John B. Dilworth's Commentary on "Tokenism and Promotion"

Commentary On
Tokenism and Promotion

Though this has the potential to be a significant case, in its specific questions it is a very straightforward. It is presented in the general context of the issue of affirmative action, yet the specific questions asked hardly admit of morally interesting answers. What should Judy Hanson do if she hears of an impending promotion of someone, whether male or female, friend or stranger, in another division of Darnell? The obvious answer is -- nothing. If Judy has no administrative responsibility for the decision, and also lacks full knowledge of all the factors that went into the decision, she has no business interfering with it in any way. Even as a personal friend of candidate Catherine Morris, she should do no more than wish her well in her new position. For it would be insulting and morally demeaning to Catherine for Judy to try to use her case as a means to some affirmative action end at Darnell.

As to Judy or Tom 'overhearing' talk about Catherine's promotion, here too she/they should do nothing. Unless what they overhear is so illegal or immoral that even hearing it imposes obligations to interfere or reveal the matter to others, they should respect the privacy of those whose conversations they overhear. Office gossips and busybodies are likely to cause much more moral damage in the workplace than would the kinds of personal expressions of prejudice against affirmative action likely to be overheard.

If, on the other hand, Judy or Tom are themselves taking part in the conversation (so that they 'hear' rather than 'overhear'), then of course they should feel free to honestly express their own views on the topic, whatever those views are.

Now let us read between the lines of this case and draw out an implied, substantive issue for those who care about the advancement of women in society. In the battle for equality for women, is it morally required that everything be done to maximize the gains and minimize the losses for every aspect of the battle, including minor

skirmishes? For example, must an individual such as Catharine be prevented from taking a job, if she might perform poorly and hence make women look bad in a particular case?

First, one should not do anything substantially illegal or immoral to advance women. The worthy goals of justice and equal rights for all does not permit achieving some at the expense of others. So behavior such as faking Catherine's performance records or other political manipulations at Darnell is unacceptable. Also, as already suggested, even an attempt by Judy to persuade Catherine to withdraw is morally suspect on several grounds. Judy would be in great danger of betraying her friend, and doing so in the process of using her as a pawn in a civil rights skirmish.

Second, we must never forget that affirmative action policies are only a means to the end of promoting equal rights for people. The moral goal of equality of opportunity for all is widely accepted, but policies of achieving this for women by preferential hiring or promotion are much more controversial. Even supporters of affirmative action policies would have to agree that preferential treatment of one group over another is morally questionable. (In their view it is a necessary evil in order to achieve changes which will make full equality possible some day.)

The practical effect of this second point is that morally the only firm ground available centers round issues of equality of opportunity. Any other issues are questionable or peripheral, and should be ignored in any conflict with the central issues. In the present case this means that since Catherine is undeniably being given an opportunity to succeed (through her promotion), then the central civil rights issue has been settled. Other issues, such as that she may fail and make women or affirmative action look bad, must be ignored because (if acted upon to prevent her promotion) they would conflict with her right to have that opportunity.

Another way to look at equal opportunity is as a right to succeed or fail. Those who would for whatever reasons deprive Catherine of her right to fail are no friends to civil rights for women.