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# Against the communitarian republic

*Chandran Kukathas*

## Taking issue with communitarianism

COMMUNITARIANISM has risen to prominence in recent debates in political philosophy largely on the strength of its criticisms of liberalism. Among its more important criticisms is the charge that liberal political thinking does not properly appreciate the value of community. At a deeper level, communitarianism asserts that liberalism is infected by confusions about the nature of community, thinking—mistakenly—that it is no more than an association of separate, isolated, ‘atomistic’ individuals. Communitarians thus advance not only certain claims about value but also other claims about how the human world should be understood.

My purpose here is to take issue with communitarians, and to argue not only that they are mistaken in the way in which they characterize liberalism, but also that the political philosophy in which communitarianism results is neither attractive nor plausible. More specifically, however, I wish to take issue with the communitarian argument that a superior alternative to liberalism is a form of republicanism which better recognizes and appreciates the importance of citizenship, of patriotism, and of solidarity which ultimately underpins freedom. This argument has been developed most forcefully by Charles Taylor. I wish to show that this brand of communitarian republicanism not only rests on dubious ontological claims but also represents an ideal which is seriously flawed from the perspective of liberty.

To present this argument I begin by elaborating the communitarian critique as it has been offered by Taylor. I then turn to criticize Taylor’s communitarian republicanism to show why it is neither plausible nor as sympathetic to liberty as he claims. The final section concludes by

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reviewing some objections to this critique of the communitarian republic.

## Charles Taylor's case

In an influential article, 'Cross-purposes: the liberal communitarian debate', Charles Taylor distinguishes two kinds of issues which have been run together in arguments between liberals and communitarians (1989: 59–82). On the one hand there are ontological issues about the explanation of social action and social structures, and their relation to individuals. On the other hand there are advocacy issues concerning the moral stand or policy which ought to be adopted. On ontological issues the major division is between atomists and holists, the former tending to think that social actions, structures and conditions can be accounted for in terms of the properties of the individuals who make them up (and that social goods can be accounted for in terms of combinations of individual goods). On advocacy issues, Taylor argues, there is a range of positions stretching from those which give especial weight to individual rights and freedoms to those which place greater emphasis on the good of the collective.

Taylor has two important points to make about the significance of this distinction. The first is that holding to a particular ontological position does not amount to advocating any specific policy or moral stand. He makes this point in an effort to show that liberal critics of communitarianism neglect this distinction and so mistake description for advocacy. Thus, for example, Michael Sandel's influential book, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), has been mistakenly interpreted as a work of advocacy, recommending (among other things) that society become more like a family and, so, less concerned with justice. In fact, Taylor maintains, the principal point of Sandel's book is ontological: it is an effort to 'show how the different models of the way we live together in society—atomist and holist—are linked with different understandings of self and identity: "unencumbered" versus situated selves' (1989: 160). This in itself does not amount to advocacy of anything in particular and liberals such as Amy Gutmann (1985), he says, have been wrong to criticize it for its non-existent recommendations.

Taylor's second point, however, is that ontological claims can have a certain critical edge because of the way in which they define the options it is meaningful to support by advocacy. 'Your ontological proposition, if true, can show that your neighbour's favourite social order is an impossibility or carries a price that he or she did not count with' (1989: 161).

All this turns into a criticism of liberalism, in Taylor's account, because of the tendency of liberals to neglect the ontological questions

and to operate simply at the level of advocacy—remaining blind to some important issues. Liberalism, he observes,

sees society as an association of individuals, each of whom has his or her conception of a good or worthwhile life, and correspondingly, his or her life plan. The function of society ought to be to facilitate these life plans, as much as possible, following some principle of equality ... Thus, it is argued, a liberal society should not be founded on any particular notion of the good life. The ethic central to a liberal society is an ethic of the right, rather than the good' (1989: 164). But once this model of liberalism is exposed to certain ontological issues of identity and community, its deficiencies are revealed. Indeed, it becomes clear that the *viability* of such a society is doubtful, and the *applicability* of such a formula to societies other than the United States highly questionable. Liberalism is both unrealistic and ethnocentric (Taylor 1989: 165).

That liberalism is unrealistic or unviable is evident, Taylor thinks, in its failure to acknowledge that society is not just a collection of individuals (or groups of individuals) with separate interests. For liberalism, the common good is constituted out of individual goods, 'without remainder'. But there is, in fact, more to the common good than that. The common good is no more a combination of separate goods than a conversation is a concatenation of statements. A society, if it is to be viable, must first be understood to be more than a collection of interests wielding a technology enabling the pursuit of those separate interests. Any attempt to maintain a society predicated on the misunderstanding that this is what society is would be doomed to failure.

A better understanding of the nature of society (in other words, a superior ontology) is to be found in a form of republicanism (stemming from the civic humanist tradition) which sees society as embodying a common good of a stronger kind than the atomistic, liberal view allows. A republic, Taylor argues, is a society 'animated by a sense of a shared immediate common good' (1989: 169). In it, the bonds among citizens are more like the bonds of friendship; and the citizen is 'attached to the laws as the repository of his and others' citizen dignity' (1989: 169). In such a society, patriotism is important because it is meaningful; for the bonds of solidarity are 'based on a sense of shared fate, where the sharing itself is of value' (1989: 170). Moreover, republican patriotism turns out to be an important bulwark of freedom. Republican solidarity 'underpins freedom because it provides the motivation for self-imposed discipline; . . . it is essential for a free regime because this calls on its members to do things that mere subjects can avoid' (1989: 170). A free society is a society of republican patriots; and there can only be patriotism in a society in which citizens see themselves united in bonds of solidarity, sharing a commitment to a com-

mon good which is more than merely the sum of their separate, private interests.

The liberal view tends, on this account, to see citizens as defined not by their participation in a process of participatory self-rule but by their rights to equal treatment by a government obliged to take into account all their preferences. The ideal in such a society is not ruling and being ruled in turn but having clout (1989: 179). This ideal, Taylor suggests, suffers not only from unloveliness but also from unfamiliarity. For most societies, with the possible exception of Britain and the United States, this ideal is descriptively inadequate because they have not and will not declare neutrality between different conceptions of the good life.

For these reasons at least, Taylor thinks, the liberal model should be questioned. It is more vulnerable to the complaints of its communitarian critics than it has so far been willing to admit. And it cannot get off the hook by appeal to the attractiveness of the ideals it advocates since it has not yet properly grappled with the deeper weaknesses communitarians have identified in its ontological premises.

## The communitarian republic

For a liberal to respond to Taylor's critique it is necessary to take seriously the charge that liberalism rests on an implausible ontology. But there are two kinds of responses available; and both should be made. The first is to say that the liberal ontology (or at least, that which is alleged to be implicit in the writings of most *contemporary* liberal writers) is not as implausible as Taylor thinks—and also has important strengths. The second is to say that the links he tries to establish between the communitarian republican ontology and freedom do not hold—unless in ways which would give no comfort to anyone who values liberty.

But both of these responses require further elaboration. To begin with the first, the view common to many liberals that society is best understood as an association made up of many *individuals* with *separate* interests is not only plausible but also picks up an important—indeed, vitally important—point about the nature of society: that it is a field of *conflict*. The conflicts we find within society can only be understood if we recognize that they are conflicts among individuals or groups of individuals. (Of course, within these groups themselves there are conflicts.) To be sure, in any functioning society there will be institutions which deal with conflicts among members; that is, in fact, an important reason for individuals to associate with one another in society—to establish and maintain regular mechanisms for dealing with the conflicts which arise among them. But this does not eliminate conflict; it only regularizes the means of its settlement.

None of this is inconsistent with saying that people have interests in common. One of the most important (and in this context, most rele-

vant) interests they have in common is the interest in maintaining the settled order that is their society. Nor is it inconsistent with saying that there are to be found among people other kinds of bonds of association—bonds of love or of friendship. It does not even require denying that humans also come together in cooperation, to pursue shared ends. What ought, however, to be emphasised is that society is indeed made up of separate individuals.

Making such a claim does not commit one to any other theses about the (conceptual) priority of the individual to society or about the constancy of human nature. It does, however, involve accepting that the point of society has to be understood in terms of the interests—or the good—of individuals. Aristotle put the matter thus:

Now all forms of community are like parts of the political community; for men journey together with a view to some particular advantage, and to provide something that they need for the purposes of life; and it is for the sake of advantage that the political community too seems both to have come together originally and to endure, for this is what legislators aim at, and they call just that which is to the common advantage (1980: 208).

In all this there is no suggestion, however, that society has a point or a purpose (or a value) that is not in some way connected to the good of individuals. (If one could coherently assert that ‘there is no such thing as society’, this is what it would mean.)

Now, Taylor is not willing to accept this because, for him, there is more to society than the advantage it brings to individuals. This other view presented above is a misunderstanding or an error found particularly in the thought of the founding thinkers of modern liberalism. Thus he asserts that ‘Political societies in the understanding of Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, or the twentieth-century common sense that they have helped shape are established by collections of individuals to obtain benefits through common action that they could not secure individually. *The action is collective, but the point remains individual*’ (emphasis added) (Taylor 1989:166). But, Taylor continues, this sort of ontology has no place in the republic of patriots; for there is a common good of a stronger kind than such atomism allows.

Yet it is not at all clear that there is some stronger kind of common good; for it is not clear that there are goods which are not ultimately good for individuals. Taylor thinks there are, and has tried to argue so at fuller length in a paper contending that some kinds of goods are ‘irreducibly social goods’ (1995: 127–145). By this term he means to identify not merely public goods—such as dams and armies—which we provide collectively to secure other ends which are important, ultimately, because they secure goods for individuals. The individual enjoys security from invasion or the protection from flood damage (Taylor 1995: 137). But Taylor has in mind, rather, such goods as

community and culture which cannot be valued instrumentally in the way dams and armies might be.

The dam itself, Taylor notes, is not good. Only its effects are. But, he insists,

*This* kind of reply is not possible in regard to the culture. It is not a mere instrument of the individual goods. It can't be distinguished from them as their merely contingent condition, something they could in principle exist without. That makes no sense. It is essentially linked to what we have identified as good. Consequently, it is hard to see how we could deny it the title of good, not just in some weakened, instrumental sense, like the dam, but as intrinsically good. To say that a certain kind of heroism is good, or a certain quality of aesthetic experience, must be to judge the cultures in which this kind of heroism and that kind of experience are conceivable options as good cultures. If such virtue and experience are worth cultivating, then the cultures have to be worth fostering, not as contingent instruments, but for themselves (1995: 137).

The question for us, then, comes to this: are community and culture intrinsic goods in the way Taylor suggests? And are human beings so thoroughly entangled in these goods that it makes no sense to try to decompose goods and valuers?

What is confusing about this set of claims is that it is difficult to understand what it means for a culture or a society to be 'intrinsically' good. It is easy to understand what it would be for a society to be good (or bad) for its members. But could it be good regardless of its goodness for its members? Consider, for example, the society and culture of the aboriginal peoples living in the forests of peninsula Malaysia. It seems clear that their society is good for them given that, taken out of their communities they would probably perish—since they lack the resources needed to survive in another social environment. If their society were destroyed they would be worse off even if they survived and were transplanted into other communities. At the same time, their society (their way of life) condemns them, and their children, to a much shorter life than that enjoyed by other Malaysians. Leaving aside the other virtues and vices of this society, it is clear that it is good for its people; but it is far from clear that it is intrinsically good. It is only contingently good.

The point here is that there is no reason why the society should not be valued instrumentally. For something to be valuable it must, at some point, be valuable to *someone* for the value it gives *someone*. It is an ill culture that does no one any good.

The fact that a good like a society is collectively produced in no way implies that the enjoyment of it is irreducibly social. As Hardin points out, 'The benefit I get from my culture is my benefit even though it may be constituted in part by my actions and beliefs as inculcated by

that very culture. Just as with material goods, collective production or provision does not entail collective consumption' (1995: 68).

The fact that we do not consume collectively but individually is important in reminding us that we are incorrigibly separate. This does not mean that there is nothing to be valued in living a life with others, in identifying with a community, in preferring one society to another (or to none). But the life lived is still, inescapably, an individual life—whether or not we are able to recognize it. Our embeddedness in a common social structure does not mean that we live the same lives—any more than being embedded in the same cemetery means we are not buried (and mourned) separately.

The claim Taylor wishes to maintain is that the social ontology which is implicit in liberalism is untenable. In the end, however, it is the alternative he proposes which looks to be on shakier ground. But this brings us only to the end of the first response to the charge brought by Taylor's communitarian republicanism. The next thing which has to be made clear is that the alleged links between the communitarian republican ontology and freedom are not as strong as has been claimed.

The strategy Taylor pursues in the attempt to demonstrate otherwise is to link freedom with community, while asserting that community is connected with patriotism and an understanding of society as a set of solidaristic bonds in which one is deeply—inextricably—implicated and not just contingently attached. In a republican society these bonds are strong because, at its core, republicanism means participatory self-rule; so patriotism will be considerable. Because patriotism has been and will continue to be an important bulwark of freedom, societies which can sustain patriotism are more likely to be free. Liberal societies, to the extent that they emphasise the importance of rights and procedures, and value self-rule only instrumentally, will not generate patriotic citizens. To the extent that they do, it will be in spite of rather than because of liberalism.

This argument is not persuasive, however, for at least two reasons, both of which have to do with the nature of society as a realm of conflict as well as cooperation. The first reason is that this vision of a communitarian republic rests on an unduly optimistic—if not naive—picture of politics. What it ignores is that reality of political power which is invariably wielded by rulers rather than exercised by a virtuous citizenry. To be sure, it may sometimes be wielded by rulers who serve the good of the community and not simply their own good. But participatory self-rule is a chimera.

The second reason is that this vision of a communitarian republic rests on an inadequate notion of freedom. The notion is inadequate because, in tying freedom to self-rule—the republican model, Taylor says, 'defines participation in self-rule as of the essence of freedom' (1989: 179)—it fails to consider that often freedom resides in the capacity to resist, or even oppose rulers. In some contemporary polities



the absence of freedom is evident in the difficulty of dissenting from the government line. One reason why dissenters in such a society face greater risks of losing their liberty is that there are no significant sources of independent opposition to the ruling elite that comprise the government. This is ensured in part by measures which impede the free flow of information (through licensing of the press and government ownership of broadcast media) and restrict the freedom to form private associations. But opposition is also made difficult by the existence of a public philosophy which maintains that the government may do whatever is necessary to ensure the security and unity of the polity. Opposition must therefore draw its strength not from the political process or the institutions of parliamentary democracy but from other sources: from the common law, from the personal resources of private citizens, from independent religious organizations, from the power of international public opinion and the international press, and even, in some polities, from the monarchy.

The point of all this is to say that what makes for freedom is the possibility of opposition. 'Not unity but difference, not the modern state but whatever is able to maintain itself against the state, not leaders but the unyielding opponents of leaders, not conformity with official opinion but persisting criticism, are the defences of freedom' (Burnham 1970: 282). In many modern societies there is as much freedom as there is because of the fact that criticism and opposition can make themselves felt, despite the many hindrances that confront the dissenting voice.

The understanding of politics and political society which underlies the liberal view is a more plausible one than that offered by Taylor because, in the end, it recognizes that conflict is as much a part of social life as is the cooperative concern for the common good. And if this is so, freedom cannot be built into the structure of the community as securely as defenders of the communitarian republic imagine. Freedom's best chance of surviving rests on the continual possibility of opposition to the wielders of power. Liberalism's task is to prevent freedom from being re-defined away.

## Answering some objections

The arguments offered thus far do not, of course, exhaust the issues in this field of debate. Since many of the questions and problems tackled here are old ones, the communitarian challenge will not end here. Yet even if the debate cannot be settled conclusively, I would like to end by making some observations about the nature of the communitarian challenge by responding to two possible objections to—or complaints against—the views defended here.

The first objection is that this outlook embodied here is too dismissive of politics and of the value of community. Like all liberal views, it

forgets that when politics goes well ‘we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone’ (Sandel 1982: 181). My reply to this is to say that it is right to be sceptical about politics, even if it ought not to be despised, for it is simply a necessary activity for the protection of important freedoms—particularly in circumstances in which freedom may be threatened. Undoubtedly, engaging in political activity will on occasion bring success, and with it a sense of belonging and of collective achievement. But the view that this in any sense represents the highest—or even a particularly important—good should be seen for what it is: an illusion. As the philosopher Chuang Tzu put it: ‘When the springs dry up, the fish are all together on dry land. They will moisten each other with their dampness and keep each other wet with their slime. But this is not to be compared with their forgetting each other in a river or a lake’ (Quoted in Oakeshott’s introduction to Hobbes n.d.).

The second objection is a familiar one which asserts that the liberal view, such as that offered here, paints an unlovely as well as an implausible picture of man as an isolated atom, disconnected from society and from others. There are two parts to the answer that might be offered to this question. The first is to say that, to a substantial extent, we do remain separate—and isolated. No matter how close we may be, we live different lives. Yet solitariness is not the opposite of sociality (See Oakeshott 1993, esp. p.54). The second is to say that to assert the existence of humans as individuals does not mean contending that they are like unconnected atoms. They come into the world ‘connected’ (some, well-connected) and acquire their characteristics as individuals as the result of these connections. At the same time, however, *individuation* is inescapable (even though the recognition granted to individuals as separate beings in the community varies from society to society). To assert this is to say, with St Augustine, that man’s separateness does not mean he must be bereft of all society. Indeed, what draws man into society is his similarity with others and his capacity for affection.<sup>1</sup>

To assert this does not require an understanding of man which shears away all social characteristics to leave us with a transcendent being. That may be the deeper truth about man and his place in creation—leading to the conclusion that ‘all the diversity of contingent beings abides in One alone’ (Bhagavad Gita n.d.: 384). But it is a conclusion we need not ponder if our question is one about how contingent beings can associate with one another in this world. **AQ**

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## Note

1. 'And therefore God created only one single man, not, certainly that he might be a solitary bereft of all society, but that by this means the unity of society and the bond of concord might be more effectually commended to him, men being bound together not only by similarity of nature, but by family affection.' Saint Augustine (1993) *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, The Modern Library, New York, Book XII, section 21: 406.