Communitarianism

Amitai Etzioni

Communitarianism is a social philosophy that, in contrast to theories that emphasize the centrality of the individual, emphasizes the importance of society in articulating the good. Communitarianism is often contrasted with liberalism, a theory which holds that each individual should formulate the good on his or her own. Communitarians examine the ways shared conceptions of the good are formed, transmitted, justified, and enforced. Hence, their interest in communities (and moral dialogues within them), the historical transmission of values and mores, and the societal units that transmit and enforce values – such as the family, schools, and voluntary associations (including places of worship), which are all parts of communities.

Although the term "communitarian" was coined only in the mid-nineteenth century, ideas that are communitarian in nature can be found in the Old and New Testaments, Catholic theology (e.g., emphasis on the church as community, and more recently on subsidiarity), Fabian and socialist doctrine (e.g., writings about the early commune and about workers' solidarity), and the writings of Edmund Burke.

In recent decades, there have been two major waves of communitarianism: the academic communitarianism of the 1980s, and the responsive communitarianism of the 1990s. The academic communitarians of the 1980s were a small group of political theorists concerned with outlining the "social dimension" of the person. Responsive communitarians, also called political or neocommunitarians, were a group of scholars and policy-makers who, in the 1990s, stressed that societies cannot be based on one normative principle, and that both individual rights and the common good are major sources of normativity, without either one being a priori privileged.

Academic Communitarianism

The communitarian theory of the self emerged largely as a critical reaction to liberalism – especially John Rawls's seminal liberal text, *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971). In that work, Rawls formulated a concept of justice based upon the inviolable rights of individuals, declaring that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (Rawls 1971: 3).

According to Rawls's communitarian critics, the liberal portrayal of the self depicts an autonomous creature who – outside of a formative social context – weighs various values and goods and exercises her liberty by freely choosing among them. Communitarians argue that this liberal conception, with its heavy emphasis on choice and autonomy, ignores the crucial fact that individuals are "embedded" in societies, finding themselves affected by external forces that influence their ultimate decision. Michael Sandel has thus observed that

> the weakness of the liberal conception of freedom is bound up with its appeal. If we understand ourselves as free and independent selves, unbound by moral ties we haven't chosen, we can't make sense of a range of moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, even prize. (Sandel 2009: 220)

Among these, Sandel argues, are solidarity, loyalty, historic memory, and religious faith. People feel the force of these moral ties without choosing to be pressured and shaped by them.

Charles Taylor expounded on that view in an essay called "Atomism," in which he wrote that

> the free individual of the West is only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilization

which brought him to be and which nourishes him … all this creates a significant obligation *to belong* for whoever would affirm the value of this freedom; this includes all those who want to assert rights either to this freedom or for its sake. (Taylor 1985: 206, emphasis added)

Some scholars argue that the liberal vision is not atomized, and the initial conflict between liberals and communitarians has been overstated or misconceived (Bell 2010). Simon Caney, for instance, notes Rawls's contention that "the theory of a well-ordered society stresses that the interests and ends of individuals depend upon existing institutions" (Rawls 1975: 547, quoted in Caney 1992: 279). Caney also points out that Rawls, despite his emphasis on autonomy, is not hostile to the notion of an embedded self, citing Rawls's insight that "Only in the social union is the individual complete" (Rawls 1971: 525, quoted in Caney 1992: 279). Indeed, as Caney concludes, "many liberals explicitly endorse the embeddedness thesis" (1992: 277). Philip Selznick has similarly affirmed this "liberal communitarianism" (or "communitarian liberalism") (Selznick 1994: 16). While there may have been disputes at the margins between strong communitarians and strong liberals (or libertarians), most liberals did not deny the formative role of communities, even if they continued to prize choice as a normative good and tended to value freedom over community (Bell 2010).

Responsive Communitarians

A second wave of communitarianism was launched in 1990 in response to the increased atomization of western societies, especially the USA and Britain in the Reagan and Thatcher years (documented by scholars such as Robert Bellah).

Attempting to counter this trend, a group calling itself "responsive communitarians," founded by Amitai Etzioni with William A. Galston, called for a balance between liberty and social order, arguing that individuals faced responsibilities for their families, communities, and societies – above and beyond the universal rights all individuals command, the focus of liberalism. Responsive communitarians offered a "new golden rule": "Respect and uphold society's moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy to live a full life" (Etzioni 1996: xviii).

Responsive communitarians argue that the preservation of the social bonds is essential for the flourishing of individuals and of societies. This led to their view that states should "sustain and promote the social attachments crucial to our sense of well-being and respect, many of which have been involuntarily picked up during the course of our upbringing" (Bell 2010). For liberals, this idea is treated as if it requires the state to determine the good and then direct its laws toward promoting that good, which is considered a grievous error. Liberals argue that citizens may fundamentally disagree about what the good is, and so attempts by the state to pursue a specific good will limit the freedom of those citizens who disagree. Better, liberals argue, to have the state remain neutral among various competing teleologies.

Communitarians counter that such a position conflates the concepts of state and society (or community). The underlying reason is that, from a strict liberal viewpoint, social pressures (which can lead people who violate the norms – "deviants" – to be ostracized), as well as state coercions, both violate individual freedoms. Communities, critics write, use their moral voice to oppress people, are authoritarian by nature, and pressure people to conform. However, from a communitarian viewpoint, informal social controls are vastly superior to state coercion, because they ultimately leave the choice of violating social norms up to the individual, letting her determine whether or not she is willing to pay the social costs – as all innovators and social change leaders have – or conform. In contrast, state coercion pre-empts such a choice, as one sees in all oppressive regimes.

A comparison of the great success of public smoking bans to the grand failure of Prohibition in the USA is revealing. The former relied

heavily on new shared norms and on informal communal controls, while the latter relied on the state to enforce a law not based on widely shared values. Given that some behaviors must be ordered in all societies, the best one can hope for is a world in which these behaviors are largely promoted and enforced by informal social processes, with the state acting only to enforce these norms at the margins, in order to keep the communal consensus from fraying. (At the same time, the norms themselves are constantly recast by various changes in the communal composition.)

Hence, responsive communitarians pay special attention to social institutions, which form the moral infrastructure of society: families, schools, communities, and the community of communities. Through families and schools, societies impart the community's shared norms and values onto its new members. Those members are free to accept or reject those norms and either embrace or leave the community, but the community has a role in inculcating them.

Critics of communitarianism charged that this approach is hostile toward individual rights and autonomy – even that it is authoritarian. Derek Phillips, for instance, remarks, communitarian thinking … obliterates individual autonomy entirely and dissolves the self into whatever roles are imposed by one's position in society" (1993: 183). Other critics argue that communities are dominated by power elites or that one group within a community will force others to abide by its values.

It is true that communitarians, in casting doubt on the desirability of a polity composed of atomized choosers, harbor an impulse toward shared values and consensus building. Yet responsive communitarians do not favor rolling back individual rights, but rather, paralleling them with concerns for the common good and the discharge of social responsibilities. They further counter that behind many of these criticisms lies an image of old, or total, communities, which are neither typical of modern society nor necessary for, nor compatible with, a communitarian society.

Old communities (e.g., traditional villages, tribes, and clans) were geographically bounded and the only communities of which people were members. In contrast, new communities are often limited in scope and reach. Members of one residential community are often also members of other communities – for example work, ethnic, or religious ones. As a result, community members have multiple sources of attachments and, if one threatens to become overwhelming, individuals will tend to pull back and turn to another community for their attachments. This multicommunity membership protects the individuals from both moral oppression and ostracism. However, incongruity between the values of a person's multiple communities may substantially weaken the moral voice; thus the importance of the next level moral community.

In short, the moral voice is most powerful when people are members of only one community, and it can be overwhelming in such cases. It is more moderated when individuals are members of several communities, but it still suffices to undergird the needed social order, as long as the various members share at least some core values.

For the same basic reason it is a valid criticism to argue that a total and monolithic community can drive people to conformism, if this means that such a community will push people to sacrifice large parts of their individual differences in order to follow shared values. But total communities are rare in modern societies, while multicommunity attachments are much more common. In other words, it is likely misguided to worry about traditionalism in the modern context.

Furthermore, dominance by power elites and other forms of authoritarianism are not basic or inherent features of community, but reflections of the way it has been distorted. To be fully or even highly communitarian, communities require authentic commitment of most – if not all – of their members to a set of core values. To attain such a commitment, the values that are being fostered need to be truly accepted by the members and responsive to

their underlying needs. If some members of the society are excluded from the moral dialogue, or are manipulated into abiding by the moral voice, or if their true needs are ignored, they will eventually react to the community's lack of responsiveness in an antisocial manner. In short, communities can be distorted by those in power, but then their moral order will be diminished, and they will either have to become more responsive to their members' true needs or transform into some other non-communitarian social pattern.

Still other critics have accused communitarians not merely of overlooking the less attractive features of traditional communities, but of longing to revive these features. According to Michael Taves, the communitarian vision concerns itself mostly with "reclaiming a reliance on traditional values and all that entails with regard to the family, sexual relations, religion, and the rejection of secularism" (Taves 1988: 7–8). Amy Gutmann pointedly remarks that communitarians "want us to live in Salem" (Gutmann 1985: 319), a community of strong shared values that went so far as to accuse nonconformist members of witchcraft during the seventeenth century. Early communitarians might be charged with being, in effect, social conservatives, if not authoritarians; however, there is no necessary link here. In fact, responsive communitarians do not seek to return to traditional communities, with their authoritarian power structure, rigid stratification, and discriminatory practices against minorities and women. Responsive communitarians seek to build communities based on open participation, dialogue, and truly shared values. Linda McClain, although a critic, nonetheless recognizes this feature of the responsive communitarians, writing that some communitarians do "recognize the need for careful evaluation of what is good and bad about [any specific] tradition and the possibility of severing certain features … from others" (McClain 1994: 1030).

Several critics argue that the concept of community is of questionable value because it is so ill defined. Thus, Margaret Stacey argues that, "There has never been a theory of community, nor even a satisfactory definition of what community is" (in Bell & Newby 1974: xliii) and suggests that the term be completely avoided.

In response, Amitai Etzioni has argued that community can be defined with reasonable precision. Community has two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one or chain-like individual relationships); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short, a particular culture.

These cultures change over time through a process of moral dialogue, which occurs when a group of people engage in a process of sorting the values that will guide their lives. Such dialogues are distinct from the deliberative ideal that is found in many discussions of democracy. That model assumes that citizens can debate controversial matters in a logical and rational way, without letting their emotions dominate. This precept tends to downplay nonrational but still valid considerations, such as ethical or religious deliberations. (It may also overstate citizens' ability to analyze complex public matters.) Communitarians recognize that although moral dialogues take place constantly in well-formed societies – which most democracies are – and frequently result in the affirmation of a new direction, this generally occurs only after prolonged and often difficult discourse.

Finally, communitarians have noted that communities need to be embedded socially and morally in more encompassing entities if violent conflict among them is to be avoided. Society should not be viewed as composed of millions of individuals, but as pluralism (of communities) within unity (the society). The existence of subcultures and dissent does not undermine societal unity as long as there is a core of shared values and institutions.

SEE ALSO: Burke, Edmund (1729–97); Community; Fabianism; Liberalism; Rawls, John (1921–2002); Taylor, Charles (1931–)

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