In search of community
Mouffe, Wittgenstein and Cavell

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Recent discussions of political community are, so I argue in this article, haunted by the spectre of scepticism about other minds. I do not intend to suggest that these discussions address directly the philosophical version of the sceptical problem. Rather, I believe they find their motivation in the same everyday impulse which, for Wittgenstein, constitutes the truth of this form of scepticism. More specifically, I argue that in these discussions difference is construed as a kind of separation. Further, I argue that scepticism leads to a thinking of the body as the opaque screen which marks this separation.

I focus my discussion on Chantal Mouffe’s endorsement of a deconstructive paradox of political community, which is central to her agonistic model of radical democracy. I also very briefly mention some points about community developed by Iris Marion Young and Jacques Rancière. Their discussions bring to light the crucial importance of a specific conception of the body to the issue of community.

My proposal should not be read simply as a refutation of the views developed by the philosophers I discuss. The impulse that generated them cannot be silenced once and for all by means of philosophical argument. Nevertheless, I hope that my diagnosis of the problem as well as my presentation of an alternative might help somewhat to reduce the hold that scepticism has on us.

There is little doubt that community building is a dangerous business. The notion of political community has often been invoked to impose on every member of a culture the ‘values and practices that pertain … to specific privileged groups within the community as values of the “culture” as a whole’.1 Thus, the ideal of community has often been used to mask the oppression of the least powerful members of a group. Awareness of this danger should lead us to watchfulness. For instance, one might support the claims made by underprivileged people that their own values and practices do not position them outside their cultural contexts.2

Instead of practising watchfulness, however, some political philosophers have recoiled from notions of political community. They have reacted to the realization that we cannot ever tell with certainty whether our ideal of community is not an instrument for the oppression of some people by asserting that fully inclusive communities are impossible. In other words, they seem to believe that, unless there is something that ensures that justice will be done, injustice is unavoidable. Thus, the always present possibility of injustice is transformed into the certainty of its necessity.

Young’s position is a prime example of this tendency. She rejects the ideal of community in no uncertain terms. She offers a variety of reasons for her position. Two are especially significant in this context. First, Young holds that any definition of community is based on the exclusion of others. This view, which is widely shared,3 is expressed by Young thus:

self-identification as a member of … [a] community … often occurs as an oppositional differentiation from other groups, who are feared, despised, or at best devalued…. The ideal of community, I suggest, validates and reinforces the fear and aversion some social groups exhibit toward others.4

Second, Young holds that, because of its commitment to the logic of identity or the metaphysics of presence, the ideal of community denies difference among subjects. Young’s choice of metaphors in conveying this objection to the ideal of community is particularly illuminating. She writes:

In community persons cease to be other, opaque, not understood, and instead become mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they
understand themselves, fused. Such an ideal of the transparency of subjects to one another denies the difference … of subjects.5

Young sets up a contrast between transparency and opaqueness as an analogue of the opposition of sameness to difference. She suggests that a failure to acknowledge the otherness of some people is a failure to acknowledge their opacity. What makes them opaque, presumably, is that we cannot understand them. We are sealed out of their lives. Their minds are hidden from us. All we have to go on is their bodies and their actions as markers of their difference from us. This theme is also explored by Rancière, who holds that identity – and by extension community – is ‘about fear: the fear of the other, the fear of nothing, which finds on the body of the other its object’.5

Rancière’s and Young’s claims capture an important truth about our attitude to building communities. We think of people who are different from us as separated from us, as opaque. We also think of their bodies as markers of this separation. Communities, we conclude, are about boundaries and frontiers. Every attempt to bring some people together in a community inevitably marks others as outsiders who are to be excluded.

The paradox of community

Chantal Mouffe has offered the clearest expression of these sentiments when she writes:

‘It is vital to recognize that, since to construct a ‘we’ it is necessary to distinguish it from a ‘them’, and that all forms of consensus are based on acts of exclusion, the condition of possibility of the political community is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its full realization.’7

Mouffe’s formulation highlights the paradox at the core of a widely shared conception of political communities: those acts which constitute the conditions of possibility of this community are also shown to constitute the conditions of impossibility of (the full realization) of this same community. This paradox deserves the label of ‘deconstructive’ because of its structural similarities with Jacques Derrida’s views about meaning.8 Further, Mouffe herself acknowledges her indebtedness to Derrida’s notion of the ‘constitutive outside’ in the development of her ideas about the centrality for politics of the opposition between us and them.9

Mouffe’s argument for the inescapability of the paradox is simple. In her opinion ‘every definition of a “we” implies the delimitation of a “frontier” and the designation of a “them”… [It] always takes place, then, in a context of diversity and conflict’.10 That is, she believes that any act of saying ‘we’ consists in the drawing of a boundary, or limit,11 which circumscribes a group of people.

Further, Mouffe claims, the construction and consolidation of a ‘we’ is a necessary condition for the possibility of any political community. But, she continues, the acts which construct the ‘we’ constitute of community at the same time delineate a ‘they’ which is excluded from that community. Consequently, all political communities are predicated on acts of exclusion.

We can visualize what Mouffe is saying by means of an analogy. The act of constructing a community is like drawing a boundary which encloses a region of space. But this notion of a limit presupposes that we can make sense of something which is located on the other side of the boundary. Hence, as Mouffe says, every act of inclusion of what is within a boundary is also at the same time an act of exclusion of what lies outside the boundary.

These considerations force the deconstructive paradox of political community upon us once we undertake the core commitment of democratic politics, which, for Mouffe, consists in respect for pluralism and difference.12 Modern democracy is characterized, on the one hand, by a respect for the equality of all and, on the other, by a recognition of individual freedom.13 However, the ideal of equality for all comes to seem incompatible with any account of community along the lines proposed by Mouffe. The problem is further deepened by a tension between equality and individual freedom.

According to the conception discussed thus far, communities are brought into being when boundaries are drawn, and these limits require that there could be somebody on the other side of the boundary. Hence, this notion of community entails the possibility of exclusion.14 However, the principle of equality dictates that any exclusion from an ideal political community be prima facie unacceptable. Thus, the condition that makes communities possible is the drawing of limits. These are the limits that make the realization of an ideal – or fully inclusive – democratic community impossible.

The problem is rendered even more acute by the recognition of individual freedom. In a modern context, this recognition involves respect for a pluralism which for Mouffe is tantamount to ‘the abandonment
of a substantive and unique vision of the common good and of *eudaimonia*. More specifically, pluralism involves the constitution of many different communities within a broader political community. Thus, it requires the drawing of many boundaries. There is a ‘we’ of women, one of the English, one of smokers, of gym users, of film lovers, of football hooligans and so on.

The paradox has now been fully developed. The condition for the possibility of political community is the construction of a ‘we’. And, in the context of modern democracy, the ideal political community is one whose ‘we’ must (because of a concern for equality) be all-inclusive and must preserve – even cultivate – group differences within it, because of a concern for freedom. However, these two requirements seem to pull in different directions. The cultivation of group differences appears to undermine the quest for inclusion whenever some of these groups aspire to the status of independent political communities. Further, as I have already mentioned, the ideal of universal inclusion is self-undoing since each act of constitution of community requires the possibility of exclusion. Hence, the conditions for the possibility of a political community are such as to render impossible the existence of an ideal political community. The paradox might seem inevitable, since – I take it – we share a commitment to the modern democratic principles which appear to generate it.

Mouffe derives substantive conclusions from the deconstructive paradox of community; it can even plausibly be claimed that the paradox is the cornerstone of her political theory. It provides the main justification for her support of a model of democracy which she calls ‘agonistic’. Mouffe believes that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, political conflict is inevitable. She holds that ‘[t]o believe that a final resolution of conflict is eventually possible – even if it is seen as an asymptotic approaching to the regulative ideal … – is something that, far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, in fact puts it at risk.’ Hence, for Mouffe, we should not even aim to resolve all conflicts. Not only is an ideal community impossible; in her opinion, we should not even strive to achieve it.

This is a very disturbing conclusion, but it is easy to see how Mouffe derives it from the paradox of democratic community. Since an ideal community is impossible, any apparent resolution of conflict is a case in which, as a matter of fact, some groups have been silenced, and their interests ignored. Thus, any belief that we could achieve such an ideal community is a dangerous fantasy. Even the more modest aim of trying to resolve as many conflicts as possible is similarly pernicious. In either case, our aim will lead us to overlook the unjust suppression of some group differences. Further, the pursuit of an ideal community prevents us from learning to live with the strife and antagonism which characterizes political life.

Instead, Mouffe suggests that we accept that ‘the aim of democratic politics is to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary”, that is somebody whose ideas we combat’. A common adhesion to the principles of liberty and equality is what makes it possible to treat others as adversaries rather than enemies. However, even though we share these principles, ‘we disagree concerning [their] meaning and implementation …, and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through … rational discussion’. That is, Mouffe’s model of democracy is agonistic because it holds that we should not aim for the rational resolution of conflicts. As this conclusion is based on her view that political communities always create an ‘us’ by excluding a ‘them’, the whole edifice of Mouffe’s model rests on the paradox of democratic community.

It is quite easy to undermine the paradox by pointing out that the analogy with the notion of drawing a limit has been asked to do all of the philosophical work in these brief considerations. The creation of the paradox fundamentally depends on thinking of the constitution of the ‘we’ as an act of encircling an area within a boundary. There is no necessity in this analogy. Whilst many speech acts that are used to construct a ‘we’ might take the form of drawing a limit, there are many other things that we can do with these words. In order to release the grip the paradox has on us, we must explore these other things. Thus, the search for community will turn on what it is that we do with words when we say ‘we’.

**The sceptical impulse**

For Wittgenstein philosophy is not an idle game; it is a talking cure. It is not about proofs or refutations, but about diagnosis and therapy. As such it does not provide definitive solutions to problems. It attempts to quieten some of our worries. Because of their deep sources, our tormenting questions will not go away, however. Thus, the work of philosophy has no end.

The sense that others are ‘closed off from me (within, as it were, their own experience)’ is the source of philosophical scepticism. It finds its
everyday expression in an acute feeling of loneliness and separation. Some people, we discover, are a complete enigma to us. Often people we trust seem to be totally unable to understand us, or they seem not to care. When faced with others we must rely on their words and their gestures in order to understand them, and these might deceive us, or we might fail to read them. There is, then, incomprehension among human beings. This everyday phenomenon gives rise to a myth, and to a fantasy. We picture the mind as hidden from view, the body as its screen. We develop a myth of the mind as trapped within the body. You are sealed within your experiences, and I am sealed out of them. I see your gestures, but, because of the myth of the inner, I ‘scoop mind out of’ them. Your mind is not in them, but – so to speak – behind them, and I have no knowledge of it.

We fantasize that we would escape this condition if we could only reach into the other person’s mind, and know it with certainty. If we could think their thoughts, feel their pains, we would understand them. In this way, we could avoid the tragedy of human incomprehension. But, we feel that our embodied condition gets in the way. What would be needed to know how they feel is to feel it with them. But this we cannot do because they are in their bodies and we are in ours. Philosophical scepticism gets its impulse from these everyday experiences and considerations. It is the result of our disappointment with attempts to get to know with certainty what goes on inside the mind of another person. Hence scepticism is hard to resist. Philosophers are always tempted by it. For instance, they may claim: ‘Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.’ Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism are often intended to weaken the grip of such claims on us. He writes, for example, in reply to the philosophers’ assertion, that in fact ‘other people very often know when I am in pain’. And, he adds, it does not make sense (except as a joke) to say that I know I am in pain, for my relation to my pain is not one of knowledge.

Further, Wittgenstein remarks that philosophical scepticism about other minds cannot be sustained. The sceptical attitude is not one we can live with in our ordinary life. We cannot imagine that others behave like minded creatures but lack minds. These considerations, how-ever, do not offer a refutation of scepticism, because it cannot receive a straight answer. Wittgenstein’s remark that we often know that others are in pain will not quieten the sceptical voice; nor is it intended to. The sceptic asks for knowledge, and her request is not satisfied. Instead, Wittgenstein tries to bring us to see why in this context a request for knowledge is out of place. At this level our relation to others is not one of knowing or believing. However, in so far as scepticism is the metaphysical expression of our feeling of separateness from others, it will always return. Thus, the work of weakening its grip on us is never-ending.

Cavell’s discussion of the difference between knowing and acknowledging throws light on the confusion manifested by the sceptic about other minds: the reason ‘I know you are in pain’ is not an expression of certainty is that it is a response …; it is an expression of sympathy….
But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because your suffering makes a claim upon me. It is not enough that I know (am certain) that you suffer – I must do or reveal something. In a word, I must acknowledge it, otherwise I do not know what ‘(your or his) being in pain’ means. A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank.

The sceptic treats the relation between me and your pain as one of knowledge (or certainty) rather than acknowledgement. He wants to know how I could have access to your pain, since pain is private, whilst all I have to go on is your behaviour. For Cavell and Wittgenstein the sceptic’s request for knowledge therefore manifests a confusion about the character of our relations to other human beings. For when we say ‘I know you are in pain’, what we mean is that your pain requires a response from me: I must relieve your suffering, if I can. Thus, when sceptics say that we do not know whether others are in pain, their words mean that the suffering of others never has a claim on me. Sceptics, of course, would not want to mean this coldness, and indifference by their words. Their scepticism, however, constantly draws them toward these failures of acknowledgement.

I will argue below that some acts of saying ‘we’ are expressions of acknowledgement, and that sometimes these acts require that we imaginatively project our words into new contexts of use. A brief discussion of Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks about our life with words will help to explain this phenomenon, and return us critically to the sceptical impulse animating contemporary discussions of political community.

**Projecting words**

This vast topic is best approached by appreciating the importance of a simple point. We all learn and teach words and other symbols are to be used correctly in all contexts. Thus, for instance, he remarks that the case of something which looks like a chair but keeps appearing and disappearing does not imperil our ability to use the word ‘chair’, even though we have no fixed answers about this case. Even if ‘the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules’, this fact alone does not undermine the meaningful employment of the word.

Similarly, Wittgenstein remarks, this ability to project words correctly into new contexts cannot be explained by an appeal to interpretation. It is easy to see that if ‘interpretation’ is taken in its ordinary meaning of ‘the substitution of the one expression of the rule for another’, we cannot always explain what makes projections work by invoking interpretations. It is true that when one fails to understand the use of a word in a novel context, others can sometimes help by providing a new explanation (interpretation) of what one means by the word in that specific context. This phenomenon, however, cannot be invoked to explain how newcomers to the language make the projective leap, since the leap requires that one has already grasped and projected other words.

Wittgenstein provides many examples of the sorts of things which could be said to involve projection. From them, we can begin to appreciate that the ability we have to project words into novel contexts of use in ways which find us in agreement with others depends to some extent on the fact that we share emotions and their physical expressions, or that we share a sense of humour. Cavell states this point to dramatic effect:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place … just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour …, of what is outrageous… all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’ Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less than this.

Our agreements about how to project words into new contexts require that we share a way of life. Such sharing is not a matter of agreement or disagreement, but rather what makes all agreement or disagreement possible. If you and I do not share the same sense of humour, it would seem perverse to see this phenomenon as a disagreement about the comic. And it is
similarly perverse to describe, for instance, my acquisition of a British sense of humour as a matter of my having achieved an agreement with you on these matters. Cavell employs the notion of attunement, with its metaphorical suggestion of being in tune or in harmony, to characterize this phenomenon. This notion is not, however, meant to explain ‘the fact of [the] agreement in the language human beings use together. … For nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent, of agreement itself.’

Sceptical communities

We are now, I suggest, in a position to appreciate why current discussions of community are animated by a sceptical impulse. Young, Rancière and Mouffe provide important diagnoses of why many attempts to build communities involve the denial of difference. Like the sceptic, community builders are faced with the tragedy of human incomprehension. They react to it by mythologizing others as opaque, hidden behind their bodies. Also like the sceptic, community builders fantasize about escaping this condition. The way out of tragedy is a dream of sameness. They imagine that only if we were all alike, the sense of isolation could be undone. For this reason community builders try to enforce homogeneity.

Mouffe, Young and Rancière are, however, also not immune from the sceptical impulse. What I take to be a correct diagnosis of a human tendency they read as an inevitability. Mouffe’s position bears the most significant similarities to the sceptic. Like the sceptic, Mouffe begins with experience of separation; also like the sceptic she believes that knowing (rather than acknowledging) is required to address the distress generated by this experience, and her position draws her towards failures of acknowledgement.

Mouffe, as I said above, is explicitly concerned with the many differences among human beings. She is aware of the many human tragedies which have been engendered by failures to appreciate these differences. She is also aware that sometimes we encounter human beings who seem so different from us that dialogue appears to be nearly impossible. Thus, there is an important truth which Mouffe tries to capture. Namely, there are many differences between groups of human beings which engender incomprehension and a sense of separation. Further, it seems that this situation can only be undone by violent means. Dominant groups assimilate other less powerful groups by suppressing difference and trying to impose homogeneity. This truth is the political equivalent of what lies hidden behind scepticism about other minds. The sceptic is motivated by an experience of isolation between individuals; Mouffe by an experience of difference as a source of separation between human groups.

Both Mouffe and the sceptic give a metaphysical expression to these experiences of separation. The sceptic takes the inner lives of others to be private, something we could understand only if we could see directly inside them. Since we can only observe their behaviour, the sceptic concludes that we have no knowledge of the inner life of other people. Similarly, Mouffe takes the ways of life of groups other than ourselves to be something we are sealed out from, while they are sealed within them. Hence, Mouffe is forced to adopt the language of ‘boundaries’ and ‘frontiers’ between different groups of
people. For Mouffe, different groups could be included within the same democratic community only if new boundaries which enclose all of them could be built. But, since these new frontiers could only be created by stating our knowledge of our similarities as opposed to yet another group’s differences, Mouffe concludes that a fully inclusive democratic community is impossible.

The sceptic’s conception of our inner life as a private enclosure leads him to misconstrue the role played in our life by words such as ‘I know that you are in pain.’ These words, at least sometimes, function as an expression of acknowledgement. The sceptic takes them to be an expression of knowledge. Thus, he withdraws these words from circulation, because such knowledge is not forthcoming. Similarly, Mouffe is led to misunderstand the variety of uses to which words like ‘we’, ‘us’ or ‘they’ can be put. Mouffe assumes that these words are always used to state that we have something in common that makes you different from us. Hence, these words cannot ever be used to include everyone. Consequently, when they seem to do so, they are as a matter of fact used to suppress difference. What Mouffe fails to realize is that these words sometimes function as expressions of acknowledgement.

In our ordinary commerce with words the speech act of saying ‘we’ is not always akin to drawing a boundary with ‘them’ on the other side of the limit. Consider the difference between saying, when encountering a person of a different race or class or culture, ‘she is just like us’ and saying ‘we are just like her.’ In the first case, the assertion is often employed to reinforce exclusions. The claim appears to state that she is our equal, when it might in fact reassert our superiority. For instance, the claim might imply that it is only in virtue of her similarity to us that she is granted a high status. If this statement implies our superiority, then it must function also as an act of exclusion. Only if there are inferiors could we possibly count as superiors. The same assertion could also be employed to mean that she is no better than us, thus implying that she considers herself to be superior. In this case, too, the statement is not used to include but to exclude.

The second kind of act of saying ‘we’ is of a different sort. When we say that we are just like you, we do not imply that you have a high or a low status. Instead, we are saying that we share your reactions, or your emotions, your commitments or sense of humour. These acts of saying ‘we’ do not entail exclusions. They are acts of acknowledgement that you are entitled to make claims upon us. These acts do not draw a boundary because they are not in the business of encircling a group.

We can now see what is wrong with Mouffe’s paradox of democratic community. It is tantamount to the claim that the conditions for the acknowledgement of some people are at the same time the conditions for impossibility of acknowledging other people. Thus reformulated, the paradox does not seem compelling after all. Why should it be true that if we acknowledge the claim that a person’s suffering has on us, then it must always be the case that there could be other people whose suffering we fail to acknowledge? There are, of course, limitations to what one can do. But this simple consideration does not show that we cannot acknowledge all the claims made on us. I am not suggesting for a moment that we do acknowledge all of these claims. This fact is, however, an indication of our callousness, for which we should take responsibility. It is not a consequence of an inescapable paradox.

Acts of saying ‘we’ which function as acknowledgements help us to test and realize the depth and breadth of our attunement in words, emotions and reactions. These are trivial things perhaps, but without them we could not agree or disagree with one another. Also, by means of projective imagination, acts of saying ‘we’ help us to expand and change the nature of such attunements. By projecting words into novel contexts, and thus revealing our commitments, we invite others to look and see things in novel ways. Sometimes we create new communities in this way. An example illustrates this point.

There is a scene in the film Torch Song Trilogy in which the gay protagonist, Arnold, and his mother are at the cemetery where both Arnold’s father and his lover are buried. Arnold’s mother is infuriated by Arnold reading the Jewish prayer of the dead at the site of his lover’s grave. When she challenges him as to what he is doing, he replies that he is doing precisely what she is doing at her husband’s grave. Arnold’s mother, instead, claims that whilst she is reciting Kaddish for her husband, Arnold is blaspheming his religion.37 Arnold is asking his mother to engage in an act of projective imagination; her doing so will allow them to be a community again.

There are, of course, no guarantees of success. Genuine tragedy is always possible. The differences between two groups might go so deep that neither is capable of acknowledging the claims made by members of the other group.38 This sad fact, which is the truth that motivates Mouffe, she turns into a metaphysical claim. Instead of alerting us to the
possibility of failure, she proclaims its conceptual necessity.

In conclusion, the lesson to be learnt from Wittgenstein and Cavell is that communities require acts of acknowledgement, and that these involve accepting a responsibility for the actions of one’s group, both its successes and its failures. The further related lesson to be learnt is that when we say ‘we’ we are not necessarily pointing to an opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Instead, we might use this expression to indicate to others that we recognize that they are entitled to make claims on us.

But the final lesson is that the sceptical impulse will not go away. I have claimed that Mouffe, Young and Rancière can be read as offering diagnoses of this impulse as that which generates the denial of differences among human beings. I have also argued that they are not immune to the same impulse. But, given its source in our everyday experiences, the impulse will always return. No amount of philosophical argument can provide a definitive cure for it.

Notes

2. This is precisely Narayan’s position. See, for instance, ibid., p. 32.
3. It is central to Mouffe’s position as discussed below. This opinion has also been voiced by Eric Hobsbawm in ‘Identity Politics and the Left’, New Left Review 1/217, 1996, pp. 38–47; see, especially, p. 43.
5. Ibid., p. 231.
8. For instance, Derrida writes: ‘the condition of possibility of those effects [of signature] is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity.’ See Limited Inc., Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1988, p. 20.
11. For the purposes of this article I use the words ‘limit’ and ‘boundary’ interchangeably.
13. Ibid., p. 35.
14. It does not, however, entail its actuality. The notion of a limit does not require that something is on the other side; it only requires the intelligibility of the possibility that something is on the other side.
16. Hence the title of her latest book of essays is The Democratic Paradox. The essays in this volume all defend some version of this same paradox.
17. Mouffe, ‘Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity’, p. 44.
19. Ibid., p. 103.
23. Ibid., §246.
24. Ibid., §420.
28. Stanley Cavell, ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’ in Must We Mean What We Say?, pp. 44–72; see p. 52.
30. Ibid., §84.
31. Ibid., §201.
38. Cavell makes the same point when he claims (in The Claim of Reason, p. 437) that in some sense we are destined to live our and others’ scepticism.