

ALTRUISM AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are two lines of thinking in tension within the contemporary feminist movement in America. According to one (the "positive" view), there are some qualities more likely to be found in women than in men which are humanly good qualities and which should be preserved and fostered in the struggle for the liberation of women. Some of these qualities are grouped around the notion of "altruism" and include supportiveness, compassion, concern for others, ability to help others grow and develop, concern with human relationships. In the process of their struggle to understand and to liberate themselves, the Boston Women's Health Collective "began to really appreciate our capacity to empathize, to nurture."¹ These altruistic qualities can be seen as universal values which are good for men as well as women to possess.

On the other hand there is a line of thinking (the "negative" view) within the women's movement that, for women, being altruistic generally goes along with being self-sacrificing, denying oneself for the sake of others, usually men. Thus the altruistic qualities are intimately tied to the oppressed condition of women. "Studies and common sense suggest that personal 'altruism' in our culture often stems from guilt, fear, and low self-esteem, rather than from freedom or self-love."² Margaret Adams says,

The main target of my concern is the pervasive belief . . . that women's primary and most valuable social function is to provide the tender and compassionate components of life and that through the exercise of these particular traits women have set themselves up as the exclusive model for protecting, nurturing, and fostering the growth of others . . . this arbitrary social definition of women's prime function (in value terms) has encouraged the hypertrophied growth of a single circumscribed area of the feminine psyche, while other qualities have been subjected to gradual but persistent attrition.³

Women are expected to be supportive and giving to their men and children, or to society (in service and volunteer work), and to neglect their own selves or to deny their self-development in the process. They are to live for others.

The tension between the two strains of thought is a real one; it is not merely illusory or a product of misunderstanding. The strains of thought involve not only differing conceptions of women, but also elements of differing strategies for women's liberation. The positive view will encourage women to preserve and value their qualities of supportiveness and compassion; the negative view, seeing the destructive aspects of these qualities, will not.

The tension is rooted in the actual situation of women; the two discrepant views must be seen as expressions of different aspects of that situation. It is true that for women the "altruistic" qualities are generally connected with self-denial and self-sacrifice, weakness and dependency. They are connected through the ways that women are socialized and through the actual conditions, institutions, and roles in which they typically function. On the other hand there is an important truth in the positive view as well. Compassion, supportiveness, a sense of the importance of human relationships are humanly good qualities. They are qualities which a good person would want to have.

The notion of "humanly good qualities" can present a problem, since we will want to say that there are distorted (i.e., in some way bad) forms which such qualities can take. It is the undistorted forms of these qualities which are humanly good. These undistorted forms cannot, however, be identified with an abstract essence which can be detached from concrete persons and situations: that is, taken in abstraction from their actual forms in a particular society, and specifically, in sexist society.

This weakness of the positive view is connected to a failure to see the "altruistic" qualities as part of the person as a whole. The positive view sees that concern and compassion are generally good but does not see that although these qualities can be associated with other positive qualities such as autonomy and independence, they may also be associated with negative qualities such as dependence, sense of inferiority, and self-denial. Conversely, the negative view does not admit the real possibility of the compatibility of altruism with autonomy.⁴

The alleged opposition between concern for self and concern for others is exhibited in the very use of the term "altruism" as referring generally to

doing good for others, motivated by concern for them, while disregarding or neglecting one's own interests. "Altruism" thus implies self-neglect, if not actually self-sacrifice. To use the word as a term covering all forms of doing good for others is thus ordinarily to imply that doing good for others generally involves or must involve disregard of oneself.⁵

A failure to recognize that autonomy (and self-concern) and concern for others are not mutually exclusive has deep roots within the individualism of our culture generally. The picture of economic self-sufficiency fostered by capitalist ideology—being owner of one's own enterprise, being one's own "boss"—becomes a model for personal autonomy. Autonomy is equated with (emotional) self-sufficiency and independence of others.⁶

What is lacking is a positive conception of "caring-with-autonomy," i.e., being concerned for oneself as well as being concerned for others. In the rest of this paper we will try to make this conception concrete and to show its importance in understanding the valid insights in both the negative and the positive view of women's "altruism." In the following section (II) we will consider a strain within traditional moral philosophy which has attempted to articulate a link, or at least a compatibility, between concern for self and concern for others, between autonomy and altruism. In the next section (III) we will give some examples to show that concern, care, and support may be defective unless they are founded on a strong sense of autonomy or independence and a healthy concern for oneself, so that in some sense a genuine and non-defective altruism actually requires autonomy. In our final section (IV) we will propose a positive conception of autonomy with altruism drawn from concrete experiences of women, and specifically consciousness-raising groups, as a context in which the qualities of autonomy yet supportiveness and giving to others are realized, and valued.

II. ALTRUISM AND AUTONOMY IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

A. BUTLER

One of the main points of Joseph Butler's famous discussion of egoism and altruism in his *Sermons* is that concern for self is perfectly compatible with concern for others, rather than being necessarily opposed to it.

Self-love was stated to consist in or be an affection to ourselves, a regard to our own private good; it is therefore distinct from benevolence, which is an affection to the good of our fellow creatures. . . . This being the whole idea of self-love it can no more exclude goodwill or love of others merely by not including it than it excludes love of arts or reputation, or of anything else. Neither, on the other hand, does benevolence any more than love of arts or reputation exclude self-love.⁷

Since love of others is an "affection" distinct from self-love, there is no reason why they would by nature conflict. Thus one person may be oriented toward the good of others as well as toward her own good, just as another person may pursue neither her own good nor that of others.⁸

Butler helps us to see that the opposition between regard for self and regard for others accepted in much moral philosophy is not a necessary one. But his view is limited in seeing this too much as a purely conceptual point. He thinks the fact that there is a distinction between the two affections means that there is no relationship between them. "Love of our neighbor then has just the same respect to, is no more distant from, self-love than hatred of our neighbor, or than love or hatred of anything else."⁹ "All things which are distinct from each other are equally so."¹⁰ In saying that everything distinct from concern for self (self-love) is equally distinct from it, he is either making a purely conceptual point which does not apply to the "contingent" conflict between concern for self and concern for others which the structures of women's lives so often impose on them; or he is saying something false, since for many people love for others is not more distinct from love of self than is "love of arts" but is, rather, intimately related to it, either in being in conflict with it or in being founded upon it.

B. SCHOPENHAUER

Arthur Schopenhauer in his ethical work *On the Basis of Morality* penetrates the issue more deeply. He says that true compassion requires a clear awareness of the other person as other, in particular that the compassionate person does not confuse the other's suffering with her own suffering, real or imagined. Here he is attacking a view such as David Hume's or Adam Smith's which sees altruistic sentiments such as sympathy or compassion as a kind of identification of oneself with the other in which one feels the same feeling of, e.g., pain, as the other does. In true compassion, says Schopenhauer,

at every moment we remain clearly conscious that *he* is the sufferer and not *we*; and it is precisely in his person, and not in ours, that we feel this suffering, to our grief and sorrow. We suffer with him and hence in him; we feel his pain as his, and do not imagine that it is ours.¹¹

Schopenhauer sees that if we acknowledge the suffering of another only through imagining that it is we who are suffering, then we do not fully acknowledge the other as other but are in an indirect way being concerned about ourselves. In this way Schopenhauer thus indicates one way in which sympathetic feeling will fail to be true compassion if it is not grounded in a clear sense of the other's separateness from oneself.

The weakness of Schopenhauer's view is the restriction of his conception of separateness to the realm of the conscious. He does not encompass the deeper, less explicitly conscious, and more pervasive levels on which people can fail to have a sense of self separate from others, e.g., levels on which a woman may not really experience herself as a separate autonomous being in relation to others such as her husband. The notion of being autonomous (and in that sense separate) as a person goes far beyond simply realizing that it is the other and not oneself who is having a certain experience to which one is responding.

C. SCHELER

Max Scheler in *The Nature of Sympathy* combines Schopenhauer's basic insight with a much deeper appreciation of human psychology. Using the term "fellow-feeling" to cover phenomena like compassion, concern, and sympathy (what we have called "altruistic" qualities) he distinguishes "spurious" fellow-feeling from genuine or authentic fellow-feeling which may look like real concern but which is in fact seriously flawed. He describes cases in which the flaw lies in the failure of the subject to have a distinct sense of himself:

I have in mind the situation in which our own life acquires a tendency to dissipate itself in a vicarious reenactment of the doings of one or more other people; where we are so caught up, as it were, in the other's changing moods and interests that we no longer seem to lead a life of our own; or where our own life largely consists in a series of reactions to such material content as becomes available, at second hand, through the other person's experiences. Here we react to what actually touches him, as though touched by it ourselves . . . simply because we are leading *his* life and not our own while remaining quite unaware of the vicarious relationship by which this process is effected.¹²

Scheler brings out that genuine and authentic fellow-feeling actually requires autonomy and independence of the self. He thus goes beyond showing merely that these are compatible.

All such subspecies of this general type [i.e., spurious fellow-feeling] consist of forms which have nothing to do with fellow-feeling proper, seeing that the conditions for this, the consciousness and feeling of being oneself, of leading one's own life and thus of being "separate" from others, are only apprehended here in a degenerate form. For this reason too their ethical value is negative, however much they may be mistaken for refinements of fellow-feeling or even for love. There is certainly nothing to prevent such attitudes from leading to actions of great benefit to the other person. All these people are capable of acts of what is commonly called "sacrifice." But in fact that is merely what they look like. For a man who neither leads his own life nor finds it worth living cannot sacrifice himself for another. He simply does not possess the one thing needful for sacrifice, namely a life of his own.¹³

Scheler's perspective describes well an important aspect of altruistic qualities as expressed in women's lives. The kind of concern which women feel and show for their husbands (or in general for men to whom they are attached) is often seriously flawed by the way that women have been discouraged from developing their own lives so that they do have a sense of self clearly distinct from their men. However, for purposes of understanding these aspects of women's situation, Scheler's perspective is limited. For he sees both the inauthenticity of fellow-feeling and the lack of sense of self on which it rests as moral defects in the individual person. This is misleading in two ways. First, it does not give us an understanding of the social conditions which produce this lack of development of self. Scheler seems content with simply making a moral judgment, because he abstracts the person from her historical and present conditions, which were not of her making.

The second weakness of Scheler's approach is this: because of his exclusively moral perspective he wants to say that even though the inauthentic fellow-feeling might be beneficial to the other, nevertheless it is morally defective. But he does not point out that perhaps a more serious problem with the inauthentic fellow-feeling is that it often actually fails fully to benefit the other. A person who has no clear sense of her own needs and wants will often not have a clear sense of the other in his separateness and his different needs and wants. Living through the other, she may simply go along with and support the other in his pursuits and endeavors, without being able to see the possible weaknesses of these

pursuits or the ways that they might be bad for him. She may well not be able to recognize the doubts which the other might have about himself and his endeavours.

D. MAYEROFF

Milton Mayeroff in *On Caring* gives a good analysis of how true caring for the other requires a clear and healthy sense of oneself which excludes dependence and inferiority.

In caring as helping the other person grow, I experience what I care for . . . as an extension of myself and at the same time as something separate from me that I respect in its own right. This feeling of the other as part of me is different from the kind of union with the other found in such relations as morbid dependency on another person . . . for in . . . these cases I am unable to experience the other as independent in its own right and I am unable to respond to it truly. . . . In helping the other grow I do not impose my own direction; rather I allow the direction of the other's growth to guide what I do, to help determine how I am to respond and what is relevant to such response. . . . I appreciate the other as independent in its own right with needs that are to be respected.¹⁴

We see, then, how dependence, lack of sense of self, etc., render unlikely this kind of focus on the other. Furthermore, in relationships of caring it is important really to understand the other, to know what she is, her powers and limitations.¹⁵ Dependence on the other or lack of sense of self makes this kind of understanding difficult. Moreover, reciprocity is necessary for the caring not to become an unhealthy self-sacrifice, but such reciprocity does not exist in a relationship in which one person's sense of self has been undeveloped and subordinated to the other.

It is a mistake to view morbid dependency as a low order of caring, or to view malevolent manipulation as "his way of caring" or to speak of caring "too much" as if overprotection were a kind of caring. These lie wholly outside the limits of caring, and to see them as examples of a low order of caring only blurs what is distinctive and important.¹⁶

The weakness of Mayeroff's account, as with Scheler's, is that he sees the process he describes too much in individual terms (though he does avoid Scheler's moralism). He says what a person has to do and to be in order properly to care for others in non-distorted ways; but he does not see how the structures in which people live often keep them from being

able to care in these ways. It may be that overprotectiveness is not a genuine way of caring; but what Mayeroff calls "overprotectiveness" is the way that mothers in certain social groups are expected to care for their children. And "dependency" is not simply a personal trait but characterizes the positions in which society places people in relation to others. That is, a woman's being "too dependent" on others is not simply a description of her psychology, but is an integral part of the social structure to which women are relegated in our society, in which they are generally denied independence, and thus actually are dependent on their parents, brothers, husbands, sons.

The consideration of this strain of thought in moral philosophy traced through Butler, Schopenhauer, Scheler, and Mayeroff suggests the conception of a person whose concern for others is founded on a firm sense of herself as a person separate from others. This conception can guide us in our understanding of the ways that the institutions and forms of socialization which oppress women also distort humanly good, "altruistic" qualities.

III. EXAMPLES OF THE DISTORTION OF "ALTRUISTIC" QUALITIES BY THE OPPRESSIVE STRUCTURES IN WHICH WOMEN LIVE

In this section we shall discuss some of the ways in which women's ability to care for others and for relationships with others becomes distorted by structural features of their lives.

The examples we have chosen cluster around marriage and the family, an emphasis which reflects our sense of that institution's centrality to the economic and social conditions which lead to the distortion of altruistic qualities.¹⁷ When we speak of a quality's being "distorted," we do not mean that it must first be exhibited or felt or intended in an undistorted form which subsequently becomes distorted. Rather, the form which the qualities take is determined in part by the context in which they occur.

If our analysis is correct, and "altruistic" qualities do become distorted in relationships based on lack of autonomy, there will be some reason to believe that it is within relationships of caring-with-autonomy that such qualities flourish. There are relationships in which one's caring

and concern for the other is both reciprocated and enhancing of a sense of self. Ingrid Bengis¹⁹ talks of relationships like this with girl friends when she was young and of the inconceivability then of having such relationships with boys, and the difficulty of the quest later to have them with men. However, the ideology of marriage and the family tells us that here we can find such relationships and such feelings, that here of all places people genuinely care about each other's uniqueness and autonomy. Thus, we often learn as paradigm cases of care and concern what are actually distortions of what those qualities can and should be.

The examples which we discuss fall under two main headings: (A) caring for another person with whom the woman has a particular relationship, and (B) caring for the form and the content of the relationship itself. Under the first heading (A) we consider three factors which lead to the distortion of such caring: (1) the economic dependence of a wife on her husband; (2) the fact that it is typically seen as a wife's role to provide emotional support nonreciprocally for her husband; (3) the lack of avenues for most women to develop a sense of themselves other than derivatively from their roles as (a) wives and (b) mothers.

Under the second heading (B), we consider two distorting factors: (1) the onesidedness of such concern typical of marriage as of many non-marital male-female relationships; (2) the economic and social dependence which women traditionally have on being married.

We will be concerned in each of the examples to indicate the defectiveness of the caring as it affects both the woman and the other toward whose supposed good it is directed. In the latter case, the distortion makes the caring either less helpful than it could be or even positively detrimental,²⁰ or in the case of a woman's concern for a relationship, that concern may help to maintain only a maimed version of the relationship.

The other side of the defectiveness is in the effects of such distorted caring on the woman herself. Her lack of autonomy, her dependence, the nonreciprocity of her concern are all reinforced by the forms which her "altruism" takes.

A. EFFECT OF DEPENDENCE ON A WOMAN'S CARING FOR HER HUSBAND

As feminist writers²¹ have explained, the root of female dependence is in the wife's economic dependence on the husband. Discouraged or denied eco-

conomic independence through paid work, the woman is dependent on another for her basic necessities. Even if the wife does work, the husband is still considered the family breadwinner, the real source of family income; the wife's income is often set aside for special, less important purposes. Even when her income is actually essential for the family, this fact is frequently not acknowledged, precisely because her contribution is seen as subsidiary.²²

The economic security which the woman receives from the husband is at the base of her more general sense of security, of feeling secure as a person in the face of the world. Furthermore, as she becomes accustomed to being dependent on the husband her sense that she is even capable of independence may well begin to disappear. The dependence may stultify her ability to recognize or take advantage of even the limited opportunities open to her to achieve some kind of economic as well as emotional independence (even if she could struggle against her husband's likely opposition). Thus, the structure of marriage is a relationship in which women are objectively dependent and which also causes the individual woman's emotional make-up to be characterized by dependence.

In a marriage in which the wife loves the husband she will care for and care about him. She will want good things for him; she will be concerned at his distress, she will want him to be happy. But this very concern will be expressed in ways which are similar to, and hence likely to be confused with, the expression of her need to continue to be acceptable to him. Because of this she will tend to go along with him, to please him. She will not challenge him or express opinions which diverge from his, even when it regards his welfare.

Let us imagine the following example: A scientist working on a research team does not like his job because he is not permitted by his co-workers to exercise complete control of the project. They block his need to dominate. However, he rationalizes this dissatisfaction by complaining, instead, that all of his co-workers are incompetent. His wife accepts this rationalization out of a desire to please her husband and to be supportive in his distress. She has never challenged his desire always to be "top dog," nor even recognized it as an aspect of his character which might work to his detriment in his job situation, and which certainly works to her detriment in her acceptance of her own subordination. Thus she will support and foster the destructive sense of self-importance which the husband gains from having someone subordinate to him, from having someone act indiscriminately to please him. Oriented towards not displeas-

ing her husband, the wife in turn will not assert her own needs, opinions, or wishes if she thinks her husband would disapprove. The caring thus reinforces the suppression of self attendant upon the dependence. Furthermore, the personal ties of caring mask the unequal power relation between the wife and husband.

Thus, the form which caring will typically take in the context of a dependent relationship will be a distortion of a true caring for the other. The focus on the other's needs is clouded by the need to please and by the lack of the development of capacity for independent judgment and perception regarding the other. Thus not only is this a case in which the caring is in some way at the expense of the person who is caring, but the caring is defective on its own terms—the other also is not really aided. For her caring to be helpful to her husband and to herself, it would have to be grounded in an autonomy and independence scarcely possible within the structure of traditional domination and subordination.

B. EFFECTS OF THE WIFE'S ROLE AS EMOTIONAL MAINTAINER ON HER CARING FOR HER HUSBAND

We will now examine a more specific way in which a wife cares for her husband—namely, through her role as the provider and sustainer of emotional support within the family. Before examining the nature of this role, however, one must show how that role emerges as the wife's and why it is important that it is the wife's.²³

In an advanced capitalist society, where many workers have jobs which the division of labor makes fragmented and unsatisfying, and where contact with other workers is both circumscribed and often competitive, the home and family is an institution which functions to satisfy the emotional needs for warmth and human sociability which are incompatible with the work situation. It is supposed to be an enclave of intimacy and security. In this sense, the family is thought of as an ideal, "a human alternative to the inhumanity of social relations at work."²⁴ The worker moves from a fragmenting situation to one which is meant to be emotionally compensating; in the family situation he is supposed to be able to be himself and to relax in an atmosphere conducive to the expression of his individuality and to aspects of his personality which were deliberately discouraged in his work situation.²⁵

Although it is primarily the emotional needs of the alienated male worker that are satisfied by the family structure (for it is *his* fragmented life that is supposedly compensated for by the family), the family is nevertheless thought to serve the needs of all human beings, since it is within the family that people are thought to find whatever comfort, love, and compassion they know. It is the role of the wife within the family to produce and sustain these values. That she has this function is an effect of her economic dependence on her husband. It is important to see why this is so.

In a society where commodity relations are dominant, where people are valued by how much capital their labor can accumulate, women are devalued because their primary work, which is considered to be that in the home, is not considered to be productive labor at all.²⁶ It is the husband who, as family breadwinner, provides for the basic necessities of life. In exchange for economic care, protection, and security, the wife is meant to assume the role of promoting and sustaining the emotional needs frustrated by the work situation of the husband. She returns to the husband a different kind of care from that which she receives from him, and it is considered by both to be a fair exchange. Thus, the emotional maintenance which a wife provides within a family is seen as an obligation which she owes to her husband and as a central part of her role.²⁷ In compensation, the woman's domestic position appears to have certain advantages: the wife is working in the interests of those she cares about and of those who care about her. Although this role involves a great deal of drudgery and is clearly held to be a subordinate one, it is thought that she is at least not subject to the fragmentation experienced by the alienated male worker.

It remains to be explained how this kind of caring within the family structure is limited by its being made the job of the wife. We will consider three ways in which this support is shown—in the first, although limited, it is clearly of genuine value to the husband; in the second and third it is in different ways distorted. We will then consider the negative effects on the wife of her role as emotional maintainer.

(i) Given the impersonal and competitive nature of most work in this society, emotional support is hard to come by, and may be most conspicuously absent when it is most needed. For example, a man who is learning a new skill as part of a training program and having difficulty acquiring the necessary expertise may not get encouragement from his co-workers (who may be competing with him for the same position) or

from his boss (who does not care who gets promoted). The worker's wife, through her support and encouragement, may be able to promote his self-confidence and thereby help him to feel able to carry the program through and master it. She not only makes him feel that he is cared about, but also that he is worth something, and this feeling may be important for his emotional growth and happiness. The supportiveness is thus genuinely helpful and constructive in overcoming his insecurities and self-doubts and enabling him to return to the work situation with a renewed sense of his own worth.

(ii) However, if the wife's role is to be the provider of *uncritical* emotional support,²⁸ there will be times when the support which she gives her husband will not be genuinely helpful, as described above in A(1). If they both see her role as supporting rather than criticizing him, she may reinforce her husband's view of himself as not contributing to the situation's unpleasantness and will discourage any self-criticism on his part.

(iii) Sometimes women realize that, although they feel that they cannot be openly critical of their husbands, there are nonetheless ways that they can influence their behavior. It is often the case that when someone in a subordinate and objectively dependent position develops independent ideas and values which she cannot afford to express, manipulative and devious means are rather naturally turned to as among the few ways of changing the superior's behavior. Women often know (but can't let on that they know) that they are merely boosting their husbands' egos by expressing a faith beyond what they feel; they talk of how fragile men's egos are and of how good they are at "managing" their husbands. One school of anti-feminists extols this ability which some women have as a form of genuine power which women would be foolish to give up. Certainly, such manipulation can sometimes change a husband's behavior, perhaps even in beneficial ways.

For example, if the husband in A(1) is short-tempered as a result of not being in total control, his wife could recast the situation in a way which might lead him to behave differently. She might say, "Well, so-and-so is, as you know, overly sensitive about this and that and likely to get touchy when he thinks someone is criticizing him. So perhaps you should take this into account when dealing with him in the future." In this way the wife gets the husband to think that what might be something to overcome in himself or to struggle against collectively (the aspects of the

work situation which make true collective work difficult) is actually something which someone else has to overcome.

This kind of dynamic may actually change the husband's behavior for the better, but it also has the effect of making him feel superior. The wife, in giving the husband a distorted view of himself and others, makes self-knowledge and meaningful change more difficult for him. Hence, her supportiveness may actually be harmful to him.

Thus, the support which the wife gives the husband is a defective form of caring, limited by her role as "emotional supporter."

It is important to note what effect this form of caring may have on her. Her role as the creator of a supportive environment, her sense that the home fills a real need of her husband's and that she is performing a service in exchange for other services rendered her, may prevent her from seeking from him the same kind of support he gains from her. As long as her caring for her husband is entangled with her feeling that it is a *responsibility* which she has toward him, she may be unwilling to trouble him with her own complaints.

On the one hand, since "emotional maintenance" is her job she will be inclined to feel ungrateful and unwomanly if she asks for the kind of support she feels she should be providing. On the other hand, as outlined above, such support isn't seen as "real" work, neither as hard, as draining, as productive, nor as important, and so she may feel that she has much less "right" than her husband to complain about her life. These feelings may be intensified by the fact that she is dependent on him for her livelihood. Thus her supportiveness may actually be harmful to her: it serves to reinforce the limiting role it stems from. In resting content with her half of the marriage bargain, she is denying herself any measure of autonomy and authority.

Thus, what is true of the more general preceding example, A(1), is true as well of these more specific examples: the wife's role as emotional maintainer creates defects in her caring for her husband, from which both she and he suffer. Unless she is more autonomous with regard to her husband and is not forced into the primary and nonreciprocated role of emotional maintainer, it will be difficult to overcome these defects.

C. EFFECT OF THE LACK OF ADEQUATE CONTEXTS FOR SELF-DEVELOPMENT ON THE SUPPORT AND HELP GIVEN TO OTHERS

(a) *Wives: The substitute success syndrome*

The altruism which we will discuss here is support given to the husband in the context of his career. Phenomena such as that of the ambitious wife who pushes her husband into a success he may not want, or works invisibly for a success in which she does not really participate, have frequently been noted. Here we will explore the connection of the distortions in the wife's help to her lack of opportunity to develop and express interests in life projects of her own.

Wendy Martyna²⁹ identifies and analyzes the "substitute success syndrome" in upper middle class marriages in which wives who have given up their own career aspirations latch onto their husbands' success as a kind of substitute for what is denied to them. They support their husbands in their work, often in crucial ways, perhaps helping them (e.g., with books they write), taking care of household affairs so that the husband will be free to devote his time to his work. They do this not merely with the sense that this is their proper role but with a direct sense of personal connection to and involvement in the husband's work. The real credit, however, goes to him.

This situation is reminiscent of Scheler's description of the person who lives through others, and who does not really feel herself distinct from others. We see here how it is the institution of marriage and the socialization of women which brings about such a situation, and not a defect in the individual person.

Furthermore, the support can take distorted forms, because of the frustrated aspirations from which it comes. The wife's ambitions for her husband may really be out of line with his desires for himself. She, however, may continue to push him in such a way that neither he nor they together recognize or take seriously the doubts which he might have, or the possibilities of doing something different.

The form of support and help which this wife gives her husband is also quite damaging to herself, as well as being an obvious product of frustrated aspirations. The illusory satisfactions of vicarious living and substitute success may well prevent the wife from being in touch with her

own dissatisfactions and lack of self-expression and development. It will help her to reconcile herself to this form of marital life which is oppressive to her.

(b) Mothers: Living through one's children

Another frequently described syndrome is that of mothers' "living through their children." Again, we want to argue that not individual neurosis but institutional structures determine the consequent distortions of caring. The structure of child-care in most American families today is frequently such that it precludes the mother's developing serious interests in activities other than caring for her child. For most people, the kind of employment available outside the home is structured as a full time activity with inflexible hours. Thus it is extremely difficult for parents to arrange schedules that allow for shared responsibility for their children. Adequate day-care is usually unavailable. Furthermore, caring for a home and children "stretches over the whole time of existence broken only by illness and holidays. Its space is the whole space of a woman's life. . . . The routine, in fact, can rarely be overtaken by the woman's efforts, partly because housework is not just effort but continuity as well and also because of the infinitely variable needs of children and husband determine the structure of the job."³⁰ The objective conditions available for child-caring thus force a choice between care for a young child and self-development of other kinds.

Furthermore, the present ideology regarding what constitutes adequate care even for older children limits the ways of caring which the woman will consider adequate for her child's needs. Mothers out of the job market for the early childhood years, facing a difficult re-entry, are likely to fall prey to society's myth of the "supermother."³¹ Even after the child has outgrown the early dependent years the belief persists that "caring for the children," arranging their lives and catering to their wants should be a full time occupation which takes precedence over any needs which the mother has for herself.

Because the mother has been denied other outlets for self-expression and development, her relationship to her children takes on a hypertrophied importance which distorts her care for them. Her need to be needed by her children becomes overwhelming because this is the one sphere in which she feels of value. Thus, it may become very difficult for her to recognize their growing needs for autonomy.

Such a woman's major source of satisfaction is vicarious, obtained by identification with the successes of her children. Thus she will frequently push them to gain the achievements she has always dreamed of their attaining. Because she does not have a strong sense of self, she will be unable to separate her needs from their needs and they too may fail to recognize that they are striving toward goals which reflect her values and choices rather than their own.

B. In this section we will be concerned with the fact that women often devote much energy and skill to the preservation and cultivation of the relationships which they have with others. In particular, we will consider two ways in which this concern for relationships becomes distorted and in turn distorts the relationships—in B(1) the fact that this concern is usually, in relationships with men, largely the woman's, in B(2) the need which women typically feel (and largely have) to become or remain married, a need which can deflect their concern from the content of the relationship to the bare preservation of its form.

1. EFFECT OF WOMAN'S HAVING PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAINTAINING EMOTIONAL AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ON WIFE'S RELATIONSHIP TO HUSBAND

Women's socialization leads them to be more concerned than men with interpersonal and emotional matters, and leads them to know how to maintain and to value personal relationships more than men do.³² The nature of the woman's role in the marriage reinforces this process, in including emotional support and nurturance as an important part of the wife role. Furthermore, the working situation of most men further erodes men's capacities to work at and to value personal relationships. Often their work situations are essentially competitive with their co-workers, making close trusting relationships difficult.³³ At work they are expected to be unemotional and self-controlled.

Thus the man comes to the marriage situation deficient in the ability to maintain and to give explicit value to emotional ties and personal relationships. The woman comes to the marriage already willing to shoulder the major burden of the emotional resources needed to hold the relationship together emotionally. This situation sets up a dynamic which is debilitating to the relationship between the two of them. Lack of reciprocity is built

into the situation. By not asserting her needs in the relationship she may in fact lose touch with them or indeed never become conscious of the fact that the relationship is deeply unsatisfying to her. So her need for acknowledgement of her feelings and of her importance in the relationship is not met.

The husband may actually remain somewhat oblivious to the fact that maintaining the relationship requires time and energy, which the wife is giving. Thus the wife will remain unappreciated, the lack of reciprocity will not be noticed, and the need for him to take some responsibility will not be acknowledged.

This situation has some analogies to the "invisibility of housework."²⁴ Since much of housework involves maintaining a *clean* house a man who sees only a clean house and does not concern himself with the process of cleaning will remain unaware of the work involved. Analogously, a man whose relationships have always been maintained by women will remain unaware of and take for granted the activity and energy which goes into maintaining relationships. A woman's capabilities in this area actually contribute to the invisibility of her work. In the case of housework, the better the woman is at keeping the house free from disorder, the less aware her husband will be that houses will become disordered unless they are regularly cleaned. Similarly the better the woman becomes at maintaining a smooth relationship the less will the man notice her efforts.

Furthermore, the very capacities necessary for maintaining close relationships are also requisite to recognizing the concern extended by another. But these are atrophied when one does not attend to relationships. The woman's concern is, thus, increasingly unnoticed because the man becomes increasingly unable to recognize on any deep level his own needs or feelings, or those of the woman.

Thus as the wife continues to maintain the emotional relationship with the husband, the relationship actually becomes emotionally deficient from her perspective. If the man has difficulties expressing his feelings and indeed in knowing what his feelings are, the woman may come to lack confidence that she is really loved and valued. Her insecurity makes her more reluctant to assert herself and challenge her husband's emotional remoteness and irresponsibility in ways which might help the relationship to become more balanced. Furthermore, her task of maintaining the relationship becomes more difficult as the emotional level becomes increasingly alien to the man.

Ironically, though she suffers from the situation, the wife may in one way prefer the man's emotional incapacity. The man's incapacities and the woman's abilities in this area may make her feel that she provides a needed dimension in his life which he could not produce for himself. She will regard this as securing her importance to him.

The effects on men of the suppression of emotion and the inability to acknowledge the emotional importance of others to themselves is portrayed in a story entitled "Frances," by Sarah Wolf,³⁵ which describes a situation in which the men of a family are unable to support the narrator's dying sister Frances because the caring in the family has been extended in the past primarily by the mothers, sisters, and wives. The men have become incapable of emotional support and expression of care even to a dying member of the family.

Frances' brother Herman is either incapable of adequately valuing his relationship to his dying sister or cannot recognize the necessity for expressions of love and care which such valuing involves.

She grieved for my brother. "It's hard for Herman," she said one day after he had paid one of his frequent but very brief visits. My brother is a nervous man, prone to but afraid of tears, and with the common male tendency to say "I can't" when he means "I won't," as in "I can't neglect my business at this time."

In a sense Herman is right. His frequently repeated "I can't" has actually become an incapacity to give himself to and to value his personal relationships.

Thus the socialization of women to carry the primary burden of maintaining personal relationships works to the detriment of the man, the woman, and the relationship between them.

2. THE DISTORTING EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEPENDENCE ON MARRIAGE ON HER CONCERN FOR THE RELATIONSHIP

Unmarried women in our society face not only the social stigma of lacking the marital derived identity expected of women, but in most cases economic hardship, especially if they are middle-aged and have been until now married and jobless. Even for younger women the message is clear. Being an unmarried woman is made to look, as it was for most women in the past (and will be in the future, unless we change it), a lamentable

fate, to be borne if necessary, but never to be chosen. And if one wants to have children, or already has them, the prospects of single parenthood are generally grim. One effect of all of this is to focus a woman's concern on the simple preservation of her marriage (or of a relationship likely to lead to marriage) often to the detriment of the content of that relationship.

Because of the reasons discussed in the previous example it is often very difficult for a woman to attempt to express her feelings and concerns about the relationship she has with her husband. We want to claim further that her very real dependence on his continuing economic and social support may well make her more reluctant to bring up with him, or even, often, to confront in herself, problems and dissatisfactions.³⁶

This reluctance to acknowledge and voice one's feelings is especially evident within the relationship itself. Sheila Rowbotham quotes a young wife,

"If he stops loving me, I'm sunk; I won't have any purpose in life, or be sure I exist any more. I must efface myself in order to avoid that, and not make any demands on him, or do anything that might offend him. I feel dead now, but if he stops loving me I am really dead, because I am nothing by myself. I have to be noticed to know I exist. But if I efface myself, how can I be noticed? It is a basic contradiction."³⁷

Thus, the energy which the woman is capable and desirous of putting into the relationship becomes focused on the maintenance of its form rather than on the cultivation of its content. "For the sake of her marriage" she overlooks problems, excuses faults, suppresses anger, feigns sexual pleasure, and ignores or lies about any beginnings of dissatisfaction. Not only does this involve a stifling of her own feelings, but it works against the development of a relationship capable of being responsive to his or her needs. Trying to make a relationship do that is difficult and unlikely to be attempted when the preservation of the marriage *per se* has assumed disproportionate importance.

Thus again, as in the previous examples, we can see how a form of caring which women typically show occurs often within a context which warps it, to the mutual detriment of the woman and the object of her concern.³⁸

IV

In Section II we presented a line of philosophical thought which attempts to articulate a positive connection between autonomy and caring.

This connection remains, however, an abstract one. This abstractness accounts for the failure of these philosophers to notice that distortions of caring occur not merely as individual failings. Rather these distortions are embedded in the institution which furnishes us with our central nonabstract paradigms of caring: marriage and the family. In arguing for this point in Section III we supported negatively the claim that caring requires autonomy; we have not yet, however, shown concretely what such caring looks like.

The centrality of marriage and the family to our understanding of how people care for each other, combined with the structures of dependence built into traditional marriage, make it difficult for us to understand the importance of autonomy with caring and difficult also to embody such a conception in our relationships. It is helpful, therefore, in developing alternative conceptions of caring, to consider institutions, such as women's consciousness-raising groups, which exist largely as a response to the difficulty people feel in relating autonomously and caringly in the context of traditional social structures.³⁹

In contrast with the traditional marriage, several structural features of women's consciousness-raising groups promote the members' caring for each other in ways that reinforce their autonomy. A member is neither economically dependent on the others nor forced to rely on them as her sole source of emotional support. Nor does a member feel that criticizing another is being "ungrateful" or overstepping her role. In fact a major aim of such groups is to encourage criticism and a collective questioning of goals.

An example will make clearer how the group functions to promote autonomy and caring. A member feels inadequate to and harassed by the demands of childcare. In voicing her unhappiness she is encouraged by the others' taking her feelings seriously. They, in turn, recognize the similarity of her feelings to theirs. Thus, listening and giving support is bound up not, as typically in marriage, with a suppression of one's own feelings, but with their shared expression.

Furthermore, the seriousness her words are accorded may enable her to become in touch with buried feelings which her immersion in the situation previously prevented her from recognizing.⁴⁰ She, and others in the group, may come to acknowledge feelings of anger under the inadequacy.

The supportive criticism of other members may aid her in coming to this recognition. Whereas someone might point out that her efforts to meet every demand are self-defeating, someone else may make the deeper criticism that she ought not to feel that she bears sole responsibility for childcare. This sort of criticism, necessary to support someone's developing autonomy, requires one to take an autonomous stance, independent of what the other wants to hear. Thus, growths in autonomy reinforce and are reinforced by the caring within the group.

The increased confidence in the legitimacy of her feelings may enable a member to make changes in her life in response to them. It is likely, however, that the woman will come to see that certain strains are inevitable, no matter how she reacts, given certain features of her situation (her husband holds an exhausting nine to five job; adequate child care is largely unavailable, etc.). She comes to see that many of these features of her situation are the product of a particular social structure which only concerted political activity could change. Thus the women's group can aid its members to see that their problem cannot be solved by personal change or in the isolated sphere of the group. The women of a group in California expressed this as follows:

Many of us were becoming more and more demoralized as we saw ourselves unable to fit our new concepts of ourselves as women into our daily lives. . . . We now see the group as a place where we can isolate areas of compromise, look at the situation objectively and analyze the most productive form of attack. . . . The group has had a radicalizing effect on us. Now we understand in our gut something we used to give only lip service to: that there is no personal solution to being a woman in this society. We have realized that if we do not work to change the society it will in the end destroy us.⁴¹

Thus, while the groups have enabled individual women to discover caring with autonomy, many have also recognized that they will only develop it fully when the political conditions which support the split between autonomy and caring, as well as the other aspects of women's oppression, are transformed.

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- ¹ Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1971, p. 7.
- ² Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, New York, Avon, 1971, p. 266.
- ³ Margaret Adams, "The Compassion Trap," in Gornick and Moran (eds.), *Women in Sexist Society*, New York, New American Library, p. 556.
- ⁴ These incomplete views of the nature of altruistic qualities bear on philosophical conceptions of the nature of altruism. This tendency to abstract a single characteristic from other aspects of a person's life and to take it out of its social context is typical of moral philosophy in general. Yet another strain of thought within philosophy, especially philosophy which is heavily influenced by Christian thought, posits an actual opposition, explicit or implicit, between a concern for self and a concern for others. This opposition can be seen in Kant in the idea of the struggle between morality on the one hand and personal happiness or inclination on the other. (Other strains of thought within Kant, such as the idea that autonomy involves acting out of a law acceptable to all, do not contain this opposition.)
- ⁵ This is not to deny that actual altruism—self-disregard for the sake of others—can be morally admirable and good, but only that it should not be seen as the paradigm case of doing good for others.
- ⁶ This theme is explored in Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1971, ch. 1.
- ⁷ Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons*, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1950.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, e.g., p. 16.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- ¹¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, p. 16.
- ¹² Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* (trans. Heath), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954, p. 42.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ¹⁴ Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring*, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 5, 7.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ¹⁷ "The family is the primary institution through which women participate in this society . . . Even working women give the family their primary allegiance. Wherever a woman is in this society, it is the family, and the ideology of the family, that contributes most to shaping her beliefs and maintaining her oppression." Eli Zaretsky, "Capitalism and Personal Life," *Socialist Revolution*, # 13-14, p. 73.
- ¹⁸ Distortion also occurs in relationships outside the family. Some is either caused by or mirrors familial relationships, and some is relatively independent and caused by oppressive economic and social features of, e.g., the work situation.
- ¹⁹ Ingrid Bengis, *Combat in the Erogeous Zone*, Knopf, 1972, pp. 106 ff.
- ²⁰ The criticism made of Mayeroff, above, pp. 202-203, is particularly relevant here. He would have us not call such distortions cases of caring at all, a rather laudable caveat which unfortunately ignores the fact that it is precisely what we learn as paradigm cases of caring (that shown by mothers and wives) which are most prone to

this sort of distortion. We have to deal not so much with individual aberration as with systematic, institutionalized distortion. And that leaves us considerably less able to say "We know just what caring is, and this simply isn't it."

²¹ E.g., by, among others, Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex* (trans. Parshley), New York, Knopf, 1952.

²² Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, Baltimore, Penguin, 1971, p. 129.

²³ In this section and elsewhere we appear to ignore the support which, even in traditional contexts, a man often gives to a woman. His care, however, is primarily in providing a calm, level-headed rationality when she is unable to cope.

²⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Pelican Books, 1973, p. 59.

²⁵ See Eli Zaretsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-116 and elsewhere. Zaretsky traces the development of this conception of the family and shows how the development of capitalism created the conditions for its applying to working class as well as bourgeois families.

²⁶ This phenomenon has been discussed extensively in feminist literature. See, for example, Juliet Mitchell, *op. cit.*, and Sheila Rowbotham, *op. cit.*, especially chapters 4 and 5.

²⁷ Of course, her caring may not be *merely* out of obligation, but we are concerned to examine what happens when caring is, *inter alia*, an obligation which someone in a subordinate position is expected to show to a person on whom she is dependent. No matter what feeling prompts her caring, our argument is that the caring occurs in an objective situation which distorts it.

²⁸ Except when dependence, lack of autonomy, and role-expectations force support and criticism apart, there need be no conflict between them. In fact, as argued below in IV, genuine support can at time entail criticism.

²⁹ Wendy Martyna, "The Substitute Success Syndrome," in *The Second Wave*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1972, pp. 28-31.

³⁰ Rowbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

³¹ Pauline Bart discusses the problem of the supermother syndrome in "Depression in Middle-Aged Women" (*Women in Sexist Society*, ed. Gornick and Moran, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-186). She notes that women who have devoted their lives to their children and have failed to develop interests of their own feel threatened and reluctant to relinquish control when their children begin to set forth on their own lives. Such women frequently suffer loss of self-esteem and depression in middle-age when their efforts are no longer required in the day to day burdens of childrearing. The loss of the role of mother is the loss of the role from which they derive their sense of being valued by others and their own sense of being a person of worth.

³² This is a standard point made in the literature on sex-role socialization. See, e.g., Adams, *op. cit.*; Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Stanford, Calif., Stanford Univ. Press, 1974, pp. 43-66.

³³ Even work situations which promote a sense of solidarity (e.g., because of a shared sense of grievance or oppression, or because of the necessity of the collective action) exist in conjunction with the aspects of the work role situation discussed here, and only rarely will these negative features be entirely absent. Furthermore, work situations will often be consciously arranged so that they preclude workers' developing a sense of camaraderie. Cf. Howard M. Wachtel, "Class-Consciousness and Stratification in the Labor Process," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. VI, No. 1, Spring, 1974, pp. 1-31.

³⁴ This is discussed in de Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, pp. 424 ff.

³⁵ Sarah Wolf, "Frances," *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 44-47.

³⁶ For example, this may be part of the reason why she may feel that her support of her husband must be total and uncritical, why, in fact, she may not even admit to herself any critical feelings—cf. A (2) above.

³⁷ Rowbotham, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75. Quoted from Meredith Tax, *Woman and Her Mind, the Story of Daily Life*, a Bread & Roses publication, 1970, p. 7.

³⁸ Our examples have all concerned ways in which women's care and concern is distorted by the forms in which it is expressed in women's lives. It might be useful to mention an example *not* regarding women in which "altruism" is distorted by the forms in which it is expressed, so that the general point that altruism can be distorted by the social and institutional forms in which it exists in a particular society is brought out more clearly. An example is *charity*, a form of giving to others in which the autonomy of the other is not respected or promoted by the giver; rather, the other is regarded as dependent on the beneficence of others, rather than being able to take care of himself. This aspect of charity is made explicit by Kant in his discussion of the notion of "beneficence" in the *Doctrine of Virtue* (part II of the *Metaphysics of Morals*); he sees to some extent the limits and defects of this form of giving to others, but rather than criticize it he accepts the charity-model as the typical case of giving to others.

Though charity might be motivated by a genuine concern for the other, this concern takes a distorted form in that charity reinforces and expresses a sense of inferiority and lack of autonomy in the recipient. This criticism of charity is made by W. C. MacLagan, "Respect for Persons as a Moral Principle, II," *Philosophy*, 1960. Related points specifically concerning women's role in charity organizations and other volunteer and service work are made by M. Adams, "The Compassion Trap," *op. cit.*, and Doris Gold, "Women and Voluntarism" in Gornick and Moran, *op. cit.*

³⁹ In connection with the feminist and new left movements of the 1960's and 1970's, such structures have emerged, partly in response to the contradictions which we have been discussing. Women's groups, communes, and egalitarian work collectives (including commercial enterprises, political action groups, etc.) are some examples. These groups perform three major functions which are relevant to our concerns:

1) In such groups autonomy and caring reinforce each other. Conflicts between them are seen as opposed to the purpose of the groups rather than inherent in them, as is the case in the examples of section III. Should conflicts between them arise, the conditions exist for their resolution.

2) Within such groups people frequently achieve new ways of relating to others, a changed sense of themselves, and political and social insights which encourage and enable them to ameliorate the oppressive effects of the institutions which structure their lives outside of the groups.

3) In these groups people come to see that many of the contradictions and problems confronted within the groups can be fully resolved only by the sort of full-scale changes in social institutions which necessitate concerted political action.

That these groups give us models for new ways of relating to others should not obscure their limitations. Any group which plays a particular historical role, such as egalitarian collectives under capitalism and women's groups in a sexist society is likely to be deficient as a "timeless" goal or ideal. These groups may be superseded by others which go further and do more. Their members must retain the awareness that these structures remain within and are deeply affected by features of the society

as a whole. Furthermore, such structures usually last for only a limited portion of the lives of their members and often are options really available only to certain groups within the society.

⁴⁰ Related to this point is Kathryn Pyne Parsons' observation in *Nietzsche and Moral Change* that the women's revolution never would have come about if its "activists had followed the advice" of Michael Walzer: "I should think the immediate goals of the activists must be set by the general consciousness of the oppressed group rather than by their own ideology. The effects can only be judged by those who will feel them. 'Helping' someone usually means doing something for him that he regards or seems likely to regard (given his present state of mind) as helpful" ("The Obligations of Oppressed Minorities," *Commentary*, May 1970, quoted in Parsons, emphasis hers). Part of what Parsons is concerned to argue here is that "People come to recognize that they are oppressed and that they have certain needs in and through the process of social change, and that to regard as legitimate only felt and articulated dissatisfactions is to ignore the deepest problems, the ones which are felt, if they are felt at all, as natural and inevitable."

⁴¹ Pamela Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation*, Washington, New Jersey, Times Change Press, 1970, p. 60.