Chapter II

ASYMMETRICAL RECIPROCITY:
ON MORAL RESPECT, WONDER, AND
ENLARGED THOUGHT

Perhaps, first of all, however, one must ask oneself, in a manner that is in some way absolutely preliminary: What is the relation between a language and giving-taking in general? The definition of language, of a language, as well as of the text in general, cannot be formed without a certain relation to the gift, to giving-taking and so forth, having been involved there in advance.

—Jacques Derrida

IN EVERYDAY moral discourse it is common for people to enjoin one another to think about an issue from the point of view of others before drawing conclusions about what is right or just. Those discussing issues of a just health care policy in the United States, for example, might say that people who now get low-cost health insurance coverage through their place of work should imagine themselves in the situation of those low-wage or part-time workers who receive no health care coverage at all. The injunction to look at an issue from the point of view of others differently situated is often effective in pulling people away from selfishness or parochialism in their reasoning about moral issues. For this reason, the ordinary language appeal "Just look at it from their position" is often an important move in moral discourse where people try to reach conclusions about what is right, good, or just.

When this rough-and-ready appeal to look at issues from the point of view of others is systematized into a moral theory, however, problems may arise. In her elaboration and revision of Habermas's theory of communicative ethics, Seyla Benhabib performs one such systematization. She conceptualizes moral respect as a relation of symmetry between self and other, and she thinks of moral reciprocity as entailing that the perspectives of self and other are reversible. I agree with Benhabib's overall project of elaborating a communicative ethics that recognizes difference and particularity. I argue in this essay, however, that identifying moral respect with a reversibility and symmetry of perspectives impedes that project. It is neither possible nor morally desirable for persons engaged in moral interaction to adopt one another's standpoint.

I develop a concept of asymmetrical reciprocity as an alternative to this notion of symmetrical reciprocity developed by Benhabib. A communicative ethics should develop an account of the nonsubstitutable relation of moral subjects. Each participant in a communication situation is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical. A theory of communication as leading to moral judgment should attend more to the structure of gifts and questions than does Habermas's theory of communication; this structure of gifts and questions expresses the asymmetrical reciprocity between communicating subjects. A communicative theory of moral respect should distinguish between taking the perspective of other people into account, on the one hand, and imaginatively taking their positions, on the other hand. Through dialogue people sometimes understand each other across difference without reversing perspectives or identifying with each other. The distinctive and asymmetrical positioning of people discussing moral or political issues, finally, forms the best basis for understanding why dialogue with others produces what Arendt, following Kant, calls the "enlarged thought" that moves people from their merely subjective understanding of issues to a moral objective judgment.

MORAL RESPECT CONCEIVED AS SYMMETRICAL RECIPROCITY

In her cogent and inspiring book, Situating the Self, Seyla/Benhabib endorses the basic outlines of Habermas's discourse ethics. She argues with Habermas that modern universalist norms of egalitarian reciprocity make explicit norms embedded in everyday speech. She follows him in seeking to construct an account of relations of moral respect as arising from dialogue in which persons aim to reach understanding.

Benhabib incorporates feminist and postmodern criticisms of Habermas, however, into her formulations of discourse ethics. Habermas believes that universalizable moral norms are generated through a dialogic process in which participants leave behind their particular experiences, perspectives, and feelings. In his version of communicative ethics, the dialogic process leads to the formulation of general principles on which all can agree, whatever their particular experience or point of view. While Benhabib does not reject this standpoint of the "generalized other," she wishes to supplement it with activities of judgment that preserve the "standpoint of the concrete other." She endorses the universality of modern moral theory but insists that it include respect for concrete particular others in their narrative contexts, and not simply adherence to generalized principles that apply to all equally. She invokes Hannah Arendt's notion of enlarged thought, which "enjoins us to view each
person as one to whom I owe the moral respect to consider their standpoint” (p. 136).

Habermas shares with Rawls and many other moral theorists the idea that moral dialogue requires people to adopt a standpoint of impartiality toward all particular experiences, and assert to only those principles and judgments that are consistent with that impartial standpoint. Benhabib proposes to arrive at similar results by theorizing that moral subjects reverse their particular standpoints in dialogical moral reasoning. The stance of moral respect, according to Benhabib, arises from putting oneself in the place of others. Equal respect for the situation and point of view of others requires being able to reverse positions with each of them. Benhabib suggests that parents teach children their stance of symmetrical reciprocity whenever they admonish them to imagine how they would feel if another child did that to them.

According to Benhabib, for a person to acknowledge others to be as valuable, morally, as herself means that she understands their positions as symmetrical and reversible.

Universality enjoins us to reverse perspectives among members of a moral community and judge them from the point of view of the others(s). Such reversibility is essential to the ties of reciprocity that bind communities together, (p. 32)

All communicative action entails symmetry and reciprocity of normative expectations among group members, (p. 32)

To characterize moral judgment, Benhabib adopts Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of Kant’s notion of "enlarged thought." Such judgment should not be understood as applying general moral principles to particular cases, she suggests, but more specifically as reflection on the basis of the contextualized narratives of moral subjects. A person is able to make judgments that take the needs and interests of everyone equally into account, according to Benhabib, because she has imaginatively represented to herself the point of view of all those others. The enlarged thought of moral judgment, she says,

requires for its successful exercise the ability to take the standpoint of the other. . . . The more perspectives we are able to present to ourselves, all the more are we likely to appreciate the possible act-descriptions through which others will identify deeds. Finally, the more we are able to think from the perspective of others, all the more can we make vivid to ourselves the narrative histories of others involved, (p. 137)

With Benhabib, I agree that communicative ethics is a fruitful framework for moral theory, partly because it is so directly linked to the values of democracy. With a communicative ethics I agree that norms of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity are expressed implicitly in ordinary situations of discussion where people aim to reach understanding. I also endorse the idea that moral and political norms are best tested by actual dialogue in which multiple needs, interests, and perspectives are represented. I agree, moreover, with the direction of Benhabib’s critique of Habermas’s approach to communicative ethics. With her I wish to develop an account of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity that depends less than his on unity and consensus and attends more to the specific differences among people. I believe, however, that identifying moral respect and reciprocity with symmetry and reversibility of perspectives tends to close off the differentiation among subjects that Benhabib wants to keep open.

In this essay I criticize the idea that moral respect entails being able to adopt the standpoint of others. Instead of an ideal of symmetrical reciprocity between moral subjects, I offer an ideal of asymmetrical reciprocity. Moral respect between people entails reciprocity between them, in the sense that each acknowledges and takes account of the other. But their relation is asymmetrical in terms of the history each has and the social position they occupy. I offer the practice of giving gifts as an illustration of this asymmetry. From Luce Irigaray I take over the value of wonder in ethical relations, and I suggest that a theory of communicative action should give more attention to questions as a way of expressing moral respect. I argue that the assumption of asymmetrical reciprocity facilitates a better interpretation of Hannah Arendt’s notion of "enlarged thought” than an interpretation that assumes the possibility and desirability of taking the standpoint of other people.

THREE STORIES OF IRREVERSIBILITY

Before I develop a conceptual critique of the idea of moral respect as taking the other person’s standpoint, I propose to render the idea intuitively problematic through some stories. In each of them some people attempt or claim to take the perspective of others differently situated as an element in their reasoning about a moral issue. As I interpret the stories, I will consider the very attempt of some to take the standpoint of others risks not respecting them.

I’d Rather Be Dead Than Crippled

When the state of Oregon first proposed its priorities for state funding of health care services, it denied people with disabilities reimbursement for some treatments or procedures for which it would reimburse able-bodied people. Anita Silvers reports that state officials gave people with disabilities lower priority because they believed the lives of people with
disabilities are less important. Officials thought that they had objective grounds for this judgment because they had conducted a telephone survey of Oregon citizens as a means of determining the qualitative grounds for their priorities. Among other things, this survey of able-bodied people asked them to put themselves in the situation of a person in a wheelchair, or a blind or deaf person. The majority of respondents said that they would rather be dead than wheelchair-bound or blind. They said that their lives would not be worth living if they became disabled. This claim was the grounds for a political judgment that health services for people with disabilities would not be subsidized in the same way as those for able-bodied people. Because these regulations were found to violate the Americans with Disabilities Act, eventually they had to be changed.

Silvers points out that the actual statistics of suicide among people with disabilities are rather low. People with disabilities usually think that their lives are quite worth living, and they strongly wish to have discriminatory impediments removed so they can live those lives as well as possible. Generally speaking, able-bodied people simply fail to understand the lives and issues of people with disabilities. When asked to put themselves in the position of a person in a wheelchair, they do not imagine the point of view of others; rather, they project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves. Thus, more often than not, well-meaning, able-bodied people seeking to understand and communicate with a disabled person express the patronizing attitudes of pity that so enrage many people with disabilities. As I will discuss later, with careful listening able-bodied people can learn to understand important aspects of the lives and perspective of people with disabilities. This is a very different matter from imaginatively occupying their standpoint, however, and may require explicit acknowledgment of the impossibility of such a reversal.

"Going Native"

Since the time of their first European contacts, the indigenous peoples of North America have been constructed by whites as romanticized figures. The white imagination of the Indian is of course complex, contradictory, and variable. One rather stable image is of the Indian as a noble authentic relation to nature, with a deep and meaningful social, cultural, and religious life. The Indian is noble, strong, blessed, and whole, in contrast to the fragmentation, mechanism, and commercialism characteristic of life in white society.

Some white people seek to see the world from the perspective of a particular Indian group. Some wish to know their stories, songs, and rituals, and some wish to practice those rituals themselves. According to a report on National Public Radio aired in the fall of 1993, some white Americans are practicing religious rituals derived from the Lakota. The movement has become so popular that when some Lakota recently climbed one of their traditional sacred mountains in the Black Hills to perform a fall ceremony, a large group of white devotees was already encamped there. Some of the Indians interviewed expressed sadness more than anger; they insisted that however sincerely the whites wish to see the world from an Indian perspective and perform rituals properly, they cannot adopt an Indian standpoint because they lack the personal and group history.

More generally, many Indians are suspicious of white efforts to take their standpoint, reverse perspectives with them, because they believe that such a desire is at least partly motivated by a fanciful longing to compensate for a perceived cultural poverty of white society. If whites sometimes wish to enter Indian culture because of their own romanticization of Indians as having a "richer" culture, then white desire to understand an Indian perspective may be a form of cultural imperialism. Many Indians would prefer a stance of respectful distance in which whites acknowledge that they cannot reverse perspectives with Indians today and thus must listen carefully across this distance.

Getting It

When Anita Hill claimed she had been sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas, many men, including several senators questioning her, did not believe her. How could she have experienced the violations and indignities she claims and not have filed any complaint at the time, continued to work with the perpetrator, and even gone with him to another position? Men who put themselves in Hill's alleged position knew that they would never have remained silent and compliant. But many women told these men that they just did not "get it," that their sexual privilege prevents them from understanding the reasoning and motives of an ambitious career woman being sexually harassed by her boss.

Many white feminists claimed that they did "get it," and claimed Anita Hill as a martyr for feminism. They were baffled when some African American women denied the ability of white feminists to take Hill's standpoint; at least on issues of sexual harassment, many white feminists thought, women's interests and experiences are symmetrical. But even many African American women who believed Hill were nevertheless sympathetic to Thomas's claim that he was being subject to a "high-tech lynching." For them, unlike for many white feminists, the case did not concern sexual harassment "pure and simple," but a complex racial drama in which once again white society was acting out its fears and
power struggles through the body of a black man. There are certainly dynamics of sexual privilege between African American men and women, but when these come before a white public they are so intertwined with the dynamics of racism that other women simply cannot take the perspective of African American women.

I develop three arguments against the claim that moral respect requires that each of us should take the perspectives of all the others in making our moral judgments. First, this idea of a symmetry in our relation obscures the difference and particularity of the other position. Second, it is ontologically impossible for people in one social position to adopt the perspective of those in the social positions with which they are related in social structures and interaction. The idea that moral respect involves taking the other person's point of view, finally, can have politically undesirable consequences.

**Obscures Difference**

The ideas of symmetry and reversibility that Benhabib relies on evoke images of mirror reflection. The images of symmetry and reversibility suggest that people are able to understand one another's perspectives because, while not identical, they are similarly shaped, and for that reason replaceable with one another. The mirroring evoked by the ideas of symmetry and reversibility suggests that we are able to understand one another because we are able to see ourselves reflected in the other people and find that they see themselves reflected in us. But such images of reflection and substitutability, I suggest, support a conceptual projection of sameness among people and perspectives, at the expense of their differences.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray warns against what she calls "the blind spot of an old dream of symmetry." Specifically with reference to sexual difference, she suggests that the desire for a symmetrical relation with another person denies the other's difference. The gender system structuring Western culture and philosophy presents the feminine others as complementing the masculine subject position, creating for it a wholeness, completeness, and return to origins. Woman functions as a mirror in which the male subject can see himself objectified, bounded, and determinate. In the specular relation of phallocentric logic the self puts himself in the place of the other in order to return reflectively to himself. But this circular relation displaces and silences the other as she might speak in a different, incommensurate register.

Irigaray's argument refers specifically to sexual difference. It can easily be extended, however, to any structured social difference, whether of sex, class, race, or religion. People who are different in such social positionings are not so totally other that they can see no similarities and overlaps in their lives, and they often stand in multivalent relations with one another. It makes little sense, however, to describe their similarities and relations as symmetrical, as mirroring one another or reversible.

Much of my argument in this essay refers to the difficulties of reversing positions across such socially structured difference, which also usually involves relations of privilege and oppression. A similar logic applies, however, to the differences among individuals in which structured social difference is not so obvious. While individuals may have many things they take to be comparable among them, they could rarely be said to share everything. Even when they find their relations defined by similarly socially structured differences of gender, race, class, nation, or religion, individuals usually also find many ways in which they are strange to one another. Individuals bring different life histories, emotional habits, and life plans to relationships, which make their positions irreversible. It closes off the creative exchange these differences might produce with one another if we consider them symmetrical and suggest that despite serious divergences in their experiences and values, one person can put herself in the place of another.

As Irigaray's analysis suggests, moreover, the result of the effort to see others as symmetrical with myself may sometimes be that I project onto them a perspective that complements my own. The perspective of the other can too easily be represented as the self's other represented to itself—its fantasies, desires, and fears. As Melissa Orlie puts it, "When one presumes to adopt another perspective without reflection on the boundaries of one's own body and location, more often than not one simply imposes the view from there upon another. Indeed, this is a principal way of bolstering one's location and demonstrates the effects involved in doing so. In such cases, one's own view arrogates another's and thus threatens to violate or do away with it altogether." I suggest that such projection happened in each of the cases I narrate above. As Benhabib herself says, the only correction to such misrepresentation of the standpoint of others is their ability to tell me that I am wrong about them.

Neither the concreteness nor the otherness of the "concrete other" can be known in the absence of the voice of the other. The viewpoint of the concrete other emerges as distinct only as a result of self-definition. It is the other who makes us aware of both her concreteness and her
otherness. Without engagement, confrontation, dialogue and even a "struggle for recognition," in the Hegelian sense, we tend to constitute the otherness of the other by projection and fantasy or ignore it in indifference. (p. 168)

If the best expression of moral respect is willingness to listen to others express their needs and perspectives, however, then why do we need the idea that moral respect requires being able to imagine oneself in the position of others?

**Impossibility of Reversing Positions**

Benhabib appeals to a Hegelian logic of the relation of self and other to explicate the meaning of reversing perspective. "To know how to sustain an ongoing human relationship," she says,

means to know what it means to be an 'I' and a "me," to know that I am an "other" to you and that, likewise, you are an "I" to yourself and an "other" to me. Hegel had named this structure that of "reciprocal recognition." Communicative actions are actions through which we sustain such human relationships. The development of this capacity for reversing perspectives and the development of the capacity to assume the moral point of view are intimately linked, (p. 52)

I believe that this passage, interpreted in light of the earlier cited passage on reversibility, wrongly reduces reciprocal recognition to an ontological concept of a reversibility of standpoints. To recognize the other person is to acknowledge that she is an "I" to herself just as I am an "I" to myself and that I am an "other" to her just as she is an "other" to me. This structure of reciprocal recognition is indeed a condition of communicative action. But this structure neither describes nor presupposes a reversibility of standpoints. In fact, it precludes such reversibility because it describes how each standpoint is constituted by its internal relations to other standpoints.

The theory of subjectivity Benhabib refers to in this passage holds that each person's identity is a product of her interactive relations with others. Through my interaction with others I experience how I am an "other" for them, and I internalize this objectification to myself through others in the formulation of my own self-conception. By this knowledge that they have a perspective on me that is different from my immediate experience of myself, I experience them as subjects, as 'I's. This relation of self and other, however, is specifically asymmetrical and irreversible, even though it is reciprocal.

The reciprocal recognition by which I know that I am other for you just as you are other for me cannot entail a reversibility of perspectives, precisely because our positions are partly constituted by the perspectives each of us has on the others. Think of the relation of mother and daughter. Mother and daughter usually share social positions of gender, race, class, nation, and so on. They often have much in common in their tastes, experiences, and opinions. The relation of mother and daughter is nevertheless asymmetrical and irreversible, in at least two respects. First, the asymmetry of age and generation give each a different perspective on their common world and their relationship. Second, their relationship is itself internally constituted by the asymmetry of positioning between them and the desires and projections that produces. While they may be very close, mother and daughter are also strange to one another, surprised at how it seems they are for the other.

Who we are is constituted to a considerable extent by the relations in which we stand to others, along with our past experience of our relations with others. Thus the standpoint of each of us in a particular situation is partly a result of our experience of the other people's perspectives on us. It is hard to see how any of us could suspend our perspective mediated by our relations to others, in order to adopt their perspectives mediated by their relation to us. The infinity of the dialectical process of selves in relation to others both makes it impossible to suspend our own positioning and leaves an excess of experiences when I try to put myself in the other person's place.9

It is true that one of the important moral lessons I learn from an encounter with other people is how I look to them, and this knowledge can carry me beyond my immediate standpoint. It does not carry me into the standpoint of the other person, however, but only into a mediated relation between us. I do not think that we want to characterize our mediated perspectival encounter as each of us reversing positions with the others, because this neglects to conceptualize the relation between us. In the last section I shall argue that taking account of the relation among perspectives, as well as of the perspectives, yields the best interpretation of the "enlarged thought" that moral judgment involves.

Politically Suspect

My final criticism of the idea that moral respect in dialogical interaction involves taking the other's point of view is a political argument. Many contexts of moral interaction and political conflict involve members of socially and culturally differentiated groups that also stand in specific relations of privilege and oppression with respect to one another. In
these contexts the social position of one group is denned by its differentiation from another or others, and where those are relations of privilege and oppression, this is also part of the definition. Earlier I argued that the idea of reversing perspectives is incoherent because each perspective is partly constituted by the response to the perspectives of other perspectives on it. Where the perspectives are also constituted by relations of privilege and oppression, it is even more difficult to envision that one of these perspectives can take the perspective of the other.

In each of the examples I narrated above, those who attempt to adopt the standpoint of others stand in a relation of social privilege to those whose perspective they claim to adopt.

As I suggested earlier, when people obey the injunction to put themselves in the position of others, they too often put themselves, with their own particular experiences and privileges, in the positions they see the others. When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation.

The social fact of structural privilege and oppression, moreover, creates the possibility of falsifying projection. Damaging stereotypes and ideologies often mediate between relations between men and women, between Christians and Muslims, between European Americans and African Americans. These ideologies and images often function to legitimate the privileges of the privileged groups and to undermine the self-respect of those in oppressed groups. When members of privileged groups imaginatively try to represent to themselves the perspective of members of oppressed groups, too often those representations carry projections and fantasies through which the privileged reinforce a complementary image of themselves.

The idea of reversing perspectives assumes that the perspectives brought to a situation are equally legitimate. Where structured social injustice exists, this may not be true. The perspective of those who maintain privilege under an unjust status quo does not have legitimacy in the same way as that of those who suffer the injustices. Even under conditions of injustice, the interests and perspectives of those who belong to privileged groups should not be disregarded: moral respect does require that everyone’s perspective be taken into account. But asking the oppressed to reverse perspectives with the privileged in adjudicating a conflict may itself be an injustice and an insult.

The injunction to take the other person’s standpoint is supposed to aid communication. It may in fact impede it, however. If you think you already know how the other people feel and judge because you have imaginatively represented their perspective to yourself, then you may not listen to their expression of their perspective very openly. If you think you can look at things from their point of view, then you may avoid the sometimes arduous and painful process in which they confront you with your prejudices, fantasies, and misunderstandings about them, which you have because of your point of view. If you enter a dialogue with all the best intentions of taking the other people’s perspectives, and then in the course of the discussion they express anger and frustration at you for misunderstanding their position, you are likely to become defensive and shut down the dialogue. It is more appropriate to approach a situation of communicative interaction for the purpose of arriving at a moral or political judgment with a stance of moral humility. In moral humility one starts with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other person’s perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences. If I assume that there are aspects of where the other person is coming from that I do not understand, I will be more likely to be open to listening to the specific expression of their experience, interests, and claims. Indeed, one might say that this is what listening to a person means.

I agree with Benhabib that communicative ethics is a fruitful framework for moral theory, partly because it is so directly linked to the values of democracy. I agree that norms of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity are expressed implicitly in ordinary situations of discussion where people aim to reach understanding. I also endorse the idea that moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, however, that uses a language and concepts that more precisely express the specific differences among people than do identifying terms like symmetry, reversibility, and imaginatively occupying the position of others.

Thus I propose to understand communicative action as involving an asymmetrical reciprocity among subjects, rather than the symmetrical reciprocity Benhabib theorizes. Moral respect does indeed entail reciprocity. Communicating parties mutually recognize one another. In a stance of moral respect, each party must recognize that others have irreducible points of view, and active interests that respectful interaction must
consider. Free social cooperation requires that each acknowledge that the others are ends in themselves and not means only. Such mutual acknowledgment is the meaning of moral equality.

This reciprocity of equal respect and acknowledgment of one another; however, entails an acknowledgment of an asymmetry between subjects. While there may be many similarities and points of contact between them, each position and perspective transcends the others, goes beyond their possibility to share or imagine. Participants in communicative interaction are in a relation of approach. They meet across distance of time and space and can touch, share, overlap their interests. But each brings to the relationships a history and structured positioning that makes them different from one another, with their own shape, trajectory, and configuration of forces.

I derive the idea of asymmetrical reciprocity from a reading of both Emmanuel Levinas's and Luce Irigaray's understanding of ethical relations between people. Levinas criticizes the philosophical impulse to reduce the communicative relation between ethical subjects to a common measure or comparability. While comparing the situation and desert of agents according to some standard of equality is ultimately necessary for theorizing justice, prior to such comparison there is a moment of respect for the particular embodied sensitivity of the person. In this moment of recognition other people’s concrete positions are asymmetrical. While people may be in touch and their communication may construct relationships of similarity or solidarity between them, their positions are nevertheless irreducible and irreversible. The ethical relation is also asymmetrical in the sense that opening onto the other person is always a gift, the trust to communicate cannot await the other person's promise to reciprocate, or the conversation will never begin.\(^\text{11}\)

In *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray speaks of the need for an interval separating self and others in order for them to meet and communicate. I understand the ethic of sexual difference as a paradigm of subject differentiation and specificity of any sort. This ethical relation is structured not by a willingness to reverse positions with others, but by respectful distancing from and approach toward them. Speakers cannot communicate unless there is a space differentiating them and across which they communicate. Nancy Love suggests that we conceptualize reaching understanding as a mode of being with rather than being in one another’s place, and that we take seriously metaphors of voice rather than metaphors of sight evoked by symmetry: "Individuals cannot 'stand inside' another's world and adopt their 'worldview,' nor should they try to do so. However, they can communicate across the distance and their differences. Voice crosses, even while it respects, boundaries."\(^\text{12}\)

Communication is a creative enterprise that presupposes an irreplaceability of each person's perspective, so that each learns something new, beyond herself or himself, from interaction with the others. Quoting from Irigaray: "The interval would never be crossed. . . . One sex is not entirely consumable by the other. There is always a remainder."\(^\text{13}\) And, "the locomotion toward and reduction in interval are the moments of desire (even by expansion-interaction). The greater the desire, the greater the tendency to overcome the interval while at the same time retaining it."\(^\text{14}\)

Thus I propose at least two important ways that the perspectives of subjects are asymmetrical. First, each has its own temporality. Irigaray's description of the interval should be heard as involving time as well as space. Each subject position has its own history, which transcends the copresence of subjects in communication. Each person brings to a communication situation the particular experiences, assumptions, meanings, symbolic associations, and so on, that emerge from a particular history, most of which lies as background to the communicating situation. One person can relate some of his or her history to another, thus bringing the other to understand more of what he or she is assuming and what particular ideas and situations mean in the context of his or her history. But that history is inexhaustible, always subject to possible retelling in new contexts. For this reason and because of its temporal difference, one person cannot adopt another person's perspective because he or she cannot live another person's history. To the extent that groups define an identity through constructing a history, the same is true of relations among groups.

In the context of the story I told above, for example, history is a major source of asymmetry between European Americans and Native Americans. Most Native Americans carry a different cultural and religious history than do European Americans, even though for most there is also considerable overlap with the recent history of European Americans. Many Native Americans have grown up seeing certain rituals and practices performed, and their elders have taught them mythical and real stories that connect them with Indian histories. Even if hegemonic culture did not operate to segregate some knowledge of these Native histories from other Americans, European Americans would still be distant from the socializing experience of such personal and group history.

Second, asymmetry refers also to the specificity of position. As I discussed earlier with regard to the Hegelian ontology of self and other,
each social position is structured by the configuration of relationships among positions. Persons may flow and shift among structured social positions, and the positions themselves may flow and shift, but the positions cannot be plucked from their contextualized relations and substituted for one another. The image of a reversibility of positions may assume an unfortunate binarism: it is either one or the other. If we recognize that subject positions and perspectives are multiply structured in relation to many other positions, however, the specificity and irreversibility of each location is more obvious. Thus the Hill-Thomas example offers the overdetermination of such multiple positions, each of which is defined partly by its relation to the others, and thus none of which is reversible with any of the others: African American man in relation to white ruling-class man, working-class African American woman in relation to professional African American woman, white middle-class woman in relation to African American professional woman, and so on. The Hill-Thomas situation is structured by the relation among all these positions at once. Thus there are many perspectives on its meaning, none of which can be substituted for the others.

UNDERSTANDING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

The purpose of theorizing moral respect as involving people putting themselves in one another's places is to give an account of how we can understand one another, so that we can take one another's perspective into account when making moral judgments. But I have argued that we cannot put ourselves in one another's places, and that trying to do so may sometimes lead to misunderstanding. It would seem to follow from this argument that we cannot understand each other. Thus it would seem that there is no point in trying to take account of the perspective of others in making moral and political judgments. I do not believe, however, that my argument leads to this conclusion. Understanding across difference is both possible and necessary. Recognizing the asymmetry of subjects, however, does imply giving a different account of what understanding is and what makes it possible.

We often think that understanding another person's point of view or situation involves finding things in common between us. I listen to the other person, or observe his or her interactions and environment, and then I compare this with my own experience to find similarity. Sometimes to find the similarity I must take my experience apart and put it together in a different way, or I must draw inferences from my experience. But the way I come to understand the other person is by constructing identification and reversibility between us, which means I am never really transcending my own experience.

But we can interpret understanding others as sometimes getting out of ourselves and learning something new. Communication is sometimes a creative process in which the other person offers a new expression, and I understand it not because I am looking for how it fits with given paradigms, but because I am open and suspend my assumptions in order to listen. Sometimes communication that reaches understanding is like a game in which people make new moves that cannot be anticipated by the rules, but which are understood as part of the game and carry it forward. Other people offer me new variations, new modalities on some practice or action or situation that is related to but beyond my experience. They explain to me their aims and presuppositions and events that have happened to them, and I come to understand their valuation because they have explained to me these aims and presuppositions. In the next section I invoke the idea of wonder to describe being open to something new.

Thus the ethical relation of asymmetrical reciprocity looks like this. We meet and communicate. We mutually recognize one another and aim to understand one another. Each is open to such understanding by recognizing our asymmetry. A condition of our communication is that we acknowledge the difference, interval, that others drag behind them shadows and histories, scars and traces, that do not become present in our communication. Thus we each must be open to learning about the other person's perspective, since we cannot take the other person's standpoint and imagine that perspective as our own. This implies that we have the moral humility to acknowledge that even though there may be much I do understand about the other person's perspective through her communication to me and through the constructions we have made common between us, there is also always a remainder, much that I do not understand about the other person's experience and perspective. I can listen to a person in a wheelchair explain her feelings about her work, frustrations she has with transportation access. Her descriptions of her life and the relation of her physical situation to the social possibilities available to her will point out aspects of her situation that I would not have thought of without her explanation. In this way I come to an understanding of her point of view. I can even spend a day living in a wheelchair in order better to understand the difficulties and social position of a person in a wheelchair. The more I understand about the multiple aspects of her life, the differences and similarities between her life and mine, however, the more I should also understand that there is a great deal I do not understand, because we are so differently socially positioned. Understanding the other person's perspective as a result of her expression to me and my inferences from that expression thus continue to carry my humble recognition that I cannot put myself in her position.
Let me refer to gift-giving to illustrate the meaning of asymmetrical reciprocity. Gift-giving is basic to the generation of normative structures in most societies, precisely because it establishes relations of reciprocity: I give a gift to you, and you give a gift to me, or the opening is made for you to give a gift to me. There is an equality and mutual recognition in the relation of gift-giving, but of a different order from the equality of contracts and exchange. When I give a gift this begins a process, makes an opening, whereby you may give me a gift in return, but if I consider that you “owe” me, the gift relation is effaced and has become a commercial exchange. As Jacques Derrida puts it in his quarrel with Mauss’s interpretation of the gift relation as ultimately an exchange relation, “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this relation is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or difference.”

The relation of gift-giving is an asymmetrical reciprocity in at least two ways. First, the gifts are not equivalent and cannot be reduced to relations of symmetrical equivalence, in the manner of objects of commodity exchange. If you give me a gift, and I give you back the same gift, you are affronted. If I give you the same kind of thing that you have given me, this is uncreative; it does not take our relation further. If you treat your gift to me as the repayment of a debt owed, then this too is ungenerous and endangers our bond. The gift, is a unique offering. The only proper response is acceptance. The relation of offering and acceptance is asymmetrical: I do not return, I accept. If later I give you a gift, it is a new offering, with its own asymmetry.

Second, the moments of gift-giving are separated by time. This is an important meaning of the interval Irigaray refers to in the relation between self and other. Gift-giving sets up a chain where the reciprocal bond endures precisely because of the asymmetry of time between gifts. Each moment of gift-giving opens onto a future of our relationships, precisely because there is not a simultaneity of exchange.

The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. Where there is the gift, there is time. What it gives, the gift, is time, but this gift of time is also a demand of time. The thing must not be restituted immediately and right away. There must be time, it must last, there must be waiting—without forgetting. It demands time, the thing, but it demands a delimited time, neither an instant nor an infinite time, but a time determined by a term, in order words, a rhythm, a cadence. The thing is not in time; it is or has time, or rather it demands to have, to give, or to take time.19

You surprise me with a gift of quince marmalade; we visit for a short while in my kitchen. Several weeks later I drop by your house with a loaf of cranberry bread, and we visit some more. We have “exchanged” gifts, created or reaffirmed a reciprocity between us. But there is no measure of equivalence between the marmalade and the bread; they are qualitatively different. The temporal interval makes each act of giving, moreover, an opening rather than the closing of a deal. The equality that our relation of giving creates between us is produced by this substantive and temporal difference which I here call asymmetry.

This account of everyday gift-giving resonates for a theory of communicative action. According to Habermas, the social bond produced by communication occurs not through the locutionary content of what is said, but through the illocutionary acts that accompany that substance. Every speech act that aims at understanding entails an offer by the speaker to make good on its meaning, and the understanding of the speech act entails an acceptance of that offer by a listener. These illocutionary gestures of offering and accepting meanings create and sustain the social bond.20 I suggest that we interpret this structure of reciprocity in communicative action as asymmetrical in the same way as gift-giving. The listener who has understood and accepted the meaning of a speaker responds appropriately. This appropriate response, however, cannot usually be seen as symmetrical with the first speaker’s speech. I respond to your statement not by saying the same thing back to you, but by making another, different, move in our language game.

In his theory of communicative action, Habermas gives little attention to the role of questions in fostering bonds of solidarity. His theory focuses on the role of statements in reference to objective, social, and subjective worlds, and the illocutionary force with which those statements are made. By contrast, a theory of communicative action that gave more attention to the asymmetry of speakers, to the ways in which there are always excesses and resistances despite overlaps in the speakers’ interests and understandings, would attend more to questions as uniquely important communicative acts. Questions can express a distinctive form of respect for the other, that of showing an interest in their expression and acknowledging that the questioner does not know what the issue looks like for them.

The idea that moral respect entails that I reverse perspectives with the other presumes that I can comprehend and identify with the other
56  CHAPTER II

person's situation and perspective. It assumes that we can be familiar to one another. Certainly communication and moral respect require some sense of mutual identification and sharing. But without also a moment of wonder, of openness to the newness and mystery of the other person, the creative energy of desire dissolves into indifference. Irigaray offers the stance of wonder as an alternative interpretation of the attitude of moral respect.

Wonder which beholds what it sees always as if for the first time, never taking hold of the other as its object. It does not try to seize, possess, or reduce this object, but leaves it subjective, still free.21

This first passion is indispensable not only to life but also or still to the creation of an ethics. Notably of and through sexual difference. This other, male or female, should surprise us again and again, appear to us as new, very different from what we know or what we thought he or she should be.

Which means that we would look at the other, stop to look at him or her, ask ourselves, come close to ourselves through questioning. Who art thou I am and I become thanks to this question. Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us simply. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An excess resists: the other's existence and becoming as a place that permits union and through resistance to assimilation or reduction to sameness.99

This concept of wonder is dangerous. It would not be difficult to use it to imagine the other person as exotic. One can interpret wonder as a kind of distant awe before the Other that turns their transcendence into an inhuman inscrutability. Or wonder can become a kind of prurient curiosity. I can recognize my ignorance about the other person's experience and perspective and adopt a probing, investigative mode toward her. Both stances convert the openness of wonder into a dominative desire to know and master the other person.

A respectful stance of wonder toward other people is one of openness across, awaiting new insight about their needs, interests, perceptions, or values. Wonder also means being able to see one's own position, assumptions, perspective as strange, because it has been put in relation to others. Since the other person is a subject-in-process, I cannot assume that because last week I understood her standpoint I can do so today. Respectful listening thus involves attentive and interested questioning. But answers are always gifts. The transcendence of the other person always means that she can remain silent, or tell only part of her story, for her own reasons.23

CHAPTER II

ENLARGED THOUGHT

Benhabib adapts Hannah Arendt's version of "enlarged thought" to characterize moral judgment. A moral point of view requires a person to think about a question or proposed action not only in terms of how an issue or action affects him or her, but also in terms of what others want or need and how they may be affected. Modern moral theory most typically interprets this moral point of view as a "view from nowhere" that transcends all particular points of view. Benhabib rejects this transcendent notion of impartiality, however, in favor of the idea of an enlarged thought in which a person thinks from the particular standpoint of all those involved or affected in a moral judgment: Judgment involves the capacity to represent to oneself the multiplicity of viewpoints, the variety of perspectives, the layers of meaning which constitute a situation. . . .This 'enlarged mentality' can be described precisely as exercising the reversibility of perspectives which discourse ethics enjoins.24

In a recent interpretation of Arendt's notion of publicity, Lisa Disch also understands the idea of enlarged thought as constituting a process in which the person judging imagines what the world looks like from other perspectives.25 Kant's original use of the concept of enlarged thought, on which Arendt relies, explicitly invokes the image of taking the point of view of everyone.26 Passages in Arendt certainly cohere with this interpretation of the meaning of enlarged thought. But I suggest that there are two problems with this interpretation of the idea of enlarged thought, and that another interpretation is more consistent with at least some of Arendt's ideas.

The concept of enlarged thought is supposed to explain how a person moves from a narrowly subjective, self-regarding perspective on action to a more objective and socially inclusive view. Interpreting enlarged thought as occupying the standpoints of each of the others affected, however, does not yet move from a subjective point of view to a more objective one. When we try to represent a multiplicity of viewpoints to ourselves, we have merely aggregated a series of subjective and self-regarding perspectives, rather than adopting a new, more objective thinking derived from them all. If we represent to ourselves all the perspectives, we still have not represented that upon which these are perspectives.

Second, the idea of taking the standpoint of all the others presumes the possibility of an identification among us all, that we can represent others to ourselves in the sense that we can be substitutable for one another. As I discussed in criticizing the claim that moral respect involves
symmetry, this assumption of reversibility tends to collapse the difference between subjects. As an interpretation of enlarged thought, it thus fails to emphasize the plurality of perspectives that Arendt found constitutive of publicity.

Publicity in Arendt's sense is maintained only if the plurality of perspectives that constitutes it is preserved. The people who appear to one another in a public situation of communication each have a perspective on the world that lies between them, as well as on one another. The public world that lies between us is a creative product of the dialogue among our multiple perspectives, but distinct from them because it is an objective relation between us. Arendt puts it this way:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it. The world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.

For though the common world is the common meeting ground for all, those who are present have different positions on it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of the two objects.

Dialogue with one another not only teaches us about the narrative histories and interests of each of the others. Through it we also construct an account of the web of social relations that surrounds us and within which we act. This collective social reality cannot be known or understood from the particular point of view of any one of us alone. Nor can it be constructed simply by adding the perspectives of each of us together, and having each of us think from the perspectives of all the others, whatever that might mean. In addition to the experiences and interests of each of us, this social reality includes the worldly consequences of our acting on the basis of our experiences and interests as they affect the physical processes of the world and also condition one another’s perceptions and possibilities. Understanding what Arendt calls the “web” of human relations,” (p. 183) which both relates and separates us, then, means reasoning about the connected implications of the actions and effects on one another that multiple narratives and critical questioning reveal to us. Melissa Orlie recommends an interpretation of Arendt’s notion of publicity along these lines:

According to Arendt, contact between human beings facilitates the appearance of both commonality and plurality. Where people speak and act together poHtically, such spaces engender and sustain whatever perception of commonality we achieve. This in turn facilitates recognition of our distinctness from other persons and the revelation of individual uniqueness or “natality.” Paradoxically, the perception of commonality creates boundaries, or at least a capacity to recognize boundaries as well as connections between oneself and others. If political community is absent or unimaginable, then not only what we potentially share with others but also what distinguishes us from them (our distinct perspectives upon and locations within the world) become precarious.24

We make our moral and political judgments, then, not only by taking account of one another’s interests and perspectives, but also by considering the collective social processes and relationships that lie between us and which we have come to know together by discussing the world. I suggest that this is a better interpretation of the idea of enlarged thought.29

Just because social life consists of plural experiences and perspectives, a theory of communicative ethics must endorse a radically democratic conception of moral and political judgment. Normative judgment is best understood as the product of dialogue under conditions of equality and mutual respect. Ideally, the outcome of such dialogue and judgment is just and legitimate only if all the affected perspectives have a voice. If it were possible for agents to reverse perspective with one another in making moral judgments, this condition that all voices and perspectives should be represented might not be necessary.

I have suggested that in order to attend to particularity in this way, it is necessary to distinguish between taking the perspective of others into account in making moral judgments, on the one hand, and reversing positions with them, on the other. Dialogue participants are able to take account of the perspective of others because they have heard those perspectives expressed. They have had to listen to those expressions with a moral humility that recognizes that they stand in relations of asymmetry and irreversibility with others. By means of openness and questioning, as well as efforts to express experience and values from different perspectives, people sometimes understand one another across difference, even when they do not identify with each other. Through such dialogue that recognizes the asymmetry of others, moreover, people can enlarge their thinking in at least two ways. Their own assumptions and point of view become relativized for them as they are set in relation to those of others. By learning from others how the world and the collective relations they have forged through interaction look to them, moreover, everyone can develop an enlarged understanding of that world and those relations that is unavailable to any of them from their own perspective alone.