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Communitarianism revisited*

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ABSTRACT *This article provides a retrospective account and analysis of communitarianism. Drawing upon the author's involvement with the political branch of communitarianism, it attempts to summarize both the history of the school of thought as well as its most prominent ideas. These include the communitarian emphasis on the common good; the effort to find an acceptable balance between individual rights and social responsibilities; the basis of social order; and the need to engage in substantive moral dialogues. The article closes with a discussion of cultural relativism according to which communities ought to be the ultimate arbitrators of the good and a universalistic position.*

Communitarianism is one of the smallest philosophical schools, as indicated by the very small number of scholars who consider themselves as communitarians, by the relatively small number of academic articles and books published that employ this term each year, and by the number of citations. Communitarian ideas, however, have a long history, are found in different civilizations and bodies of religions, and are very widely followed. One finds strong communitarian elements in many modern and historical political and religious belief systems. They make appearances in both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the Christian New Testament such as in Acts where it is written that 'the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.'[1] Similarly, one sees communitarian ideas expressed in the early Islamic concept of shūrā ('consultation'); in Confucianism; in Roman Catholic social thought (the papal encyclical Rerum Novarum [1891] as well as the emphasis on the Church as community); in moderate conservatism (e.g. Burke's edict that 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle … of public affections'[2]); and in social democracy, especially Fabianism.

*We depart from usual practice and publish this article as a reflective consideration of communitarianism by a major thinker who has been involved in the shaping of the current philosophical and ideological contours of that belief system.

This article reviews developments in the philosophical treatment of these ideas since 1990 from one limited viewpoint, that of one scholar's journey, the author of the essay, looking back at it as it is ending.

The 1980s

The term 'communitarianism' was first used in 1841 by John Goodwyn Barmby, founder of the Universal Communitarian Association, and referred to the public philosophy of those concerned with the development of intentional and experimental communities.[3] After that it was rarely employed until the 1980s when it was used to refer to the works of Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer. Michael Sandel, particularly, was associated with the communitarian criticism of liberalism, the main theme of which was that there must be common formulations of the good rather than leaving it to be determined by each individual by him or herself, for themselves.[4] Communitarianism hence holds that the state cannot be neutral.

A telling case in point is marriage. The state can limit it to marriage between a man and a woman or include marriage between two people of the same gender—but in either case it takes a position in that some particular set of arrangements are included within the scope of the term, while others, such as marriage among three, are excluded. To those who argue that a true liberal state may remain neutral by refraining from issuing marriage licenses—and, thus, leaving it to religious and other civilian authorities to conduct marriages—communitarians respond that by staying neutral on this issue but not on others (e.g. by definition what constitutes a crime) the state is nevertheless taking a normative position, namely that marriage is not of significant moral import.[5]

All three communitarian scholars held that one cannot deal with people abstracted from their particularistic attributes and put them behind a veil of ignorance and let them choose the principles on which to found the liberal state—because people are bundles of particularistic attributes. As Joseph de Maistre put it, 'In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, [and] Russians … But as for "man," I declare that I have never in my life met him.'[6] Similarly, Michael Sandel argues against the liberal notion of the 'unencumbered self,' noting that

> To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments … is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth. For to have character is to know that I move in a history that I neither summon nor command, which carries consequences nonetheless for my choices and conduct.[7]

The debate about these two core points and related issues ranged during the 1980s and somewhat beyond, involving on the communitarian side Charles Taylor,[8] Michael Walzer,[9] Michael Sandel,[10] Avner de-Shalit,[11] Shlomo Avineri,[12] Seyla Benhabib[13] and Alasdair MacIntyre[14] and on the contemporary liberal side John Rawls,[15] T.M. Scanlon,[16] Jürgen Habermas,[17] Will Kymlicka,[18] Robert Nozick, Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin.[19] In representing the liberal position, Dworkin, for example, argues that 'political decisions must be, so far as possible,

independent of any particular conception of the good life, or what gives value to life.'[20] John Rawls writes that 'In a well-ordered society … persons are left free to determine their good, the view of others being counted as merely advisory.'[21] Since then, the debate has largely died down leaving in its wake what according to some is a compromise. Liberals shy away from normative claims 'founded exclusively on the moral argumentation and political experience of Western liberal societies,' that are said to be centred on liberty and individual rights. Communitarians concede that most non-liberal societies, such as those grounded in fascism or caste systems, are according much too high a standing to their conceptions of the common good.[22]

Most of the academics involved were political theorists or philosophers. They were not affected by—nor did they cite—a long and rich sociological tradition of studying related issues that reaches back to Emile Durkheim andFerdinand Tönnies, and was developed since by scores of works including those of Robert Nisbet,[23] William Kornhauser,[24] Philip Selznick,[25] Robert E. Park[26] and Georg Simmel,[27] among others.

The 1990s

Most disciplines reflect a tension between basic and applied works. Actually they often benefit from each other. Basic work seems to be at the foundation of applied work and protects its integrity. Applied work seems to encourage 'basic' thinkers to consider matters they have not previously reflected on, at least to sharpen and elaborate their considerations. For example, the rise of medical ethics, an applied field, has been credited with helping move the field of ethics beyond a the stalemate that had developed between different ethical camps (as well as between moral realists and anti-realists), as it required that ethicists move beyond their preoccupation with general principles to address particular cases, that often called for drawing on more than one set of principles.[28] Thus, bioethics developed from a strong focus on autonomy to include concerns for beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and, in some cases, even considerations of the common good.[29]

A similar development took place in the beginning of the 1990s when several communitarians applied this 'basic' communitarian philosophy to the political condition of the time.

1990 marks the end of the Reagan and Thatcher era, one built on laissez-faire conservative ideas and policies. Societies seem to suffer from poor cybernetic capacity (or guidance systems).[30] Their policy makers hence tend to oversteer in one direction, which tends to lead to reactions—often overreactions—in the opposite direction. In the US, President Reagan's drive to scale back the government (on the ideological level) and unfetter the market forces reflected a conservative reaction to a very extensive introduction of liberal programmes during the Great Society, during the Kennedy era, and especially during the Johnson era.

In the UK the Thatcher era reflected a reaction to the strong left policies and powerful unions that favoured nationalization of most industries and financial

institutions.[31] Both of these periods in which laissez-faire conservative ideas were extolled, were held to have tilted the British and in particular American society too far toward radical individualism. Particularly telling was a study by Robert Bellah and his associates that found that when what they called utilitarian individualism (defined as a form of individualism wherein people are viewed as self-interested maximizers along the lines of what is now called *Homo economicus*) was added to expressive individualism (defined as the freedom to express oneself, emphasizing the liberation of the individual and participation in profound experience and emotion), that was a sign that society was coming apart.[32]

The Spirit of Community[33] seems to be the first communitarian book aimed at a non-academic readership. Its main thesis was the next correction ought to be not pulling society in the opposite direction to rampant individualism—but toward a middle ground of balance between individual and communal concerns, between rights and the common good. It was followed by the issuance of a platform. Its drafters and initial endorses included James Fishkin, William A. Galston, Mary Ann Glendon, Philip Selznick, Thomas A. Spragens, Jr and Amitai Etzioni. It was initially endorsed by close to 100 American and other scholars and public intellectuals from a wide political spectrum that struck a similar position,[34] as well as scores of articles in the popular press, radio and TV appearances.

In the 1990s these communitarian ideas received a measure of public support and several public leaders in several Western democracies wove such ideas into their campaigns, including Tony Blair,[35] Bill Clinton,[36] Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende[37] and Barack Obama.[38] These ideas also paralleled or resonated with those embraced by the New Democrats in the US, Germany's Neue Mitee party and New Labour in the UK,[39] as well as many Scandinavian parties, particularly in Sweden and Denmark.[40] A considerable number of voluntary associations revised their respective bill of rights to become a bill of rights and responsibilities.[41] And—a group of 30 former heads of states attempted to complement the UNUDH with a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities.[42]

Several scholars were rather critical of these popular communitarian ideas and the authors they referred to as 'political communitarians.' Elizabeth Frazer dedicated a whole book to show that the core term of communitarianism, community, was so vague, it defied definition and urged it to be dropped.[43] Other scholars argued that the new communitarian position was undermining the support for individualism and rights[44]—and others that it was insufficiently attentive to the common good and especially to authority as a mainstay of a solid society.[45]

Particularly damaging was the association of communitarian positions with philosophical and ideological positions struck by scholars and public leaders who supported authoritarian regimes such as Park Chung Hee,[46] Bilahari Kausikan,[47] Lee Kuan Yew,[48] Mahathir Bin Mohamad[49] and Russell A. Fox.[50] They extolled social obligations and the importance of the common good and accorded much less weight to autonomy and rights, viewing individuals as more or less interchangeable cells who find meaning in their contribution to the social whole rather than as free agents. The association of the term communitarianism with

these authoritarian communitarians was so strong that the three leading academic scholars of the 1980s systematically refrained from using the term at all. This resulted with the odd consequence that those scholars most often cited as communitarians distanced themselves from this approach, although they rarely explained their reason for this distance.[51] The 'political' communitarians tried to deal with the same challenges by adding an adjective to their communitarianism, calling it 'responsive'[52] or 'liberal.'[53]

Autonomy and the common good

The New Golden Rule, published in 1996, attempted to provide a systematic, scholarly foundation to the responsive communitarian position. Its main thesis is that, contrary to both philosophical liberals, whose normative commitments tend to privilege liberty and individual rights, and conservatives who tend to privilege social order and authority, the design of a good society requires drawing on (a) multiple normative principles, (b) principles that conflict with each other at least in part and (c) a careful balancing of these principles (d) whose point of equilibrium changes as the historical conditions change. These conditions require some elaboration.

Libertarianism illustrates a philosophical commitment to a single sort of normative values. It not merely privileges liberty over all other considerations but treats alternative values as negative hindrances that may have to be overcome or tolerated. Thus, libertarians are quick to deny that there is a 'common good'—a good whose promotion might compete with the imperative to respect individual rights. Generally this denial takes the form of a two-step whose first premise is that there can be a 'common good' only if there exists some metaphysical entity who is the beneficiary of that good. The existence of such an entity is then denied, with the entailed conclusion being that there can be no such common good. For example, Robert Nozick argued that '[T]here is no *social entity* with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives.'[54] Similarly, Ayn Rand argues that

> there is no such entity as "the tribe" or "the public"; the tribe (or the public or society) is only a number of individual men. Nothing can be good for the tribe as such; "good" and "value" pertain only to a living organism—to an individual living organism—not to a disembodied aggregate of relationships.[55]

And Margaret Thatcher, while not quite making it to the normative conclusion, famously affirmed the metaphysical claim, stating '... who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families ....'[56] That is, to the extent that such libertarians recognize some form of social good, they do so only in reductive terms whereby that social good is understood strictly as an aggregation of individual goods.[57]

The communitarian response to this objection is to deny the starting premise, namely that the existence of the common good depends upon the existence of some collective metaphysical entity who is the *beneficiary* of that good.

One account of the common good is that it is some benefit done for the sake of helping others with no regard for who those people are in particular beyond their membership in some community, including future generations. That is, the person acting to further the common good is unable to determine who will be the beneficiary of their actions. They do so because of the value of the particular good in its own right. For example, basic research, protecting the environment, preventing climate change and developing sustainable energy sources are all costly projects that will only pay off over the longer run, and then only to unknown, unpredictable beneficiaries. The common good also includes developing and nurturing and preserving goods that belong to the community but no particular person including the archaeological and historical sites and documents (e.g. the text of the Constitution) and the democratic political process.

Balancing, within history

Given that the communitarian position draws on the recognition of several core values as equal in their standings, as basic foundations of the good society, none of which is privileged a priori—the question arises how these core values relate to one another. Autonomy and the common good are two such core values that need to be balanced. The relationship between the two is not strictly zero-sum. Rather, the two stand in a relation of 'inverting symbiosis' whereby the two values enhance each other up to a point beyond which they begin to exhibit something closer to zero-sum behaviour. For example, when public safety is restored in a community with a very low level of social order, both rights and the common good benefit. This can be seen in Moscow, following the very high crime rates in the early 1990s, and earlier—in several major American cities. However, once basic order is established, the two core values tend to come into conflict and require balancing. This is highlighted by the debate over whether stop and frisk is justified and whether the Patriot act tilts too far in favour of security, undermining rights.

Communitarianism holds that there is no one set balance point that can be found in all societies. Rather, the particular balance between rights and responsibilities or rights and the common good will vary with the cultural and historical context, across societies and over time.[58]

Communitarians note that societies constantly adjust the balance between rights and the common good as internal and environmental conditions change. Moreover, they often overcompensate by moving too far towards one value when another one was or seemed underserved. They often tend to oversteer. Thus, one might imagine this movement among dedication to core values as akin to a marble moving in a bowl that is subject to outside forces. Though the marble will swing back and forth over the centre of the bowl (the metaphorical optimal balance point), there is a risk that the marble will shoot up over the lip of the bowl, making a return to the bowl's nadir impossible. This metaphorical event stands in for the

society that dissolves into irreparable chaos (e.g. Syria in 2011–2013) or break-up (e.g. the former Yugoslavia).

Although critics have challenged the very concept of balance,[59] and advocates often champion one core value over all others, the courts of democratic societies and their legislatures are clearly balancing, and very much in the communitarian way, without being aware of this philosophy or at least its terminology.

Both the Fourth and Fifth Amendments of the American Constitution illustrate this point. Unlike the First Amendment, which states 'Congress shall make NO law' and is, hence, quite absolute, centring on one core value, the Fourth Amendment states that people's rights are only protected 'against unreasonable searches and seizures,' with the implication being that there is a whole category of searches that *are* allowed, e.g., when there is compelling public interest—a legal term for the common good. Similarly, the Fifth Amendment balances individual property rights with the common good, decreeing that the seizing of property is not necessarily forbidden, but must involve compensation paid to the original owner.

Community, the third sector and 'soft' communitarianism

Much of the public debate about basic principles concerning societal design has focused for the last two centuries on the role of the coercive sources of societal organization (the state)—versus that of voluntary transactions and exchanges (the economy). In this realm as well, strong advocates struck positions that centred on one principle ('That government is best which governs least,' vs. encompassing nationalization and central planning) while in effect all societies draw on some kind of balancing of the two or become highly dysfunctional.

Communitarianism leapfrogged this debate by pointing out that it overlooks the importance of the third sector, composed of families, local communities, voluntary associations, religious organizations and numerous social groupings including racial, ethnic, professional/vocational and others. A very large volume of social transactions takes place in the third sector, and these heed different principles than either the state or the government.

To understand these principles one must take into account that individuals are not free-standing agents, who make independent choices that their rational deliberations led them to conclude will best serve their self-interest. That is, they are not *Homo economicus*, a concept that was applied well beyond the economic realm to describe the world of politics (assuming the voters are rational agents out to serve their self-interest) and even in social life (including crime, sex and religious life).[60]

Communitarianism, drawing on sociology and social psychology, pointed out that individuals are, as Aristotle put it, social animals. That meant that they have bonds with others (e.g. family and community members) which affect their preferences and choices in two major ways. First, in the original formation of these preferences during socialization, when the values of their particular communities became part of their selves. Hence, they come to view what the community prescribes as lines of actions they freely chose! Second, as a source of continuous

subconscious signals that use approbation and social censure to enforce established preferences or reformulate them. These key observations, communitarians warned, should not be interpreted to mean that people have no degrees of freedom and are fully socially determined, but that the range of these choices is limited by people's social bonds. (Academics, public intellectuals and 'bohemians'—those who live in the Village, Castro or Left Bank—have unusually high degrees of freedom because of the social structure of their sociological environment, but should not project those on others.)

Many consequences follow from the understanding of the social nature of individuals. Of particular interest to communitarianism is (a) that people often act in groupings rather than as individuals (hence the great importance of social movements such as the civil rights movement in societal change) and (b) that social bonding provides a major and distinct source of social order: a 'soft' one.[61] The reason is that when people abide by norms due to informal social controls, to gain approbation of others to whom they are bonded, or avoid their censure, these 'control' mechanisms leave the ultimate choice to the person in contrast to outright coercion. (Compare the sign 'Do not even think about parking here - hospital fire lane!' to a steel barrier or a tow truck.)

One ought further to note that informal social controls are essential because the volume of transactions in a modern society is so large that there never can be enough accountants, inspectors, border guards, custom officials and police to limit anti-social behaviour to a level a free society can tolerate. Moreover, these official enforcers themselves need to be policed, as has long been captured in the refrain, Who Will Guard the Guardians? Hence, the only way a desired level of civility can be attained is if (a) a large number of the members of society (including the law enforcement personnel) will 'behave' because they believe that it is their civil or moral duty and (b) a good part of the enforcement will be left to informal social controls, which, to reiterate, draw on limited privacy.

Moral dialogues versus reasoning

Given the special import communitarianism attributes to the social nature of people and hence to informal social controls and communities in maintaining non-coercive sources of social order, two major questions arise regarding the substance of the norms that guide behaviour. Are they morally acceptable or unacceptable? And who will judge their standing? These questions arise because informal social controls, the foundations of communal order, is not merely based on communal pressure—on granting and withholding social approbations and censure—but also relies on sorting out what the community considers morally appropriate. That is, the particular content influences whose dictates the communal pressures seek to suppress or uphold. The pressures are like pipelines; the stronger they are, the more volume they can carry. The social norms, behavioural specifications of values, are what flows through these pipelines.

The answer to the twin questions centres around two key concepts: moral dialogues and deontological values. The normative content of communal pressures

is constantly edited, formulated and reformulated, through discussions among members of the community over the dinner table, in places of worship, at the water cooler or coffee pot at places of work, at community pools and during other social gatherings. Recent examples in the US include gay marriage, deficits and gun control.

These moral dialogues should not be confused with the kind of reasoned deliberation political theory and philosophy often explore, the idealized give-and-take of the agora or town hall meeting. These are viewed as deliberations based on reason, ideally evidence-driven, cool and logical. For instance, consider the debates over the death penalty. In such a discussion, one would focus on the empirical question of whether or not the death penalty is effective at deterring crime. By contrast, moral dialogues engage values, asking, in this case, whether it is ever appropriate for the state to deliberately take a human life.

Note that the precept of moral dialogues is distinct from Habermas' conception of communicative action. For Habermas, the primary challenge of society is how to integrate people who are increasingly alienated from past social institutions and traditions ('disenchanted') and who have different ends, beliefs and cultural presuppositions.[62] His solution is to call upon social institutions to facilitate what he calls 'communicative action'—a form of communication wherein people forego appealing to one another's self-interest (as per coercive threats or market transactions) and, instead, attempt to arrive at some sort of shared end which provides them a shared reason to pursue a given course of action.[63] To use Habermas' language, the reasoning process might express itself purely in terms of technical-pragmatic claims rather than in rightness claims or authenticity claims.

More importantly, Habermas calls for neutral proceduralism which communitarians hold do not suffice, and hence the need for moral dialogues to sort out shared formulations of the good. Thus, Habermas holds that participants must follow basic rules such as staying on-topic and responding directly to objections and arguments, an improved set of Roberts' Rules.[64] More generally, Habermas suggests that the extent to which one can have faith in the validity of an argument depends upon the extent to which that argument has been rigorously tested, e.g. subjected to a battery of counterexamples and thought experiments, exposed to a variety of counterarguments and objections, etc. Thus, it is not enough that participants follow basic argumentative procedures. Rather, the entire discussion must be structured in accordance with rules that allow for rigorous testing of arguments. Habermas therefore argues that (a) all relevant voices are included in the debate, (b) each participant is given an equal opportunity to participate in the debate, (c) each participant speaks honestly such that they deceive neither themselves nor others and (d) the participants are free from any sort of coercion as they participate in the process. In this way, Habermas avoids questions of normative value and, instead, frames deliberations as a set of neutral procedures and rules.[65]

Communitarians show that contrary to a widely held belief that moral dialogues lead to prolonged confrontations without resolutions (e.g. about abortion), most moral dialogues do lead to new shared moral understandings, which in turn change

behaviour, as they are undergirded by informal social controls. Examples include the changed attitudes toward minorities, women, people of different sexual orientations and attitudes to the environment.

Universalism versus Relativism

Observations that moral dialogues take place within communities have led some to conclude that communities are the ultimate arbiters of the good. Michael Walzer, for example, argues in *Thick and Thin* that normative values can be either thin/minimalist—i.e. values that are universally shared and which can, thus, be invoked in cross-cultural moral debate—or thick/maximalist where they are specific to a given culture and context. Importantly, though, Walzer rejects the notion that people start with thin values that serve as a foundation upon which culturally contingent thick values grow. Rather, he contends that one *begins* with thick, culturally specific values and, of these, one finds a narrow section of overlapping values found across different cultures that qualify as thin or minimalist values.[66] Further, he suggests that these thin values are often not even a subset of the thick values but, rather, are something closer to a caricature of those values—a set of principles that have been so abstracted from the thick values from which they originate that the relation between the two cannot be described as a part to a whole.[67] Walzer thus suggests—alongside some of the other communitarians of the 1980s described earlier—that the normative conclusions for a particular society must be derived from the normative language, arguments and reasoning found in that society.[68] Given all this, Walzer concludes that notions of justice come down to the extent to which life in a particular community reflects the shared values and understandings of the members of that community.[69] He argues that a 'given society is just if its substantive life is lived … in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members.'[70]

However, this is a position difficult to maintain given that a community of Nazi or KKK or Afrikaners can conclude that lynching people of different colour than that of the members is morally appropriate; or agree that burning books is commendable. A communitarian hence needs an Archimedean moral point above and beyond the consensus of a community, and a substantive one, albeit not necessarily as thick as local ones.

This issue arose when the 'The Responsive Communitarian Platform' was formulated. In writing the draft, Robert Bellah objected to the phrase 'universal values' or any other such wording that might imply an endorsement of absolute values. Philip Selznick objected along similar lines. In contrast, Amitai Etzioni maintained that, without recognizing universal principles, of which human rights is but one, and social responsibilities (expected of all, although the communities to which they are responsible may vary), communitarianism was but a form of cultural relativism. And if we did not recognize any substantial values above and beyond those upheld by various communities or cultures, we would deny ourselves a basis on which to rest moral claims across communities. We thus could not challenge other nations' practices of stoning adulterous women, chopping off

limbs of thieves, jailing dissenters and trading sex slaves, not to mention child labour, forced marriages and female circumcision.

The position advanced by the author is that are there a small number of major moral values that speak to us directly, that we find compelling, that are—as the founding fathers of the American republic put it so well—self-evident. People are born with a moral sense that yields strong judgements about various behaviours both *within* a culture and *across* cultures. Once one experiences such a sense, one basically faces two choices. One can tell oneself that such a sense is inappropriate because different people have different cultures, and what is perceived as outrageous or as morally commendable may not be so in the eyes of others, in their terms, or by their values. Such an argument leaves one's moral sense, which rarely is assuaged by such notions, raw, unexamined and, above all, unaccounted for. Or, one can understand this preliminary sense as beseeching its owner to establish whether the initial response was justified—as an invitation for renewed reflection on which grounds for moral judgements will allow one to justify those positions that will be maintained after initial reflection.

To illustrate: in trying to account for intuitive dismay at learning about arranged marriages between young girls and old men in some parts of the world, one might first wonder whether this might be an arrangement to which both parties agreed—thus rendering the initial intuitive dismay uncalled for, indeed largely a reflection that such marriages are not part of contemporary Western experience. One might still have some doubt about the morality of such marriages on the grounds that not all contracts, even if voluntarily entered, are necessarily moral. For instance, a contract to serve as someone's slave is never acceptable. Moreover, on further reflection, one might well conclude that the girls' conditions do not allow them to provide valid consent. Thus, these are, in effect, forced marriages, and the original sense of dismay is hence justified.

In contrast, upon learning that young children work long hours for meagre pay in the sweatshops and factories of Third World countries, one's initial intuitive reaction is likely to find the situation highly objectionable. However, further examination reveals that if these children were denied this work, their condition, on the farm with starving families whom their factory work helps to feed, would be worse. This consideration, then, might shift the focus of moral outrage to the fact that these children exist in a world in which many millions do not have the basic minimum they need to live. In this way, the focus of moral outrage might shift away from the culture of Third World countries and toward the wealth differentials between rich and poor countries, as well as corrupt local elites.

In both cases, there is of course room for additional, much more complex deliberations. (For instance, why object to the use of force to arrange intimate relationships?) The only goal here is to illustrate the merit of examining moral sense rather than trying to set it aside in vain, in effect leaving it 'raw' and unaccounted for. In the process, one moves from a moral sense to a moral judgement. This examination is also the main way the approach advanced here differs from intuitionism[71] or emotivism,[72] both of which rely on the moral sense but leave it unexamined. (That difference has eluded certain critics.[73])

But how can one justify these moral judgements? One possibility is that moral judgements are justified insofar as they reflect consensus among all relevant parties. One may say, for example, that consensus could arise across communities, on a national or even regional and global level, say in favour of women's rights or select measures justified by the need to protect the environment as a common good, and thus provide a source of transnational moral judgements. First of all, evidence shows that there is precious little on which all people agree (even that killing is morally inappropriate). Second, what if some communities or nations do not agree? Is what is moral then to be subject to a majority ruling?

Speaking more generally, consensus has great pragmatic value but contains little moral justification. Say one submits to two ethics committees in two hospitals the same case for ruling—for instance whether life support may be turned off in a given case. One committee rules 5 to 0 whatever it concludes, the other 3 to 2. Surely the first committee's ruling is much easier to follow, but there is no reason to hold its decisions of greater moral 'value.' Indeed, a community can readily agree, even unanimously, that any non-member who strays into its confines will be shot or, if of a different race, lynched. But a few decades back, one could have quite readily reached global consensus that women are second-class citizens. Hence, one cannot reliably build cross-cultural moral judgements (indeed any) on consensus.

An alternative proposition has been posited by ethicists who champion deontological ethics. The term generally refers to ethical theories based on moral obligation, duty or necessity. It recognizes that certain moral causes speak to us in a compelling manner. William Frankena writes,

> Deontological theories … assert that there are other considerations that may make an action or rule right or obligatory besides the goodness or badness of its consequences—certain features of the act itself other than the value it brings into existence—for example, the fact that it keeps a promise, is just.

A deontologist 'contends that it is possible for an action or rule of action to be the morally right or obligatory one … simply because of some other fact about it or because of its own nature.'[74] (Unfortunately the term brings to mind numerous other issues that have no bearing, that indeed distract from the discussion at hand.[75] It is, hence, avoided from here on and with reference, instead, being made to self-evident truths.) For example, when one points out that people have greater obligation to their own children than to the children of others, this moral claim speaks for itself, effectively and directly. One does not sense that there is a need for some consequentialist explanation, a calculus of harm, or some other form of utilitarian analysis. Indeed, one is unlikely to find a single person who maintains, believes or argues that people have the same moral obligation to all children that they have to their own.

Statements about moral causes that present themselves as compelling are similar to what religious authorities speak of as revelation. This does not mean that one cannot reason about these matters. The fact that some cause appears powerful does not obviate the need to examine it closely. However, here reason follows,

buttresses or challenges revelation, rather than being the source of judgement. When one senses that certain positions are self-evident, one asks if one can find a compelling counterargument. If not, the judgement stands. Thus, when one recites the dictum that 'it is better to let a thousand guilty people walk free than to hang one innocent person,' it may at first seem self-evident. However, when one then notes that these freed criminals are sure to kill at least several innocent people, one finds that the certitude of the initial statement is no longer nearly as strong as it seemed at first blush. In contrast, when it comes to the reaction to a crime and attempts to use the anger generated to justify revenge or police misconduct, the line 'two wrongs do not make one right' stands, even after it has been contested.

Charles Taylor emphasizes this dual nature of morality, arguing that 'our moral reactions have two facets, as it were. On one side, they are almost like instincts; on the other, they seem to involve claims about the nature and status of human beings.'[76] Naturalists and emotivists, Taylor argues, want to forget about the second part;[77] but it would be equally a mistake to forget about the first part. One must keep in mind that rational explanations of moral values are attempts to, as Taylor puts it, 'articulate' the moral sense, but are not its essence.[78]

All systems of thought, whether mathematical, scientific, religious or moral, require at least one starting point, primary concept or assumption that we must take for granted—which is another term for self-evident. Many a philosopher who does not recognize the validity of the term 'self-evident truth' may well agree that every moral argument ultimately comes down to a number of premises. These premises may also be supported by arguments that themselves have premises. However, when one gets to the root of things, there are inevitably premises for which one cannot reasonably ask for further foundations, but which nonetheless seem reasonable, similar to what Alvin Plantinga calls 'properly basic beliefs.'[79]

In short, behind every sustainable moral construction is a self-evident foundation, or it is on very shaky ground.[80] This is not to say that, because reason needs anchors, one should make up or blindly embrace some truth and call it self-evident. Rather, it is here suggested that there are truths that are recognized as self-evident, and they serve also as anchoring points.

To extend the list of self-evident truths, consider two that are particularly important for communitarian thinking (or, at least, certain varieties thereof. There are as many differences among communitarians as there are among followers of other schools of thought). The normative standing of social order and autonomy, for a carefully crafted balance between them, has a similar standing to the concept of life and health in medical sciences. Each of these terms is subject to different definitions and whole literatures regarding their meanings. They are used here in the following basic interpretation: autonomy is used to mean one's right to act on one's preferences. Social order is used to express the idea that some constraints on the right to act on one's preferences are needed. Carefully crafted balance refers to the notion that a society that maximizes either value is not a tolerable one.

Theoretically, one could ask, 'Why recognize life and health as self-evident goods? Could one consider death and illness as good and build sciences that

embody them as core values? Some kind of Satanic science?' It is, though, far from accidental and rather telling that very few, if any, would grant such a possibility serious consideration. Life and health are compelling goods that speak to us unmistakably when compared to their opposites.

This observation is not belied by the fact that there are some limiting conditions under which one may find virtue in sacrificing life or health—say, for a just war, or in an experiment to test new drugs for the sake of others. Given that there are multiple goods that cannot all be fully adhered to at the same time, it is necessary to work out conflicts among them, and even sacrifice a measure of some for the sake of the others.

One augments the self-evident status of core concepts by various secondary and instrumental accounts—for instance, that a dead person can neither exercise moral responsibility nor be a bearer of rights, or that illness limits our autonomy. However, we correctly judge these arguments to be secondary. Life and health are compelling in and of themselves, as are autonomy, social order and a carefully crafted balance between them.

One might ask: where do these self-evident truths come from? Nature? God? Or are they built into our humanity? The answer is not clear, but this matters little for the purpose at hand. The analogue is to see an arch and understand what holds it together, without any cement or glue or wire. It stands because the way the bricks are laid out generates a formation that is self-sustaining. One can recognize this quality of the arch without having the faintest idea who put it together. Similarly, self-evident truths feel complete without one having to know how such point has been reached. To suggest that they are given by God or nature or in some other way merely moves the justification to an earlier link in the argument chain which, in turn, demands the self-evident status. Once one asks, as children are bound to do, who made God or how he got into heaven, we are back to the reductio ad absurdum that undermines all moral and intellectual constructions. The same holds for nature and all other questioned anchor points. This is not to suggest that these may not be critically examined, but rather, in doing so, one is in effect introducing another anchor point, the ground on which one justifies the critical assessment, another self-evident truth—or one is left with moral and intellectual anarchy, also known as relativism.

It should be noted that the discussion here deals with the values that members of a society seek to uphold rather than merely with judgements they must come to share in the public realm in order to formulate public policies, which entail numerous moral judgements. Several 'solutions' to the challenge at hand that may work in the public realm do not work for society at large because it encompasses the private and not just the public (or political) realm.[81] For instance, many who follow liberal political theory suggest that people can hold divergent ultimate values privately but agree on shared public policies—and find them normatively acceptable—although they reach these conclusions on different moral grounds, or because they find legitimate policies that have been reached through a procedure considered legitimate—for instance, on a vote in a legislative body after due deliberation. None of this satisfies the question of which, if any, shared values the

members of society may draw on in rendering moral judgements, which very much include the private realm.

Hans Joas criticized the concept of self-evident truth by suggesting that if it was self-evident the founding fathers (and all others who evoke this concept) would not have needed to proclaim it. The fact that they did constitutes prima facie evidence that the truths claimed are not self-evident.[82] The response to this objection is that self-evident truth may elude people either because they live in closed societies (fundamentalist theocracies or secular totalitarian states) or have closed minds although they live in open societies. In the first case, so much social pressure and cultural indoctrination can take place that people are blinded to what stares them in the face, so to speak. No wonder children betray their parents to the secret police and people kill their best friends in the name of a cause. In the second case, people 'under the influence' of one mind modifier or another, whether it is alcohol, drugs or merely mass culture (watching TV for six hours on an average day), are unaware of most moral considerations, including those that are self-evident. However, both of these kinds of people can be brought to see the compelling nature of the truths involved when their societies are opened up, they are freed to participate in unencumbered moral dialogues or they are helped to overcome their various mind-numbing addictions.

It is, thus, recognized here that moral truths are not necessarily self-evident 'to everyone.' Indeed, hundreds of millions of people have not seen the light, for reasons already discussed, and quite a few of them are on our shores. However, more and more societies are opening up and more and more people have the basic creature needs and a rising level of basic education and access to the means of communication. Thus, more and more are ready to discover universal moral truths. However, for them to find those truths, they must learn to heed their inner moral sense, be able to examine freely its implications and not be diverted by claims that there is nothing to look for, or that there are no shared and lasting moral truths whose validity holds beyond the boundaries of any culture, civilization or historical period.

Finally, there is one more reply that ought to be made in response to those who argue that there is such significant variation and diversity in moral opinion that there will always be disagreement regarding what moral truths are self-evident. Such critics seem to think that the existence of such differing views entails that one ought to retreat from one's own claims and either reserve judgement or adopt some sort of relativism. But are those who disagree with one's moral intuitions going to stop making such claims if one folds? Will they wilt away if one proclaims (counter to both experience and good sense) that there are no self-evident truths? Do cross-cultural moral dialogues benefit when one responds to strong moral claims by others that they—as true believers—have a strong sense of right and wrong, by a qualified, nuanced, hedged and above all culturally and historically contingent view? The answer seems self-evident. To curb one's own voice merely leaves the void to be filled by the voices of others and, furthermore, would impoverish the moral dialogue.

The claim that all systems of thought, not just ethical but even mathematical and logical ones—even the claim that $2 + 2 = 4$—need some primary concepts, some axioms that one must take for granted, which cannot be proven goes against the grain, especially of Enlightenment philosophers, the true believers in reason. It also paints an unflattering view of human nature, including the much celebrated individual. To acknowledge the pivotal roles that primary concepts have in reasoning is to recognize that rational thought draws on givens that cannot be understood, explained, nor justified. This does not mean, to reiterate, that the implications and consequences of a given set of primary concepts cannot or should not be examined; on the contrary. But one cannot maintain the comforting but fallacious notion that it is all a matter of reason from the onset. No wonder Genesis opens with 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'; God is the primary concept of many religions, the inexplicable force that gives rationale to all that follows. Why abide by the Ten Commandments? Because God gave them to Moses. Why abide by the Pope? Because he represents God. And so on. Take away this primary concept and religious arguments are severely hampered. Thus, it is the effort of this paper to provide some such first principles to ground a normative project whose conclusions hold across cultures rather than merely within them.

Post-nationalism

To the contemporary ear, it may seem difficult to sustain the argument that nationalism, as a public philosophy that accords a strong emotional and ideological standing to one's own community over all others, is deeply associated with the value of liberty. Nationalism these days tends to bring to mind blind loyalty to the state, xenophobia and subjugation to demagogues. Historically, though, nationalism largely (far from exclusively) was associated with the breaking up of empires and colonial regimes, with allowing major ethnic groups to gain self-determination rather than be governed by others. It was the ideological force that nurtured the social movements that led to the formation of the various Balkan states out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Latin American nations out of the Spanish, Portuguese and other empires; and that of many nations in Africa and Asia. Today this kind of nationalism can be observed on the West Bank, where the Palestinians seek to govern themselves, in a nation of their own.

In much of the rest of the world though, nationalism, at least as this communitarian sees it, has become a hindrance to a government that will truly serve the people. The main reason is that technological and economic forces are increasing transnational—while the institutions of governance and of communal bonds remain largely national. As a result, all but the most powerful nations are buffeted by forces beyond their control, and even those considered superpowers cannot effectively manage their economies, security and environment (climate included). There seems to be a need to form supranational communities, the basis of soft order and a source of legitimacy for the state, in order to develop a layer that is coextensive with the scope of the technological and economic forces. (I write a layer, because just as lower level communities did not disappear nor did the need

for them when nations are formed, so nations may well continue but need to be encased in overarching communities.) The EU is a well-known regional attempt to form such a supra-national community, and one that is hindered by nationalism. Other examples of attempts to form such communities all failed.[83] Nationalism is on the rise, as are anti-immigration sentiments and anti-EU feelings. Nationalism is also on the rise in Japan, China and elsewhere. Liberalism long sought to focus on universal ideals, especially individual human rights. How to complement them with a sense of the common good that encompasses the global community is the challenge for communitarians—as long as they accept that there can be layers upon layers of communal bonding, rather than treating particularistic, local (or national) communities as ultimate.[84]

Acknowledgements

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