C.E. Harris' Commentary on "Tokenism and Promotion"

Commentary On
Tokenism and Promotion

If Judy's assessment of Catherine's prospects as Chief Engineer in Quality Control are correct, the long-range consequences of Catherine's not getting the job are probably better than the long-range consequences of Catherine's getting the job. If she fails and has to be removed, her promotion will not increase the number of women in senior management. In addition, her failure will reduce the chances of other women being promoted to senior positions in the future.

This still leaves open the question of what Judy should do. Presumably she is not directly involved in the promotion decision, and she may not even be asked for her opinion about the promotion. Thus she will have to go out of her way to make any effort to affect the decision process. What obligation does she have to do this?

Generally speaking, our obligation to prevent an unfortunate consequence (especially where it does not involve the loss of life) is weaker than our obligation not to directly participate in wrongdoing. Our obligation to do what we can to prevent environmental damage in the rain forests of Brazil is not as strong as our obligation not to engage directly in environmental pollution ourselves. On the other hand, we do have some obligation to try to prevent unfortunate consequences when we are in a position to do so, especially if there is relatively little cost to ourselves. In this case, the primary cost could be the damage to the friendship between Judy and Catherine. If suggestions to those in a position to make the decision about Catherine's promotion could be made discretely, this might be avoided. But Judy would still have to wrestle with the fact that she has undermined Catherine's chances for promotion without her knowledge. This knowledge would almost inevitably limit Judy's ability to relate to Catherine in an open and honest way, even if Catherine never knows the reason for the difference in Judy's relation to her.

Judy might decide to simply tell Catherine that she has suggested that Catherine is not the person for the promotion at this time. This would probably damage the relationship in the short run, but it might provide the basis of a stronger and more honest relationship in the future. This option would have the advantage of satisfying more moral demands: it would prevent potentially serious damage to the cause of gender equality at Darnell and it would preserve a healthy, honest friendship between Catherine and Judy.

An honest and informed commitment to the cause of gender equality might require that both Judy and Tom express their partial agreement with the male engineers who believe that Catherine is not qualified for the promotion. They could say that, even though they support gender equality, they agree that Catherine is not the right person for the promotion. Catherine would probably eventually hear about this conversation. But if Judy and Tom told Catherine of their position, this would not be a problem.