

COMMUNITARIAN RESPONSE TO LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

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Abstract

Communitarianism is a contemporary philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Communitarianism points to shortcomings of liberalism and attempts to redefine the relation between individual and community. However, Communitarianism tries to bridge the broken relationship between the individuals and the community. Will Kymlicka argues that Communitarians believe that the value of community is not sufficiently recognized in liberal theories of justice or the public culture of liberal societies. Communitarianism introduces the idea of 'situated self' against the liberal concept of 'isolated self'. Communitarianism tries to replace politics of rights with politics of the common good. Liberal or Rawls's theory of justice gives priority to 'individual right' over the 'common good'. This paper tries to offer critical insights about the origin, development, various types and streams of communitarianism in response to liberal individualism.

INTRODUCTION

Communitarianism is a contemporary political philosophy which believes that the self or person is constituted through the community, in the sense that individuals are shaped by the communities to which they belong and thus owe them a debt of respect and consideration; there are no unencumbered selves. Although it is at odds with liberal individualism, communitarianism has a variety of political forms. Left-wing communitarianism holds that the community demands unrestricted freedom and social equality. Centrist communitarianism holds that community is grounded in the acknowledgement of reciprocal rights and responsibilities. Right-wing communitarianism holds that the community requires respect for authority and established values. (Haywood:1997: p.136)¹. It is noted that communitarianism points to shortcomings of liberalism and attempts to redefine the relation between individual and community. However, Communitarianism tries to bridge the broken relationship between the individuals and the community. Will Kymlicka argues that Communitarians believe that the value of community is not sufficiently recognized in liberal theories of justice or the public culture of liberal societies. Communitarianism introduces the idea of 'situated self' against the liberal concept of 'isolated self'. Communitarianism tries to replace politics of rights with politics of the common good. Liberal or Rawls's theory of justice gives priority to 'individual right' over the 'common good'. (Kymlicka: 2005: pp.208-283)². According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy "Communitarian ideas have a long history, in the West, China, and elsewhere, but modern-day communitarianism began in the upper reaches of Anglo-American academia in the form of a critical reaction to John Rawls' landmark 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971)³. Drawing primarily upon the insights of Aristotle and Hegel, political philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer disputed Rawls' assumption that the principal task of government is to secure and distribute fairly the liberties and economic resources individuals need to lead freely chosen lives. These critics of liberal theory never did identify themselves with the communitarian movement (the communitarian label was pinned on them by others, usually critics), much less offering a grand communitarian theory as a systematic alternative to liberalism. Nonetheless, certain core arguments meant to contrast with liberalism's devaluation of community recur in the works of the four theorists named above. (Bell: 2020)⁴. In brief, Communitarianism is part of the neo-romantic reaction to rationalism. It emphasizes moral and social values and the societal institutions that support them, especially community and its traditions, passions and beliefs, religion, and the habits of the heart. Communitarianism is not blind to facts and logic, the cool calculations of the rational mind, or the importance of science, technology, and economic progress. Nevertheless, it is concerned that such perspectives may override, if not ignore, other *human* considerations, to which communitarianism is attentive. For the same reasons, communitarianism seeks to balance concern for individual rights and liberty with concerns for the common good and community (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law:2018>).⁵

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Though the political philosophy of communitarianism is the product of the 20th century, the ideals of communitarianism can be traced to early religious doctrine as far back as monasticism in 270 AD, as well as the

Old and New Testaments of the Bible. For example, in the Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul wrote, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had." (Longley:2021)⁶. However, the term "communitarian" was first coined by John Goodwyn Barnby in 1841. He was a leader of the British Chartist movement, who used it in referring to utopian socialists and other idealists who experimented with communal styles of life. The specific term "communitarianism" was coined in the 1980s by social philosophers in comparing contemporary liberalism, which advocated using the powers of government to protect individual rights, with classical liberalism, which called for protecting individual rights by limiting the powers of government.

SOURCES OF COMMUNITARIANISM

Communitarianism is inspired by the idea of Aristotle, J.J, Rousseau, G.W.F Hegel and T.H. Green. Contemporary sources of Communitarianism may be found in the views of Michael Oakshott and Hannah Arendt. The present-day communitarian thesis in political philosophy is closely associated with the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer⁷, coalesced during the 20th century through the works of political theorists such as Ferdinand Tönnies, Amitai Etzioni, and Dorothy Day. However, there are two major sources of communitarianism- Marx and Hegel. According to Kymlicka, the emphasis on the community can be found in Marxism as well and is of course a defining feature of the communist ideal. Marxists (old communitarians) see community as something that can only be achieved by a revolutionary change in society, by the overthrow of capitalism and the building of a socialist society. The new communitarians (MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor, Walzer and Bell), on the other hand, believe that community already exists in form of common social practices, cultural traditions and shared social understandings. The community does not need to build *de novo* (anew), but rather needs to be respected and protected. To some extent, communitarians see a community in the very social practices that Marxists see as exploitative and alienating (Kymlicka:2005). As Amy Gutmann puts it, whereas the 'old' communitarians looked to Marx, and his desire to remake the world, the 'new' communitarians look to Hegel, and his desire to reconcile people to their world (Gutmann:1985, cited in Kymlicka:2005)⁸.

TYPES OF COMMUNITARIANISM

Authoritarian communitarianism

Authoritarian communitarians are generally known as "Asian" or "East Asian" communitarians are those who argue that to maintain social order and harmony, individual rights and political liberties must be curtailed. They also advocated for giving the need to benefit the common good of the community priority over the need to ensure the autonomy and individual rights of the people. In other words, if it were deemed necessary for the people to cede certain individual rights or freedoms to benefit the society as a whole, they should be willing, even anxious, to do so. The social practices of East Asian authoritarian societies such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia, in which individuals were expected to find their ultimate meaning in life through their contributions to the common good of the society (Longley:2021).

Responsive Communitarianism

The doctrine of responsive communitarianism, developed by Amitai Etzioni in the 1990s, seeks to strike a more carefully-crafted balance between individual rights and social responsibilities to the common good of the society than authoritarian communitarianism. In this manner, responsive communitarianism stresses that individual freedoms come with individual responsibilities and that neither should be neglected to accommodate the other. Early in 1990, a school of communitarianism was founded by Amitai Etzioni in which sociologists played a key role, although it included scholars from other disciplines. The group took communitarianism from a small and somewhat esoteric academic discipline and introduced it into public life, and recast its academic content. The modern responsive communitarian doctrine holds that individual liberties can be preserved only through the protection of a civil society in which individuals respect and protect their rights as well as the rights of others. In general, responsive communitarians stress the need for individuals to develop and practice the skills of self-government while remaining willing to serve the common good of society when needed. (Ibid: Longley:2021)

Political communitarianism

Political communitarianism emerged in the 1980s and is closely associated with the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer. They criticized liberalism for its failure to realize that people are socially "situated" or contextualized, and its negligence of the greater common good in favour of individualistic self-interest. Communitarians argue that political community is an important value which is neglected by liberal political theory. Liberalism, they contend, views political society as a supposedly neutral framework of rules within which a diversity of moral traditions coexist. . . . [Such a view] neglects the fact that people have, or can have, a strong and 'deep' attachment to their societies—to their nations. Above mentioned

Political theoreticians of communitarianism are considered the founding fathers of communitarian thinking, none of them uses the term in their work, possibly to avoid being confused with authoritarian communitarians. These scholars almost completely ignored sociological works that preceded them and put forth their political thinking about communitarianism (encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law:2018).

The communitarian perspective of justice

The communitarian perspective of justice is best understood by contrasting it with liberalism. It tries to bridge the broken relationship between the individuals and the community. Communitarians believe that the value of community is not sufficiently recognized in liberal theories of justice. Communitarianism introduces the idea of 'situated self' against the liberal concept of 'isolated self'. Communitarianism tries to replace politics of rights with politics of the common good. Liberal or Rawls's theory of justice gives priority to 'individual right' over the 'common good. It is noted that Rawls describes justice as 'the first virtue of social institutions. For communitarians the right implies virtue, and when we accept the good, the right has already been taken care of. **Alasdair MacIntyre** (British Philosopher) in his famous book *After Virtue* (1981)⁹ highlights the limitations of Rawls's notion of virtue. He offers a serious critique of the liberal notion of individuals as autonomous moral agents, disconnected from social context; and argues that individuals flourish only within the context of socially established cooperative human activity, which is designed to encourage the development of human excellence. He further argues that liberals are committed to 'moral relativism' detaching themselves from any particular standpoint to practise tolerance. So they could not able to develop any particular or unified concept of justice. But later in his book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), he realizes the pitfalls of moral absolutism and concedes that liberal tolerance itself is a virtuous practice.

American political theorist **Michael Sandel** in his book *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) attacks the liberal concept of justice represented by Rawls's theory. He argues that Rawls's theory represents the disconnected and disembodied individuals as rational negotiators who discovered the principles of justice behind the 'veil of ignorance. Rawls individuals are seemed to be independent of all social activities. Is anything left of the person when we subtract all this from his personality? Rawls fails to understand our embeddedness in a particular time, place and culture. He is an ardent advocate of the 'unencumbered self'. Sandel asserts that justice cannot be secured by isolated individuals seeking personal benefit, but by those who create a 'deeper commonality' through 'shared self-understanding and mutual affection. Liberal perspective talks about 'self is prior its ends'. In contrast, Sandel asserts that the self is not prior to its ends, but rather constituted by its end. He maintains that Rawls 'unencumbered' does not correspond with our deepest self-understanding (Sandel:1982)¹⁰.

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, ridicules the liberal perception of 'atomistic individualism, which is central to liberalism. Taylor does not regard human beings as autonomous choosers. He argues that the atomistic type of individualism promised freedom for a human actor, but ultimately failed to realize that human beings constantly reflect on their life to find their meaning. Human beings are not a mere manifestation of the will, rather the development of human personality is situated in society. In his book 'Sources of the self' (1989)¹¹, he asserted on 'embodied individuals', engaged both in self-interpretation and in constant interaction with others. He observes that human agency, rights and freedom exist only in their social context whereas modern liberal political theory failed to account for the reciprocal relations among individuals and between individuals and society.

Walzer's Views on Socialist Communitarianism

Michael Walzer is an ardent exponent of socialist communitarianism who rejects the universal and transcendental principles of justice. He tries to ground his theory of distributive justice on "shared social meanings of goods. Walzer in his book *Spheres of Justice* (1993) represents the communitarian case against Rawls's theory of distributive justice. Walzer's basic point is that no system of justice can be evaluated as inherently just and unjust; evaluation is possible only based on the social meanings attached to goods at stake. The distribution of goods cannot be decided without an understanding of the specific meanings of those goods which are socially constructed and embedded in the community. its practices and institutions rather than individual deeds and thought (Bhargava & Acharya: 2008: pp.81-82)¹². Walzer has sought to reconstruct the liberal approach to justice-as the problem of determining suitable criteria of distribution- by introducing a communitarian approach to justice. In this context he has rendered two major doctrines of the distributive theory of justice- 'shared social meanings of goods' and 'complex equality' According to Walzer, people are culture-producing creatures. They come together to turn their living place into a society or a political community. They create their own particular tradition, culture, religion, and language. They design their life and moral value. They are discoverers and inventors of all social goods. From the process of social creation, valuation, and conception, goods derive their social meanings. Once the social constructions of goods are in place, according to Walzer, the understanding of the social meanings of goods has been and will continue to be determined by those subjects (creators and users) of the goods. (Walzer:1993: p.166)¹³ For Walzer, the social meanings of goods are shared because they are socially created, conceived and valued. All these processes happen in social constructions. And there must be a general agreement to be reached in the social construction

or the social process of creation, conception, and valuation of social good. As the social meaning of a good rarely comes from a vote, people's shared understanding of this meaning reflects the fact that "there must be a consensus." (Walzer:1993:p.167)¹³.

He argues that it is futile to look for any principle of justice outside the community. The requirements of justice could only be identified in the context of a particular community, its practices and institutions. He argues that justice has shared meanings. Walzer asserts that the shared understandings in our society require us to apply the principle of 'complex equality in the distribution of social goods i.e., a system of distribution that does not try to equalize all goods, rather it seeks to ensure that inequalities in one sphere (e.g. wealth) do not permeate other spheres (e.g. health care and political power) (Kymlicka:2005: p. 211). He focuses on the social meaning of justice and the plurality of spheres of justice. Walzer emphasizes that the distribution of social goods should be determined according to the right reason as applicable in each sphere. Thus, the spheres of politics, or health, or education, should not be corrupted by the domination of money, for money properly rules in the sphere of commodities; the sphere of office should not be contaminated by nepotism, which belongs to the sphere of kinship and love; the sphere of kinship and love should not be contaminated by the consideration of profit and loss which are relevant only in the market- place; the family organization should not be patterned after male domination which properly belongs to the sphere of the military organization (Gaub: 2014).

Thus, Walzer tries to ground the distributive theory of justice on "shared social meanings of goods." He believes that as long as we distribute social goods in accordance with their social meanings, this kind of distribution is a just distribution and will bring us "complex equality" or make us free from domination. From this account, you may find that 'the social meanings of goods' and 'complex equality' are two leading categories in Walzer's theory of justice

CRITICAL EVALUATION

The communitarian perspective of justice receives severe criticism also. However, if we apply Walzer's model of communitarian justice in actual practice, a just society could be realized as envisaged by him. But he does not prescribe any mechanism to convince the dominant people in different spheres to adopt these rules. Walzer's theory of justice embodies strong moral philosophy, but it does not provide for an equally strong political philosophy.

Secondly, the doctrine of 'complex equality' is stipulated by Walzer to demonstrate that justice, as well as equality, is in opposition to domination. The doctrine of 'social meanings of goods' is developed to give respect to the shared understandings of people. For Walzer, the just distribution of a good is simply the distribution in accordance with the good's social meaning. What Walzer wants is, by use of these two doctrines, to establish a benign relativist theory of justice. However, these two doctrines of justice are problematic and encounter lots of criticism. Some, like Richard Ameson, criticize that Walzer's 'complex equality' is a principle of non-equality and cannot prevent widespread inequalities. Some others, like Amy Gutmann, Brian Barry, and Ronald Dworkin, concentrate their criticisms on the shared social meanings of goods. Amy Gutmann pointedly remarks that communitarians "want us to live in Salem" (Gutmann:1985:p.319), a community of strong shared values that went so far as to accuse nonconformist members of witchcraft during the seventeenth century.

Some of them see what Walzer promotes as an unnecessarily restrictive thesis of sphere-specificity. Some others criticize that Walzer grounds distributive justice on unreflective conventions and overlooks the disagreements over social meanings of goods (Fan:2000:p.i)¹⁴

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Moreover, some other liberal theorists (such as Simon Caney) disagree that philosophical communitarianism has any interesting criticisms to make of liberalism. They reject the communitarian charges that liberalism neglects the value of community, and holds an "atomized" or asocial view of the self.

Furthermore, Peter Sutch outlines some of the principal criticisms of communitarianism: that communitarianism leads necessarily to moral relativism; that this relativism leads necessarily to a re-endorsement of the status quo in international politics; and that such a position relies upon a discredited ontological argument that posits the foundational status of the community or state. (Sutch:2021)¹⁵ However, he goes on to show that such arguments cannot be levelled against a particular communitarian like Michael Walzer.

In addition to this, some critics argue about the close relation of communitarianism to neoliberalism and new policies of dismantling the welfare state institutions through the development of the third sector.

Despite its certain limitations, we can conclude that communitarianism is a philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Its overriding philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely moulded by community relationships, with a smaller degree of development being placed on individualism. Unlike classical liberalism, which construes communities as originating from the voluntary acts of pre-community individuals, it emphasizes the role of the community in defining and shaping individuals. Communitarians believe that the value of community is not sufficiently

recognized in liberal theories of justice.

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