

THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITARIANISM AND THE EMPTINESS OF LIBERALISM  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ronald Beiner, Will Kymlicka, and Leszek Kolakowski, through their comments on a summary version of Part I that I published as "The Politics of Communitarianism," led me to believe that I might not be chasing a wild goose. Emma Rothschild, Amartya Sen, and Jeremy Waldron--through their enthusiasm for an unpublished paper, "The Intrinsic Worthlessness of Freedom," that summarizes Part II--prompted the notion that I had captured something worthwhile. I would like to thank them for their encouragement, along with Michael Allen Gillespie, Ian Shapiro, Rogers Smith, and Norma Thompson.

## PREFACE

(rev. 12/08)

I began this study in the early 1990s, when the liberal confrontation with communitarianism had not yet evolved into the current communitarian-liberal convergence. Even then, the communitarian challenge to liberalism was not exactly fresh, but it was still fascinating.

My main concern was to understand why such gifted political philosophers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer had made telling criticisms of the liberal prioritization of the good over the right, and the attendant formalism, proceduralism, and value subjectivism--only to propose, as their alternative, doctrines that were just as formalist, proceduralist, and subjectivist, in that they merely substituted the community for the individual as the arbiter of the good. Search as I did among the communitarians' canonical works, I could find no more of a substantive specification of good ends than in theorists such as Rawls, who had deliberately set himself the task of subordinating the good to the right.

In the years since, as other obligations kept me from completing this book, communitarian perspectives came to be adopted and adapted by the liberal mainstream, forming the common ground between, for instance, those who favor preserving the integrity of communal

identities in the name of individual autonomy; and those who favor securing individual autonomy by cultivating tolerant versions of communal identity. The premise underlying this communitarian-liberal convergence was that communitarians made real contributions, such as demonstrating the communal constitution of individual identity and exposing the pretenses of universalistic, neutralist liberalism; but that these good points could be accepted without buying into the potentially tyrannical conclusions that the communitarians reached.

If the argument of this book is correct, the consensus view about communitarianism is far too generous. The communitarian philosophers, I maintain, advanced no *prima facie* valid arguments either for the communal constitution of the self; or against liberal universalism, liberal neutralism, or the liberal apotheosis of equal individual freedom. Nor did they even try.

MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor, and Walzer never came close to showing that people are communally constituted in a philosophically relevant, normative (rather than, say, sociological) sense. Nor did they show that the particular is more objective than the universal, or that universalism is unsound and ethical neutrality, impossible. All that their arguments even attempted to show is that, in various ways, people would behave better--from a liberal perspective--if they believed that they were communally constituted, and thus antecedently bound to collectively determined conceptions of the good.

Thus, for example, although Sandel, Taylor, and Walzer defended the legitimacy of nationalism, their only argument for it was that it is useful in bolstering citizens' feelings of interpersonal obligation,

and thus their commitment to the liberal welfare state. This commitment, according to these authors, was undermined by the individualist foundations of Rawlsian liberalism, which were vulnerable to attack by right-wing individualists such as Robert Nozick.

For equally liberal (if more unusual) reasons, MacIntyre thought that individualism threatened freedom and equality by leaving people no choice but to treat each other as means to their arbitrary private ends, since individualism posited no shared ends that would allow interpersonal agreement. He therefore proposed to educate people into local practices that embody shared ends. Despite his rhetorical suggestions, MacIntyre neither argued nor proved that such goods are less arbitrary than the goods pursued by the atomized citizens of liberal nation-states; his only actual claim was that, if people can be taught to treat impersonal, shared ends as if they were objective—that is, if they can be induced to think of shared ends as normative facts, rather than as arbitrary values—they would no longer manipulate or coerce each other in pursuit of personal, exclusive ends. This is a familiar liberal hope; only the anti-individualist means for ending interpersonal hierarchy and subordination were unusual.

None of the major communitarian philosophers wanted to sanction illiberal communities or subjectivist conceptions of the good. What they considered problematic about liberalism were, indeed, the illiberal and subjectivizing effects they attributed to its individualistic foundations. But there were obvious contradictions between these writers' own broadly liberal ends and their communitarian means. No liberal critic failed to note that an implication of the

communitarians' arguments was the legitimacy of illiberal communities. A Nazi community is still a community, so if the individual subject is legitimately constituted by any community, what follows?

Just as obviously, the communitarians contradicted their critique of the conceptions of the good that were the objects of individual subjects. Rawls was not the only one to prioritize the right over the good: the right is, after all, the ability to determine the good. Communitarianism in its pure form--the form hinted at, but immediately diluted, by the communitarian philosophers--insists, in effect, that the community has the right to determine the good. If the individual's right to determine the good relativizes it as between different individuals, and if the choices among ends open to the individual subject can be decided only "subjectively"--in the sense of arbitrarily--then why is the good any the less relative as between different communities, and how does communitarianism render "intersubjective" choices of ends any less arbitrary?

A metaphysical identification of the good with the communal is the implication of Sandel's and Walzer's appeal to the goods that "we" experience as binding; of Taylor's invocation of the authority of our "webs of interlocution"; and of MacIntyre's valorization of a life of collectively inculcated practical virtues. In all four cases, the communitarians intended to free the human subject by collectivizing, and thereby "objectivizing," her objects. But it was immediately evident--even to the communitarians--that, unadulterated, communitarianism subverted both their political and axiological goals.

In preemptive response, all four communitarians adulterated

communitarianism. Each devised a profusion of ad-hoc caveats that cut the individual loose from the collective authority they had implied. The result was the vague, contradictory, self-negating doctrine that was so effectively attacked in the critical literature.

So, the first puzzle: why did the communitarians bother? Why promulgate views that they had to bury under a blizzard of provisos?

The answer, I think, lies at the level of unspoken metaethical assumptions. The trap into which the communitarians fell is as old as Sophocles: it is to assume that political philosophy is a matter of determining who has the moral authority--the right--to determine the good: the individual, or the community?

Thus, my second puzzle: Why should we think metaphysics--the ontology or moral epistemology of the subject--relevant to the goodness of the ends that are subjects' objects? The communitarians inherited the metaethical assumption that goodness is determined by the chooser, not the choice. Hence their notion that values--including liberal values--could be rendered less "subjective" if the choosing subject, not the choice itself, were more "objective." And in this sense, "objective" does not mean good; it means communal, rather than individual.

From Hegel (and, in the case of MacIntyre, Marx), the communitarians borrowed the notion that liberal values grounded in community could confer on equal individual freedom (the traditional goal of liberalism, shared by the communitarians) the authority of collective identity. But such an Aufhebung carries any weight only if one assumes that the good is a matter of somebody's authority: the

individual's; the community's; or, given the politics of Hegel and the modern communitarians, the individual's by way of the community's sanction. The alternative metaethics is to view the good as being a matter, simply, of the goodness, in themselves, of the ends, regardless of who chooses them.

Communitarianism was just as formalist, proceduralist, neutralist, and empty as liberalism not only because the communitarians were liberals in everything but name, but because their metaethical assumptions left them no choice but to blame the problems of extant forms of liberalism on individualism. It seemed to follow that the alternative that would rescue liberalism must in some way be communitarian.

For political reasons, then, the communitarians chose the collective side in the age-old dichotomy. But this merely traded the emptiness of individual authority for that of the community. In the pure, unadulterated version of communitarianism, the good is subordinated to the right of the community to determine it. Once caveats and provisos water down this frightening doctrine, however, ensuring that only liberal communities count as "real" communities, moral authority is transferred back to the individual--only now, sanctioned by the community, it is sanctified as "the good." The priority of the individual's right over the good has been passed through the hands of the community, but when it completes its dialectical journey the only thing that has really changed is its name: "the good" is now what used to be reviled by the communitarians as an arbitrary "right"--a change justified solely by its communal

endorsement.

It is still, however, an empty vessel, as is immediately discovered by any individual who might wonder what to do with his communally laundered freedom.

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In Part II of this study, I deploy against communitarianism Leibniz's critique of the theological version of the communitarians' metaethics: voluntarism. I argue that like Leibniz's target, Ockham, the communitarians assumed a view of the will that is incompatible with the logical presuppositions of freely made choices. Free choice does, as the communitarians suspected, require an antecedently binding conception of the good. But communal validation does not provide it. The voluntarist mistake is to collapse the task of determining the good into the (necessarily arbitrary) authority of one or another decision maker to undertake this task, conflating the good with the one who wills it.

The same view of the good and of the will are implicit in non-consequentialist liberalism, including the communitarian forms of liberalism that have gained currency since I began writing this book. In the concluding chapter, therefore, I analogize both theological and communitarian voluntarism to liberal voluntarism. Here my argument is that the legitimate axiological concerns about liberal relativism expressed by the communitarians can be resolved by subtracting the moral authority of the individual, rather than by exchanging it for the

moral authority of the community.

If my argument here is correct, the idea that individual freedom is intrinsically valuable must be jettisoned. Since it was this idea, and its implicit voluntarism, that gave rise to communitarianism, arguing against it is meant to challenge both the communitarian and the liberal sides of the liberal-communitarian consensus.