

## Communitarianism between Text and Context

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Received Date: 20/04/2020

Accepted Date: 02/08/2020

DOI: 10.22096/HR.2020.139365.1257

### Abstract

Communitarianism is considered as one of the most pivotal schools of thought in contemporary normative political theories. In fact, it is a label for a group of people who share common characteristics such as critiques on liberalism, and some concepts like “community”, “tradition” and “self”. Since most communitarians belong to the analytical philosophy, which focus on language and logic, they could not be regarded as contextualists. On the other hand, their analysis is related to “tradition”, “here and now”, and “particularism” which denotes the importance of historical, political and sociological situation. It seems that not only the enrichment of morality and human rights in communitarianism is possible, but also it implies somehow relationship with context, cultural diversity and relativism. It seems that communitarianism needs a “third way” between text and context.

**Keywords:** Communitarianism; Community; Self; Particularism; Human Rights; Textualism; Contextualism.

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## **Introduction**

This article deals with the relationship between textualism and contextualism with regard to communitarianism, as one of the pivotal schools of thought in this century. By textualism, here, is meant a method of interpretation whereby the parts of text are considered sufficient to determine the meaning of whole text. Instead of attempting to refer to the socio-political condition, textualists adhere to the objective meaning of the very text. According to contextualism, here, meaning of text depends on its circumstances and the political and social conditions which surround the text. While based on textualism text should be interpreted by text, according to contextualism text should be understood in its context. Communitarianism emerged in the 1980s as a response to the limits of liberal theory and practice. Instead of the liberalist notions such as “individual” and “universalism”, this school of thought suggests some other concepts such as “community” and “particularism”. Most communitarian ideas belong to analytic(al) philosophy. Since text is interpreted by text in analytical philosophy, it is expected to be the method of communitarianism. On the other hand, referring to communities and the circumstances imply the importance of context. The communitarian stance between text and context is ambiguous, and it seems that none of prominent communitarian scholars has a solution for this dilemma. This article suggests bridging between textualism and contextualism as “the third way”, or the “confluence” of them.

## **Communitarian Concepts**

Famous communitarians include some great scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Amitai Etzioni, William Galston, Gad Barzilai, Robert Neelly Bellah, Phillip Blond, Mark Kuczewski, Stephen Marglin, José Pérez Adán, Costano Preve, Robert Putnam, and Joseph Raz. While philosophical communitarianism considers classical liberalism to be ontologically and epistemologically incoherent, ideological communitarianism is considered as a radical centrist ideology which refers to the Responsive Communitarian movement of Amitai Etzioni and others. Communitarian theorists tend to emphasize the communal construction of social individuals and social formations, and of values and practices. It also needs to develop models of how individuals with different community memberships and allegiances can relate to and engage with members of other communities. According to Elizabeth Frazer, “If we trace communitarianism's philosophical origins we see that it is a coalescence of a number of strands of western

philosophy, including hermeneutics (or interpretivism), phenomenology, and pragmatism. These contrast with the rationalism and empiricism that are associated with liberal political philosophy.” (Frazer, 2000: 20)

**Communitarian key notions include:**

1- Community: while liberals believe in the abstracted self, communitarians would argue that the "I" is constituted through the "We" in a dynamic tension. In both philosophical and political communitarianism the concept 'community' is, unsurprisingly, central. Communitarians value community itself, and tradition. Of course, 'community' is not univocal, and across these various traditions and strands of tradition there is a huge variety of conceptions of the nature of community and the conditions under which it might be realized, and its relation to other concepts such as freedom, love, work, equality, history, and more. One analytic tradition, according to Frazer, which might seem to promise clarity about the concept 'community' is community studies within sociology. Here we find that there has been disagreement about whether community entails any or all of:

- A bounded geographical area,
- A dense network of non-contractual relations including those of kinship, friendship and cultural membership,
- A network, dense or otherwise, of multiplex relations,
- A particular quality of identification on the part of members with place, or culture, or way of life, or tradition—usually involving emotional attachment, loyalty, solidarity or unity, and/or a sense that the community makes the person what they are,
- Shared symbols, meanings, values, language, norms; shared interests such as occupational interests (as in a 'fishing community') or political and cultural interests (as in the gay community).

Walzer refers to 'communities' throughout *Spheres of Justice*: “the political community is probably the closest we can come to a world of common meanings'; 'the sharing of sensibilities and intuitions among the members of a historical community is a fact of life'; 'in any community, where resources are taken away from the poor and given to the rich, the rights of the poor are being violated”. (Walzer, 1983: 52) There is no doubt that there is a relationship between community and context.

2- Tradition: For many communitarians, one must accept or reject a tradition in its entirety. They do not believe in the dualism of tradition and modernity, since modernity is the logical continuum of tradition. Similarly, this term, as I will explain, has a connection with context.

3- Self: Communitarian dominant themes are that individual rights need to be balanced with social responsibilities, and that autonomous selves do not exist in isolation, but are shaped by the values and culture of communities. The critique of one-sided emphasis on rights has been key to defining communitarianism. Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* established him as one of key authors of this school of thought. Rawls' theory involves a conception of the self as unencumbered. The self is unencumbered by her conception of the good, which she chooses. The unencumbered self appears in the original position.

4- Virtue: Communitarianism, according to both its promoters and its critics, focuses on what we all share values, beliefs, and goals. What we all share forms a substructure which supports and enables the disagreement and conflict that are essential in democratic, liberal, and indeed communitarian societies. Communitarians would probably agree that community involvement intended to address the common good, is not "value-free." The potential for value-driven community involvement to explore, define, and address a new sense of community values is very promising and worthy of significant investment by higher education.

5- Political particularism: political particularism in contrast with universal rights of liberalism is to provide narrow interests rather than broader national platforms. Despite universalism, in particularist cultures, what is good and right can be defined based on obligations of relationships and unique circumstances. While liberal culture and human rights are universal, communitarians consider them as special time and space.

6- Social capital and civil society: by social capital, as a key component to building and maintaining democracy, is meant the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. Benjamin Barber distinguishes between three kinds of civil society: the libertarian, communitarian, and strong democratic models. He proposes six areas for legislative action in support of civil society. According to Communitarian Platform:

"Many social goals ... require partnership between public and private groups. Though government should not seek to replace local

communities, it may need to empower them by strategies of support, including revenue-sharing and technical assistance. There is a great need for study and experimentation with creative use of the structures of civil society, and public-private cooperation, especially where the delivery of health, educational and social services are concerned". (The Communitarian Network, 2010)

7- Positive rights: Those are rights or guarantees to certain things including state-subsidized education, state-subsidized housing, a safe and clean environment, universal health care, social security programs, public works programs, and laws limiting such things as pollution, and even the right to a job. Negative rights, such as torture, include ones which requires others to abstain from interfering with your actions. While liberalist universalism is based on negative rights, communitarians believe in both negative and positives rights.

### **Two Waves of Communitarianism**

The advocates of the first wave of communitarianism, the academic one, include some important scholars such as Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer. Amitai Etzioni, William Galston, Mary Ann Glendon, Thomas A. Spragens, James Fishkin, Benjamin Barber, Hans Joas, Philip Selznick, and Robert Bellah are among the scholars of the second wave of school known as the "responsive communitarianism". As Etzioni points out:

"In recent decades, there have been two major waves of communitarianism: the academic communitarianism of the 1980s, and the responsive communitarianism of the 1990s. The academic communitarians of the 1980s were a small group of political theorists concerned with outlining the "social dimension" of the person. Responsive communitarians, also called political or neo-communitarians, were a group of scholars and policy-makers who, in the 1990s, stressed that societies cannot be based on one normative principle, and that both individual rights and the common good are major sources of normativity, without either one being a priori privileged". (Etzioni, 2015: different pages)

For Etzioni and Galston, "responsive communitarianism", as practical (and not just academic) effort calls for a balance between liberty and social order.

### **Communitarian Critique of Liberalism**

Since communitarianism is considered as a critical theory to liberalism, it should be understood through its critiques on liberalism. It seems that this critique can illustrate the relationship between communitarian theory and contextualism. The main communitarian comments on liberalism include: the politics of community, the conception of “self”, priority of public good over individual right, considering communities based on here and now, particularism versus universalism, criticism of liberal neutrality and its claim to be value-free. According to Oliver Leaman, Religion fits in with communitarian accounts of morality, in the sense that it identifies morality with a particular set of beliefs and practices which are part of community. What makes morality is its accordance with faith, since only God is able to say what morality is. According to Liberalism, the concepts of public, external, communal, general, universal, religion, emotional, nature, Shari’a, prayer, virtue and religion are in order constructed out of those of private, self, internal, individual, particular, personal, philosophy, rational, culture, nomos, awe, wisdom and rationality.<sup>1</sup>

Communitarian thinkers in the 1980s such as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor argued that Rawlsian liberalism rests on an overly individualistic conception of the self. While Rawls argues that we have a supreme interest in shaping, pursuing, and revising our own life-plans, he neglects the fact that our selves tend to be defined or constituted by various communal attachments (e.g., ties to the family or to a religious tradition) so close to us that they can only be set aside at great cost, if at all. In an influential essay titled ‘Atomism’, Charles Taylor objected to the liberal view that ‘men are self-sufficient outside of society’. Instead, Taylor defends the Aristotelian view that “Man is a social animal, indeed a political animal, because he is not self-sufficient alone, and in an important sense is not self-sufficient outside a polis”. (Taylor, 1985: 190) Will Kymlicka, for example, explicitly recognizes that things have worth for us in so far as they are granted significance by our culture, in so far as they fit into a pattern of activities which is recognized by those sharing a certain form of life as a way of leading a good life.

Whereas Rawls seemed to present his theory of justice as universally true (at least for Euro-American societies), communitarians argued that the standards of justice must be found in forms of life and traditions of particular societies and hence can vary from context to context. Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor argued that moral and political judgments will depend on the

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1. See: Leaman, 2005: 289-293.

language of reasons and the interpretive framework within which agents view their world. Hence it makes no sense to begin the political enterprise by abstracting oneself from the interpretive dimensions of human beliefs, practices, and institutions. In line with the arguments of '1980s communitarians' such as Michael Walzer, it is argued that justifications for particular practices valued by Western-style liberal democrats should not be made by relying on the abstract and unhistorical universalism that often disables Western liberal democrats. Rather, they should be made from the inside, from specific examples and argumentative strategies that one uses in everyday moral and political debate.

The communitarian response to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* reflects dissatisfaction with the image Rawls presents of humans as atomistic individuals. Although Rawls allows some space for benevolence, for example, he views it merely as one of many values that exist within a single person's head. Walzer agrees to an extent with universalism, though in the sympathy with the opposite principle, he does not prescribe democracy for all spaces and times. Thus, systems of 'justice' abstract away from the particulars of circumstances and actors, and, in particular, abstract away from actors' feelings about and in situations.

The relationship between community and locality is taken for granted in many contexts. However, it has been disrupted in a number of ways in recent theory. In this regard, the place and role of "locality" in communitarian theory, and the place and role of 'community' in recent theories of local government are very important. These two issues promote the issue of the relationship between the concept "community" and patterns of human relationships. They also raise the general question of the nature of "community politics".

### **Enrichment of Morality and Human Rights**

My claims, here, are three: the first is that the enrichment of morality and human rights in communitarianism is possible, the second is that it implies somehow relationship with context, and the last is that cultural diversity and relativism are more compatible with localism than universalism. A thin (minimalist) morality is one constituted by general and universal principles, though, a thick (maximalist) morality is that which is constituted by deliberation conditioned by history, tradition, and culture. As Michael Walzer suggests, this dualism is an internal feature of every morality. A minimalist [that is, thin] set of such values pertain to rights, duties, and norms

in three areas: (1) positive duties of mutual care and support, (2) negative duties (e.g. no harm to others), and (3) norms of rudimentary fairness and procedural justice. Being enriched enough, the literature of “thin and thick” was developed by most communitarians. A thin morality is one constituted by general and universal principles, though, a thick morality is that which is constituted by deliberation conditioned by history, tradition, and culture. As Michael Walzer suggests, this dualism is an internal feature of every morality. He agrees to an extent with universalism, though in the sympathy with the opposite principle, he does not prescribe democracy for all spaces and times. Sissela Bok makes a similar point: “Certain basic values necessary to collective survival have had to be formulated in every society. A minimalist [that is, thin] set of such values can be recognized across societal and other boundaries”. (Bok, 1995: 13) Bok maintains that they are necessary for the kind of trust that underlies all social relations and thus are essential for societal order on all levels. Societies have produced a diversity of maximalist (thick) values that are not common but can be consistent with the three kinds of universal minimalist values. For McIntyre, sentiments inspire thick religious interpretations of morality contends that any attempt to establish a universal ethic grounded in human nature per se fails to appreciate that there is no universal morality, but that in fact we live in a fragmented world of many moralities.

To understand what Benjamin Gregg means by thin normativity, it would help to understand what he means by the idea that thick normativity characterizes the level of commitment to a creed, an idea, or way of life, which is so strong as to exclude other creeds, ideas, and ways of life. By contrast, thin normativity adheres more or less only to the principle that people should be free to choose. As Gregg notes, thin normativity is inclusive. However, precisely because of its exclusivity, thick normativity simply cannot serve as the basis of a modern society. He respects thick normative in sub-communities.

Anyway, what is meant by “thin human rights” is the minimal and liberal ones, and by “thick human rights” the maximal and religious ones. Whereas thin human rights are general and universal, the thick ones here, are based on socio-political conditions. Since thin human rights are based on thin moralities, they need tradition and culture to be enriched.

Whether essentialism or (non) anti-essentialism, we can talk about the possibility of enriching thin human rights. In philosophy, essentialism is the



view, that, for any specific kind of entity it is at least theoretically possible for there to be a set of characteristics all of which any entity of the specific kind cannot fail to have. This view is contrasted with non-essentialism which states that for any given kind of entity there are no specific traits which entities of that kind must have. An essence characterizes a substance or a form, in the sense of the Forms or Ideas in Platonic idealism. It is permanent, unalterable, and eternal; and present in every possible world. Classical humanism has an essentialist conception of the human being, which means that it believes in an eternal and unchangeable human nature. This viewpoint has been criticized by Marx, Nietzsche, and Sartre and many modern and existential thinkers. Plato is considered as an essentialist because he believed in ideal forms of which every object is just a poor copy. Since ideas are eternal in his view, they are superior to material objects. When we see objects in the material world, we understand them through their relationships between them. This belief is clearly manifested in his famous parable of the cave. Karl Popper splits the ambiguous term realism into essentialism and realism. He uses essentialism whenever he means the opposite of nominalism, and realism only as opposed to idealism. Essentialism in ethics is claiming that some things are wrong in an absolute sense, for example murder breaks a universal, objective and natural moral law and not merely an adventitious, socially or ethically constructed one. Essentialist positions on gender, race, or other group characteristics, consider these to be fixed traits, while not allowing for variations among individuals or over time. Contemporary proponents of identity politics including feminism, and anti-racist activists generally take constructionist viewpoints, agreeing with Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born, but becomes a woman", for example. Essentialism is used by some historians in listing essential cultural characteristics of a particular nation or culture. A people can be understood in this way. Opposed to this model of interpretation are historical studies which turn from essences to focus on the particular circumstances of time and place.

With respect to the possibility of enriching thin human rights it seems sufficient to look at the communitarian criticism on liberal human rights. In his book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre illustrates that the Aristotelian tradition can be restated in a way that restores rationality and intelligibility to the moral and social attitudes and commitments. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, he attempts to show both what makes it rational to act in one way rather than

another and what makes it rational to advance and defend one conception of practical rationality rather than another. In this, he compares Aristotle's conception of justice (based on city-state and phronesis) with that of Aquinas (concerning the compatibility of religious and secular elements) and also with Hume (on the relationship of reasoning to action with the priority of human rationality over religion). His central preoccupation is the nature of the connection between justice and (religious) laws. According to Augustine, justice is what was ordered in The Ten Commandments. Observing that liberalism itself has transformed into a tradition, he sees those conceptions of universality and impersonality to be too thin and meager to supply what is needed. Although his analysis is considered as contextualistic, he tries to get rid of relativism and historicism.

Whatever the soundness of liberal principles, the fact remains that many communitarians seem worried by a perception that traditional liberal institutions and practices have contributed to, or at least do not seem up to the task of dealing with, such modern phenomena as alienation from the political process, unbridled greed, loneliness, urban crime, and high divorce rates.

Participants in a cross-cultural dialogue can agree on the right not to be subject to cruel and unusual punishment while radically disagreeing upon what this means in practice — a committed Muslim can argue that theft can justifiably be punished by amputation of the right hand, whereas a Western liberal will want to label this an example of cruel and unusual punishment. Since there is no universal rule for theft in all countries, we should consider the implications of space and time i.e. the context.

According to Melé & Sánchez-Runde, "Cultural diversity and globalization bring about a tension between universal ethics and local values and norms. Some ethicists are in favor of moral relativism, while others insist on the shortcomings of this position and defend moral universalism. According to Bok, the need to pursue the inquiry about which basic values can be shared across cultural boundaries is urgent. Apart from academic research, ethics in culturally diverse and global environments may require the opening of closed attitudes too strongly secluded in technical and economics viewpoints, for they display certain disregard for what we have in common as humans. In fact, we should consider the context of different localities and somehow relativism as Melé & Sánchez-Runde refer to differences races, sexes, languages, ethnicities, values systems, religions, and local practices.

### **Republicanism and Communitarianism: between Text and Context**

Republicanism is a school of thought close to communitarianism. Michael Sandel cons According to Bok, “the need to pursue the inquiry about which basic values can be shared across cultural boundaries is urgent iders himself as one of the advocates of republicanism. Although he is considered as one of the most prominent philosophers of communitarianism, he says: “if communitarianism means the priority of majority interests, I am not a communitarian”! (Haghghat, 2019: 80) The point is that republicanism is not the same as democracy and majority right, for republicanism asserts that people have inalienable rights that cannot be voted away by a majority of voters. Republicanism is a political ideology in opposition to monarchy and tyranny. The most important Republicans include Hannah Arendt, Cicero, James Harrington, Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, James Madison, Montesquieu, Polybius, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Michael Sandel, Algernon Sidney, Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, Cass Sunstein, Philip Pettit, and Mary Wollstonecraft. They hold that a political system must be founded upon the rule of law, the rights of individuals, and the sovereignty of the people. It is also closely connected to the idea of civic virtue, the responsibility citizens owe to their republic, and to opposition to corruption, or the use of public power to benefit the politician. Dominated American political thought, republicanism was revived during the Renaissance, especially by political thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli.

Comparing the key concepts of republicanism with communitarianism, we can find out the similarities and differences of the two schools of thought. The main notions of republicanism include anti-monarchism, appeal checks and balances, civic virtue, civil society, due process, equality before the law, mixed constitution, popular sovereignty, republic, republican liberty, “res publica”, rule of law, separation of powers, and social contract. While come ideas such as civil society and rule of law are common, they might differ, as Sandel asserts, in some others such as the majority rights.

Not only some key concepts of communitarianism and republicanism are common, but some scholars such as M. Sandel belong to the two schools of thought. Besides, both of them need to find a third way between textualism and contextualism since they refer to text on one hand, and to political and social situations on the other. The difference between Cambridge school, including Skinner and Pocock, and others is that the scholars of this school have found the “third way” between text and

context. It worth to mention that Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer, as the most prominent communitarian scholars, confirm the need to a new way between text and context.

### **Conclusion**

Traditionally, the communitarian scholars belong to analytical philosophy which is basically text-oriented. Nevertheless, there are two things that push them to the context: the standards of justice which should be found in forms of life and traditions on one hand, and the enrichment of morality and human rights on the other. Life style and various traditions differ from one society and context to the other. Hence, the standards of justice require the contextualist method. Enrichment of morality and human rights be tradition and culture is possible. In fact, it is considered as one of the pivotal critiques of communitarians on liberalists. This notion in itself implies considering the context. Communitarians would enrich thin liberal human rights by invoking communities of place, or communities based on geographical location, communities of memory, or groups of strangers who share a morally-significant history, and psychological communities, or communities of face-to-face personal interaction governed by sentiments of trust, co-operation, and altruism. In sum, there is no way for communitarians except defining a new way between text and context. Methodologically speaking, it could be called as “the third way” between textualism and contextualism.

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