

Globalizing Communitarianism

Communitarianism emphasizes the unique and fundamental importance of the individual's connection to local community. Yet communitarians are criticized for how they "avoid discussing how morally to resolve our conflicts and therefore fail to provide us with a political theory relevant to our world" (Gutmann 189). In this paper, I will argue that communitarianism must expand its focus beyond the local community, additionally considering a global community of communities, in order to adequately address real-world issues such as intracommunity dissent and systematic social change. To make this point, I will summarize the central tenets of communitarianism and the objections it makes to liberalism, pointing out the questions it leaves open and analyzing how well they are answered by various forms of communities (i.e., local vs. global and voluntary vs. non-voluntary).

In communitarianism, the individual has a duty to belong to their local community: to contribute to it and to uphold its core values. This philosophy is usually contrasted with liberalism, where priority is given to individual rights and autonomy. In fact, communitarians argue that the liberal prioritization of rights creates unfavorable distance between the individual and the community to which they belong (Sandel 154). Another important distinction between communitarianism and liberalism is found in the discussion of the right and the good. Liberalism prioritizes the right over the good; it asserts that principles of right precede society as they derive from universal choice in the original position, while conceptions of the good are products of individual choices in the real world (Sandel 154). Communitarians believe that the distinction

between the right and the good is largely illusory (Sandel 154). Rights do not preexist the formation of community and social norms. Rather, both the right and the good are constructs fully internal to particular societies.

Defense of communitarianism can be broken down into three major arguments, each with its own critique of liberalism. First, as mentioned above, communitarianism asserts the importance of social context for moral reasoning. Liberalism neglects this value and with it the importance of attachments beyond the self. For example, prioritizing individual rights, Rawls states that we must free ourselves from individual circumstance to become “independent from the interests and attachments we may have at any moment, never identified by our aims” (Sandel 175). This strategy allows us to assess when our particular interests come into conflict with the universal right and to adjust our aims accordingly. Yet communitarians view this freedom from attachment as leaving one “wholly without character, without moral depth” (Sandel 179). For community, they argue, is a crucial component to one’s character. Sandel writes: “community describes not just what [people] *have* as fellow citizens but also what they *are*... [community is] not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity” (150).

Second, communitarians prioritize the emergent properties of community such as love and friendship. They claim that “we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone” and that these external attachments go beyond what “justice requires or even permits” (Sandel 179). Communitarians like Sandel believe that liberalism wrongly upholds justice as the “first virtue of social institutions” when in fact it is only needed in the absence of higher community virtues (Sandel 175).

Third, communitarianism is based in claims about humans’ social nature. From childhood, we must be nurtured by our family. Even as adults, we “continue to need them to

express an important part of [our] humanity” (Taylor 203). In other words, Taylor writes, it is certain that “humans need others in order to develop as full human beings” (203). Yet Taylor is more specific than to prescribe one’s belonging to *any* community. Since identity is constituted by community, he argues that the individual “has to be concerned about the shape of this society/culture as a whole”, elaborating that “it is important to him that certain activities and institutions flourish in society. It is even of importance to him what the moral tone of the whole society is” (Taylor 207). In making this claim, Taylor brings to light a number of questions about the influence of an individual within the broader community. What role, if any, does the individual play in shaping the community they belong to? What happens if his opinion dissents from community norm? If this is the case, or even more generally, can people incite social change within the communitarian framework?

In my attempt to answer these questions, I will first respond to the issue of intracommunity dissent. It is easy to think of cases throughout history where dissent has led to oppression of the minority rather than an open discussion of people’s differences. In fact, one of the biggest critiques of communitarianism is that it “opens the door to intolerance in the name of communal standards” (Gutmann 189). Certainly, a discussion about the positive values of community is incomplete without recognizing their negative counterparts. And though communitarians like Sandel praise local communities at length, they barely address the racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that such communities can espouse.

For the sake of completeness, I want to acknowledge the potential communitarian response that oppressive treatment of the minority is morally permissible given that community value supersedes individual rights. Yet asking people to accept this, or as Gutmann says “asking us to live in Salem”, is a hard pill to swallow (189). It does not satisfy our moral intuition and

few philosophers will argue for this position. Instead, communitarians like Sandel will claim that intolerance is not actually tied to communities, but flourishes where “forms of life are dislocated, roots are unsettled, traditions undone” (Gutmann 189). Yet Gutmann maintains that history simply does not support [Sandel’s] optimism” (189). In reality, it appears that the majority’s deep roots of tradition are what compels them to bypass a more accepting treatment of those that defy their community values.

So, we must seek alternative methods for engaging with dissent. Present literature provides us with two options: enabling intercommunity mobility and expanding community lines. Though both have their challenges, I hope to demonstrate that issues from the latter can be resolved by identifying simultaneously with a local and a global community.

In defense of the first strategy, Michael Walzer argues that human beings are “highly mobile”, citing the vast number of people who travel geographically and alter their local community membership (32). Walzer even claims that communities themselves can move, stating that if dissent is large enough to make the community “so radically divided that a single citizenship is impossible, then its territory must be divided” (62). Yet, according to Sandel, the community that one chooses is barely a community at all. For people who seek out groups that share their values have an individualist conception of community, viewing it as a means by which to advance particular interests. Indeed, Sandel describes the individual-community bond as “not a relationship [people] choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover” (180).

Even if we ignore this ideological concern, there are pragmatic limits to social migration. At some point in time, the more widely favored societies may have to turn individuals away. To illustrate this issue in simplified terms, imagine having only two choices for community

membership: 1) that which you are born into but do not favor, where you believe you would be mistreated for individually-derived aspects of your identity, and 2) that which you favor but cannot join due to lack of space, money, or other resources. If you refuse to stay in the former community, you default to a state of social isolation. This non-membership is at odds with the foundational arguments of human's social nature, making social migration a flawed answer to community inclusion.

The next strategy for dealing with dissent is to “opt for a world without particular meanings and without political communities” where everyone instead belongs to a single global state (Walzer 34). Here, “admissions policy would never be an issue” (Walzer 34). Yet Walzer stands by the importance of communal exclusion. He argues that community members wielding the power of admission and exclusion suggest the “deepest meaning of self-determination” (62). Without exclusion, there could not be “communities of character” where people demonstrate a historically stable commitment to each other and to greater values (Walzer 62). Further, Walzer argues that membership in a global community does not provide a strong sense of belonging. He compares the connection one feels with a small, immediate community (e.g. a family) to that one feels with a broader community (e.g. a country). We intimately know the inner workings of our family, while we may have “strong feelings about our country, [but] only dim perceptions of it” (Walzer 35). Finally, Walzer claims that shared values in a global community must be “so abstract that they would be of little use in thinking about particular distributions” (8). In other words, these universal principles can have little to no bearing on our day-to-day lives.

Walzer's appeal to intuition is compelling, but I believe his argument here is too dualistic. Individuals do not have to belong solely to a local community or to a global one. We could keep our local ties, allowing for strong connections and dissent-based exclusion, while

ensuring that people always belong to *some* community i.e., the global one. We can protect against oppression by allowing local communities to follow particular consensuses so long as they do not violate the global community's overarching values. Walzer worries that we cannot meaningfully define global values, but these are the very principles we uncover in the original position. After all, a global community is built from individuals who may share nothing but a consensus under the veil of ignorance. Thus, we can reframe the individual rights that communitarians are accused of neglecting as the values shared by a global community of communities. In this way, individual rights are not in opposition to community values, but are simply one layer of them.

Having intermittently discussed the communitarian replies to this argument, I want to additionally address a liberal objection. Even if liberals grant that global values protect the right of individual diversity, they might argue that global values do not adequately address other individual needs. If qualities like freedom of choice are required and are only resolvable by embracing voluntary communities, I still believe that both philosophies can find a middle ground. Sandel would claim that choice and meaningful commitment are mutually exclusive due to the following reasoning: if attachments are freely chosen, they can be freely severed. If you can sever an attachment at any time, you do not demonstrate a commitment to it. Community requires commitment and thus a true community cannot be one that is voluntarily chosen. I concede to the logic of this argument, but object to its first claim. It is possible to legally or socially dictate that individuals may choose their attachments, but not be free to sever them. This binds each person to their chosen community with just as much commitment as they would have to the community they were born into, with the added benefit of promoting free choice and individual expression.

Regardless of the form of the community in question (voluntary or non-voluntary, global or local), philosophers like Sandel and Walzer emphasize the value of community stability (Walzer 62). As such, there is little specification in communitarian literature about how a community can or should evolve. This raises the question: how does communitarianism approach systematic social change?

We can categorize potential strategies for change by whether they stem from internal or external critique. Internal critique aligns more closely with communitarian values, but raises certain practical challenges. For example, one internal strategy is deliberative democracy. This policy attempts to reach consensus through extensive community dialogue. Here, each member of society is an equal agent for legitimating change (Etzioni 160). But given that communities are not homogenized, there is no guarantee that such debate will ever be resolved. As long as there is dissent, any particular community may not be able to enact social change.

A more decisive form of internal critique is proceduralism: the strict adherence to existing procedure. One example of this policy in action is the United States Supreme Court. It does not aim to create change, but still affects social norms as judges interpret society's ruling procedure (the written word of the Constitution). However, this ruling procedure could take any number of forms. Rather than the Supreme Court interpreting the Constitution, we could have deferred all decisions to majority vote or the flip of a coin. This open-endedness highlights the evasive logic of proceduralism: rather than ask how to legitimate and potentially change social norms, we must now ask how to legitimate and potentially change social procedures.

A third approach of internal critique is to adopt the ideology of relativism, which states that there are no flaws or improvements that can be made to any procedure or norm. As there is no objective truth to strive for, every community's present values are perfectly and equally valid.

Implicit in this claim is that there is no need for communities to direct change. Walzer verbalizes this passivity, stating that communal standards “are vulnerable to shifts in social meaning, and we have no choice but to live with the continual probes and incursions through which these shifts are worked out” (319).

The major real-world issue that relativism and other internal strategies face is inter-community conflict. Even if there is perfect harmony within each community, there is no guarantee of cooperation between them. For example, communities A and B may have conflicting demands for possessing land and different values for justifying them. Relativism provides no metric by which to resolve these differences. As Walzer writes, “certainly, justice is better than tyranny; but whether one just society is better than another, I have no way of saying” (312). Proceduralism too has no way of resolving transcultural differences. If A and B have conflicting procedures on how to deal with each other, neither law can definitively triumph. Thus, the benefit of a broader community of communities emerges once again. This “external” approach (external, that is, to the local community) attempts to resolve differences by appealing to a universal value. In this example, A and B would call upon the ruling principles of the global community to which they both belong, making the critique internal in nature.

With these large changes made to traditional communitarianism, one might wonder which of its principles remain. First, we preserve the core communitarian value of connecting with and contributing to an entity beyond the self. Being a member of multiple communities does not detract from external connection or its resulting social virtues like love and friendship. Though we have lost some aspects of the constitutive self, we have argued that one’s commitment to a chosen community can be just as binding as his commitment to a given one. This strength can supplement the weaker and more abstract connection one feels to broader

society. Further, the values of this “community of communities” can be identified through the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, helping bridge the ideological gap between individual rights and community values. With recognition of what is lost, recall what we stand to gain. These changes allow for “wholeness incorporating diversity”, where groups can retain their identities while sharing in larger social connections (Gardner 41). As we have shown, this placement of groups within a primary community of communities paves the way to productively engage with dissent, resolve inter-community conflict, and enable systematic social change.

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