Review

A moral theory of solidarity

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Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, ix + 194 pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-19-876978-1

Contemporary Political Theory (2018) **17,** S252–S255. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0174-3; published online 15 November 2017

Solidarity is a somewhat plastic concept that has many manifestations and meanings. It can refer to a culture of sympathy and sentiments (in Adam Smith's terms) which can be manifest as altruistic benevolence, such as charitable donating and collecting. Then there is the sense, associated particularly with traditional revolutionary socialist politics, of common cause with the oppressed – especially the proletariat and colonized peoples. There is again the more diffuse sociological sense of the term as the foundation of sociality, the bonds that tie us together, as with Durkheim's forms of social solidarity and the collective conscience. Kolers' forensic dissection of the moral basis of solidarity sits somewhere near the socialist version but is much more tightly specified. He defines solidarity as 'political action on other's terms' which crucially involves a disposition to defer to the judgement of the oppressed as to what is the right course of action. Solidarity in this sense overrides individual conscience and personal autonomy, and we have no right to claim to define the needs and strategies of the oppressed better or other than they do themselves. In line with his implicit communitarianism, Kolers dismisses personal autonomy as 'anomie masquerading as autonomy' (p. 78). He rejects both a teleological conception of solidarity, as a goal of promoting justice, and as loyalty or shared community, since these he sees as moral options rather than obligations. Kolers advances a deontological theory grounded in both Kantian and Aristotelian notions of equity, which is to be the measure of commitment to solidarity. Treating others equitably is a perfect duty, valuable in itself, not as a means to an end and is therefore not primarily about promoting justice but treating people justly. Above all, solidarity demands action so 'we are not in solidarity if we sympathize but do nothing', which includes mere 'writing' (p. 29), and, although 'action' is not defined, it appears to mean things like protesting, boycotting and engaging in direct action.

The text is thin on concrete examples to illustrate the practical consequences of his position and relies heavily on hypotheticals, which vary in persuasiveness. So, asking what should a White passenger on the Rosa Parks bus have done to show

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solidarity? – leave the bus with her when she is removed (p. 28–29) – is unproblematic. But if a mining community supports mountain top removal (open cast mining) and assuming no one other than them is harmed by this (which is unlikely, and how is 'harm' understood?), then we must also support this on the principle of deferment to the knowledge of the subject (p. 86). This is one of many instances where a deontological morality conflicts with a consequential one, since the support for the mining community is presumably made with indifference to any environmental consequences. It is striking that only intra-human solidarity is ever considered – not the potential for that with sentient animals, presumably since they cannot demand it. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's idea of the possibility of a solidarity with the dead as part of a redemptive politics of the present (Benjamin, 2000, p. 478) is precluded here.

The only concrete example Kolers discusses, and then sketchily, is the anti-Israel, Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Since BDS is a call for solidarity from Palestinian civil society groups, he says, we are not permitted to 'choose the side based on what we think is right' (p. 92). He does contrast the 'strong' version of the call – complete academic and cultural boycott – with the 'weak', which targets only officials, government and enterprises 'complicit in the occupation' (p. 171). While favouring the 'weak' form on the grounds of equity, since shunning all Israelis would be discrimination on identitarian grounds, he requires contact be limited to only those Israelis who 'work against the Occupation' (undefined), a position he calls a 'Modulated-Strong' version (p. 173). This readmits identitarian discrimination as 'the perpetrators of injustice do not get to devise victims' politics' (p. 173). This discussion, however, highlights unaddressed problems. Decisions about the extent of any boycott are grounded in BDS internal politics not by the principle of deference. Kolers' position manifestly involves the kind of personal judgement he elsewhere dismisses. Further, he seems to assume that those who speak for the oppressed are of one voice but this is rarely the case. Those who support BDS cannot simply defer to what Palestinians 'actually decide' since there are factional splits, such as that between the Fatah and Hamas, and so they will need to exercise their own judgement on what forms of solidarity are appropriate. Although solidarity entails commitment to share the 'object's fate' (p. 71), boycott entails minimal or no cost to boycotters – which might not be so much the case if, say, Tibetan calls for solidarity against illegal Chinese occupation were heeded. Kolers does not offer *moral* criteria for whose 'call' is heard – it seems to be a case of who gets above the noise. Further, social movements will be judged by their tactics. If campuses are violently disrupted by BDS activists, and antisemitism and Holocaust denial are tolerated in the movement, then a moral agent is entitled to avoid them. They are further entitled to ask what the goal of BDS is – two states, a bi-national state, or eradication of Israel and its 'non-indigenous' (i.e. Jewish) population? But apparently not for Kolers, because even if 'not morally attractive', the demand for solidarity must be followed precisely, because it is a 'call to

solidarity' (p. 116), and 'the goal does not drive the bus – the object group does' (p. 58). Kolers is aware that the principle of deference is dangerous, since it overrides personal conscience, and he therefore goes to some lengths to set out conditions in which it is defensible. In the process though he cannot accept the inevitability that moral agents will make their own judgements based on a wide range of criteria and that moral autonomy is, as Kant argued, the condition of maturity. This does seem to re-enter covertly though in that one is permitted to choose who is an 'appropriate object of deference' (e.g. p. 63).

The question of violence is crucial here (not least because of its consequences), but Kolers deals with it only cursorily in four pages (pp. 174–178), which, given its historical importance in liberation struggles, hardly seems adequate. Deontological solidarity supports a prohibition on aggression, that is, initiating violence, although self-defence is justifiable, including that against chronic and structural violence. This in practice might involve initiating violence. Again, although this is 'not a question of conscience' but of deferential solidarity, 'we cannot rule out violence for equity' on the basis of just cause, because protecting non-combatants is paramount. Unless one is a pacifist, then, one might accept Kolers' claim, but it begs the question of judgements about when violence is justified, which are likely to be pragmatic rather than deontological. One might support the cause (or 'reason' in Kolers' terms) but not the means, such as an oppressed group using terrorist methods. Kolers has difficulty reconciling the principle of deference (acting on the other's judgement) with the necessity of making judgements about the validity of means and their consequences. Practical judgements of who is worthy of political support are complex and will take account of consequences, including unintended ones.

Kolers develops a detailed, careful and sometimes thoughtful argument. But in the end, I felt the insistence on deference was unsustainable, potentially dangerous and actually an amoral surrender of judgement to others. Indeed, he says 'we are conscripted' (p. 78). It is further profoundly un-sociological to claim that 'no elaborate theory of society is needed' (p. 114) to see structural inequalities. It is necessary to understand the dynamics of these, how they are articulated, and to make informed judgments about different courses of action. Kolers concedes that, in offering solidarity, we will prefer groups that have worked-out plans, coherence, commitment and efficacy (p. 151), but then why not exercise such personal autonomy on other matters such as their goals, methods and strategy? Kolers' attempt to remove personal judgement and moral autonomy fails, since the argument relies on it again and again. Deference also gets into difficulties when the victim no longer requests support – he suggests that had Rosa Parkes requested her supporters to stand down, then they would no longer have been in solidarity, had they refused. But if an abused or enslaved person, for fear of reprisals, asks you not to protest, it might still be morally right to do so. There is an extensive literature on the social complexity of witnessing, spectatorship and solidarity (e.g. Chouliaraki,

2013), that is absent here. Kolers is right that the other should not be seen as a mere object worthy of compassion, but as a subject deprived of dignity who seeks recognition. However, this is a process of highly mediated mutuality within complex historical bonds of sociality – rather than something resolved through formal clinical reasoning.

References

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