Pragmatism, Rights, and Democracy

Beth J. Singer

Published by Fordham University Press

Singer, Beth J.
Pragmatism, Rights, and Democracy.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64039

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2280449
5

Difference, Otherness, and the Creation of Community

Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilisation is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all people, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace.

—FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

My purpose here is to discuss further the problem of conflict resolution, treating it in terms of the creation of community rather than negotiation or mediation as they are commonly understood and practiced. What I am suggesting is a way of uniting the combatants in a new, inclusive community that will serve them both (or all) and, at the same time, preserve the integrity of each. To locate the discussion in a theoretical context, I shall review some points about the concept of community and several related concepts.

The Concept of Community

When its meaning is not simply taken for granted, the term ‘community’ is often used by philosophers in narrow senses, as when Josiah Royce maintains that a true community is not only one that has a history and established institutions, but also one whose members are conscious of their common history. This rules out many kinds of community, including linguistic communities. Royce’s use of the term is an honorific one, as is John Dewey’s in those contexts in which he identifies community and democracy. Acknowledging that the word ‘community’ is used in a number of different senses, the contemporary writer R. E. Ewin states that he is using it to refer to “a group of people who can act and speak
as one . . . such that we sensibly speak of what the group decided or what the group did.⁴ That is, he limits the concept to what I call “agential” communities, a category that would include a mob as well as a committee or a citizenry empowered with the vote but would exclude communities such as the academic community, which is too widely dispersed to act as a unit.

What we need is a value-neutral sense of this term that is broad enough to encompass communities of all kinds. In the generic sense provided by Justus Buchler, persons are joined in community by sharing an attitude or perspective. As Buchler puts it, “what makes the being of any community is not so much the homogeneity of individuals as the potency for many individuals of a given natural complex.”⁵ An example of community in this sense is the community of those who appreciate beauty. Its existence does not presuppose interaction among its members or conscious identification with it, or awareness of its history—or that it have a history. Such a community, which I call a “perspectival community,” may even be “invisible,” its existence unnoted. The main importance of perspectival community is that sharing a perspective is the indispensable precondition of communication and mutual understanding. (This is the case, despite the fact that, by their content, some perspectives militate against particular actualizations of this potentiality.)

As I have noted in earlier chapters, George Herbert Mead defines community in terms not merely of shared perspective, but of the kind of perspective he calls “the attitude of a generalized other.” By this he means an organized set of understandings and expectations that govern what he calls “institutions”: established ways of acting and responding, including the use of gestures and symbols and the organized behavior patterns that constitute social roles.⁶ Whereas sharing a perspective in Buchler’s generic sense is a necessary condition of communication and meaningful social interaction, sharing the attitude or perspective of a generalized other is the sufficient condition. In my own terminology, persons who share a normative perspective constitute a “normative community.” All speakers of Russian constitute such a community; so do performers and their audiences, who understand their respective roles in terms of a commonly understood set of norms.

Every individual human being belongs to indefinitely many
communities, both perspectival and normative. Each one’s personal perspective is complex and intersects with those of many others. Analogously, communities and their perspectives intersect in innumerable ways, and a given community may encompass indefinitely many subcommunities. Moreover, there are different kinds of community. There are face-to-face communities and communities whose members may never come to know or interact with one another, communities that are organized and those (like that of English speakers) that are not. Some communities are long-lasting and others transient; some, but not all, are capable of acting as entities. Some are self-conscious, in the sense that those who belong to them recognize themselves and one another as doing so, whereas others (like the perspectival community of those who fear heights or the normative community of dictionary users) are not. The most highly self-conscious communities are those that sociologists call “reference groups”: communities whose members identify with one another and with whose interests they see their own to be bound up. But while each of us may identify most strongly with a primary reference group—often an ethnic group, sometimes a religious one—the perspective of even that community is only one constituent of our personal perspective as an individual self. A community is not a collection of persons with identical outlooks or behavior patterns. The condition of community is one of sameness-in-difference, of partial commonality of perspective among persons whose perspectives as individuals also include other perspectives, some unique to themselves and some shared with members of the multiple communities to which they also belong: families, occupational communities, friendship groups, religious communities, political movements, and so forth.

Culture and Community; Difference and Otherness

The word ‘culture’ is also used in several ways in connection with human communities. We speak of “the culture of science” as well as the “cultures” of different peoples or ethnic communities, and we sometimes refer to a people as a culture. The culture of an ethnic community is a system of norms or institutions compre-
hensive enough to constitute a way of life. A cultural community in this sense is a self-conscious one, and for its members—at least those born into it—is likely to be an important reference group, essential to their sense of identity as well as a source of their characteristic ways of behaving and viewing the world. Nevertheless, individual differences and differences among subgroups in the community retain their significance.

Members of a self-conscious community are inevitably aware of differences between their community and other communities, and between themselves and the members of those other communities. But recognizing that persons, whether individually or collectively, are different from oneself is not necessarily to view them as alien, or as better or worse than oneself, and it need not be a hostile attitude or one accompanied by fear. An American is likely to find aspects of Japanese comportment not only different, but puzzling; yet despite the history of war between our countries, Americans who encounter them today typically accept the Japanese and their culture. In the perspective of these Americans, difference is recognized but neither disdained nor feared. However, there is a second perspective that we might call one of “otherness” that involves a sense of social distance based on a negative and sometimes hostile response and a feeling that the other is, somehow, a threat to oneself or to a community with which one identifies. Such an attitude toward one or more groups of outsiders may come to be an important element in the perspective of a given community or of a significant subcommunity within it. A strong sense of otherness, especially when it is mutual, may feed or even generate conflict among communities, and it can be deliberately fostered, as can the conflicts to which, in turn, it lends support. But it may also arise as a consequence of conflicts that stem from other sources (such as conflicts over territory). The perspective of difference, in contrast, permits acceptance and tolerance, and allows those who hold it to value diversity as well as to like and even admire traits that differ from their own.

Conflicts are not always based on perceived differences. Communities, like individuals who view one another as competitors, may fight one another precisely because of perceived similarities among them, each motivated by a concern for its own interests, which, because of their parallelism, they take to be incompatible
with the others'. The sense of otherness here rests on presumed similarity, not difference. But the perspective of otherness is most visible and most powerful today in the ethnic and tribal conflicts of the sort we are seeing in so many places. And, whether open or incipient, the conflicts among ethnic communities in the United States express the same attitude. While they may reflect real socioeconomic grievances, these conflicts are increasingly motivated by hatred of the other as other, the attitude of the combatants characterized by prejudice toward and fear of the culture and the person of the other, individually and collectively. Here, as elsewhere, the sense of otherness is sometimes deliberately cultivated in order to sharpen the hostility of the participants. To some extent, the perspective of otherness is a feature of every social conflict, but in what follows, I shall primarily have in mind conflicts in which it is dominant, particularly those among ethnic communities.

Community and Conflict

The methods customarily employed in attempts to resolve conflict are negotiation and mediation. That negotiations so often fail is because neither party wishes to give up what it has been fighting for. Any settlement that is achieved is likely to be a compromise, sowing the seed of further conflict. Mediation, on the other hand, usually consists in the mediator’s proposing a solution designed to be as unobjectionable as possible to all parties to the conflict, who then negotiate with the mediator to secure terms that they deem more appropriate or that they see to be more favorable to themselves. Even if it is successful in alleviating the conflict at hand, mediation of this sort may leave a residue of dissatisfaction similar to that which can remain as an outcome of any other negotiation. Ideally, the way to resolve a conflict would be to alter the conditions that engendered it, but this is seldom possible, and those conditions too often include the attitudes of the combatants toward one another. Alternatively, we might devise a new way of looking at the situation, one that places it in a different light and compels a more constructive response. Part of what this new perspective must accomplish is to help bring about
a change in the attitudes of the opposing parties toward one another, to help them overcome their hostility and fear and the pervasive attitude of otherness. At the same time, if it is not to pose a threat to the parties involved, it is important not to jeopardize their sense of their own identity or their freedom to participate in determining their future. To this end, whatever steps we take must foster the mutual acceptance of difference.

To suggest the development of a perspective to be shared by those who have been engaged in conflict is to suggest the creation of a new, inclusive perspectival community, opening the way for fresh communication and interaction. But this alone is not guaranteed to alleviate hostility or put an end to conflict. The members of a community do not necessarily interact or, if they do, relate positively or constructively to one another. To the extent that they respond to one another in ways that are mutually intelligible, the parties to a conflict actually constitute a community already: They are engaged in communicative interaction, responding to one another in ways that are mutually intelligible. (This is not to deny that hostility toward others, even when it is mutual, can sometimes be blind and uncomprehending.) Depending on its content and its form, communication may exacerbate existing hostility or even serve to create hostility. Through misunderstanding if not by design, it can reinforce the estrangement between the parties to a conflict. And even where there is not open combat, people may share a perspective that is potentially one of conflict, an attitude of mutual resentment, say, or mistrust.

Nevertheless, community and communication are essential to peaceful interaction, and even communities that are hostile to one another may share perspectives that, whether or not they are aware of them, join them in an inclusive community that is potentially one of mutual support and cooperation. Building on William James’s call for “a moral equivalent of war”—which James looked to as a way of producing social cohesion among people who had been but are no longer united against a common enemy—Mead sought, in his paper “National-Mindedness and International-Mindedness,” a way to ensure a lasting peace in the aftermath of World War II. “The moral equivalent of war,” he wrote, “is found in the intelligence and the will both to discover
... common interests between contending nations and to make them the basis for the solution of the existing differences and for the common life which they will make possible” (NM 366). That is, discovery of common interests can serve to unite people in a self-conscious community. Where “common goods do become the ends of the individuals of the community,” Mead says, they develop “solidarity”: a “sense of common selfhood” (NM 369). But if this is to endure, he insists, joining in community with other nations must not entail the sacrifice of national cohesion and national pride.

Adopting Mead’s approach, we would endeavor to resolve conflicts by seeking some common interest or goal that is important enough to induce the conflicting parties to settle their differences and work together for a common end. That is, we would try to identify a community of interest—a perspectival community—on which to build an active and agential normative community. Supposing the conflict to be that among the ethnic communities in Flint, Michigan, for example, we might try to build an effective, inclusive community around the common need to rebuild the city’s shattered economy. But how should this community operate? What can secure the continuing cooperation of former antagonists? What will prevent the members of each group from feeling that their own collective identity is threatened by a process to which it might seem they have subordinated their independence? How can they foster appreciation of difference and help decrease the sense of otherness?

We can look for help to Dewey’s concept of the method of democracy, the experimental method of organized intelligence, and to Mead’s ideal of universality and mutuality. Both are designed to preserve diversity within the framework of community, and, as far as possible, to serve the separate interests of the participants together with those interests they share. The problem in conflict resolution, Dewey says, “is precisely how conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of the widest possible contribution to the interests of all—or at least of the great majority.” He proposes “to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately” (LSA 56). And, in
another context, he calls for a democratic political process in which "all those who are affected by social institutions . . . have a share in producing and managing them."11

Rather than simply the rule of the majority, Dewey sees the method of democracy to be a cooperative exercise of the pragmatist method of problem-solving, a method of inquiry akin to the method of science. It is experimental in that it involves open discussion and critical evaluation at every step of the way, even of its own procedures. Stressing a different aspect, Mead identifies the ideal of democracy with the attitude of universal brotherhood he finds embodied in "the universal religions," an attitude that holds every individual "to stand on the same level with every other" (MSS 286). Politically, he finds the same egalitarian principle in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract, in the idea of a society "in which the individual maintains himself as a citizen only to the degree that he recognizes the rights of everyone else to belong to the same community" (MSS 286). Whether among individuals or among communities, Mead sees the democratic ideal as one of mutual self-realization through functional differentiation, similar to what he finds in economic life, where difference is valued and respected precisely because it serves a common interest. In a democratic society, "the individual realizes himself in others through that which he does as peculiar to himself" (MSS 289). In a democratic international community, which he takes the League of Nations to be, "[t]he smallest community is in a position to express itself just because it recognizes the right of every other nation to do the same." It would follow, to paraphrase Mead, that, in any truly democratic community, every subcommunity recognizes every other subcommunity in the very process of asserting itself (cf. MSS 287).

At the heart of Mead’s religious and political conception of democracy is the idea that it is potentially universal. Given the centrality of communication in his thought, it should not surprise us that he takes as the model of universal community that of a universal community of discourse, epitomized by logical discourse. Here, every participant uses the same terms and understands them in the same way, so that, whether communicating his or her own intent or interpreting the communications of others, each one is taking the same attitude. "If communication can be
carried through and made perfect,” Mead says, “then there would exist the kind of democracy to which we have referred, in which each individual would carry just the response in himself that he knows he calls out in the community” (MSS 327). But commonality or universality of response, mutual understanding, does not preclude individuality. While responding as a member of this community we remain ourselves, our identity partly determined by the other communities to which we belong.

**Overcoming Otherness**

Extrapolating from what I have said, I would like to outline a strategy for overcoming otherness and reconciling communities that have come into conflict with one another. While I have in mind conflicts among ethnic communities, I believe the proposal is applicable to conflicts of other sorts as well. The procedure I suggest would incorporate the following three steps:

(1) Identify a compelling need, goal, or interest that is common to as many members of the opposing communities as possible, or a problem that they all share and whose solution would be in the interest of all. If they are not aware of any such interest, it may be necessary to point one out to them and show them how they might be served if it could be satisfied. What I am proposing, in other words, is to search for or cultivate an attitude that joins the members of the conflicting communities in a wider community of interest—a kind of perspectival community—and to help them not only to recognize that they have this interest in common but to feel comfortable with this fact. Important to this enterprise is that the interest defined by the shared attitude be one that can best be served by means of a joint effort. Examples might be a common need to stop or prevent an epidemic (AIDS, for instance), the need to improve the quality of the common water supply, or a desire to improve public transportation in a region both groups inhabit.

(2) The next step would be to develop this perspectival community into a community of inquiry: a normative community dedicated to cooperative and exploratory (“experimental”) discourse regarding the way in which the common goal can best be
understood and the means by which it might be reached. Among the norms of this community, as of an ideal scientific community, should be the principle that all discussion be open and public, and that the contributions and the viewpoints of all participants be taken equally seriously and equally carefully and critically considered. The latter is the principle I have called "dialogic reciprocity." In a process designed to help in the resolution of intergroup conflict, another normative principle ought to be that, as far as possible, where the needs of the participants differ, these too should be taken into consideration in determining how best to further the interest in which they all share. Participation in joint inquiry under these conditions should help to replace the sense of "otherness" with acceptance of and, it is to be hoped, mutual respect for one another. It might serve as well to cultivate an acceptance of differences in other areas: in the present context, the cultural differences that had been the focus of mutual alienation and hostility.

(3) Finally, as Dewey recommends, the process of inquiry itself would need to be carefully structured and conscientiously monitored. The participants (the members of the contending communities, working if necessary through their chosen representatives) should establish rules of procedure that all understand and accept, as well as a common vocabulary of carefully defined terms. As they proceed, they should keep both under review, revising them when necessary in order to ensure clarity and mutual intelligibility and avoid misunderstanding. This, in turn, should serve to strengthen the bonds of community among the participants in the inquiry and facilitate the extension of this community to other areas of concern.

Notes

1. From a speech that was to be given the day after Roosevelt died. Reported in The Guardian Weekly, Volume 156, Issue 12 (for the week ending March 23, 1997).
3. For example, "The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all


12. See chapter 2 above.