Review: Communitarian Critics of Liberalism

Reviewed Work(s):
Liberalism and the Limits of Justice. by Michael Sandel
Morality and the Liberal Ideal. by Michael Sandel
After Virtue. by Alasdair MacIntyre
Is Patriotism a Virtue. by Alasdair MacIntyre
Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age. by Benjamin Barber
Atomism. by Charles Taylor
Powers, Possessions and Freedom: Essays in Honor of C. B. MacPherson. by Akis Kontos
"The Diversity of Goods," in Utilitarianism and Beyond. by Amartya Sen; Bernard Williams
Knowledge and Politics. by Roberto Mangabeira Unger
Spheres of Justice. by Michael Walzer
Amy Gutmann

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Communitarian Critics of Liberalism

We are witnessing a revival of communitarian criticisms of liberal political theory. Like the critics of the 1960s, those of the 1980s fault liberalism for being mistakenly and irreparably individualistic. But the new wave of criticism is not a mere repetition of the old. Whereas the earlier critics were inspired by Marx, the recent critics are inspired by Aristotle and Hegel. The Aristotelian idea that justice is rooted in "a community whose primary bond is a shared understanding both of the good for man and the good of that community" explicitly informs Alasdair MacIntyre in his criticism of John Rawls and Robert Nozick for their neglect of desert;[1] and Charles Taylor in his attack on "atomistic" liberals who "try to defend . . . the priority of the individual and his rights over society."[2] The Hegelian conception of man as a historically conditioned being implicitly informs both Roberto Unger's and Michael Sandel's rejection of the liberal view of man as a free and rational being.[3]

This review essay concentrates on the arguments presented in Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Sandel, "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," *The New Republic*, May 7, 1984, pp. 15–17; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981); and MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" *The Lindley Lecture* (University of Kansas: Department of Philosophy, March 26, 1984). Other works to which I refer are Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in Alkis Kontos, ed., *Powers, Possessions and Freedoms: Essays in Honor of C. B. Macpherson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 39–61, and "The Diversity of Goods," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 129–44; Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1975); and Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

1. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 232–33.
2. "Atomism," p. 39.
3. *Knowledge and Politics*, pp. 85, 191–231; *Limits*, pp. 179–80.

The political implications of the new communitarian criticisms are correspondingly more conservative. Whereas the good society of the old critics was one of collective property ownership and equal political power, the good society of the new critics is one of settled traditions and established identities. For many of the old critics, the role of women within the family was symptomatic of their social and economic oppression; for Sandel, the family serves as a model of community and evidence of a good greater than justice.[4] For the old critics, patriotism was an irrational sentiment that stood in the way of world peace; for MacIntyre, the particularistic demands of patriotism are no less rational than the universalistic demands of justice.[5] The old critics were inclined to defend deviations from majoritarian morality in the name of nonrepression; the new critics are inclined to defend the efforts of local majorities to ban offensive activities in the name of preserving their community's "way of life and the values that sustain it."[6]

The subject of the new and the old criticism also differs. The new critics recognize that Rawls's work has altered the premises and principles of contemporary liberal theory. Contemporary liberals do not assume that people are possessive individualists; the source of their individualism lies at a deeper, more metaphysical level. According to Sandel, the problem is that liberalism has faulty foundations: in order to achieve absolute priority for principles of justice, liberals must hold a set of implausible metaphysical views about the self. They cannot admit, for example, that our personal identities are partly defined by our communal attachments.[7] According to MacIntyre, the problem is that liberalism lacks any foundations at all. It cannot be rooted in the only kind of social life that provides a basis for moral judgments, one which "views man as having an essence which defines his true end."[8] Liberals are therefore bound either to claim a false certainty for their principles or to admit that morality is merely a matter of individual opinion, that is, is no morality at all.

The critics claim that many serious problems originate in the foundational faults of liberalism. Perhaps the most troubling for liberals is

4. Sandel, *Limits*, pp. 30–31, 33–34, 169.
5. "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" pp. 15–18 and passim.
6. Sandel, "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," p. 17.
7. *Limits*, pp. 64–65, 168–73.
8. *After Virtue*, p. 52.

their alleged inability to defend the basic principle that "individual rights cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the general good."[9] Because Sandel and MacIntyre make the most detailed and, if true, devastating cases against believing in a liberal politics of rights, I shall focus for the rest of this review on their arguments.

The central argument of Sandel's book is that liberalism rests on a series of mistaken metaphysical and metaethical views: for example, that the claims of justice are absolute and universal; that we cannot know each other well enough to share common ends; and that we can define our personal identity independently of socially given ends. Because its foundations are necessarily flawed, Sandel suggests in a subsequent article that we should give up the "politics of rights" for a "politics of the common good."[10]

MacIntyre begins his book with an even more "disquieting suggestion": that our entire moral vocabulary, of rights and the common good, is in such "grave disorder" that "we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality."[11] To account for how "we" have unknowingly arrived at this unenviable social condition, MacIntyre takes us on an intriguing tour of moral history, from Homeric Greece to the present. By the end of the tour, we learn that the internal incoherence of liberalism forces us to choose "Nietzsche or Aristotle," a politics of the will to power or one of communally defined virtue.[12]

The Limits of Communitarian Criticism

Do the critiques succeed in undermining liberal politics? If the only foundations available to liberal politics are faulty, then perhaps one need not establish a positive case for communitarian politics to establish the claim that liberal politics is philosophically indefensible.[13] Although this is the logic of Sandel's claim concerning the limits of liberal justice, he gives no general argument to support his conclusion that liberal rights

9. Sandel, "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," p. 16.
10. Ibid., p. 17.
11. *After Virtue*, pp. 1–5.
12. Ibid., pp. 49, 103–13, 238–45.
13. I say "perhaps" because if defensibility is relative to our alternatives, then Sandel still would have to establish the positive case for communitarian politics before claiming that the faulty foundations of liberal politics render it indefensible.

are indefensible.[14] He reaches this conclusion instead on the basis of an interpretation and criticism of Rawls's theory, which he reasonably assumes to be the best theory liberalism has yet to offer.

Sandel argues that despite Rawls's efforts to distance himself from Kantian metaphysics, he fails. Sandel attributes Rawls's failure to his acceptance of the "central claim" of deontology, "the *core conviction* Rawls seeks *above all* to defend. It is the claim that 'justice is the first virtue of social institutions.' "[15] As Rawls presents it, the "primacy of justice" describes a moral requirement applicable to institutions. Sandel interprets Rawls as also making a metaethical claim: that the foundations of justice must be independent of all social and historical contingencies without being transcendental.[16]

Why saddle Rawls's moral argument for the primacy of justice with this meaning? To be sure, Rawls himself argues that "embedded in the principles of justice . . . is an ideal of the person that provides an Archimedean point for judging the basic structure of society."[17] But to translate this passage into a claim that the grounds of justice can be noncontingent

14. The general argument that can be constructed from Sandel's work (using his conceptual framework) is, I think, the following: (1) To accept a politics based on rights entails believing that justice should have absolute priority over all our particular ends (our conception of the good); (2) To accept the priority of justice over our conception of the good entails believing that our identities can be established prior to the good (otherwise our conception of the good will enter into our conception of justice); (3) Since our identities are constituted by our conception of the good, justice cannot be prior. Therefore we cannot consistently believe in the politics of rights. But each of the steps in this argument are suspect: (1) We may accept the politics of rights not because justice is prior to the good, but because our search for the good requires society to protect our right to certain basic freedoms and welfare goods; (2) Justice may be prior to the good not because we are "antecedently individuated," but because giving priority to justice may be the fairest way of sharing the goods of citizenship with people who do not accept our conception of the good; (3) Our identities are probably not constituted, at least not exclusively, by our conception of the good. If they were, one could not intelligibly ask: "What kind of person do I want to become?" Yet the question reflects an important part (although not necessarily the whole) of our search for identity. If, however, we assume by definition that our identities are constituted by our good, then we must consider our sense of justice to be part of our identities. My commitment to treating other people as equals, and therefore to respecting their freedom of religion, is just as elemental a part of my identity (on this understanding) as my being Jewish, and therefore celebrating Passover with my family and friends.

15. *Limits*, p. 15. Emphasis added. See *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 3–4, 586.

16. *Limits*, pp. 16–17. Rawls must, in Sandel's words, "find a standpoint neither compromised by its implication in the world nor dissociated and so disqualified by detachment."

17. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 584; see also pp. 260–62.

ignores most of what Rawls says to explain his Archimedean point, the nature of justification, and Kantian constructivism.[18] "Justice as fairness is not at the mercy, so to speak, of existing wants and interests. It sets up an Archimedean point . . . *without invoking a priori considerations.*"[19] By requiring us to abstract from our particular but not our shared interests, the original position with its "veil of ignorance" and "thin theory of the good" avoids reliance on both existing preferences and *a priori* considerations in reasoning about justice. The resulting principles of justice, then, clearly rely on certain contingent facts: that we share some interests (in primary goods such as income and self-respect), but not others (in a particular religion or form of family life); that we value the freedom to choose a good life or at least the freedom from having one imposed upon us by political authority. If we do not, then we will not accept the constraints of the original position.

Rawls's remarks on justification and Kantian constructivism make explicit the contingency of his principles of justice. The design of the original position must be revised if the resulting principles do not "accommodate our firmest convictions."[20] Justification is not a matter of deduction from certain premises, but rather "a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view."[21] Since Rawls accords the view "that justice is the first virtue of social institutions" the status of a "common sense conviction,"[22] this view is part of what his theory must coherently combine. Rawls therefore does not, nor need he, claim more for justice as fairness than that "given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it

18. In interpreting Rawls, I rely (as does Sandel) on passages from both *A Theory of Justice* and "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory: The Dewey Lectures 1980," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 9 (September 1980), pp. 515–72. Someone might reasonably argue that not until "The Dewey Lectures" does Rawls consistently and clearly defend the position on justification that I attribute to him. Had Sandel directed his criticism only against *A Theory of Justice*, his interpretation would have been more credible. But he still could not have sustained his central claim that Rawls's principles and liberalism more generally *must* rest on implausible metaethical grounds.

19. *A Theory of Justice*, p. 261. Emphasis added. See also "The Dewey Lectures," esp. pp. 564–67.

20. *A Theory of Justice*, p. 20. The reasoning is circular, but not viciously so, since we must also be prepared to revise our weaker judgments when principles match our considered convictions, until we reach "reflective equilibrium."

21. Ibid., pp. 21, 579.

22. Ibid., p. 586.

is the most reasonable doctrine for us. We can find no better charter for our social world."[23]

Rawls could be wrong about our firmest convictions or what is most reasonable for us. But instead of trying to demonstrate this, Sandel argues that Rawls must show that the content and claims of justice are independent of all historical and social particularities.[24] If this is what constitutes deontological metaphysics, then it is a metaphysics that Rawls explicitly and consistently denies.

What metaphysics must Rawlsian liberalism then embrace? Several commentators, along with Rawls himself, have argued that liberalism does not presuppose metaphysics.[25] The major aim of liberal justice is to find principles appropriate for a society in which people disagree fundamentally over many questions, including such metaphysical questions as the nature of personal identity. Liberal justice therefore does not provide us with a comprehensive morality; it regulates our social institutions, not our entire lives. It makes claims on us "not because it expresses our deepest self-understandings," but because it represents the fairest possible *modus vivendi* for a pluralistic society.[26]

The characterization of liberalism as nonmetaphysical can be misleading however. Although Rawlsian justice does not presuppose only *one* metaphysical view, it is not compatible with *all* such views. Sandel is correct in claiming that the Kantian conception of people as free and equal is incompatible with the metaphysical conception of the self as "radically situated" such that "the good of community . . . [is] so thoroughgoing as to reach beyond the motivations to the subject of motivations."[27] Sandel seems to mean that communally given ends can so totally constitute people's identities that they cannot appreciate the value of justice. Such an understanding of human identity would (according to

23. "The Dewey Lectures," p. 519. Cf. Sandel, *Limits*, p. 30.

24. *Limits*, p. 30. Sometimes Sandel comes close to making a more limited but potentially more plausible argument—that Rawls derives his principles of justice from the wrong set of historical and social particularities: from (for example) our identification with all free and rational beings rather than with particular communities. Such an argument, if successful, would establish different limits, and limits of only Rawlsian liberalism.

25. See Rawls, "The Independence of Moral Theory," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 48 (1975), pp. 5–22.

26. Charles Larmore, "Review of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 6 (June 1984): 338. See also Rawls, "The Dewey Lectures," p. 542.

27. Sandel, *Limits*, pp. 20–21, 149.

constructivist standards of verification) undermine the two principles.[28] To be justified as the *political* ideals most consistent with the "public culture of a democratic society,"[29] Rawlsian principles therefore have to express some (though not all) of our deepest self-understandings. Rawls must admit this much metaphysics—that we are not radically situated selves—if justification is to depend not on "being true to an order antecedent to and given to us, but . . . [on] congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations."[30]

If this, rather than Kantian dualism, is the metaphysics that liberal justice must admit, Sandel's critique collapses. Rawls need not (and he does not) claim that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions" in *all* societies to show that the priority of justice obtains *absolutely* in those societies in which people disagree about the good life and consider their freedom to choose a good life an important good.[31] Nor need Rawls assume that human identity is *ever* totally independent of ends and relations to others to conclude that justice must *always* command our moral allegiance unless love and benevolence make it unnecessary.[32] Deontological justice thus can recognize the conditional priority of justice without embracing "deontological metaethics" or collapsing into teleology. Sandel has failed therefore to show that the foundations of rights are mistaken.

Missing Foundations?

MacIntyre argues that the foundations are missing:

> The best reason for asserting so bluntly that there are no such rights is indeed of precisely the same type as the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no witches . . . : every attempt to give good reasons for believing there *are* such rights has failed.[33]

The analogy, properly drawn, does not support MacIntyre's position. The best reason that people can give for believing in witches is that the existence of witches explains (supposedly) observed physical phenom-

28. Rawls, "The Dewey Lectures," pp. 534–35, 564–67. See also *A Theory of Justice*, p. 260: "The theory of justice does, indeed, presuppose a theory of the good, but *within wide limits* this does not prejudge the choice of the sort of persons that men want to be." (Emphasis added.)

29. Rawls, "The Dewey Lectures," p. 518.

30. Ibid., p. 519.

31. Ibid., pp. 516–24. Cf. Sandel, *Limits*, pp. 28–40.

32. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 560–77. Cf. Sandel, *Limits*, pp. 47–65.

33. *After Virtue*, p. 67.

ena. Belief in witches therefore directly competes with belief in physics, and loses out in the competition. The best reason for taking rights seriously is of a different order: believing in rights is one way of regulating and constraining our behavior toward one another in a desirable manner. This reason does not compete with physics; it does not require us to believe that rights "exist" in any sense that is incompatible with the "laws of nature" as established by modern science.[34]

MacIntyre offers another, more historical argument for giving up our belief in rights. "Why," he asks, "should we think about our modern uses of *good*, *right*, and *obligatory* in any different way from that in which we think about late eighteenth-century Polynesian uses of taboo?"[35] Like the Polynesians who used *taboo* without any understanding of what it meant beyond "prohibited," we use *human right* without understanding its meaning beyond "moral trump." If the analogy holds, we cannot use the idea correctly because we have irretrievably lost the social context in which its proper use is possible.

But on a contextualist view, it is reasonable for *us* to believe in human rights: many of the most widely accepted practices of our society—equality of educational opportunity, careers open to talent, punishment conditional on intent—treat people as relatively autonomous moral agents. Insofar as we are committed to maintaining these practices, we are also committed to defending human rights.[36] This argument parallels MacIntyre's contextualist defense of Aristotelian virtue: that the established practices of heroic societies supported the Aristotelian idea that every human life has a socially determined *telos*. Each person had a "given role and status within a well-defined and highly determinate system of roles and statuses," which fully defined his identity: "a man who tried to withdraw himself from his given position . . . would be engaged in the enterprise of trying to make himself disappear."[37]

If moral beliefs depend upon supporting social practices for their validity, then we have more reason to believe in a liberal politics of rights than in an Aristotelian politics of the common good. In *our* society, it does not logically follow that: "I am someone's son or daughter, someone

34. I am grateful to Thomas Scanlon for suggesting this reply.

35. *After Virtue*, p. 107.

36. We need not be committed to a thoroughly deontological moral apparatus. Sophisticated consequentialist theories justify these same practices and are consistent with believing in rights.

37. *After Virtue*, pp. 117, 119.

else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation[,] *hence* what is good for me *has* to be THE good for one who inhabits these roles."[38] One reason it does not follow is that none of these roles carries with it only one socially given good. What follows from "what is good for me has to be the good for someone who was born female, into a first-generation American, working-class Italian, Catholic family"? Had Geraldine Ferraro asked, following Sandel, "Who am I?" instead of "What ends should I choose?" an answer would not have been any easier to come by.[39] The Aristotelian method of discovering the good by inquiring into the social meaning of roles is of little help in a society in which most roles are not attached to a single good. Even if there is a single good attached to some social roles (as caring for the sick is to the role of a nurse, or searching for political wisdom to the function of political philosophers, let us suppose), we cannot accurately say that our roles determine our good without adding that we often choose our roles because of the good that is attached to them. The unencumbered self is, in this sense, the encumbrance of our modern social condition.

But the existence of supporting social practices is certainly not a sufficient condition, arguably not even a necessary one, for believing in liberal rights rather than Aristotelian virtue. The practices that support liberal rights may be unacceptable to us for reasons that carry more moral weight than the practices themselves; we may discover moral reasons (even within our current social understandings) for establishing new practices that support a politics of the common good. My point here is not that a politics of rights is the only, or the best, possible politics for our society, but that neither MacIntyre's nor Sandel's critique succeeds in undermining liberal rights because neither gives an accurate account of their foundations. MacIntyre mistakenly denies liberalism the possibility of foundations; Sandel ascribes to liberalism foundations it need not have.

The Tyranny of Dualisms

The critics' interpretive method is also mistaken. It invites us to see the moral universe in dualistic terms: either our identities are independent

38. Ibid., pp. 204–5 (emphasis added). Sandel makes a very similar point in *Limits*, p. 179.

39. *Limits*, pp. 58–59.

of our ends, leaving us totally free to choose our life plans, or they are constituted by community, leaving us totally encumbered by socially given ends; either justice takes absolute priority over the good or the good takes the place of justice; either justice must be independent of all historical and social particularities or virtue must depend completely on the particular social practices of each society; and so on. The critics thereby do a disservice to not only liberal but communitarian values, since the same method that reduces liberalism to an extreme metaphysical vision also renders communitarian theories unacceptable. By interpreting Rawls's conception of community as describing "just a feeling," for example, Sandel invites us to interpret Aristotle's as describing a fully constituted identity. The same mode of interpretation that permits Sandel to criticize Rawls for betraying "incompatible commitments" by uneasily combining into one theory "intersubjective and individualistic images" would permit us to criticize Sandel for suggesting that community is "a mode of self-understanding *partly* constitutive" of our identity.[40] Neither Sandel's interpretation nor his critique is accurate.

MacIntyre's mode of interpreting modern philosophy similarly divides the moral world into a series of dualisms. The doomed project of modern philosophy, according to MacIntyre, has been to convert naturally egoistical men into altruists. "On the traditional Aristotelian view such problems do not arise. For what education in the virtues teaches me is that my good as a man is one and the same as the good of those others with whom I am bound up in human community."[41] But the real, and recognized, dilemma of modern liberalism, as we have seen, is not that people are naturally egoistical, but that they disagree about the nature of the good life. And such problems also arise on any (sophisticated) Aristotelian view, as MacIntyre himself recognizes in the context of distinguishing Aristotelianism from Burkean conservatism: "when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose."[42]

The dualistic vision thus tyrannizes over our common sense, which rightly rejects all "easy combinations"—the individualism MacIntyre at-

40. Ibid., p. 150. When Sandel characterizes his own preferred "strong" view of community, it is one in which people conceive their identity "as defined *to some extent* by the community of which they are a part." (Emphases added.)

41. *After Virtue*, pp. 212–13.

42. Ibid., p. 206.

tributes to Sartre and Goffman "according to which the self is detachable from its social and historical roles and statuses" such that it "can have no history,"[43] as well as the communitarian vision MacIntyre occasionally seems to share with Roberto Unger according to which the "conflict between the demands of individuality and sociability would disappear."[44] Because the critics misinterpret the metaphysics of liberalism, they also miss the appeal of liberal politics for reconciling rather than repressing most competing conceptions of the good life.

Beyond Metaphysics: Communitarian Politics

Even if liberalism has adequate metaphysical foundations and considerable moral appeal, communitarian politics might be morally better. But MacIntyre and Sandel say almost nothing in their books to defend communitarian politics directly. Sandel makes a brief positive case for its comparative advantage over liberalism in a subsequent article. "Where libertarian liberals defend the private economy and egalitarian liberals defend the welfare state," Sandel comments, "communitarians worry about the concentration of power in both the corporate economy and the bureaucratic state, and the erosion of those intermediate forms of community that have at times sustained a more vital public life." But these worries surely do not distinguish communitarians from most contemporary liberals, unless (as Sandel implies) communitarians therefore oppose, or refuse to defend, the market or the welfare state.[45] Sandel makes explicit only one policy difference: "communitarians would be more likely than liberals to allow a town to ban pornographic bookstores, on the grounds that pornography offends its way of life and the values that sustain it." His answer to the obvious liberal worry that such a policy opens the door to intolerance in the name of communal standards is that "intolerance flourishes most where forms of life are dislocated, roots unsettled, traditions undone." He urges us therefore "to revitalize those civic republican possibilities implicit in our tradition but fading in our time."[46]

What exactly does Sandel mean to imply by the sort of civic republi-

43. Ibid., p. 205. See also Sandel, *Limits*, pp. 40, 150. Cf. p. 180.
44. *Knowledge and Politics*, p. 220.
45. "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," p. 17.
46. Ibid.

canism "implicit within our tradition"? Surely not the mainstream of our tradition that excluded women and minorities, and repressed most significant deviations from white, Protestant morality in the name of the common good. We have little reason to doubt that a liberal politics of rights is morally better than that kind of republicanism. But if Sandel is arguing that when members of a society have settled roots and established traditions, they will tolerate the speech, religion, sexual, and associational preferences of minorities, then history simply does not support his optimism. A great deal of intolerance has come from societies of selves so "confidently situated" that they were sure repression would serve a higher cause.[47] The common good of the Puritans of seventeenth-century Salem commanded them to hunt witches; the common good of the Moral Majority of the twentieth century commands them not to tolerate homosexuals. The enforcement of liberal rights, not the absence of settled community, stands between the Moral Majority and the contemporary equivalent of witch hunting.

The communitarian critics want us to live in Salem, but not to believe in witches. Or human rights. Perhaps the Moral Majority would cease to be a threat were the United States a communitarian society; benevolence and fraternity might take the place of justice. Almost anything is possible, but it does not make moral sense to leave liberal politics behind on the strengths of such speculations.[48]

Nor does it make theoretical sense to assume away the conflicts among competing ends—such as the conflict between communal standards of sexual morality and individual sexual preference—that give rise to the characteristic liberal concern for rights. In so doing, the critics avoid discussing how morally to resolve our conflicts and therefore fail to pro-

47. Sandel may be correct in claiming that *more* intolerance has come—in the form of fascism—from societies of "atomized, dislocated, frustrated selves." But the truth of this claim does not establish the case for communitarian over liberal politics unless our only choice is to support a society of totally "atomized" or one of totally "settled" selves. This dualistic interpretation of our alternatives seems to lead Sandel to overlook the moral value of establishing some balance between individualism and community, and to underestimate the theoretical difficulty of determining where the proper balance lies.

48. Sandel might want to argue that societies like Salem were not "settled." Perfectly settled communities would not be repressive because every individual's identity would be fully constituted by the community or completely compatible with the community's understanding of the common good. This argument, however, is a truism: a perfectly settled society would not be repressive, because perfect settlement would leave no dissent to repress.

vide us with a political theory relevant to our world. They also may overlook the extent to which some of their own moral commitments presuppose the defense of liberal rights.

Constructive Potential

Even if the communitarian critics have not given good reasons for abandoning liberalism, they have challenged its defenders. One should welcome their work if for no other reason than this. But there is another reason. Communitarianism has the potential for helping us discover a politics that combines community with a commitment to basic liberal values.

The critics' failure to undermine liberalism suggests not that there are no communitarian values but that they are properly viewed as supplementing rather than supplanting basic liberal values. We can see the extent to which our moral vision already relies on communitarian values by imagining a society in which no one does more or less than respect everyone else's liberal rights. People do not form ties of love and friendship (or they do so only insofar as necessary to developing the kind of character that respects liberal rights). They do not join neighborhood associations, political parties, trade unions, civic groups, synagogues, or churches. This might be a perfectly liberal, arguably even a just society, but it is certainly not the best society to which we can aspire. The potential of communitarianism lies, I think, in indicating the ways in which we can strive to realize not only justice but community through the many social unions of which the liberal state is the super social union.

What might some of those ways be? Sandel suggests one possibility: states might "enact laws regulating plant closings, to protect their communities from the disruptive effects of capital mobility and sudden industrial change."[49] This policy is compatible with the priority Rawls gives to liberty and may even be dictated by the best interpretation of the difference principle. But the explicit concern for preventing the disruption of local communities is an important contribution of communitarianism to liberalism. We should also, as Sandel suggests, be "troubled by the tendency of liberal programs to displace politics from smaller forms of association to more comprehensive ones." But we should not therefore

49. "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," p. 17.

oppose all programs that limit—or support all those that expand—the jurisdiction of local governments. We may be able to discover ways in which local communities *and* democracy can be vitalized without violating individual rights. We can respect the right of free speech by opposing local efforts to ban pornographic bookstores, for example, but still respect the values of community and democratic participation by supporting local (democratic) efforts to regulate the location and manner in which pornographic bookstores display their wares. Attuned to the dangers of dualism, we can appreciate the way such a stand combines—uneasily—liberal and communitarian commitments.

Some ways of fostering communal values—I suspect some of the best ways—entail creating new political institutions rather than increasing the power of existing institutions or reviving old ones. By restoring "those intermediate forms of community that have at times sustained a more vital public life," we are unlikely to control "the concentration of power in both the corporate economy and the bureaucratic state" that rightly worries both communitarians and liberals.[50] If large corporations and bureaucracies are here to stay, we need to create new institutions to prevent them from imposing (in the name of either efficiency or expertise) their values on those of potentially more democratic communities. Realizing the relatively old idea of workplace democracy would require the creation of radically new economic institutions.[51] Recently mandated citizen review boards in areas such as health care, education, and community development have increased interest in democratic participation. Wholehearted political support of such reforms and others yet untried is probably necessary before we can effectively control bureaucratic power.[52] Although the political implications of the communitarian criticisms of liberalism are conservative, the constructive potential of communitarian values is not.

Had they developed the constructive potential of communitarian values, the critics might have moved further toward discovering both the

50. Ibid.

51. For a communitarian defense of economic democracy that is not based on a rejection of liberal values, see Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 161 and 291–303.

52. For a suggestive agenda of democratic reforms, see Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*, pp. 261–307. Although Barber attacks liberal theory as fundamentally flawed in the first nine chapters, the aim of his agenda for reform in the last chapter is "to reorient liberal democracy toward civic engagement and political community, not to raze it" (p. 308).

limits of Rawlsian liberalism and a better charter for our social world. Instead, MacIntyre concludes that we should be "waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."[53] The critics tend to look toward the future with nostalgia. We would be better off, by both Aristotelian and liberal democratic standards, if we tried to shape it according to our present moral understandings. At the end of his book, Sandel urges us to remember "the possibility that when politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone." But he has neglected the possibility that the only common good worth striving for is one that is not "an unsettling presence for justice."[54] Justice need not be the only virtue of social institutions for it to be better than anything we are capable of putting in its place. The worthy challenge posed by the communitarian critics therefore is not to replace liberal justice, but to improve it.

53. Ibid., p. 245. Roberto Unger similarly concludes *Knowledge and Politics* waiting for God to speak (p. 235).

54. Cf. Sandel, *Limits*, p. 183.

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