

Who Owns What and What For?

Larry Harwood

Bodies are like fences. In our world they partition humanity into individual humans and they serve to distinguish us from each other. Generally speaking we do not regard this individuation as a limitation upon our interaction with other individuals. In other words, my being me and you being you does not of itself hinder friendship or relationship, but it does provoke the question of our relationship to each other. Moreover, while not regarding our separateness as an obstacle to human relationship, we can regard it as making relationship possible. Our individual identity, if recognized and respected as such, is the condition for community in which there is meaning in saying: «Love your neighbor as yourself,» or «Do unto others as you would have them do to you.» Or for those not Christian, but Confucian, in the Analects it is written «Is there anyone word,» asked a disciple, «which could be adopted as a lifelong rule of conduct?» The Master [Confucius] replied «Is not sympathy the word? Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.» In the context of this pluralism we are separate and distinct, but nevertheless sometimes unequal, other times equal. It is notable therefore that separateness and distinctness do not by themselves ensure equal treatment-sometimes they provoke discrimination-but they do provide two things (a self and another self) upon which relationships of equality become possible and intelligible. Therefore, the maintenance of distinct persons who are not all one is a necessary first step toward community, because the distinction of separateness presents the reality of something outside of our separate self, which is not our self, but an «other.»

In this paper I shall contend that while being hospitable to others necessitates the welcoming of others in our lives, the maintenance of individual selves is the condition for a genuine relationship of hospitality. Furthermore, what we give to another in such a relationship is truly given because it is «another» to which we give. Therefore, the reciprocation that occurs in a relationship of mutual hospitality may indeed symbolize the two or more as one, such as in the marriage ceremony, but without the distinction the oneness is meaningless.

Recognition of and respect for persons other than self forces us to come to terms in a community, in a way that if we were all one, would not be necessary. In short, because we are not the all or the Plotinian «One,» we need to comport ourselves in some reasonable manner with others. The denial that there are ultimately others can be dangerous and frightening, as when Nietzsche's Zarathustra announces that the Übermensch will have nothing denied to him, because there is nothing to dictate to him outside of himself

- and this for Zarathustra, is the ultimate liberation: «For me - how could there be an outside - of me? There is no outside.» This is the ultimate form of me-ism possession - in which an all-consuming passion for possession acknowledges no «other.» Assertions of ontological pluralism are therefore the enemy of the monopolist or the totalitarian who would claim to own the rights of all for himself.

The relationship of separate selves, even in community, will therefore have to be approached with extreme care, so as to ultimately guard against a kind of totalitarianism that would swallow individuals. To avoid this, the freedom of the individual to some degree must be recognized and maintained. In the so-called Postmodern age this issue is further accentuated when reference to others is almost synonymous with the emphasis upon diversity and multiculturalism that follows from admitting, permitting and allowing «others» to be different from us, without insistence upon a choking conformity. In this age melting pots and meta-narratives are looked upon with suspicion; local and ethnic particulars are welcomed and wanted. In a social or political sense this phenomenon is an exhibition of democracy in action-to some. The fear of others, however, is that the wholesale and uncompromising acceptance of too much difference is ultimately fragmentary to a cohesive community. The relationship between freedom, difference and democracy is often contentious.

The argument for individuals starts with our bodies and the rights of individuals start with the rights of the body, as in Locke. We view violation of bodies, to include crimes such as assault, rape, torture and murder as constituting a class of crimes we view as especially heinous, because there is something about our bodies that is ours and that belongs to no one else. They belong to us in the first place. (I will qualify this later) Even the prostitute «sells» what is his or hers, though the despotic pimp steals from it. We refer to our private parts, which we do not share with just anybody. Consent is important in interaction between bodies, and without it, we have not only contentions but crimes. Persons are not called up for Platonic relationships, but for wandering and uninvited hands. Consent and the absence of coercion are all important here, thus necessitating some requirement for the negative «freedom from» rights that we cherish in a democracy. We tend to be protective, even possessive about our bodies because we deem that our bodies are ours and are only shared with those to whom we extend permission. In case there is doubt here, this is not an argument by extension for abortion, but rather for the protection, indeed the sanctity, and protection of life - individual life.

This is not all there is to say however. While material bodies may make us distinct as individuals and reflect our boundaries and moreover make community possible, they do not define us. I would say if they do, then we have been defined badly, though perhaps correctly. We can recall Christ's story of the rich man and the poor beggar in the New Testament. There was no community between them. The poor man sits outside the rich man's estate, starving, while the rich man's fence within his other fence cannot contain his own bumper crop of grain, so the rich man makes his grain storage facilities bigger. This man is today remembered, not for what he had, but rather for what he did not do with his plenty. This illustrates the fact that humans are not, except in a crass materialistic sense, evaluated by their possessions, but by what they do or do not do with what they have. Furthermore, to a great degree happiness seems independent of what we have, though to look at most of us you would think we know exactly what we are doing, by the diligence with which we do it.

For my part, I would not care to live on Walden Pond, but Thoreau does have a point - most humans do lead lives of quiet desperation - making the fences more and higher and stronger. This is

despite the fact, however, that what we own that is most prized and should be, is not our physical or material components. So why are we so insistent that what is ours be protected? Is there a mistake here? In his famous work *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis has a senior devil instruct a junior devil

That the sense of ownership in general, is always to be encouraged. The humans are always putting up claims to ownership which sound equally funny in Heaven and in Hell, and we must keep them doing so. « Much of the modern resistance to chastity comes from men's belief that they «own» their bodies - those vast and perilous estates, pulsating with the energy that made the worlds, in which they find themselves without their consent and from which they are ejected at the pleasure of Another. It is as if a royal child whom his father has placed, for love's sake, in titular command of some great province, under the real rule of wise counselors, should come to fancy he really owns the cities, the forests, and the corn, in the same way as he owns the bricks on the nursery floor¹

If Lewis is correct, I shall have to qualify my earlier statement about self-ownership - that is, as Christians we do not own ourselves. We are not therefore, autonomous, so we need to be careful with fences we put around ourselves, because we may be claiming God's property as our own. Furthermore, all kinds of traditional divisions of people are contested in the Christian ethic. The most notorious, perhaps, is the injunction of Christ to love one's enemies. Thus, as owned by God, we have been bought and paid for to serve others as God has served us. We are under obligation to God, but what are we to make of this, in light of our allegiance to the protecting theory of liberal individualistic democracy? In that theory our requirement for permission extends all the way up to whom we will allow to rule over us. Is our theory of liberal individualism and democracy in conflict with such Christian values as hospitality?

Furthermore, it is also the case that Christ joins himself to humanity. Moreover, what Christ does for humanity, he does for humanity as strangers. Christ gave his own for someone else. In the New Testament there is reference to «While we were yet sinners, [estranged from God] Christ died for us.» In short, Christ died for strangers; at which point we have not even asked Him to do; He does first and then we reel. We remember the Roman soldier at the cross of Christ, who, when the sky blackens, says «Truly this man was the Son of God.» Christ died for strangers; He forgives strangers at the Cross: «Father forgive them they know not what they do.» In other words, Christ is the initiator; he does what He does without being asked. He does not wait. He does for people who do not, at the time He does what He does, know Him. God in Christ has already provided for human need. He knocks on doors before we knock on His. Furthermore, He says, you didn't choose me, I chose you. So the fence between God and ourselves comes down - because God brings it down.

In some sense, this is why, in contrast to our democratic political arrangement, where we rule, in this arrangement God leads and people follow, but in what I said previously, there appears to be too much emphasis on the individual. Here the individual can appear stand-offish by such a stance and look suspiciously on «others,» even to the point of the Sartean quip that «Hell is other people.» (Sartre, I would suggest, had never read Robert Byrd's haunting story *Alone*, where Byrd recounts his experience of being without other people at the South Pole).

But coupled with the need and necessity for other people, we must remember our need for distinction and yes, separation. Furthermore, we must remember the order of our human history. That is, liberal democracy is a late historically development, precious but precarious. Of course it has antecedents here and there in early history, but it is a form of government arising from the dissatisfactions with earlier arrangements in which the individual had little to no freedom. This historical ordering of democracy is analogous to the ordering of Greek mythology and Greek philosophy. Moreover, it has often been the case that religious motivations have been the catalyst for democracies.

NOTE

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 97-98.

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