

**Political Philosophy Lecture 8:**  
**Communitarianism and Communitarian Critiques of Liberalism**

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**1. The main features of liberalism**

- a. a commitment to freedom;
- b. a commitment to equality;
- c. the belief that the state's role is to enhance freedom and equality;
- d. a commitment to the legitimacy of the state, in the eyes of those subject to its rules. Legitimacy is secured via a mechanism of consent (via elections, for example);
- e. 'reason', which is common to everyone, is or ought to be the guiding tool of decision-making and governance.

**2. Communitarianism: first take at a definition**

Communitarianism is the name given to a set of theories, which tend to define themselves in opposition to liberalism in these ways:

- a. the freedom that liberals describe is 'empty' and unnecessarily universalising;
- b. it is impossible to define the 'self' prior to her ends;
- c. whatever principles we share emerge from community debate and discussion; they are, in other words, culturally embedded; and
- d. the terms of the debate, over which principles of justice we might like, are themselves culturally specific; and
- e. community is intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable.

**3. The liberal 'self' is non-sensically unencumbered (Michael Sandel)**

The liberal self is '*unencumbered*': the people in the original position are imagined without 'encumbrances', such as gender, race, religion, class, a commitment to a particular 'good' life, etc. This isn't a good way to imagine people reasoning about justice.

Liberals are wrong to think about the 'self' as prior to its 'ends', as we need to do in the original position. There is no 'self' without 'ends'. The 'I' cannot be separated in any meaningful way from the values the 'I' holds.

The difference principle is problematic. We are to think of our talents as morally arbitrary; they do not 'belong' to us. Why should we think that talents (and the fruits of our talents) belong to the common good? What makes them common assets?

The move – from the claim that we do not deserve our own assets to the claim that they are commonly owned – presupposes the existence of a community where people feel *morally* bound to each other. But, Rawls argues for a community as a system of cooperation for mutual self-interest, and this is insufficient to ground the justification for redistribution.

**3b. Liberalism presupposes an 'atomistic' view of the self (Charles Taylor)**

*Atomism*: people are self-sufficient, i.e., do not depend on each other or on the communities they share to live fulfilling lives. But, the atomist thesis must be rejected: there is no good reason to think that people are self-sufficient. Why should we reject it?

Liberals focus on the rights people hold: they fail to attend to the social conditions under which these rights can be exercised.

The right to choose doesn't imply the *capacity* to do so, and it is the capacity with which we ought to be concerned. People aren't born with the capacity to choose: it must be developed.

Further, if we privilege a certain set of capacities (say liberal capacities), we have to recognise that some communities are better at fostering them than others. We therefore have a moral commitment to support these communities.

#### **4. The value of community (Michael Walzer)**

Of the original position, he writes: 'It is surely doubtful that those same men and women, if they were transformed into ordinary people, with a firm sense of their own identity, with their own goods in their hands, caught up in everyday troubles, would reiterate their hypothetical choice or even recognize it as their own.' p. 5

'The question...is not, What would rational individuals choose under universalising conditions of such-and-such a sort? But rather, What would individuals like us choose, who are situated as we are, who share a culture and are determined to go on sharing it?' p. 5

We must recognise that there is no objective list of primary goods. Goods are valuable in a community based on the meaning we, as a community, ascribe to them. People's identities are bound up with the goods they value as a community. There is no single distributive principle that can guide the distribution of all goods: goods that are valued for different reasons should be distributed according to different principles (e.g., need, desert).

#### **5. Participation in the creation/alteration of community (David Miller)**

As constructed, it may appear (wrongly) that Walzer's position is relativistic: we seem to be committed to the view that all cultures are equally valid. But, that's especially anathema to liberals. Can we save communitarianism?

One way to save communitarianism: focus on the role that *all* people have in shaping a community's norms. If communitarianism is about the role that community's members have in shaping norms, we need to focus on *all* members. Communitarian political theory is therefore committed to an ideal of *equal* citizenship (and so certain anti-egalitarian communities are legitimately subject to moral opprobrium).

We need to focus on the public space in which people contribute to shaping the norms and principles – the 'public culture' – that guide a polity. A public culture is the 'common ethos' that characterises a community. It is legitimate under the following conditions: 1) it is fluid; 2) it is publicly determined; and 3) it doesn't require uniformity of belief.

#### **6. A general communitarian insight: universalism versus particularism (Daniel Bell)**

One strand of thought running through communitarian thinking: liberalism is *unnecessarily* universalising. It assumes all people are fundamentally the same and so should be in communities regulated by principles of justice that are committed to maximising freedom. But, the principles adopted and valued by liberals are western-centric.

Even if it were true that everyone valued roughly the same things, culture has a tremendous influence on our political decisions and communities in three ways: 1) cultural factors influence the prioritising of rights; 2) cultural factors influence the justification of rights; and 3) cultural factors provide moral foundations for distinctive political decisions and practices.