Community: What is it?

Date: Wednesday, December 4
Location: Museum of Northern Arizona
Facilitated by: Andrea Houchard, NAU Philosophy Department

6:00 p.m. Welcome and Introductions
Dr. Heidi Wayment, Director of NAU’s Compassion Project and Psychology Department Chair
Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

6:15 p.m. Andrea Houchard

- What is public? What is private? What is community?
- How do we identify with nonhuman communities?
- How healthy are our communities?
- How does technology affect community?

7:20 p.m. Recap of discussion

We are grateful for support from NAU’s McKenzie Endowment for Democracy and the Richard Wood Fund.
What is a Public?
John Dewey formed a conception of the public based on human perceptions of joint action that generate a common interest. He concluded that a public is comprised of, “those who are indirectly and seriously affected by the actions of others, for good or bad.” Dewey’s conception of a public is thinner than a robust sense of community that involves connection, mutual interest, and care. It may be useful to contrast the conceptions of public, private, and community in an effort to locate community.

Communities and the Natural World
In his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block explicitly states that communities are groups of people that share a sense of belonging. This is the way communities have traditionally been conceived in the West. This is also a plausible way to think about creating connectedness and belonging since human beings have agency and can express their communal affinities in ways that are easily understood by other people. However, philosophers have asked if this sense of belonging can be extended beyond human relationships to include other elements of the natural world.

Aldo Leopold suggests that ethics form a basis for communities when he says, “Ethics are possibly a kind of community in the making.” Leopold thought that both our system of ethics and our understanding of community should be extended to the natural world: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” Leopold’s suggestion raises two issues: (1) who or what comprises a community? (2) what is the relationship between communities and ethics?
From The Arizona We Want 2.0: How Arizonans Feel About Their Communities

12% of Arizonans believe the people in their community care about one another. –Gallup Arizona Poll

The Center for the Future of Arizona recently published the results of its Gallup Poll which resulted in the The Arizona We Want 2.0. Its Citizen’s Agenda includes three main categories: caring for the economy, caring for people, and caring for communities. When it comes to communities, Arizonans want to:

- Protect Arizona’s natural environment, water supplies and open spaces.
- Build a modern, effective transportation system and infrastructure.
- Empower citizens and increase civic engagement.
- Foster citizen well-being and sense of connection to one another.

A key insight that was discovered through this report was that, “Arizonans believe the strength of the state rests in local communities.” However, while people in Arizona believe the future depends on robust, healthy communities, for the most part, they do not feel a part of one. Arizonans report that they are attached to a sense of “place” but do not have a strong feeling of personal connection.

**Communities Require Caring: Do we care?**

In, “Rich People Just Care Less,” Daniel Goleman draws on social science research to support the view that people with more social power do not pay attention to or care about those with less social power. There is not just an increasing economic gap, but also a gap in empathy. However, this lack of caring and understanding might be counterbalanced by an increasing emphasis on dialogue, communication, human connection, and compassion. While we see evidence of people becoming more isolated and less caring, we also witness a number of focused efforts that are deliberate efforts to foster community building and human connection.

**Philosophy and Community**

The early philosophical schools such as the Stoics and Epicureans were genuine communities. They did not merely advocate systems of belief but ways of living and ways of living together that were beneficial and led to flourishing and healthy human development. The schools of Plato and Aristotle were similarly comprised of groups of people who reasoned together about how to live well. In this sense, the history of philosophy is rooted in community in a way that has been lost in the contemporary academic pursuit. Historically, a philosophical community had a shared vision of the good, the valuable and the excellent. These communities were characterized by people coming together to reason with one another both practically and theoretically.

**SOURCES:**

The Arizona We Want 2.0


*Museum of Northern Arizona*
The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members representing diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

Flagstaff & Winslow

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