

The Moral Liberal

The Individual and the Community

Friday November 4th 2011

Last May sociologist Amitai Etzioni participated in a debate hosted by the Cato Institute in which he argued against the classical-liberal theory as being too atomistic, excessively concerned with selfish individualism, and neglectful of the importance of community. He's been making this point for 20 years, which is strange for two reasons: First, it isn't true, and second, I have been refuting it for 20 years.

Okay, perhaps I shouldn't be surprised that Etzioni does not read my work. He's a "celebrity" academic whose writings are discussed in *The New York Review of Books* and who is generally regarded as one of the leaders of the communitarian movement. He need not bother reading obscure philosophers. On the other hand, his arguments have also been rebutted by Stephen Holmes in *The New Republic*, as well as *The Economist*. So if writers of far greater prominence than me also engaged his arguments and he remains unwilling even to acknowledge this, one is led to believe he is deliberately caricaturing.

The communitarian movement was at its most popular in the mid-to-late nineties, although it has not gone away; it continues to repackage itself and appears like clockwork whenever classical liberalism comes up. Its flagship journal, *The Responsive Community*, went by the slogan "Rights and Responsibilities" and now uses "For Individual Rights and Social Responsibility." With slogans like these, one might be forgiven for wondering why communitarians don't like liberalism. The answer is, while classical liberals argue for negative rights and limited government, communitarians argue for positive rights and an expansive government that can limit rights on behalf of the common good.

"Negative rights" is another name for liberties, the sort of rights-claims that impose on others a duty of noninterference. "Positive rights" is another name for the sort of rights-claims that impose on others a duty to provide or perform, sometimes called entitlements. A key concept of classical liberalism is that a system of negative rights is internally consistent and does not lead to conflicts of rights, whereas positive rights can generate such conflict. If Smith has a right to be provided with something, then Jones must have a duty to provide it. If this is not a consensual arrangement, then Jones's right to liberty is now in conflict with Smith's right to be provided with the thing in question. Since liberalism (by definition) takes liberty seriously, this sort of conflict is a problem. For a nonliberal it is not necessarily a problem: Simply announce that other values trump liberty—equality, for example, or security, or salvation.

One interesting conundrum raised by the positive-rights model is, who exactly bears the corresponding duties? With negative rights this is easy: Everyone can *abstain* from interfering with a person's pursuits. But if there is a right to be given food or a car, who

has to provide it? If the positive right is the result of a contract, the contract will specify who has what obligations, but this won't entail any conflict with negative rights since the arrangement is consensual. If the right is simply stipulated as part of "the common good," then all members of the community must bear the duty of provision jointly (but nonconsensually).

The communitarian critique of liberalism gets its traction from a combination of a true observation and a false one. The true observation—hardly novel, Aristotle noted it two millennia ago—is that we are social creatures. We require social living to flourish. In a purely economic sense, it is obvious we cannot do everything ourselves if we're to do much of anything at all. The division of labor and our capacity for specialization and trade allow us each to benefit from the talents of others and prosper far above the mere subsistence of other creatures. Beyond that there is a psychological dimension to our sociality as well. As Aristotle noted, we require friends to attain the happiness we're capable of attaining. We require families within which to develop. As we mature we form distinct personalities as a result of the many relationships we have. "The self" does not emerge fully formed *ex nihilo* but rather is the result of many influences and relational associations and affiliations. When communitarians like Etzioni make this point, they're noting something true.

The part of the equation that is false is the claim that classical liberals either disbelieve or are indifferent to the preceding account. Communitarians claim that liberalism presupposes an atomistic individualism—that it neglects the value of community and fails to see that there is a social component to the formation of the self and to human flourishing. None of this is true. Classical liberalism does not ignore these claims; it depends on them. It's as if one tried to argue against pizza by claiming that cheese is good, but since pizza has no cheese, pizza must be bad.

Economically speaking, the straw man being employed here is virtually self-evident: The market is a social phenomenon. So you can't have a theory about the ways in which the market benefits people and at the same time regard sociality as unimportant. The classical-liberal position is that we all benefit from our participation in the social phenomenon of the market—not merely financially, but in terms of the great diversity of our kind. Cooperation in a market system promotes, and in a way presupposes, heterogeneity and pluralism. This expands people's horizons and shows them new ways to derive and create value.

Of course, for a particular sort of communitarian the heterogeneity and pluralism of the market are considered bad things. Karl Marx claimed that our identities are constituted entirely by our socioeconomic class and that autonomy was an illusion. The prevailing economic system *determines* how you think. The liberal project is flawed, Marx said, because it caused people to have false ideas about labor, capital, society, and even our own selves. Mussolini also claimed that the liberal project was flawed because it caused people to have false ideas about labor, capital, society, and our own selves, but his claim

was that our identity was constituted and determined not by class but by our ethnicity. Communitarians today distance themselves from fascists and communists, and make the more generic claim that “the community” determines our identity, while still coming to the same conclusion: that liberalism is a flawed project. This enables them to defend some liberties while arguing for positive rights and for the right of the community to infringe on liberty.

Of course, we’re all members of many different communities simultaneously: family, town, ethnicity, region, nation, religion. In addition to these, we become members of communities through our interests and affiliations—professions, hobbies, sports loyalties, and other manifestations of preference. To be sure, all these different things play a role in helping shape who we become, but it’s a stretch to say that any one of them trumps the others, or that the process is deterministic. Communitarianism seems to elide the distinction between influencing and determining. We still make choices about our values and actions, despite the many influences on our thinking.

In his 1996 book, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, Etzioni makes the same criticisms of a liberalism that “neglects the role of community” that he made at Cato in May. But he also praises autonomy and explains that his ideal society wouldn’t be coercive. But a noncoercive community that respects individual autonomy sounds like liberalism, so this may be a case of wanting to have it both ways. Worse, it suggests that the best way to have a good life is to live in a community (which is true, but uncontroversial) and that individualism won’t allow for this (which is false).

In many cases, Etzioni’s prescriptions are vague and almost contradictory: We shouldn’t have too much autonomy because that’s bad for community; but we shouldn’t enforce community plans in tyrannical ways because that’s bad for autonomy. He explicitly calls for compulsory national service, which is hard to reconcile with a noncoercive society. He even invokes the expression “voluntary social order,” but is clearly not making a Hayekian argument: He explicitly rejects the free-market approach to economics. He specifically praises “symbolic displays” that promote community solidarity—does that mean requiring religious dissenters to recite the Pledge of Allegiance? It is true of course that some “community values” are incompatible with liberal individualism. Self-appointed spokesmen for the community might have an interest in suppression of dissent (mustn’t offend community sensibilities) or the subjugation of minority religious practices (mustn’t promote excessive individualism). But Etzioni stops short of taking his argument to this conclusion.

Even a cursory overview of liberal authors shows respect for human sociality and a recognition of the importance of community. This is evident in Locke and Smith, Ricardo and Hayek, Nozick and Rothbard. Etzioni’s reliance on such obvious straw-man conceptions of liberalism suggests it is tactical rather than intellectual: How can we maintain some recognizably liberal framework, yet support positive rights and government control? By suggesting that the liberal project is based on a mistake. If the proponents of classical-liberal individualism and free markets are shown to be people

who neglect the value of community, then communitarianism can gain traction. But there's no easy way around what J. S. Mill called the "tyranny of the majority": That a majority of the people want things a certain way is not enough to justify coercing the minority. Classical liberalism embraces social cooperation—indeed presupposes it—but distinguishes itself from its competitors by insisting that the communal projects and social arrangements be consensual. In Etzioni's characterization this means we do not care about the community.

But caring about the community and respecting individuals as individuals are not contradictory aims. Yes, we're social creatures, but one reason society has so much to offer is that we're all a little different. The great diversity of human interests and preferences and talents is a testimony to our individualism, and "society" is just the manifestation of these differences as they are brought together. If everyone thought the same way and liked all the same things, society would be a much less interesting place. So the idea that, to protect community, we need to stop thinking of people as autonomous individuals gets it backwards. If we really care about the well-being of communities and preserving the way society contributes to human flourishing, we ought to keep in mind the unique and autonomous individuals that make it up, and respect them.

[Aeon J. Skoble](#) is professor of philosophy and chairman of the philosophy department at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts.

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