

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

A prominent liberal once wrote: “The hard truth is this: There is no moral meaning hidden in the bowels of the universe.”¹ I take these words as expressing the most essential core and creed of the liberal faith. Why faith? Because it requires an initial premise like the one just stated, which is not supported with unquestionable evidence but, instead, remains a proposition open for debate. It seems to me that precisely this initial premise gives the best account for subsequent liberal postulates like pluralism of conflicting values, the autonomy of the individual, or the neutrality of the state. However, the practice of liberal states has recently shown some negative side-effects of following these ideals. Preoccupation with protecting the rights of the individual, which became the ultimate goal and concern of the liberal regime, resulted in the substantial growth of atomization of the modern liberal societies. Consequently, a number of scholars and political activists in 1980’s and 1990’s raised the issue of the loss of community in the Western political thought and practice. Quite understandably, they soon came to be recognized as communitarians, though most of them were uneasy with the new label.

The obvious and profound differences between the ways that the particular communitarian scholars addressed the problems of liberal philosophy and practice make it quite difficult to establish the essence of communitarianism. Still, the point remains that all of the intellectuals who are commonly considered communitarian do address more or less the same issues, such as the place of individual versus his or her community,

¹ Bruce A. Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, p. 368.

the status of rights and duties, the relationship of negative and positive freedom, the problem of the identity of the self, the nature of the good life and common good, and the significance of the social virtues for the continuity of the liberal state. Similar concerns draw diverse people under one label. Who are these people? Typically, the political analysts include here the names of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael J. Sandel, Michael Walzer, Robert N. Bellah, William Sullivan, as well as the group associated with Amitai Etzioni's Communitarian Network and its quarterly (published for a number of years till 2004) *The Responsive Community: Rights and Responsibilities*. Quite recently, there have been some developments of communitarian forums in a few European countries, e.g. Great Britain, Spain, Germany, and Finland. However, even if they locate themselves in the European traditions of concern with community, their coming to existence was stimulated by the communitarian developments in the Anglo-Saxon, particularly American, environment.² While the philosophical analysts of communitarianism usually stick to the first four names only, the sociological ones rather concentrate on the activities of Amitai Etzioni's Communitarian Network,³ though the sole most active participant of the initiative has always been its founder, who has been extremely prolific on the internet.⁴

As the term "communitarian" can be understood quite broadly, it is sometimes used to cover the ideas as diverse as those discussed by Karl Marx and the ones analyzed by the so-called postmodernists. The term itself, according to Etzioni, was first created in 1841 by the founder of the Universal Communitarian Association.⁵ However, as we can further learn from the "Introduction" to *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, the modern meaning of the word ("of, pertaining to, or characteristic of a community")

² More on this subject can be found on the communitarian website at <http://www.communitariannetwork.org/> or <http://icps.gwu.edu>.

³ See eg. Robert Booth Fowler, *The Dance with Community: The Contemporary Debate in American Political Thought*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991; Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993/1996; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Introduction*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990; Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

⁴ Look at Amitai Etzioni's blog at the following website address: <http://blog.amitaietzioni.org/>.

⁵ Amitai Etzioni, "Introduction," in: Amitai Etzioni (ed.), *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998, p. ix.

replaced the 19th century meaning (“a member of a community formed to put into practice communistic or socialist theories”) around the turn of the century, as it is proven by the 1909 edition of the *Webster* dictionary. Communitarian elements can easily be discovered in ancient, medieval, or early sociological papers. However, for the purpose of my dissertation, I will limit my analysis to the group of the modern intellectuals most commonly referred to as communitarians, particularly to those that preoccupy themselves with the theoretical problems of liberalism that they identify and analyze, and who, moreover, try to overcome the liberal problems by means of communitarian answers. I will not, for the most part, deal with the practical solutions or proposals of communitarian activists, political advisors, etc., though I might analyze the rationale for their proposals in order to better understand their motives and thus better judge their status vis-à-vis the liberal theory they are supposed to oppose. Although some of the thinkers mentioned above openly dissociated themselves from communitarianism, (e.g. MacIntyre or Walzer) or never identified themselves as such (e.g. Sandel), I will still treat their ideas as the objects of my analysis, because I see their impact on the whole liberal-communitarian debate as crucial.⁶ As I have already said, many analysts proceed in the similar way: they do treat MacIntyre and Walzer as communitarians. Therefore, my use of the term “communitarianism” might be just tentative, though I cannot think of a better heading to describe the range of arguments put forward by MacIntyre, Taylor, or Sandel.

To the common accusations stating that communitarianism is so diverse that it cannot be properly described, I would respond that the same problem befalls liberalism. Actually, not only the modern versions of it, but even the older ones are equally difficult to grasp under one

⁶ The fact that some of the political thinkers mentioned in my dissertation disclaimed their connections with communitarianism might point to their unwillingness to being associated with the group of the communitarian activists who are the signatories of “The Communitarian Platform.” Nevertheless, they still qualify for the label communitarian for the purpose of my analysis, as they are the ones who criticize liberalism for its leanings towards radical individualism. Moreover, their writings continue to be hotly discussed at the communitarian summits and conferences, probably due to the fact that they often provide the strong arguments against the liberal theory as well as the hard-core rationale for communitarian activities. For sure, they manage to stimulate the openly-identified communitarians to even better ways of defining their own positions.

overarching set of ideas or values. John Gray speaks about *Liberalisms*, as is shown in this title of his book.⁷ (That is why I chose to speak about communitarian critiques of liberalism in this dissertation, instead of speaking about one kind of critique.) However, as is the case with modern communitarianism, it is possible to talk about liberalism as such, though its protagonists have had multifarious views on its content. The core can still be found, as I claimed at the beginning of this dissertation. Whether one goes back to John Locke, Adam Smith, Benjamin Constant, James Madison, John Stuart Mill, or any modern liberal thinker like Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Bruce Ackerman, or Robert Nozick, the crucial value in their theories appears to be freedom understood as the individual autonomy - freedom to establish, define, and pursue one's goals without constraints or obstructions. Such a view is implemented in the legal and political practice of the first truly liberal state in the world. The Supreme Court of the United States of America aimed to define the nature of the country's main ideal: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."⁸ According to Dworkin, autonomy is the right to structure one's life according to one's own values.⁹ Thus, the liberal theory necessarily presupposes the existence of the plurality of conflicting values as well as the notion that there is no single good or value common to all human beings. Consequently, liberals cannot envision any single final goal (*telos*) for all humanity. One might claim that liberalism does not exclude the possibility of there being such a common value; it just operates on the premise that its existence cannot be proven beyond doubt. However, by promoting individual rights and the neutrality of the state as the only legitimate policy, liberalism actually does not let the people in their collective (political) capacity to express their common ideas about the good. Thus it precludes the possibility of ever discovering or pursuing any common good. The early premises of liberalism (about there being no common good for all individuals) are not open enough to allow for any possible future finding of there actually being one or many of such goods. Once liberal theory gets implemented

⁷ John Gray, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

⁸ *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 744 U.S. 902 (1992).

⁹ Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion. An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, p. 225.

into political practice, it does not leave the question open. It then operates on the supposition of the lack of such goods and it actively speaks against the pursuit of any common value. Whatever is allowed in theory, the practice does not leave any question open. It seems to be always the issue of either/or: either you operate on the idea that there is no common goal or *telos* of humanity and you allow each individual to define it (or abstain from defining it altogether) for himself; or you operate on the notion that there is such an objective *telos* and you try to do your best to find out its content and pursue it.

It appears to me that liberals chose the first path, somehow hoping that they still leave the question of the essential common good open. After all, if any such good exists, it should come out in reality by itself, they might say. The problem is that such a good may exist but not be intrusive enough to impose its existence on the human race. Liberals, who believe in human freedom, should take this freedom seriously: human beings are free enough to affirm or reject any good, even their common *telos*, if there is such a thing. The important issue is, thus, not only whether it exists but also what position we take towards it, especially since it is so difficult, if not absolutely impossible, to prove beyond all doubt and describe with concrete precision the complete nature of any common good. Liberalism requires us to provide this precise account of the common good, before we can proceed on our way of living by its standards. However, it does not provide its own account of pluralism of conflicting values or its implementation of the pseudo-neutrality of the procedural state.

I take the above mentioned views to be central to the nature of liberalism and in the light of these ideas I will analyze the arguments put forward by communitarians to see whether their proposed solutions of the liberal drawbacks are internally coherent and consistent. My analysis will predominantly be restricted to internal critique. I will possibly rely on using the communitarians' own terms of discourse. I will thus look for contradictions present in their theories first. However, to judge the plausibility of their proposals, I will later confront them with some liberal arguments about the same problems. Then I will compare the suggested alternatives or propose possible ways of overcoming the drawbacks.

The intellectuals I chose for the purpose of my study embrace Amitai Etzioni, Michael Walzer, Michael J. Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre because in my opinion they represent the most essential paths of the debate between liberalism and communitarianism. In order

to make my points more visible and better to assess, I will sometimes resort to using several arguments suggested by other participants in the debate, though always staying predominantly concentrated on the five above mentioned figures. My study will involve analyzing their views on the issues of the human nature, the autonomy of the individual, the pluralism of values and goods, the community, and the neutrality of the state as well as a number of problems specific to particular communitarian theories. Generally speaking, communitarians criticize liberals for basing their social theories on speculations about social relations which do not exist, while attempts to establish them always end up with failure or evil done to actual people. Communitarians, instead, propose theses based on existing social relations that have always worked. That is why they find the notion of community useful in political and social theory, as they find the communal aspect significant in the lives of human beings and citizens. In their opinion, people do live in actual communities; consequently, the radically individualistic perspective is inadequate.

The thesis I would like to analyze and defend is that the mainstream communitarian thinkers either accept the core contradictions of liberal assumptions or do not perceive their own contradictions behind their theories. Consequently, they are not able to address the liberal failings. I will also claim that communitarians need to exchange this liberal core for the assumption of there being a common human good, whose realization in the form of the mutual care for human dignity can be a legitimate positive goal of political institutions, which would not endanger the freedom of the individual. However, by concentrating on some weak spots in liberalism, communitarians effectively manage to stimulate the discussion about the status of the vitality of liberalism and even offer some interesting insights into the problems. Being aware of it or not, they might point our attention towards the possible solutions of the liberal predicament. Nonetheless, by pursuing some of their arguments to their logical conclusions, some of the communitarians would have to concede that they remain liberal "at heart," while others would have to admit that their proposals to reform liberalism would require liberalism to stop being liberal, at least if being liberal is what I have been briefly describing so far.