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Toward an Ethic of Shared Selfhood

Diana Fritz Cates

Turning a receptive ear toward the voice of women's experience, feminist ethical inquiry has begun to articulate an understanding of moral selfhood which takes seriously the depth and breadth of the self's relationality. Recognizing that the moral self is formed and reformed in community with other selves, feminist ethical inquiry has begun to articulate an understanding of that moral agency which selves-in-relation exercise toward other selves-in-relation.[1] Ethicists seem to have a sense of the ways in which separate selves influence each other as they pursue their own separate ends, but do we have a sense of the ways in which separate selves become one self in the shared pursuit of shared ends? What would it mean to share a self with someone and to exercise moral agency within the context of shared selfhood?

In exploring this question, I will focus on intimate friends who are also 'character-friends.'[2] Construed broadly *intimate friends* can include lovers, spouses, parents and grown children, and close co-workers. *Character-friends* are friends who love each other largely because of each other's character. They are attracted and attached to each other, drawn toward the promotion and shared enjoyment of each other's good, largely on account of the shape of each other's vision and virtue. Each character-friend is captured and compelled in some measure by the other's understanding of the humanly good, by the other's interests in the concrete realization of that good, by her ways of receiving and responding to particulars in her purview, by her dispositions toward pleasure and pain, and by her manner of deliberating and committing herself to action.

Spending a great deal of time with each other, living their lives in mutual awareness of their love and in mutual commitment to the deepening of that love, character-friends come to share a self. By this I mean that they come to share many of the beliefs, perceptions, desires, passions, choices, and actions which interact and interpenetrate to

constitute the moral self. What is it for friends to share these things? Let us focus our attention on the sharing of moral vision, in particular. What is it for character-friends to share a vision of the good? If we can get at this much of what it is to share a self, we will be in a position to explore some of the ethical implications of shared selfhood.

The Co-construction of Moral Vision

We noted that character-friends are captured and compelled from the start by each other's vision of the good human life. As they continue to spend time in each other's company, they continue to probe each other's vision with interest. Confronting a situation of moral import together, friends communicate to each other initial impressions of value. They encourage each other to reflect upon the moral significance of these impressions. They challenge each other to examine the way in which these impressions have or have not been shaped by more considered moral judgments. They press each other to examine their considered judgments for reasonableness, consistency, and coherence. As they press each other in this fashion, the friends educate each other morally. They also persuade each other mutually toward the shared adoption of a well-deliberated and carefully formulated vision of the good.

As character-friends engage in the co-construction of moral vision, differences in vision surface. One friend may discover that the other values a slightly different cluster of goods. She may discover that the other values the same cluster of goods, but ranks these goods in a different way. One friend or the other may discover any number of respects in which their visions of the good not only differ, but conflict. In the face of conflict, character-friends tend to press for the deepening of mutual awareness and understanding in the confidence that imaginative reinterpretations or reconfigurations of what each friend takes to be good will keep their combined vision consistent and coherent. Friends do not necessarily want to level differences in vision; rather, they want to ensure that these differences do not unravel their friendship. They want to confront differences in vision and value, explore them, and somehow knit them together into a more complicated, but mutually much more interesting and satisfying whole.

My husband, Bryan, and I enjoy considerable agreement concerning the content of human good. We have a similar sense, for example, of what it would mean for our five-year-old son, Ben, to flourish. We have a similar sense for the sorts of activities that will likely contribute to his flourishing. We do disagree, however, about whether or not playing at war will likely contribute to Ben's good. Bryan tends to think that it will;

I tend to think that it will not. Pressing each other on the issue over the years, neither of us has succeeded in talking the other out of his or her position, but both of us have managed to reach an understanding and appreciation of the other's perspective which makes possible the building of certain bridges. Beginning with the perspective that war-play teaches children to resolve their differences by controlling and manipulating each other, I have come to include as partly my own Bryan's perspective that war-play can teach initiative, ingenuity, and strategy. With this more inclusive perspective, I am better able to tolerate Bryan's desire to play at war with Ben. I am also able to see something of value in that desire which I could not see before. Beginning with the perspective that war-play incites a playful sense of camaraderie among compatriots, Bryan has come to include as partly his own my perspective that war-play can encourage an 'us-them' mentality which discourages the forging of friendships among foes. From this more inclusive perspective, Bryan can better tolerate my disdain for war play. He can even see something of value in this disdain which he could not see before. From our jointly expanded perspectives, we are better able to compromise when it comes to making concrete decisions in Ben's regard. We compromise, for example, by encouraging Ben to pursue activities like soccer. Playing soccer enables Ben to enjoy with Bryan and with his other friends an invigorating character-building intimacy which is not associated vividly in imagination with the violence of war.

Of course, shared deliberations can bring sharp disagreements into stark relief. Friends may discover too many rips or holes in the fabric of their relationship to sustain a friendship of character. The friendship may break abruptly in a rude awakening or it may slowly give way to indifference. I may find out, for example, that Bryan's desire for war-play is grounded in a lust for dominance. He may discover that my desire to discourage such play is grounded in a contempt for male experience. Such discoveries could fray the ties that bind us. Fortunately, the dynamism of shared selfhood works against dissolution, especially with friends who have spent years in each other's company. Deep, deliberate desires for continued community promote the working assumption that some sort of co-construction of vision and value remains possible. Perhaps what looks like a lust for dominance is only a desire for personal challenge and adventure. I can appreciate the basic thrust of this desire, even though I dislike some of its concrete manifestations. Perhaps what looks like contempt for male experience is only frustration with the violence of patriarchal society. Bryan can appreciate something of my frustration, even though he feels personally threatened by it at times.

Sharing a vision of the good, then, is partly a matter of jointly constructing, by means of continuing reflection and argumentation, an extended network of vision with which to view the world of value. There are, however, other aspects of this process of co-construction which are less reasoned and more immediate. One friend, for example, may sense in living with another that the other's vision of the good is being shaped unduly by a certain desire. She may identify that desire accurately. She may communicate its intentional content to the other effectively. She may persuade the other to re-examine the pull which he has hitherto allowed that desire to exert on his attention. The other may conclude that, indeed, his friend is right about that desire. He may succeed in re-forming and re-ordering his desires in light of his friend's perspective. The change in his desire may bring about a change in his vision of the good. I may succeed, for example, in convincing Bryan that his desire for war-play is excessive. He may succeed in channelling his war-play energy toward other pursuits.

The interesting part of this process is the part that goes on below the surface. Even as the one friend stands apart from the other and identifies the excess of the other's desire, she stands within the person of the other and is somehow swayed by that desire. She may not want to be swayed. She may be repulsed at the same time that she is compelled by that desire. The point is that the desire affects her. It infects her. It becomes her own, if only weakly and obscurely. When I argue with Bryan about playing at war and I perceive his passionate attachment to that play, I am captivated in some measure by that passion. I am not swayed by Bryan's argument, yet I cannot help but be somewhat swayed by his desire. It is not simply that, upon reflection, I see something of value in Bryan's desire which I had not seen before; I am also spontaneously caught up in his desire—in its particularity. I am "taken" by it.

It is partly *as* an infected person that the friend exercises her moral agency. She has learned of another's desire. She has come to suspect that this desire is off the mark, but it is when she feels the other's desire as her own and experiences the commotion caused by its contrary pull that she senses most deeply: something is amiss. It is when she experiences this tug and pull within her own body that she is moved to reflect carefully upon what that something is. It is in the midst of this tug and pull that she deliberates and decides about how the conflict between her own and the other's desire might best be negotiated. As I am swayed by Bryan's desire to play at war, I am also repelled. Swayed, I come to a deeper understanding of Bryan's perspective. To a certain degree, that perspective becomes my own. Repelled, I bring my/his combined and conflicted perspective to bear in the construction of a more responsive

position on the issue at hand. Swayed, some of the wind is taken out of my sail. My course may be altered. Repelled, I venture back into the choppy waters and navigate them with greater care.

Similarly, when the other is informed of a perceived excess in his desire, he steps back from his immediate experience and reasons about his desire. At the same time, he feels something in the immediacy of his experience which impacts his very reasoning. As he perceives the passion behind his friend's argument, something of that passion infects him. He hears what his friend says, and he is moved by what he hears in part because he is swayed by the desires which motivate and shape her words. Bryan has yet to be convinced by my arguments about war-play, yet the more we struggle over the issue, the more his desire to play at war with Ben recedes. To his own chagrin, Bryan now finds it difficult to engage in or even fantasize about war-play without imagining my distress and responsively cringing himself. My dislike has begun to alter the structure of his desire.

One way to explore this phenomenon is to imagine that friends occupy separate poles of a single, elliptical self. This is a flexible self that stretches and becomes more elliptical when the friends conflict while it contracts to become more uniformly circular when the friends concur. Perceiving what she takes to be an excess in the other's desire, the one friend has already been affected by the other's desire. She has already been pulled toward the other in the spontaneous sharing of his desire. As this shared desire comes into conflict with other of her desires, however, these other desires begin to exert their own pull. Swelling, they stretch taut the elastic boundaries of the shared self. They give the friend the sense that she is *way over here* in the self reflecting upon something that is happening *way over there*. As she deliberates from *over here,* she deliberates under the influence of that desire *over there,* that desire which has somehow become her own. If she succeeds in altering that desire at the distal pole, she will accordingly alter its impact on her. Desires at the proximal pole which had swelled in response to the desire at the distal pole will begin to recede. Other desires, such as the desire for intimacy, will once again become prominent. These desires will stimulate the self's contraction. The polar perspectives will begin to come together.

Even when friends stand firm in their differences, even as they push vigorously against each other to establish and extend the distance between their respective poles, they continue to experience a contrary pull toward a shared center. It is as participants in this dynamic tension that the friends receive and respond to each other morally. It is as partners in this dialectical back-and-forth that the friends receive and respond to other persons in their lives. Sharing a vision, then, is a matter of seeing in light

of what another sees, but it is a matter of seeing as a single, extended self. It is a matter of holding certain beliefs about the good, but it is a matter of wanting what is believed to be good with something of the same extended desire.

I write of desire as if it were something that passes from self to self like liquid through a porous membrane. I write as if desire were something whose exchange does not depend on the complex interworkings of belief, perception, imagination, and the like. The exchange of desire between selves *does* depend upon these activities: it is partly in the exercise of these activities that intentional desires are constituted. Still, I think it would be profitable to rest for awhile in our metaphorical thinking and ponder some of its implications.

Let us note explicitly that the sharing of a vision of the good will affect character-friends' perceptions, beliefs, desires, deliberations, choices, and so on, even when the two of them are apart. Even when they are not in each other's company, the friends will find themselves seeing with the same set of eyes, only now they will see as if the other were there, even though he is not. Or they will see in anticipation of what the other will see when the situation at hand is made present to him in description. Or, more profoundly, they will see in accordance with deep habits of shared perception which the two of them have cultivated in tandem. They will see, in effect, as they have taught each other to see.

Practical Moral Consequences

We noted at the beginning of this inquiry that the sharing of a vision of the good is only one of the many activities constitutive of the sharing of a life. It is only one of the threads which knit separate selves together into a single, extended self. Character-friends also share interests, pleasures and pains, deliberations, choices, and so on. The sharing of all such activities can contribute to the exercise of a shared moral agency. We are not in a position here to examine these other contributions to the sharing of moral agency. My hope is that we have said enough with respect to the sharing of vision, in particular, that we can now go on to consider some of the ethical implications of the broader notion of shared agency.

The way in which we image the self and the self's moral agency is in part a matter of choice. It is a matter of choice which bears important consequences for the shape of our lives in community. Let us ask ourselves what some of the practical moral consequences might be if we were to form our self-understandings in light of a concept of the self as extended and shared. The individualistic bias of conventional moral

discourse might lead to an immediate worry that the consequences will be negative.

We might fear that such an image of moral agency could encourage moral complacency. The adoption of a notion of shared selfhood could bring home to us the deep and pervasive ways in which our friends affect our persons. It could lead us to conclude that we have little control over the movements of our agencies-in-relation. It could lead us to conclude, accordingly, that we bear little responsibility for our judgments and our actions. How can I be held responsible for a decision to allow war-play when my decision is largely compelled by the desire of another? If I cannot help how Bryan's desire affects me, why should I bother to try?

Strangely, we are also prey to the converse fear that a notion of shared selfhood could cripple initiative by generating inordinate concern about the incalculable effects of our actions. Understanding and experiencing ourselves as extensible inter-selves could encourage us to take so seriously our complicity in each other's character-formation and action that we find ourselves paralyzed in a destructive excess of fear, shame, or compassion. How can I continue to press Bryan toward a change in his desire? What if my pressing forces a repression of healthy aggression? What if this repression issues forth in self-destructive behavior!

It would be unfortunate, indeed, if the notion of shared selfhood were construed in such a way that it seemed necessarily to promote either an unconcerned complacency, on the one hand, or an overly-concerned paralysis, on the other. Properly construed the notion of shared selfhood makes manifest that these consequences are wide of the mark. It also helps us discern the virtuous mean to which these extremes refer. We are, indeed, informed and shaped in profound ways by the persons with whom we share our lives. The boundaries between selves who share a life in common can and do become more and more passable and permeable over time, but this does not mean that we lose the capacity to choose deliberately how our extended selves will be formed. Neither does it mean that we are relieved of the responsibility for forming these selves well. It just means that the choices-in-relation which we make in the presence of the included other will be envisioned and executed in the midst of many overlapping and interpenetrating influences, some of which will not be subject to our control. It means that responsibility for our extended selves will have to be shared throughout these selves.

We are, for example, responsible to some extent for negative aspects of our friends' characters. We cannot force a friend with whom we share a self to undergo moral change in the interest of the larger self, but we can contribute day by day to the construction of our shared identity in

such a way that this change is made possible and encouraged. It is our responsibility to make this contribution. On the other hand, the friend *over there* whom we want from *over here* to change is already and inescapably part of us. He affects us even as we pull against his influence, even as we form an image of the change which we desire, even as we decide how best to secure this change. Our friend, accordingly, shares responsibility for the very way in which we envision and aim at the good of our extended self-in-relation. Choice is constrained, then, in the sharing of a single self as the beliefs, perceptions, and desires ingredient in choice are conditioned by the included other. Nevertheless, conditioned contributions to co-choice remain possible and we are responsible for these. We share responsibility with our friends for these.

We should not, however, fix ourselves so intently on our contributions to shared character that we succumb to an excess of fear, shame, or compassion. A *mean* with respect to fear seems appropriate. The power which we exercise in relation to others is awesome and should certainly give us pause, but an *extreme* of fear will inhibit any perception and promotion of each other's good. A *mean* with respect to shame and compassion seems appropriate as well. The good of our friends is ingredient in our own. It is natural and appropriate that we suffer together the loss of important human goods (including the good of honor), but an *extreme* of shame or compassion collapses the self into the immediacy of the included other's pain. It destroys that flexibility and extensibility of shared selfhood so essential to responsible deliberation in difference.

We should take seriously, then, the way in which our moral agencies are intertwined, but the recognition of our interconnectedness ought not to overwhelm us. A concept of shared selfhood can be of help to us in this regard. It can teach us what it is to remain characteristically vulnerable to the sharp contraction of the self in compassion and yet, at the same time, desirous of the space and perspective which a measure of separateness provides. It can teach us, accordingly, to promote more effectively our own and each other's good in concert.

It is not my purpose in this brief essay to offer an exhaustive study of the consequences which might attend the adoption of a concept of shared selfhood.[3] My purpose is simply to propose the concept so that we may try it on for size and see how it fits with our experiences and our considered moral reflections. My hope is that a trial fitting will lead us to take yet another look at the nature of the human self, the nature of the self's relationality, and the way in which this relationality conditions the exercise of moral agency.[4] Many of us (especially, but not exclusively, many of the women among us) do understand and experience ourselves

in something of the way that I have begun to describe. This understanding and experience should be given a more prominent voice in professional ethical discussions.

Perhaps we are afraid, for reasons philosophical or personal, to let the neat, hard boundaries which we have constructed between our separate selves soften and make possible a more fluid interaction and interpenetration between selves. If we fail, however, in thought and in practise, to take seriously the perplexities of boundary permeation and mutual infiltration, we will fail to construct an ethic which answers adequately to the experiences of persons who share their lives deeply with one another. We will fail adequately to value and promote the fullness of relational experience. We will fail, accordingly, to promote the fruits of such experience.[5]

Notes

1. See Ruth L. Smith, "Feminism and the Moral Subject," in *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 235-50.

2. The term *character-friend* is used in John M. Cooper, "Aristotle on Friendship," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 301-40.

3. I explore additional consequences in *Compassion for Friends in Friendship with God* (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1990).

4. We must move beyond analyses of one-to-one relationships and seek to elucidate the workings of more expansive and inclusive inter-agencies.

5. I am grateful to Giles Milhaven for his contribution to this project.

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