as institutionalized caring
falls on subordinate and relatively powerless members of society—often work-
ing class and minority women (Held 1995)—I want to add that "paternalistic
caring" of the sort found in colonial discourse can also be wielded as a form of
control and domination by the powerful and privileged. The colonial notion
of "the white man's burden" included both a sense of obligation to confer the
benefits of western civilization on the colonized, and a sense of being burdened
with the responsibility for doing so—an obligation and responsibility rooted
in a sense of being agents who had a world-historic mission to bring the light
of civilization and progress to others inhabiting "areas of darkness"!

The seemingly universal, free, equal, independent, separate, and mutually
disinterested individual of contract theory and of rights discourse has been
criticized as being contrary to the experiences of most women. I wish to add
that the contractual focus on relationships between equals, and on agents as
independent, separate and mutually disinterested was only *part* of the liberal
story. Another part of the story was that these same subjects had paternalistic
obligations and responsibilities to "inferior Others," whether women in their
own families or distant colonial peoples. Rights-discourse was constructed
during the historical time when western countries were becoming increasingly
interdependent with, unseparate from, and anything but disinterested in their
unfree and unequal colonies, and most liberal political theorists had no
difficulty endorsing colonialism. We would be mistaken if we read liberal
rights-theorists as concerned only with contractual relationships between
equals, or if we focus only on notions of agency pertinent to that side of their
thought, since we would be ignoring their support for colonialism, and the
more "missionary" notions of agency embedded in that facet of their
worldview. If we recognize that the agent of liberal rights theory was also the
agent of the colonial project, its independence, separateness and disinterest-

edness appear to be more qualified properties than the picture of the same agent that emerges if we ignore the colonial dimensions of liberal theory.

In the colonial worldview, white women too had their own version of the "white man's burden," in which caretaking roles played a large part. Many white women went to the colonies as wives, whose presence was meant to shield their husbands from the lurking dangers of miscegenation and of "going native" (see Zlotnick 1994). White women had their own brand of paternalistic roles towards the colonized, and often shared in roles that constructed the "natives" as children.

Many aspects of the self-perceptions of the colonizers seem to have depended heavily on their relationship to the colonized. The world-view of colonialism, as well as the moral and socio-political world-views of many colonized cultures, subscribed to a picture where several large groups of people were normatively defined in terms of their relationships as inferiors and subordinates vis-a-vis members of dominant groups. To be a slave, a colonized Other, an untouchable, a woman, has often been meant as having one's entire existence defined in terms of one's "proper place" with respect to those with power, which entailed obligations to acquiesce to relationships of domination.

This suggests that strands in contemporary care discourse that stress that we are all essentially interdependent and in relationship, while important, do not go far enough if they fail to worry about the *accounts* that are given of these interdependencies and relationships. The colonizers and the colonized, for example, while both acutely conscious of their relationship to each other, had very different accounts of what the relationship and its interdependencies amounted to, and whether they were morally justified. Many social movements and struggles on the part of subordinate groups, though often couched in terms of individual rights, were also attempts to renegotiate and change the prevailing relationships between social groups.

While I do not endorse reducing the value of any moral theory to its ideological uses, I would argue that we must attend to the ideological functions served by various moral theories. Pervasive structural relationships of power and powerlessness between groups, such as those between colonizers and the colonized, tend to foster ideological justifications for the maintenance of such relationships. While aspects of care discourse have the potential virtue of calling attention to vulnerabilities that mark relationships between differently situated persons, care discourse also runs the risk of being used to ideological ends where these "differences" are defined in self-serving ways by the dominant and powerful. Notions of differences in vulnerabilities and capabilities should be recognized as *contested terrain*, requiring critical attention to who defines these differences as well as their practical implications.

Ideological pictures of the nature of Self and Others, and of one's relationship to Others are problematic pictures shared by large historically constituted

groups of individuals. It is not clear to me that any moral theory is immune to such ideological deployment, nor am I convinced that there is any moral faculty or set of moral practices, neither Humean "reflexion" nor Kantian "reason," whose careful and sustained cultivation *necessarily* liberates particular individuals from the historical effects of such ideologies. It seems to me that what such ideological pictures often yield to are not primarily theoretical moral self-corrections, based either on reason or on enlarged sympathies with Others, but to political contestations and moral challenges by groups who are victimized by the status quo. To challenge the paternalistic construction of femininity and of colonial subjectivity, western women and the colonized had to resort to insurgencies, rebellions, and protests, and had to *prove* themselves to be moral and political agents in order to make plausible their claims to such agency.

Two broad strategies were used both by western women and by the colonized in these contestations: (a) there were frequent assertions that western women or the colonized possessed the capacities and capabilities that entitled them to the same rights as white male colonizers, and (b) there were frequent re-descriptions of the "paternalistic protective project" as one based instead on force and exploitation, inflicting misery on the powerless, and brutalizing those with power. The powerful role played by rights discourse in these emancipatory movements should not lead us to ignore their concurrent critique of the paternalistic colonial care-discourses that operated as justifications for their domination.

The alternative moral visions of the agency of women or of the colonized that developed in such political contestations, though they challenge the moral picture of the world held by the powerful, are not themselves immune to creating or reinforcing other relationships of power. A great deal has been written on how, for instance, the contemporary feminist movement has tended to be focused on the interests of middle-class white women, and about how drawing attention to the problems of women of color remains an ongoing problem. Anticolonial nationalist movements often displayed similar problems—in that nationalist discourses often constructed issues in a manner that marginalized colonized women. Several strands of Indian nationalism, for instance, associated Indian women with the preservation of Indian traditions, culture, and spirituality—a function that simultaneously gave them an *imagined function* in the nationalist agenda, but excluded them from *real participation* in many areas of work, politics, and public culture (Chatterjee 1990, 243). Thus, though I believe large-scale political movements have been historically crucial in bringing about certain forms of moral change and progress, these movements too generate problematic moral narratives. I would conclude that moral theories need to be evaluated not only in terms of their theoretical adequacy in accounting for the range of phenomena in our moral lives but also

with regard to the instrumental political uses to which they lend themselves at concrete historical junctures.

I shall end with a few reflections on the relationship between rights and care discourses. The perspectives of colonialism, as well as those of many colonized cultures, and of many contemporary societies, provide several examples of what John Ladd refers to as the "Doctrine of Moral Disqualification," whereby groups with social power define members of other groups in ways that disqualify them for full membership in the moral community (Ladd 1991, 40). These definitions have been repeatedly used to justify the denial of rights to members of "disqualified" groups. These definitions have also been used to justify the failure to be genuinely attentive and responsive to the needs, interests, and welfare of the members of these groups. Dominant social definitions of what an untouchable or a slave was, did not encourage the powerful to care for the less powerful; and the same definitions were in fact inimical to the well-being of the less powerful, who were not, by these definitions, entitled to the means and opportunities for flourishing.

Justice concerns have been central to many social and political movements because asserting and gaining rights have been instrumental in transforming certain groups of people, however imperfectly, into fellow citizens whose concerns mattered, into people whose human worth mattered. However, as many slave-narratives well illustrate, much of the moral and political work that was necessary to change the "moral disqualification" inflicted on powerless groups consisted not only of claims to rights, but of attempts to call attention to the *suffering* inflicted on the powerless by the status quo. These political depictions of suffering can be seen as attempts to elicit the attentiveness and moral responsiveness of those with power, by redescribing the life situations of the powerless in ways that challenged the rationalizations of the powerful. The discourses of slave narratives, for example, make it difficult for members of dominant groups to continue to believe in the myth of happy slaves, content with their lot.

Joan Tronto may well be right in arguing that "one of the practical effects of the widespread adoption of a theory of care may be to make our concerns for justice less central" (Tronto 1995). I would like to add the converse claim, that a more serious commitment to and enforcement of the claims of justice might, at least in some cases, be a precondition for the possibility of adequately caring for and about some people. Tronto herself acknowledges that "*until* we care about something, the care process cannot begin" (Tronto 1995). Social relationships of domination often operate so as to make many who have power unable to *genuinely* care about the marginalized and powerless.

Although I am very sympathetic to the idea of a politics and of public policies that are more sensitive to *needs*, I am not sure we can arrive at what Tronto calls "a full account of human needs" without serious attention to considerations of justice that would enable the powerless to seriously partici-

pate in the social and political discourse where such needs are contested and defined. Once again, adequate attention to justice may, in some instances, be a precondition for adequately caring policies.

Virginia Held argues that though justice is an important moral value, much moderately good life has gone on without it, for instance, in families where there has been little justice but much care. She points out that we can have care without justice, but that, without care, there would be no persons to respect (Held 1995). I suggest that attending to what happens in some families also reveals situations in which without justice, care may fail to be provided. India, for instance, has an alarming and growing "deficit of women" in the population. Some of this is due to active acts of infanticide and female feticide. But the most significant cause seems to be what is called "the fatal neglect of female children" by their own families. In a nutshell, girl children are system-atically and seemingly non-deliberately provided substantially less care—nutritional, medical, and so forth—than are boys (Sen 1990). My point is, in some families, without more justice, of a sort that changes the cultural meanings and material implications of having daughters, care will fail to be provided, and many female infants will not grow up to become adult bearers of rights.

Carol Gilligan's work suggests that rights and care perspectives provide alternative accounts of moral problems and decisions, and that shifting to a care perspective foregrounds moral issues of preserving and maintaining rela-tionships that are often not well illuminated by a rights perspective. I under-stand both Tronto and Held as arguing that the care perspective is a wider or possibly more foundational framework, within which considerations of rights and justice constitute a subset—though admittedly an important one.

I would like to suggest yet another possibility. Improvements along dimen-sions of justice and rights might, in some cases such as the issue of fatal neglect of female children, provide what I shall call "enabling conditions" for the provision of adequate care. In other cases, improvements along care dimen-sions, such as attentiveness to and concern for human needs and human suffering, might provide the "enabling conditions" for more adequate forms of justice. For instance, attention to the needs, predicaments and suffering of the impoverished and destitute in affluent western societies might result in social policies that institutionalize welfare rights, rights to adequate medical care, and so forth.

I suggest that this is one possible dimension of the relationships between care and justice considerations, and not an over-arching account of their relationship. I am suggesting that, in particular contexts, struggles for greater justice may foster more adequate or richer forms of care and that in others, the cultivation of a care perspective might foster enhanced forms of justice. In some situations at least, justice and care perspectives might be seen less as contenders for theoretical primacy or moral and political adequacy and more

as collaborators and allies in our practical and political efforts to make our world more conducive to human flourishing.

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