**Privacy, Self-knowledge, and the Commune:**

**Toward an Epistemology of the Family**

by

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Advocates of communal living often urge that life in a commune provides the framework for a deeper knowledge of other people. I believe this is clearly true and because it is true, communal living is also instrumental in promoting self-knowledge. The dialogue that is part of the life of a commune enables one to incorporate the insights of the other members into his understanding of himself and his world.

My experience with living in an urban, middle-class, pluralistic commune has taught me that 1) life in a pluralistic commune is more conducive to dialogue than the available alternatives (living by oneself, living with a roommate, in a couple, the nuclear family, and the monistic commune) and 2) pluralistic communes enable dialogue to be more penetrating with respect to issues concerning one's personal life than it could be under conditions found in other lifestyles. In this paper, I have not developed these points in the usual fashion by constructing an abstract analysis to support them. The autobiographical, anecdotal style aims to be evocative and suggestive; it is intended as an indication, not a demonstration.

The loss of privacy involved in communal living is obvious and often mentioned. However, I believe that communes are so productive of self-knowledge precisely because of this loss of privacy. To understand why this is so, we must first understand something about what kind of privacy is lost and why.

The loss of privacy is not a loss of solitude brought about by the constant presence of others. In our commune, you can go into your room and shut the door; no one will disturb you, object, feel affronted or personally excluded. Some members of our commune have done precisely this for days, even weeks on end. In fact, I have felt more freedom to be alone in a commune than I did when living in a nuclear family because others will take my children off my hands when I need that and because I can be alone without thereby forcing my wife to be alone. Nor does the loss of privacy result primarily from the feeling that you are accountable to others for what you do. Although some communes are opposed to this sort of privacy, members of the commune I live in believe they have no right to demand an explanation of actions that are not likely to dramatically affect the lives of the other members.

The most significant loss of privacy is due simply to the fact that you are known by people who care for you. If you retreat into solitude for long periods of time, people who care about you will notice this and wonder about it. If you are not on good terms with your spouse, lover or friend, good friends cannot fail to be aware of this fact. If your children are aggravating you or if you are too preoccupied for days or weeks to really be with them, people who like both you and your children will be concerned. If elements of your lifestyle or your ways of relating to others are harming yourself or others, this will be observed and noted. Other members of the commune may ask what's bothering you or whether you want to talk about it. But in many communes no one will insist that you do.

Nonetheless, whatever it is, it's still there, they still know and they still care. Your refusal to talk about it is there, too -- another complicating factor in your daily existence, in your relations with them, and in their reflection and concern about you. Privacy is lost, then, mainly because so much of what you are and do is a matter of public knowledge and concern within the commune. If there is a loss of autonomy due to a feeling that you owe others an explanation, it is largely a result of their awareness and concern.

The impetus toward self-examination, dialogue and shared deliberation grows out of this knowledge and concern. The superior quality of dialogue in a

commune also results from the fact that you are known. If someone is to make you aware of aspects of your self or your practice that you are not aware of, they must be allowed to see what you do not just listen to what you say. If someone is to challenge assumptions that are so long-standing and seem so unquestionable that you never bother to mention them (not even to yourself), they must somehow have access to your "private life." "Don't you see that you're treating Bill like an adult? A five-year old couldn't possibly understand what you're expecting him to understand." No, I hadn't noticed that. "You and Marilyn just don't fight with each other because you're both so quick to dismiss your feelings - even strong feelings -- as irrational and hence to relegate them to the realm of your own problems." No, I'd assumed that other explanations better accounted for our relative lack of fights. "You are an honesty freak! You refuse to lie out of loyalty to your wife or friends, or to protect the feelings of others and their needs for privacy or secrecy." It had been an awfully long time since I'd seriously considered any other way of operating.

Many of the most penetrating and thought-provoking discussions I have had would have been impossible without the loss of privacy that communal living entails. "Why did you say that to Bill when he started to pout because he didn't want to do what was convenient for you?" "You really live in your head, don't you. Sometimes you don't even seem to be aware of how much of you you lose by doing that." "You're so career-oriented! You're almost always willing to sacrifice your family, your friends, even what you want, to the demands of being a better philosophy teacher." "You really get off on being down, don't you. You seem to get into it, to enjoy it a lot. I think you use it to prove to yourself and others that you're sensitive and aware of the problems." "Why are you so damned rationalistic? You can't refuse to acknowledge what she's feeling even if it is irrational -- she's feeling it and that means it is important."

I have also found that when I kept my personal life private, it was relatively easy to answer these questions or to defend myself against the charges implicit in them, even if someone had been perceptive, impolite, and bold enough to make such a remark. Those who asked the question or made the comment simply did not know enough to penetrate my initial reply. Then I could dismiss the charges (even to myself) by saying, "Of course I don't refuse to acknowledge the reality or importance of feelings" and they could not effectively reply. In a commune, too much is known to escape so easily, for the immediate response is, "Oh yes you do! You just turned her off when she got upset at you for cancelling your plans, even though you couldn't help it. And what about last Friday night?. . ."

The fact that others need to have the information that enables them to pursue me beyond my initial (often defensive) reply is crucial to the epistemology of self-knowledge and self-evaluation. The first fruits of self-knowledge are often bitter and one naturally resists upsetting and potentially disruptive insights into oneself. Consequently, each of us has good reason to be suspicious of his own assessments of himself.

In other words, self-judgment is necessarily interested judgment, for no one can be indifferent to evaluations of himself and his practice. An interested judgment is not inevitably erroneous, mistaken or biased. But an interested judgment is always epistemically suspect, not only because a person who is the judge in his own case may knowingly tip the scales of justice, but also because he may unknowingly do so. For these reasons and because I have learned so much about the blindnesses, biases and epistemic weaknesses of my own internal self examination, I have become skeptical of any methodology for deliberation that relies solely or ultimately on one's own judgment.

Fights with one's partner provide a particularly dramatic example of how the knowledge of others can be helpful in achieving increased awareness of the characteristics and limitations of one's perspective and judgments. Obviously, it is an extremely important occurrence when a couple fights. That two people fight about this (instead of something else that other couples would fight about) is significant in itself. Also, issues, attitudes, feelings and beliefs that are normally unnoticed, dormant, or covered up come to the surface on these occasions.

In a commune I soon discovered how much I had to learn about myself, my wife and our relationship from occasionally allowing myself to fight with her in front of other people whom both of us trust and who have enough information to be able to recognize many of the lies, distortions and self-deceptions of each. What kinds of claims does one take seriously and which are ignored or waived aside as irrelevant or unimportant? In what terms must an objection be couched before one will seriously consider it? How much projection is going on? What claims are in fact treated as non-negotiable? What topics does one refuse to discuss, preferring to shift the focus of discussion every time they come up? Which of one's remarks are cogent and telling, and which are nasty, petty, unfair or simply false?

I learned so much about all of this that I now believe it is unfortunate that fights between a couple are almost always conducted in privacy where there is no check on any of this because the only witnesses are also combatants whose answers to these questions are for this reason always suspect. I have found that even after tempers cool and a more "rational" mood prevails, far too many of the lies and self-deceptions remain. Others can, then, usefully serve as observers of an argument or discussion, as well as direct participants in one's deliberations.

But, valuable as the role of observers to an argument is, I have also confronted the differences between an informed observer and a relatively uninformed observer. I became acutely aware of my relative inability to detect distortions when watching a good (but non-communal) friend of mine fight with his wife at a turning point in their lives. Presented with two, almost diametrically opposed views of what was happening and why, I was unable to tell much about who was lying to whom about what and why. When members of my commune fight in front of me, my observation of their argument rests on a rich background of information absorbed through living with them and my observations could be correspondingly more penetrating, to the point, and helpful to the combatants. Equally important to their comprehension and reception of my observations is their familiarity with me and my approach to similar issues -- they know where I am coming from, as the saying goes.

To some extent, of course, dialogue with one's partner in the context of living as a couple can strengthen and sharpen self-examination in ways similar to the dialogue of a commune. However, my own experience is that my wife's ability to help me in these ways is limited in comparison to that of the commune.

There are two other sources of limitations. First, it is relatively easy to dismiss one person's observations about you, especially if accepting their comments would force changes in established and comfortable patterns of action and interaction. And most especially if you think he or she is disqualified as a judge because he or she has an interest in the change that would be entailed. (As a member of another commune so eloquently put it: "If one chick tells you you're doing something, you think she's crazy. But if three chicks tell you you're doing it, you've got to start listening.")

Second, stable relationships tend, I believe, to be stable because they begin with or quickly evolve an ideological, as well as a psychological compatibility. A couple will share a large number of common assumptions about themselves, each other and their relationship. Consequently, a stable couple will tend to share a way of seeing. . . and also a way of not seeing.

This final point serves to underscore the importance of the fact that I am speaking of life in a **pluralistic** commune. Monistic communes begin with or strive for ideological uniformity among their members. Pluralistic communes do not seek uniformity of perspective and may, in fact, strive to include members of widely divergent views and viewpoints. As a result, monistic communes tend and are usually intended to reinforce the commitment of each member to the common viewpoint; pluralistic communes tend and may also be designed to challenge the views of all their members.

I don't think I could live in a monistic commune because the threat to individual autonomy is too great. Also, I doubt that anyone can ever achieve a viewpoint so unquestionable that he is entitled to the kind of self-confidence implicit in committing himself to a program of reinforcing the views he already has. Dialogue in a commune is both more challenging and more illuminating to the extent that different views, lifestyles and modes of evaluation are present.

The point in all this is not, of course, that others should be included in one's self-examination and self-evaluation because they are ideal observers or speak with the voice of Pure Reason. The point is that there is no Pure Reason or ideal observer to which anyone can appeal in deliberation. Others can, however, observe your statements and your action without this observation having been filtered through your own conception of who you are and what you are doing. To the extent that others do not share your perspective, they can observe you in a way that is in principle impossible for you to observe yourself. Because it is impossible for anyone to have an external perspective on himself and an internal perspective on someone else, the other who is familiar with you, your actions and your views is in a position to perform a service for you that no one could possibly perform for himself.

Now, I do not wish to stretch the point about the role of communes in dialogue and self-knowledge further than is warranted. I believe that dialogue is essential to self-knowledge, not that communes are necessary for dialogue or for self-knowledge.[1] If a person has friends of widely divergent viewpoints, if he can learn to be open and honest enough with them and if he also spends enough time with them so they can become thoroughly familiar with his practice not just his own account of his practice, perhaps conversation with friends could serve the same function that living in a commune has served for me.

We must not, however, underestimate the ways in which social institutions reinforce or weaken personal intentions. Obviously one can intend that others function as touchstones in one's deliberations and self-examination. A pluralistic commune is an institution which supports this intention and militates against the lack of dialogue. It is, therefore, an appropriate institution for those who have this intention. The traditional middle-class nuclear family tends to undermine this intention, for the privacy of life in a nuclear family tends to eliminate all other observers or to disqualify them because they "don't understand what we're talking about."

And yet, dialogue is clearly possible outside of communes. It is also possible to avoid dialogue (though probably not being known) in communes. My claim, then, is twofold: 1) In a commune, one must try to avoid dialogue and be willing to pay a price for doing so in order to prevent it. To the extent that one lives by oneself or with those who share his views, he must continually pursue dialogue for it to occur. 2) If others are to be optimally qualified to serve as touchstones for deliberation and self-examination, they must have access to information about one's life. For an informed other is more capable of provoking and pursuing dialogue that penetrates, that is telling and to the point. Communes create informed others.

Perhaps the experience of others would differ significantly from my own on all these points. Perhaps my view that dialogue is essential to self-knowledge is a classic case of cosmologizing my embarrassments. Others might find that, being more reflective and self-conscious than I, they would have little or nothing to learn about themselves from living with others. Perhaps their relationships do not rest on hidden, though questionable agreements or on the results of domestic battles so definitively won so long ago that neither party ever thinks about them any more. Perhaps they are already aware of the assumptions on which their theory and practice of child raising rest and of the points of divergence between the two. Maybe others are already aware of their priorities as evidenced by the way they spend their time and could explain satisfactorily (not just satisfactorily to themselves) why they have ordered their priorities in this way.

And yet, there is no way anyone could know that he has already anticipated all that he might have learned from others by allowing them to become familiar with his daily life, from observing their practices at close range, and from a confrontation by both of the evaluations of each. For there is no way to ascertain that one has nothing to learn from others except by sustained dialogue with them. For this reason, if for no other, any first-person, one-person method of self-examination and self-evaluation is epistemically suspect.

There is, then, a generally unnoticed tension between privacy and self-knowledge: a thoroughgoing commitment to self-knowledge requires a sacrifice of privacy, while preservation of privacy diminishes self-knowledge. For many people, an increase in self-knowledge would not suffice to justify the sacrifices of privacy (and perhaps also of autonomy) that are inherent in communal living.

However, I have come to see that the desire for privacy often hides and "justifies" a much less noble desire for a kind of fundamental irresponsibility. If the skeletons remain closeted and the dirty linen is never publicly aired, I can conduct my personal life free from the scrutiny of others. If others do not know what I am doing in my "private life," they will be unable to question, challenge or accuse me. And if everyone is thereby disqualified from judgment due to my preservation of my privacy, I can conduct the reexamination of my values and conduct in front of a very sympathetic and friendly, all too understanding and forgiving, though somewhat ignorant judge -- myself.

**POSTSCRIPT:**

**THE MORNING AFTER --**

# SOME SOBER PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON AN IMPASSIONED STATEMENT

The above is a lightly-edited version of an essay I wrote more than twenty years ago, in the heyday of the communal living movement. Despite its antiquity, I still like it -- it still has the ring of truth to my ear. In the meantime, however, feminist

epistemology has developed and has given us much better tools for understanding **why** it is true than any I had available twenty years ago.

I have not felt free to make substantive changes in this essay. It now feels like an historical document to me. Of course, I would write differently were I to write this essay now. Perhaps the most important change would be to expand the notion of "dialogue" to include more than verbal exchanges. A major part of the learning from communal living comes not through talk, but from the "conversation of gestures" -- the facial and bodily responses of others to what you have just said or done. You go back to your room wondering why she looked annoyed or dismayed or disgusted when you did that -- it seemed so normal and appropriate to you. And she wonders why you looked surprised. Like talk, this silent dialogue can be informed or uninformed -- I recognize her annoyance only because I am familiar with the way her emotions register on her face. I now believe much more in the critical epistemic import of face-to-face interaction. But the conversation of gestures will not be given an adequate place in the following reflections, either -- I still do not know how to work this silent conversation into an epistemology.

In one sense, the intervening decades have reduced this essay to something of mere academic interest: so far as I can tell, there is no longer widespread interest in communal living. I myself no longer live in a commune -- I no longer know enough people who are interested in communal living. I have dusted off this early essay, then, partly as a requiem to the commune. I think it was/is a worthy institution that is likely never to get the serious reflection due it. But I have more than antiquarian interests. I believe there are implications here both for epistemology and for philosophical reflection on the family.

"The epistemology of the family" may seem more than a little odd, both from the side of epistemology and from that of the family. In terms of the latter, it may seem perverse to train an epistemological spotlight on the family. The family did not evolve as an institution for promoting self-knowledge . . . or any other kind of knowledge. It developed as a response to concerns about progeny, property, security, companionship, and perhaps even love. These may well be more important values than self-knowledge, values not to be sacrificed for mere self-knowledge. Similarly, self-knowledge is usually not the primary motivation for communal living.

From the side of epistemology, philosophers are only beginning to realize that institutions have anything at all to do with knowing. In traditional epistemology, knowers have been portrayed as fundamentally **a**instutional: independent, totally self-reliant, and self-sufficient. Indeed, this independence from the judgment and opinions of others has often been taken as one of the hallmarks of knowers, as opposed to mere believers. Knowers become knowers by transcending all institutions.[2] But even those philosophers who clearly recognize the importance of institutions for knowing -- e.g., feminist epistemologists, social epistemologists -- have been largely silent about families in epistemology.

Yet, the family is important for epistemology. Let me briefly suggest three ways in which this is so.

1. Feminist epistemology has been one of the contemporary movements that have combined to teach us that knowers are always positioned or situated. The "God trick" is out; there is no disembodied view from nowhere. The question of positioning and of the relationships among knowers (and with the known) thus becomes critical for any "strong objectivity." But we must recognize that situated knowers are more than gendered, raced, and classed -- they are also familied. Most were raised in some sort of family and even those who were not have experience that is decisively shaped by the **absence** of family. Moreover, unless knowers live entirely in their work, they still have relationships, friends, lovers, partners, marriages, and many live in families.

All this has epistemic relevance. It must have, if it is impossible to erect an internal *cordon sanitaire* to prevent one's personal life from crossing over into one's work and reflection on that work. The family of origin has particular relevance if there is anything at all to the psychoanalytic theory that the main outlines of our personalities are laid down in the first few years of life. Thus, an epistemology of families -- and of alternatives to the family -- would be an essential ingredient in epistemology.

1. Epistemology is not, of course, only a theory about science. It is also an account of self-knowledge, including self-examination, self-evaluation, and self-transformation. Consequently, the theory of positioned rationality must be brought to bear on how we understand self-knowledge. No one can be completely transparent to herself, so we will need an account of how others can be best positioned to contribute to someone's self-knowledge. Nuclear families are one way of positioning others, communes another.

1. Self-knowledge (or lack thereof) influences knowledge of other things. As a result, one cannot successfully specialize in knowing particle physics, cancers, the economics of developing nations, or moral theory and leave self-knowledge aside, or put it off until later in life. Ultimately, each of us has only one instrument of observation and reflection -- our self. The more someone knows about the strengths and weaknesses, capabilities and distortions of her own epistemic instrument, the better can she use it to arrive at reliable conclusions. For this reason, institutions that promote self-knowledge enhance the reliability of a society's knowers; institutions that impede self-knowledge leave us all epistemically more vulnerable.

Each of these observations requires much more detailed consideration. In fact, I believe that each points to a research program within epistemology. But the present volume is dedicated to reflection on the family, so we must return to the primary theme of this paper -- epistemological evaluation of the family.

Epistemology is also important for families. . . and couples, partners, companions and friends. We all regularly face critically important questions about how valid are the claims both of ourselves and of the others with whom we share our lives. Decisions that alter the rest of our lives sometimes hang on the way we answer such questions. Self-knowledge is also an important value for families: our degree of self-knowledge affects the ways in which we are lovers, partners, parents. Finally, the epistemic strengths and failings of families would form one part of a complete evaluation of the family as a social institution. Thus, epistemology is an important tool for thinking about families; philosophical reflection on the family is not complete without an epistemology of the family.

Here I can only try to whet the appetite of the reader for an epistemology of the family. I will organize my attempt to do so around the notions of inside/outside, and of private/public. As we shall see, epistemological reflection on the family requires **two** distinct senses of inside/outside.

Patricia Hill Collins' powerful notion of an "outsider within" can be adapted to thinking about the epistemology of families.[3] The creation of intimacy involves the creation of a private, yet shared space by gradually allowing someone inside. But preservation of the privacy of an intimate relationship or a nuclear family keeps all others **outside** -- ignorant, uninformed, marginalized, unable to knowledgeably or effectively comment.

Because we are all positioned and no one is completely transparent to herself, we all need touchstones with whom to work out epistemically sensitive and reliable portraits of ourselves. Since no one speaks with the voice of Pure Reason and a view from nowhere, there is no one ideal touchstone. The best we can do is to tie our reflections -- not only about ourselves, but especially about ourselves -- to potential insights gathered from those occupying a variety of positions.[4]

Thus, our self-portraits should be constructed through interaction and discussion with many others, all inevitably imperfectly positioned. If I recognize that everyone -- myself included -- is imperfectly positioned to know me, I should not decide to rely on the observations of only one or two. I would almost always be better served if more than one other person were positioned to comment knowledgeably on me and my life and I were to work out my view of myself through a complex process of checking various reports against each other in order to try to figure out how important and accurate are the comments of each. This already argues against the preservation of privacy and points to an epistemic advantage of communes over couples and nuclear families.[5]

It is also possible to say some things about epistemically-advantageous position**s** for some others to occupy in order to be well-positioned to contribute to someone's self-knowledge. There are two sets of features to one kind of epistemically-advantaged position -- the traditionally-epistemological or what I will call the "cognitive" and the emotional. Closeness and distance, inside and outside are critical to both.

1. In terms of cognitive features, at least some others need to be intellectually distant -- far enough outside so that they do not share all the forms of life or ways of seeing that are to be the subject of investigation. Otherwise, our self-examination will be too circumscribed by the very paradigms, assumptions and commitments that are to be reexamined -- by the ideological similarity I spoke of as characterizing stable relationships. But others also need to be close enough to have considerable information about our practice. They have to be far enough inside to be positioned to watch how we live, not just listen to what we say about how we live. (Listening to what we say could suffice only if we already had perfect self-knowledge and were also completely open.) If others are not close enough to have a rich basis of first-hand observation, they will usually not be well-positioned to be able to recognize our distortions, self-deceptions, lies, and the discrepancies between our practice and our accounts of it.

There is an increasingly rich literature about the critical epistemic problem of how to create people with the right mixture of cognitive closeness and distance so that they will have both a rich informational basis and also enough conceptual distance and independence to be able to question or challenge the paradigms of a community. I cannot try to add to that literature here.

1. There is also an inside and outside in terms of emotional closeness to -- and hopefully also care for -- the observed other. Traditional scientific methodology strives to create detached others, others who care about but not **for** the "object of investigation." The detached observer is an emotional outsider, if you will. The sheer possibility, and also the strengths and weaknesses of the stance of an emotional outsider have been the subject of intense discussion within feminist epistemology, science studies, and the methodological reflections of cultural anthropologists.

Completely detached observation seems impossible, certainly for a subject matter everyone is so emotionally involved with as relationships and families. Moreover, almost all of us strive to shield ourselves and our loved ones from the scrutiny of uncaring, detached observers.[6] But especially when we're talking about knowing other people, there may also be too much emotional closeness or involvement to see well -- either too much positive emotional connectedness (love, caring, commitment) or too much negative emotional connection (anger, resentment, outrage, hostility, even fear).

Both have their epistemic drawbacks. Love and emotional commitment tend to produce a way of seeing that grows out of kindness, compassion, a desire not to disrupt a satisfying relationship, and an inclination to affirm and support your loved ones. Love is blind, they say.

On the other hand, when the kinds of very personal anger, resentment, or hostility normally generated only in personal relationships and families are present, discussants become combatants and all talk tends to become strategic. (No one is candid with one she sees as her oppressor.) This, in turn, often leads to strong interests in maintaining previous positions; to distrust and suspicion about the motivation behind comments or observations of the other; to lying, blaming, distorting, projecting . . . all not very conducive to growing self-knowledge on either side. Clearly, there are epistemological advantages to dialogue with someone whose identity, lifestyle, emotional well-being, finances, plans for the future, etc. are not so intensely bound up with you.

The inside/outside of traditional epistemology and that of emotional involvement are intertwined in all sorts of interesting ways. But the present point is that our self-reflection and self-examination will tend to be epistemically better if it is conducted in dialogue with at least some others who are close but not too close, who have enough distance in both the cognitive and the emotional sense without being strangers or uninvolved observers.

In these terms, the epistemic problem of the nuclear family (and the couple) is twofold: a) those who are "inside" enough in terms of information are too ideologically similar and also too emotionally close; b) those emotionally detached enough and ideologically different enough are too unaware of important information. The nuclear family (and private relationships) tend to restrict observation and evaluation to those who are VERY close or VERY distant and removed. The nuclear family tends to force everyone to the epistemological extremes of these two polarities of cognitive inside/outside and emotional inside/outside.

But we have just seen that our self-reflection needs to be shared with those who occupy some sort of intermediate position -- close, but not too close. By contrast, pluralistic communes strive to create and maintain precisely such intermediate positions. They create "outsiders within." If an outsider within plays an important epistemic role, she does so for a couple or a family, not just for an academic discipline or a university.

I will close now by putting some of the same points in the language of private and public. As a companion to Collins' notion of an "outsider within," I propose that of a "private public." As it has evolved in our culture, home and family are private spaces. Moreover, one common use of our increasing disposable income is to buy additional privacy, both privacy within the family (each family member often now has her own room) and privacy of the family unit as neighbors are kept at greater and greater distance.

Of course, if you preserve your private space, others will not normally know what is going on in it. They know primarily what you choose to tell them and, often, not much more. This means that others will have to rely largely on your own interpretation of events in your family. (Surely, it is not only because I am male that I know so little about what goes on in other people's marriages and families!)

Communes strive to make the private public. They are created by inviting other people into the private space which couples and nuclear families normally consider exclusively their own. Pluralistic communes are attempts to create and sustain a special kind of space in which you can risk being known and evaluated due to the context of support and care that characterize this space. But not so much support and care that the knowledge and evaluation are myopic, prejudged, biased by ideological uniformity, etc.

But the public which a commune creates is a "**private** public." It is not a public that any and everyone can inhabit -- you must be trusted and approved to be invited in. You must also invest a lot of yourself to belong -- in fact, you must agree to share a major portion of your life with these people in order to belong to this public. So, a private public is created.[7] Accordingly, much that is common knowledge within the commune will not be shared with outsiders. Indeed, some of it **cannot** be shared with outsiders. (Those who were invited to our communal meals often remarked that they just couldn't follow a lot of the banter among us. Just as a guest at a family reunion often can't understand or fully appreciate what is being said.)

Like marriages and families, pluralistic communes can fail, and they can fail epistemically. Although I believe communes normally have epistemic strengths that traditional nuclear families lack, communal living is no royal road to self-knowledge. There is no royal road to self-knowledge, no institution that can guarantee greater self-knowledge. Some of the ways communes can fail epistemically can be understood as the collapse of the private public. Serious personal conversation may end and living together may become mechanical and superficial. The commune then degenerates into a boarding house or a rooming house in which people live for reasons of cost, convenience, companionship, or comradery. (All perfectly valid reasons.)

Theoretically, the private public can collapse (or fail to materialize) either through a deficiency or an excess of closeness (cognitive and/or emotional). The Ogilvys theorize that communes have a "natural [epistemic] half-life," after which familiarity leads to diminishing returns from dialogue.[8] However, I suspect the private public in communes most often collapses due to excessive emotional distance. The mutual respect, acceptance, support, or trust requisite to sustain a private public evaporates and people are returned to their private realms of solitude, relationships, or families, even if some form of group living continues.

Communal living is clearly neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for self-knowledge. Still, to the extent that it is always epistemically important for others to be positioned to see how I live and respond to what I do, not just to listen to what I say, the epistemic strengths of living together remain. To the extent that we are all positioned or situated knowers, living with several people will have epistemic advantages over living with only one other adult.

Feminism has surely taught us that the personal is political. The feminist movement has tried and -- on a general, impersonal level, at least -- partly succeeded in casting light on the private sphere of couples and families. But we still need an epistemology of the family. Moreover, each of us also needs epistemic light cast on us individually, on our personal lifestyles and on our private lives. That's why we need a private public. Finally, if anyone is interested in circling back to where we began, that's why a pluralistic commune is epistemically better than a couple or a nuclear family.

# FOOTNOTES

\* I wish to thank Jim Bennett, Kathy Bohstedt, George Brenkert, Nanne Johnson, Hugh LaFollette, Hilde Nelson, John Nolt, and especially Mary English for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Several of these friends lived in a commune with me. But it should come as no surprise to anyone that these friends do not all agree with everything I say about communes. . . or even about the commune some of us lived in.

[1] For an argument that dialogue is necessary for the kind of self-knowledge ingredient in moral rationality, see another ancient paper of mine: Hardwig, John. "The Achievement of Moral Rationality." Philosophy & Rhetoric 6 (1973), 171-85.

[2] My own contribution to the attack on this paradigm of the knower is found in two papers: Hardwig, John. "Epistemic Dependence." The Journal of Philosophy 82 (July, 1985), 335-49. Hardwig, John. "The Role of Trust in Knowledge." The Journal of Philosophy 88 (December 1991), 693-708.

1. Patricia Hill Collins. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." Social Problems 33 (1986, No. 6), S14S32.

1. There is no ideal position which others **must** occupy to contribute to self-knowledge. This alone implies that fellow members of pluralistic communes are not the only ones positioned to contribute to self-knowledge. Indeed, it implies that there are valuable things to be learned about yourself from a variety of positions -- from friends, from strangers, from family members, from therapists, from fellow employees, etc. (To some extent, one can also vary one's own position -- insights into oneself can also be gained from various jobs and other activities, from travel, from reading. . . and also from extended periods of solitude, especially unoccupied solitude.) But those who live in communes can also read, have a lover, talk to strangers, go rock climbing, participate in various groups, etc. Indeed, people living in many communes also have marriages or other long-term relationships, and families within the commune.

1. Is it also necessary to say that I would not argue that living in a pluralistic commune with closed, unobservant dullards would be epistemically superior to a nuclear family composed of bright, articulate, perceptive, self-conscious and forthright people? Like many philosophical points, the idea that pluralistic communes are epistemically superior to the alternatives (living by oneself, in couples, the nuclear family) is true only standardly, normally, usually, or **ceteris paribus**. But this is not to minimize the importance of this point -- in social philosophy, most of the critical and evaluative points we can make are true only standardly, normally, for the most part, or **ceteris paribus**.

1. Our commune, located in a town with a large research university, became a magnet for sociology graduate students in need of thesis or dissertation topics. They were detached -- they wanted to study us, but not to become involved or to help us in any way. We felt uncomfortable subjecting ourselves and our lives to constant, detached observation. Besides, it threatened to overwhelm us -- it looked like we would be the subject of many sociological investigations. After some fumbling, we hit upon a way to deal with this problem. We told these potential observers that they could study us, but in return we would like to study them, too. For we were interested in them and had a number of questions about their lives -- how their marriages or relationships worked, how tasks were divided, how they made decisions or who made them, who the leader in **their** relationships was, how he/she was selected, etc. Having been told of our conditions, the would-be observers left and never returned. Presumably, most of them decided to study people who are further outside the academy then they (and some of us) were.

1. It is worth noting that dialogue within the private public of a commune is not an epistemic substitute for a genuine public or community discussion. There are too many different people and too many different viewpoints for any commune to encompass them all. Moreover, no one would choose to share her life with all the different kinds of people there are. Most of us need the familiarity, comfort, and support of a private public to discuss our personal lives in any depth. But it is also important to talk with people who are genuinely outside your circle of friends and the people you live with.

1. Jay and Heather Ogilvy, "Communes and the Reconstruction of Reality." In TeSelle, Sallie, ed., The Family, Communes and Utopian Societies. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, 83-99.