COMMUNITARIAN VALUES

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Summary

The notion that human beings can flourish only within the context of a community has played a prominent role in both ethical and political thought throughout history. In the 1980s, a number of political philosophers—notably Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer—challenged the predominant contemporary political theory, liberalism, for ignoring the significance and value of community. "Communitarianism" is the label under which this critique became known. The communitarian critique comprises a number of distinct theses. On the methodological and descriptive level, liberal theory was criticized for its mistaken individualism, a faulty concept of the self, and for neglecting the communal sources of practical reasoning. On the normative level, liberals were charged with putting too much value on autonomy at the cost of community. With regard to justification in political discourse, communitarians objected to the liberal view that the state should be neutral between alternative conceptions of the good life.

This so-called liberalism-communitarianism debate has considerably cooled down since its peak in the late 1980s. On the negative side, it soon emerged that criticism of liberals' alleged views about the individual and society does little to undermine their position on how the state should work. On the positive side, liberals were led to reformulate their doctrine in ways capable of answering the central objections advanced by communitarians.

Discussion of communitarian themes is not confined to political theory, however. As a piece of social philosophy, communitarianism is a largely North American movement involving academics as well as politicians from across the political spectrum. Some are mainly concerned with the crumbling of the social fabric and the decline of moral standards; others advocate "strong democracy" and participatory politics. This latter strand of communitarianism, whose best-known representative is Amitai Etzioni, has proclaimed the need to bring to bear a "communitarian perspective" on contemporary moral, legal, and social issues. Such an approach is meant to balance the liberals' emphasis on autonomy and individual rights with concern for the common good and awareness of social responsibilities.

1. Community and the Common Good

1.1. Community

The notion that human beings can flourish only within the context of a community has been labeled "communitarianism." Even before communitarians put the term back into the center of political discourse, it was a common complaint that "community" has a high level of use and a low level of meaning. Families, neighborhoods, nations, as well as churches, are referred to as communities; political philosophers write about moral and political communities; there is also talk about the scientific community. These are different forms of social entities, and one might doubt whether there is much they have in common.

Despite the differences, communities may usefully be characterized by the following three features. 1. Members of a community are united by shared goals and values, where these are not just their coinciding individual interests. Members of the same church, we do not merely congregate because we happen to have the same private interest in worship and have found a convenient arrangement to share the costs. 2. Members of a community value their relationships for their own sake, not just for their instrumental value in pursuing their own ends. If a football team is a community, members enjoy playing football together even if they lose and each of them would be more likely to win by joining the opposite team. 3. Members of a community consider their membership as part of their identity. When asked who they are, most people will mention their nation or at least the place they are from.

The three characteristic features—shared goals, relationships that are not merely instrumental, and a sense of identity—are all a matter of degree. Arguably one's being a member of a certain football team is not all that important for my identity. The non-instrumental valuation of relationships, which typically makes for a sense of solidarity among the members, may also differ considerably. Likewise, the values and goals shared in communities can be more or less comprehensive. Communities differ in what their members consider to be communal concerns. A football team takes an interest in its members' physical fitness, but it cares neither about their religious views nor about their political allegiances. Religious communities, on the other hand, are more comprehensive as they tend to concern themselves with issues ranging from their members' sexual practices to their beliefs about the origin of the universe.

Communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel focus on communities where membership is not a matter of individual choice. Such communities, for example, families, ethnic groups, or nations, are claimed to be "constitutive" of our identity. Communitarianism differs from another political doctrine emphasizing community, Marxism, in two respects. First, while Marxists see community as something that needs to be created in the future, communitarians look to the various communities that already exist. Second, communitarians highly value these traditional communities and urge us to preserve and nurture them. Marx, however, considered such parochial communities obstacles to the establishment of a true general interest and thought it necessary to eliminate all such partial attachments. For the communitarians these partial attachments are constitutive of our identity.

1.2. Common Good

Just as liberals are accused of neglecting community, they are charged with neglecting the common good. Where this is not just the popular, but quite mistaken, view of liberalism as a sort of egoism, something else is at issue. As with community, the notion of the "common good" is a contested one. Liberals and communitarians differ in their views about what the common good of a society consists in.

Liberals conceive the common good as some aggregation of individuals' well-being, usually defined in terms of satisfied preferences. What is good for a given society is a function of what the individuals in it consider good for themselves. This contrasts sharply with a view of the common good as defined by the community's favored way of life. As communitarians conceive it, the common good provides the standard for assessing individuals' conception of the good life. Their value depends on their contribution to or realization of the common good.

The common good needs to be distinguished from what are usually called "collective goods." Collective goods are goods where there is either no rivalry in using them or where non-payers cannot be excluded from using them. The former include language, culture, social stability; examples of the latter are unpolluted air and public security. Again, liberals need not, and do not, deny the significance of collective goods.

We all benefit from a shared language, from external and internal safety, as well as from a social climate where we can generally trust one another. All the liberals insist on is that they are valuable insofar as they help individuals to realize their conceptions of the good life. Of course, it is still open to communitarians to argue that liberals do not give collective goods enough weight against individual rights. But it is what they call the common good that cannot be taken into account by liberals.

2. The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism

Communitarianism has emerged both as a critique of contemporary liberal theory and as a diagnosis of contemporary liberal society. The general criticism that liberals have neglected the significance of community can be structured around three distinct issues, involving methodological and descriptive as well as normative aspects.

2.1. A Defective View of the Person

Ever since Hobbes suggested considering "man as if but even sprung out of the earth, and suddenly like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other," liberal political theory has been associated with "atomism." Margaret Thatcher gave the atomistic view of human beings expression in her famous statement that "there is no such thing as society." This may sound like a dispute about the proper way to understand society, when what is really at issue is how humankind should be conceived. As Charles Taylor defines it in his article *Atomism*, "[a]tomism represents a view about human nature." It is the denial that by nature we are social creatures, motivated to engage in social activities for reasons other than pure self-interest.

While such criticism may have some force against particular liberal thinkers and politicians, it does not threaten liberal theory as such. Liberalism need not be based on the denial of our social nature. The sort of individualism to which liberals subscribe is neither ontological nor motivational individualism: it is moral individualism. It is the independent normative view that all justification must be to individuals. Liberals demand that political institutions as well as concrete policies be acceptable from each individual's point of view. This is quite compatible with acknowledging the great significance of the social life.

A more recent line of criticism is directed against the liberal view of the self, which takes us to be free to question any of our ends and commitments. Much has been made of a somewhat peripheral remark by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* that "the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it." Communitarians reject this "Kantian view of the self" as an exaggeration of our capacity to examine critically our conception of the good. Michael Sandel, in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,* has argued that the self is embedded in existing social practices, from which we cannot always stand back. Rather than enjoying priority, the self is constituted by its ends. Our identity is defined by certain ends that we can not give up, because we did not choose them in the first place. Our ends are given by the communities to which we belong, and we discover them by understanding the roles that we occupy in these communities.

Liberals have responded to this criticism in different ways. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls basically accepts the communitarian point and rejects the Kantian ideal of self-determination. He now emphasizes that the liberal view of the self is meant to be only a political conception of the person rather than to state a metaphysical truth. Others have not followed this defensive move, but argue instead that the communitarian criticism misunderstands the liberal point: there is indeed no self that is "unencumbered" by *any* ends. Liberals do not claim that we can detach from all our ends at once, but, as Will Kymlicka puts it in *Liberalism, Community and Culture,* "that we can always envisage our self without its *present* ends." While reflection on our ends must always take place against a background of ends that are taken as given, no particular end is immune to revision.

This is a good argument, but it does not adequately address the communitarian point, which is precisely that there are ends we cannot put in question. The communitarian Daniel Bell, for instance, insists that some of our attachments are "so fundamental to

our identity" that we could distance ourselves from them only on pain of serious psychological damage. Rather than denying their existence, liberalism's defenders should ask how plausible it is to assume that attachments conflict with liberal institutions. What sort of problem is supposed to arise if, as Bell suggests in *Communitarianism and its Critics*, I cannot "choose to shed the attachment I feel for the family which brought me up"? Yet with those cases that do cause trouble, like the deeply committed Nazi, we might consider a psychological breakdown not to be a bad thing at all. Such cases also cast doubt on the view, popular among communitarians, that one's identity settles what obligations one has. This is not to deny that identities and roles come with specific duties that are constitutive of them. But the example of the committed Nazi shows that liberals are right to insist that one's contingently given identity cannot have the last word on what one should do.

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Biographical Sketches

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