# *Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique**

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The dominant form of liberal theory, deontological liberalism, is now encountering a serious challenge from communitarians who reject the liberal commitment to individualism and to human rights. An analysis of thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, and Benjamin Barber shows that liberalism withstands the communitarian critique. Communitarians properly reject a mistaken form of individualism, sociological liberalism; but another form, moral individualism, is necessary if persons are to be understood as autonomous. Communitarians wishing to protect persons from authoritarianism implicitly incorporate conceptions of moral individualism and human rights into their reformulations of shared understandings or their defense of participatory institutions.

## Communitarianism and Liberalism

Michael Sandel claims that the major arguments between utilitarians and Kantian, or "rights-based," liberals have been won by the Kantians, a victory due in large part to the influence of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Sandel, 1984, p. 4). This "deontological liberalism" has three closely related features, according to Charles Fried (1983, p. 960). The commitment to human rights outweighs all but the most extreme considerations of the overall good or any general end state; rights are attributed mainly to individuals and constitute the fundamental presuppositions of moral and political theory; and the concept of the right is distinguished from that of the good. The right specifies a set of politically guaranteed entitlements, and the good—a way of life—is chosen by individuals. Because the right, not the good, provides the principles of political order in deontological liberalism, no way of life can be authoritatively judged to be superior to another. Attempts to impose any preferred way of life on individuals are therefore illegitimate (Dworkin, 1978, pp. 127–29).

Liberals now encounter a revival of "communitarian criticism" (Gutmann, 1985, p. 308). Challenging the liberal stance on individualism and human rights, communitarians insist that "we cannot justify political arrangements without reference to common purposes and ends, and that we cannot conceive our personhood without reference to our

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role as citizens, and as participants in a common life" (Sandel, 1984, p. 5). Because of their concern about the presence of moral chaos and the absence of common purposes, communitarians argue that moral authority should be lodged in shared understandings and institutions, not in individual choices. In this essay we focus on the communitarian challenge to the dominant form of liberal theory.

Since it would be impossible to consider every communitarian critic of individualism and of human rights, and since the major issues are theoretical, we explore the theories of the more powerful and influential contemporary communitarian writers. Amy Gutmann argues that the most sustained and potentially devastating critiques of liberalism are offered by Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre (Gutmann, 1985, p. 310). However, these writers do not develop a theoretical account of important values implicit in their own theories. As the preeminent examples of communitarian approaches that provide alternative political theories, Gutmann mentions, but does not examine, the work of Michael Walzer and Benjamin Barber (Gutmann, 1985, p. 321n). We concentrate on these four representative communitarian theorists.

In spite of their attacks on individualism and human rights, the communitarian critics are unwilling to abandon the achievements of liberalism in protecting persons from authoritarianism. Sandel argues that a *safer* haven for persons is provided by communitarian political communities than by the liberal state (1984, p. 7). Walzer and Barber defend communitarian principles and institutions that they believe can protect persons from tyranny without reliance on individualism or on human rights. It might seem that the concerns of these theorists are very different from those of MacIntyre. While Sandel, Walzer, and Barber seek to fulfill the modernist project of individual autonomy, MacIntyre repudiates this project. He appears to idealize societies in which persons were subordinate to the authority structure implicit in complex activities called "practices." In such societies the person's task was to acquire the virtues necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices (1984, p. 191). However, MacIntyre realizes that some practices are evil. He also understands that practices are subordinated to the traditions through which they are transmitted, and he opposes the conservative ideological conception of tradition. A tradition "in good order" is "partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose" (1984, p. 222). We suggest that argument about tradition is not possible without some degree of personal autonomy. Moreover, because MacIntyre's social models are more like medieval guilds than modern democratic institutions, his models are at odds with some positions he has taken on contemporary issues. Lewis

Hinchman writes that MacIntyre's left-liberal stands on such questions as poverty, imperialism, and women's rights fit him "into the mainstream of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment political thought" (1986, p. 33).

## The Communitarian Critique

Since the communitarian theorists do not intend a return to authoritarianism, they need to show how the autonomy of persons can be achieved outside the framework of rights-based (deontological) liberalism. In this section we sketch the communitarian critique. MacIntyre argues that contemporary moral chaos—the plurality of arbitrarily chosen, incommensurable values—results from the abandonment of the classical teleological understanding of persons. Classical discourse emphasized "the conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-*telos*" (1984, p. 53). Without this idea of the telos, moral declarations could only be expressions of arbitrary preferences, for, according to MacIntyre, human beings cannot know their good unless they understand their highest end. Without a single, final good—a telos—human lives lack unity and intelligibility (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 203). He insists that to avoid Nietzsche we must return to Aristotle.

Since "changes in moral concepts are always embodied in real, particular events" (1984, p. 61), MacIntyre places the blame for the abandonment of the idea of the telos squarely on the advent of modern individualism. Individualism was supported by thinkers who wanted to liberate persons from those "outmoded forms of social organization" that had imprisoned them "within a belief in a theistic and teleological world order and within those hierarchical structures which attempted to legitimate themselves as part of that order" (1984, p. 60). As individualism undermined the hierarchical social structures of the ancient and medieval worlds, it also destroyed the teleological understanding of human beings. When the human good came to be seen as prior to and separate from all social roles, not as internal to roles, the telos could not be known. This meant, MacIntyre continues, that "man" could no longer serve as a functional concept. In the Aristotelian tradition, factual statements about a good man could be true or false like statements about other things that perform functions. When the modern world rejected the classical conception of the role-based telos, one could no longer say, "I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation," and hence "what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles" (1984, p. 220).

Communitarians also question the human rights position which developed along with individualism. Gutmann writes, "The communitarian critics want us to live in Salem, but not to believe in witches. Or

human rights" (1985, p. 319). MacIntyre insists that there are "no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns." As the attempts to give reasons for belief in witches and unicorns have failed, so "every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed" (1984, p. 69). There is, he insists, at least one universal truth: "A moral philosophy . . . characteristically presupposes a sociology" (1984, p. 23). Moral principles arise out of particular social conditions and are comprehensible only in those conditions. The concept of human rights was generated to serve "as part of the social invention of the autonomous moral agent" (1984, p. 70). Human rights claims thus cannot occur outside these conditions. In a nonindividualistic society, "the making of a claim to a right would be like presenting a check for payment in a social order that lacked the institution of money" (1984, p. 67).

Although MacIntyre insists that we must restore the essence of the Aristotelian view, the idea that "to be a man is to fill a set of roles, each of which has its own point and purpose" (1984, p. 59), he acknowledges the danger in emphasizing an Aristotelian conception of the telos. Aristotle presupposed the social relations of the ancient city-state. MacIntyre rejects the social hierarchy implicit in Aristotle's metaphysical biology, the view that persons, like everything else, have fixed natures in a natural hierarchy of dominance and subordination. We shall analyze MacIntyre's argument that patterns of social domination can be avoided by a communitarian theory that does not incorporate individualism or human rights.

Communitarians reject rights-based liberalism in part because of their interpretation of the liberal approach to the self. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,* Sandel argues that deontological liberalism misunderstands the nature of the self because it deracinates persons from community. Focusing on what he believes is the most powerful and influential liberal theory, Sandel states that Rawls's account of the original position pictures the self as a subject apart from and prior to its purposes and involvements. Rawls portrays an "antecedently individuated subject, standing always at a certain distance from the interests it has" (Sandel, 1982, p. 62). Sandel charges that this deontological view is a flawed account of our moral experience, for it does not recognize that communal bonds are inseparable from moral character and obligation. A perspective which stresses an encumbered self (a "thick" self) is more accurate, Sandel continues, because one's identity and one's obligations are inextricable. However, Sandel does not think the self is entirely constituted by society. The self is "always open, indeed vulnerable, to growth and transformation in the light of revised self-understandings" (Sandel, 1982, p. 172). We shall consider whether Sandel's attack on the liberal approach to the self permits an account of personal autonomy.

In his communitarian alternative to liberal theory, Walzer argues that the ideas of individualism and individual rights are "a bad sociology. They do not provide either a rich or a realistic understanding of social cohesion; nor do they make sense of the lives individuals actually live, and the rights they actually enjoy, within the framework of on-going institutions" (1984, p. 324). He rejects individualism in his view of the goods that are distributed (1984, pp. 323–24). Goods are *social* because they are conceived and created through social processes on the basis of shared meanings. The identities of people depend on "the ways they conceive and create, and then possess and employ social goods" (1983a, p. 8). Moreover, Walzer insists that social goods should be distributed in terms of the shared meanings intrinsic to the goods, not according to universal principles held by some imaginary observer standing outside society. He stresses those shared understandings of the common life that he thinks can accomplish the main purpose of deontological liberalism—the prevention of tyranny. Nancy Rosenblum suggests that Walzer anticipates this chronology of development in the West: "homogeneous communities with a strong sense of moral membership, followed by a falling-off from original unity to differentiation and fragmentation, and then by a new stage of community—postmodern and postliberal" (1984, p. 590). We shall examine Walzer's attempt to establish a communitarian alternative for the protection of persons that is not based on concepts of individualism and of human rights.

Barber argues that these concepts are often used to justify the "thin democracy" of Western liberalism. Liberal democracy contends that people are "generically autonomous beings," that a realistic politics must control behavior by manipulating (not altering) self-interest, and that political authority must provide a framework of representation, hedged by individual rights, within which persons may mutually tolerate their divergent conceptions of the good (1984, pp. 6–18). He argues that because the presuppositions of liberal democracy are untrue to human nature and to optimal political practice, liberal democracy should be replaced by a "strong democracy" that is founded on participation and close-knit citizenship bonds.

Barber supports the value of personal autonomy. He insists, however, that autonomy is not attainable within the liberal view of political activity as contractual arrangements between separate individuals who bear abstract, universal human rights. Autonomy requires participatory democracy: "Without participating in the common life that defines them and in the decision-making that shapes their social habitat, women and men cannot become individuals" (Barber, 1984, p. xv). We shall explore Barber's argument that a participatory communitarian theory can assure autonomy without relying on liberal presuppositions.

## Selfhood and Human Rights

When MacIntyre asserts that belief in human rights is like believing in witches and unicorns, he conflates quite different ideas and misinterprets the reasons for the decline of superstition. The rationalism that brought the modern concept of human rights also weakened the hold of superstition on the Western mind. Superstitions are beliefs that conflict with scientific knowledge. Witchcraft is therefore a superstition because it is based on false notions of causality. MacIntyre does not establish that the belief in human rights is a superstition, since he does not show that it is contradicted by some body of knowledge. Gutmann states that belief in witches "directly competes with belief in physics and loses out in the competition" (1985, p. 315). MacIntyre also could not argue that the belief in human rights contradicts knowledge accumulated in the social sciences, for he insists that there are no scientific *laws* in the social sciences and that there cannot be such laws (1984, pp. 88–108).

By insisting that the good of persons is internal to social roles, MacIntyre denies the moral authority of individual choice. Because roles are generally givens, not inventions of the people who perform them, liberals correctly believe that persons lack moral autonomy if they understand themselves completely in terms of their roles. Although some might argue that persons preserve their autonomy when they *choose* roles to achieve personal goals, MacIntyre does not take this position. He objects to the distinction between the good of persons and their social roles.

MacIntyre believes that he can avoid the hierarchical dominance of persons by rejecting Aristotle's metaphysical biology. But roles are not isolated monads of objective good. They are structured functionally by societal commitments. When roles encapsulate the good of persons, then persons are dominated by the social system in which the roles are performed. Without a source of moral authority outside role requirements, roles are simply vehicles for the societal imposition of values. If persons cannot comprehend themselves except as functional parts of a hierarchy of social roles, then the conception of a role-based human *telos* leads back to the general idea of social relationships in Book 1 of *The Politics*—with or without Aristotle's metaphysical biology.

MacIntyre shrinks from this implication of his theory. "The fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community" (1984, p. 221). However, MacIntyre fails to provide a theory of the self which can

account for a critical stance against society; he does not identify aspects of the self that transcend social roles. Although he favors debate about the meaning of a tradition, we suggest that persons would not argue about this meaning if their identities were entirely bound up with their roles. Societies that protect dissent and argument about tradition do not assume that moral choices are necessarily dictated by role requirements.

In his critique of Rawls's theory, Sandel provides the most searching communitarian attack on the liberal view of the self. He argues that a comprehensive theory must understand persons in terms of their social relationships and that Rawls ignores the communal ties of the encumbered self. He thinks that Rawls's original position and its veil of ignorance do not explain the lives of real people. We insist, however, that Rawls does not attempt such an explanation. Sandel collapses an important distinction between two quite different theoretical projects, and he obstructs our understanding of deontological liberals.

Sandel's interpretation of Rawls's position may result from ambiguities in *A Theory of Justice,* ambiguities which Rawls now acknowledges (1985, p. 238). Although he avoids Kant's idea of the transcendental ego, Rawls does not base his concept of the original position on the notion of a "living" (encumbered) self. Instead, his major arguments presuppose the idea of an "abstract" self. The concept is abstract because it focuses on certain aspects of the person and deliberately excludes others. Rawls stipulates that "the parties to the original position are theoretically defined individuals," and "the motivation of the persons in the original position must not be confused with the motivation of persons in everyday life" (1971, pp. 147–48). He employs an abstract conception of the self not to deny social ties but rather to highlight a feature of moral deliberation—the selection of principles that will constrain persons and communities. In the original position, people would think of themselves as representative rational agents, not as individuals with particular attributes (Rawls, 1985, p. 237). Because "artificial agents" deliberate in the original position, that device does not imply any particular substantive conception of the self (1985, p. 239n). It is, therefore, an "illusion" to think that the description of the parties presupposes "some metaphysical conception of the person, for example, that the essential nature of persons is independent of and prior to their contingent attributes, including their final ends and attachments, and indeed, their character as a whole" (Rawls, 1985, p. 238).

Because the concepts serve different purposes, the idea of the abstract self does not conflict with the idea of the living self. Rawls stresses that "citizens in their personal affairs, or in the internal life of associations to which they belong, may regard their final ends and attachments

in a way very different from . . . the political conception"; their religious, philosophical, and moral "convictions and attachments are part of what we may call their 'nonpublic identity'" (1985, p. 241). While the concept of the abstract self is thus basic to Rawls's theory of legitimate *political* principles, the concept of the living self accounts for social ties, the development of moral character, and communal obligations. Rawls relies on the latter concept when he discusses the education of citizens who will be committed to principles of justice (1971, pp. 453–512).

Sandel's attack focuses on Rawls because of his influence in recent deontological liberalism. However, Rawls's idea of the original position is not the only possible formulation of the concept of the abstract self. He admits that there are "many interpretations of the initial situation" (Rawls, 1971, p. 121). We defend the importance of the concept of the abstract self to the quest for impartiality, not Rawls's particular version of the concept. People act as abstract selves when they make moral choices under constraints that rule out factors irrelevant to the selection of principles of justice. Of course, the idea of the abstract self could be used to support spurious claims to impartiality. Some have argued that Rawls smuggles arbitrary substantive conceptions of the person into the original position (see, e.g., Schaar, 1974, pp. 77–81). Since the concept does not entail an Archimedean position of absolute impartiality, particular formulations of the abstract self must be subject to revision. Nevertheless, when seeking impartiality persons must assume the constraints of an abstract self. An argument about principles of justice must, like a jury, be sequestered from considerations favorable to the interests of particular persons. Bias must constantly be removed in an unending search for more defensible principles.

Some who are committed to impartiality may question the concept of the abstract self. We suggest, however, that the distinctive constraints of an abstract self are so important that theorists who try to avoid the concept often interject it when they strive for impartiality. For example, James Fishkin believes that hypothetical constructs like the original position are not required by liberal theorists, that principles of justice can be distilled from real social conditions. "The idea is to attempt so far as possible to purge the actual on-going society—rather than some imaginary counter-part—of bias and indoctrination" (1985, p. 25). Yet, he thinks that refined motives must be brought to bear on the existing situation. Refinement occurs when "the motivation for choosing principles has been altered or filtered in the interests of impartiality" (Fishkin, 1985, p. 22). When motivations are thus refined, a person adopts the constraints of an abstract self.

The distinction between the abstract self and the living self helps to delineate two concepts of individualism—sociological individualism

and moral individualism. Sociological individualism is a false view of the living self because it assumes that persons are not connected by intrinsic social bonds. This notion of individualism deserves the attack of communitarians, for an empirical case against it has been confirmed in most of the social sciences. Moreover, communitarians often point out that sociological individualism can lead to the claim that authoritarian institutions are needed to produce order among warring individuals (Sandel, 1984, p. 7; Barber, 1984, pp. 109–12). Moral individualism, the conception of persons on which the idea of the abstract self is based, presupposes a capacity for moral choice that cannot be reduced to the performance of given roles. It emphasizes that although people cannot escape social ties, they can critically evaluate shared understandings. Persons who seek impartial principles of justice cannot be totally constituted by their social (and natural) environment, and moral deliberation about justice is not possible if they can only recite prevailing prejudices.

Although Rawls thinks that his idea of the original position does not presuppose a view of the essential nature of the self, Gutmann points out that his theory is incompatible with the notion of a radically situated self (Gutmann, 1985, p. 313). Rawls emphasizes that people in the original position "regard moral personality . . . as the fundamental aspect of the self" (1971, p. 563). Such persons presume that the self may choose the good and have a sense of justice (Rawls, 1985, p. 244). Moreover, liberals are not alone in rejecting the idea of the radically situated self. The communitarian theorists that we examine do so as well. For example, Sandel thinks the self is not completely defined by a particular society. He refers to "the capacity of the self through reflection to participate in the constitution of its identity" (1982, p. 144). As a "self-interpreting being, I am able to reflect on my history and in this sense to distance myself from it, but the distance is always precarious and provisional" (Sandel, 1982, p. 179). Another communitarian, Carole Pateman, is critical of the idea of an abstract self because, like Sandel, she does not distinguish it from the living self. However, she also rejects the radically situated self: "Individuals are not completely submerged in their rules, meanings and oughts, but are also superior to them, and use them as a necessary basis from which they judge, choose and act, and create and change their social relationships" (1986, p. 29). One of Rawls's critics thinks that those who have a "relations-centered conception of the good," that is, communitarians, understand that persons have the "capacity for autonomous self-direction" (Rodenwald, 1985, p. 240). Nevertheless, because communitarians emphasize the living (encumbered) self, they have difficulty providing theoretical grounds for personal autonomy. In order to adopt the constraints of an abstract self, a person must be able to choose principles as a free moral agent.

The moral agent who freely adopts the constraints of an abstract self is not a Kantian "transcendental ego," that ghostly entity conceived as a response to philosophical problems that are insoluble in a mechanistic universe. Rather, the idea of the moral agent articulates the undeniable experience of moral choice. Even a deterministic psychologist like Milton Gordon admits that "as individual human beings engaged in making decisions at virtually every moment . . . we *must* and *do* act as though we had free will" (1978, p. 41). Of course, the exercise of moral choice can either be politically suppressed or permitted. However, the experience cannot be accounted for theoretically by the concept of a self that is engulfed by social and natural determinants.

If the potentiality of persons for free moral choice is grounded in human nature, this capacity provides a foundation for the idea of human rights. Deontological liberals recognize that, since persons cannot exercise essential capacities except under certain conditions, they have a human right to these conditions. For example, Alan Gewirth argues that a "rational agent" (his formulation of the concept of the abstract self) would claim a human right to freedom and well-being (1978, pp. 59–63). In criticizing Gewirth, MacIntyre admits that a rational agent must will the possession of freedom and well-being, but he denies that the presence of a need establishes a right (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 66). Gewirth replies that although every need does not generate a right, such an agent would claim a human right to the freedom and well-being that are *absolutely necessary* for the exercise of rational agency (Gewirth, 1985, p. 745).

Dismissing the idea of the rational agent as a liberal invention, MacIntyre states that human rights have been claimed only in modern individualistic societies. Indeed, he finds no expression in any ancient or medieval language that corresponds to our term "a right" (1984, p. 66). We suggest, however, that, since language derives its meaning from context and function, different words could be used to claim human rights. Gewirth argues that rights-claims can sometimes be expressed as "demands that social institutions be established, as when slaves revolt against their masters, or in other revolutionary situations" (1985, p. 747). His idea of the rational agent thus supports this political argument for the right to freedom and well-being: if a community can provide these goods, then a rational agent will accept the legitimacy of the political system to the extent that it does provide them.

## Spheres of Freedom

MacIntyre and Sandel criticize deontological liberalism but do not offer an alternative communitarian theory to protect freedom. Without presuming individualism or human rights, Walzer and Barber

defend principles and institutions that they believe will prevent tyranny. We consider Walzer's theory in this section and Barber's in the next. Walzer argues that the principles of justice in developed Western societies should be pluralistic because these societies are not hierarchically integrated. "Different social goods ought to be distributed, for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents" (1983a, p. 6). A pluralistic approach to distribution can avoid the loss of freedom, he insists. Since dominance exists when persons who control more of one good or one set of goods use this control to seize another good, we should seek a "complex equality" in the distribution of social goods. "*No social good should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good y merely because they possess y and without regard to the meaning of x*" (1983a, p. 20). Walzer believes that the relative autonomy of social goods would preserve freedom, for persons would be protected by the walls separating the "spheres" of justice and by the principles internal to these spheres.

Walzer's communitarianism is rooted in this fact: "Over a long period of time, shared experiences and cooperative activity of many different kinds shape a common life" (1977, p. 54). The explicit source of moral authority for his theory of justice is not a conception of human rights (Walzer, 1983a, p. xv) but rather the shared understandings of the common life. "It is to these understandings that we must appeal when we make our arguments—all of us, not philosophers alone; for in matters of morality, argument simply is the appeal to common meanings" (1983a, pp. 28–29).

Our examination of Walzer's theory will show that persons can be protected from domination by shared understandings only if the understandings incorporate conceptions of moral individualism and of human rights. Our argument thus differs from that of Charles Fried, who thinks that Walzer reconciles deontological liberalism with communitarianism because he implicitly "affirms a right (a universal right, at that) to form particularistic ties of community" (Fried, 1984, p. 41). We suggest that the liberal conception of the person's right to form communal ties should not be conflated with the communitarian view. While liberals want to protect the right of *individuals* to choose their good, communitarians emphasize the right of the *collectivity* to autonomy. The latter view underlies Walzer's argument that states have a right to territorial integrity and to political sovereignty and that this right is not contingent upon respect by states for their citizens' liberties (1977, p. 54; 1980, pp. 224–28). Of course, virtually no society voluntarily accepts the rule of outsiders; the history of anticolonialism shows that people prefer tyrants from their own community to sometimes less oppressive colonial authorities.

Because Walzer thinks that shared understandings are the proper source of moral authority, he endorses in general terms the right of political communities to have the common life they want. "We do justice to actual men and women by respecting their particular creations" (1983a, p. 314). But what should we think of communities that desire an illiberal common life? Although Walzer focuses on societies with differentiated social goods, he refuses to state that the hierarchical understandings of traditional societies are unjust (1983a, pp. 312–16). Clearly, deontological liberals have no difficulty criticizing such forms of common life. They question the moral authority of any communal order which prohibits the individual's choice of the good. Moreover, within the framework of the liberal state, associations are subject to the purposes of individuals, no matter how intense the social bonds.

Whereas deontological liberals emphasize human rights and communitarians stress shared understandings and common membership, both groups may defend similar policies to free persons from domination. For example, Sandel states that "the civil rights movement of the 1960's might be justified by liberals in the name of human dignity and respect for persons, and by communitarians in the name of recognizing the full membership of fellow citizens wrongly excluded from the common life of the nation" (1984, p. 17). In fact, however, the civil rights movement argued from both a human rights and a citizenship perspective. That movement insisted that constitutional provisions (the Bill of Rights and the Thirteenth to Fifteenth Amendments) which legally guaranteed full membership were embodiments of human rights. Nevertheless, Walzer thinks it is possible to formulate the shared understandings of societies with differentiated social goods so that these understandings, not conceptions of human rights, provide a critique of existing policies. For example, he argues that underlying shared values about citizenship should rule out the "guest worker" policies of European countries. These policies permit entry to persons from poor countries who need the jobs the host citizens refuse. Denied basic civil and political rights, the guest workers are ruled over by "citizen-tyrants" (Walzer, 1983a, pp. 56–59).

An appeal to shared understandings is not persuasive unless the reformulated understandings are actually shared at some level. In the guest worker example, the host citizens *apparently* believe that the entry of the workers is conditional and that justice is achieved by fulfilling the terms of their work permits. However, from a perspective that emphasizes shared understandings, an obligation to admit the workers to full membership must rest on the citizens' *deeper* moral commitments. Walzer argues that a different policy is required by the commitment of the host citizens to life in a democratic political community. Democratic societies

must accept this principle of political justice: "The processes of self-determination through which a democratic state shapes its internal life, must be open, and equally open, to all those men and women who live within its territory, work in the local economy, and are subject to local law" (Walzer, 1983a, p. 60). His approach to membership thus stresses the commitment of citizens to democracy, not their belief in individualism or in human rights.

Walzer's conception of democracy is central to his theory of the political sphere. Democracy is "*the political way* of allocating power. . . . What counts is argument among the citizens. Democracy puts a premium on speech, persuasion, rhetorical skill" (1983a, p. 304). Democracy, therefore, does not require "simple equality" in the exercise of political power. Though there must be an equal chance to talk, citizens who make more persuasive arguments should have more power. Moreover, persons should not have political power simply because they control another social good; nonpolitical goods must be left outside the forum.

In arguing that political power should stem from a relationship based on persuasion, Walzer makes a particular sort of common life necessary to democracy. We suggest, therefore, that his conception of democracy does not endorse whatever common life a people may choose. In effect, he adopts a liberal standard. Liberals insist that persons have a human right to be persuaded in political matters because of their capacity for rationality and moral choice. By arguing that political participants should exclude considerations irrelevant to rational argument, Walzer in effect insists that citizens should assume the constraints of abstract deliberators who ignore their own particular characteristics.

Walzer's discussion of the political sphere shows the importance of the theorist's commitments to the delineation of the boundaries between spheres and to the identification of the principles internal to spheres. He thinks the spheres—and, by implication, the boundaries—are empirical discoveries (1983b, p. 44). However, the boundaries are actually artificial, not natural, for they could be drawn in different places. Moreover, since the spheres are only relatively autonomous, no unbroken wall separates them. Legitimate and illegitimate boundary crossings must be distinguished. William Galston points out that Walzer introduces a transcultural value when he declares that democracy is required in the political sphere (Galston, 1984, p. 333). We add that the source of this value must be Walzer's moral and political commitments. He claims that his commitments about boundary demarcation are part of the basic shared understandings of liberal democracies. Indeed, he acknowledges

that his theory is appropriate to the commitments of *our* society (1983a, p. xiv). We suggest that if the citizens of liberal democracies agree that democratic political power should be distributed only through argument and persuasion, they believe this in part because of their commitment to human rights.

If Walzer were to acknowledge that shared understandings *should* incorporate moral individualism and human rights, he could defend his theory against the widespread interpretation that it is a form of relativism (see Dworkin, 1983, pp. 4, 6; Fishkin, 1984, pp. 756–60). This interpretation is based on statements such as this: "A given society is just if its substantive life is lived . . . in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members" (Walzer, 1983a, p. 313). He even refuses to question the justice of the Indian caste system. We suggest that Walzer's methodology is at odds with his moral convictions. The fields he draws upon, history and anthropology, lead to the discovery of variety in ways of life and in moral outlooks. Nevertheless, his commitment to democracy is incompatible with relativism. This conflict between Walzer's method and his moral commitments was less of a problem for him in *Just and Unjust Wars* because in that work he discerned standards which transcend historical epochs and theoretical orientations (Walzer, 1977, p. 19).

Walzer suggests a possible way around this impasse when he hints at a normative conception of the process by which the shared understandings of a society *should* develop. This standard could provide a critical perspective on particular communal practices. The "attitude of mind" basic to a theory of justice is respect for "those deeper opinions that are the reflections in individual minds, *shaped also by individual thought,* of the social meanings that constitute our common life" (Walzer, 1983a, p. 320; emphasis added). This reference to the contributions of individuals means that persons *ought* to be allowed to participate in the formation of social meanings and that greater respect is due societies which permit and encourage their members to contribute. Such an imperative implies a human right to participate and presupposes moral individualism.

A more explicit recognition of the right of individuals to contribute to the formation and maintenance of their common life would undermine the legitimacy of shared values that deny this right. It would also enable Walzer to provide clearer standards for identifying oppression. Defining tyranny as rule without consent, he argues that when there are widely accepted social meanings there is no tyranny. But if societies with broadly accepted social meanings are just, then tyranny does not exist unless people *believe* they are oppressed. Surely this cannot be true, as a reference to slavery will show. Walzer views slavery as an example of

tyranny because "slaves and masters do not inhabit a world of shared meanings" (1983a, p. 250n). However, even though captured slaves may not have accepted their condition, many who were born into slavery took their status for granted. Such slaves were no less subject to tyranny because they shared some understandings with their owners. The feelings of slaves about their situation are irrelevant to an evaluation of their condition. Similarly, if a person felt enslaved but actually was not owned by another, we would not call him or her a slave except in some metaphorical sense. Walzer could extricate himself from this awkward position by explicitly defending the human right to contribute to shared understandings. Such an argument would incorporate essential elements of deontological liberalism.

### Participation and Autonomy

In Barber's powerful defense of participatory communitarianism ("strong democracy"), he acknowledges the historical role of the concept of natural rights in protecting persons from tyranny (1984, p. 100). But this concept "is at best a fiction . . . and loses most of its credibility and all of its utility when it is offered as a real and sufficient psychosociological foundation on which real women and men can build meaningful, free lives within a community" (Barber, 1984, p. 100). Barber believes that the idea of individualistic rights impedes the emergence of a community which would be more effective than liberal ("thin") democracy in fostering personal autonomy. Liberal democracy presumes radical individualism, understanding persons as "solitary, as hedonistic and prudential, and as social only to the extent required by the quest for preservation and liberty in an adversary world of scarcity" (Barber, 1984, p. 213). In Barber's view, liberalism assumes that only private interests are served by political institutions. As long as people see themselves through liberal eyes and engage in politics through representative institutions, they will never be free: "Men and women who are not directly responsible through common deliberation, common decision, and common action for the policies that determine their common lives are not really free at all" (Barber, 1984, pp. 145–46).

Like other participatory democrats, Barber insists that persons lose autonomy in liberal democracies because only those who find political action to be profitable will continuously participate. Since most people focus on their private interests, and since only the wealthy and powerful perceive high stakes in government action or inaction, average citizens do little other than cast occasional ballots. They experience a loss of power and thus a loss of freedom. Atomistic individualism must be overcome because people become genuinely free "by forging a common

consciousness. The road to autonomy leads through not around commonality" (1984, p. 217). Strong democracy creates a participatory process of talk, decision, and action which brings autonomy as private interests are transcended. Democratic politics is "the art of engaging strangers in talk and of stimulating in them an artificial kinship made in equal parts of empathy, common cause, and enlightened self-interest" (1984, p. 189).

Barber is sensitive to liberal fears that participatory communitarianism will lead to the loss of freedom. He distinguishes strong democracy from "unitary" democracy, which "calls for all divisive issues to be settled unanimously through the organic will of a homogeneous or even monolithic community—often identified symbolically as a race or nation or people or communal will" (1984, p. 148). Unitary democracy requires agreement on beliefs, values, and ends; its main virtue is fraternity. Barber understands that whatever the merits of primitive unitary communities, modern unitary societies employ force to gain consensus. In contrast, he insists that the ground of strong democracy is creative consensus; its primary virtue is reciprocal respect and empathy. Genuine personal autonomy is attained as citizens "reformulate their interests, purposes, norms, and plans in a mutualistic language of public goods" (1984, p. 171).

We suggest that in spite of his attack on liberal theory, Barber can argue that his version of participatory democracy preserves autonomy because he incorporates liberal presuppositions. However, he does not clearly distinguish the two forms of individualism. When he attacks the liberal conception of the self, he criticizes competitive individualism, the sociological individualism that modern social science has discredited. It is this conception of persons that reduces participation. But when he incorporates autonomy into strong democracy, Barber adopts moral individualism, the conception of persons as free moral agents. He replaces sociological individualism with a dialectical conception of the relationship between persons and society. There is an ongoing interaction "by which world and man together shape each other" (Barber, 1984, p. 214); persons contribute to their development through cooperative response to the preexisting human world. In strong democracy, individuals are transformed when the citizens' "vision of their own freedom has been enlarged to include others" (Barber, 1984, p. 232). We believe that this transformation in persons incorporates moral individualism, for Barber emphasizes the capacity for free decision. "Freedom is integral to politics, and for there to be a politics there must be a living notion of the free, choosing will" (1984, p. 126). He states that although people

are not free by nature, they become free in the right kind of political and social setting (1984, p. 216).

If people did not naturally possess an inborn capacity for autonomous self-direction, as liberals argue, how could autonomy flourish in a participatory democracy? In a Kantian sense, persons commit themselves to values or principles that create mutual obligations, but individual moral selves still exist. If they did not, the abandonment of representative institutions would lead to unitary democracy rather than to Barber's strong democracy. In unitary democracy "the individual citizen achieves his civic identity through merging his self with the collectivity, that is to say through self-abandonment" (Barber, 1984, p. 148). Barber presupposes moral individualism in stating that the healthy politics of strong democracy will "leave room for the expression of distrust, dissent, or just plain opposition" (1984, p. 192). We suggest that whereas Rousseau wanted citizens whose arguments were rejected by the assembly to believe that they had been mistaken throughout the debate (Rousseau, 1967, p. 113), Barber insists that losing minorities have a right to think they had been correct all the while. Barber assumes that the common will forged in strong democracy must permit persons to be autonomous moral agents.

Deontological liberals stress that the freedom of individual moral agents must be institutionally protected. Barber repeats the liberal question: "If there is no appeal to prior standards, who can legitimately prevent a people from democratically abdicating its own right to self-rule" (1984, p. 159)? His answer is that while a constitutional bill of rights may be useful in constraining majorities in representative democracies, this danger can be better prevented by public discourse in strong democracy (1984, p. 160). We acknowledge that in small-scale, informal communities persons may find stronger protections in participatory discourse than in legal rights. However, Barber's proposals would not lead to a politics of small-scale informality. The most local political unit would be the neighborhood assembly with from 5,000 to 25,000 members (Barber, 1984, p. 269). Although the incremental establishment of participatory institutions might strengthen democratic politics, in large, heterogeneous societies political discussion and debate would need to be legally protected. Barber recognizes that the democratic process must be guarded, for he would set up the office of Facilitator to protect the rules of fair discussion (1984, p. 272). Nevertheless, to be effective over time, the legal rules protecting free discussion must be grounded in a widely shared, principled commitment to the human right of persons to dissent from the prevailing view of the good.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the commitment of deontological liberals to moral individualism and to human rights can withstand the communitarian critique. Moreover, although tensions between communitarianism and liberalism will remain, their differences could be narrowed. While retaining moral individualism, liberals should utilize sociological individualism only to describe a society characterized by competition between possessive individuals, not to portray the essential nature of persons. As communitarians realize, sociological individualism cannot account for social relationships or foster shared purposes. For their part, communitarians should accept moral individualism as a theoretical foundation for personal autonomy.

Even if they agree that persons have the capacity to choose principles as free moral agents, communitarians will continue to believe that wide agreement about the good is essential to the shared understandings of a common life. And liberals will continue to fear that in any large society the demand for broad agreement may lead to coerced conformity. Rawls and Gutmann express the liberal view that freedom is necessary because of disagreements about the good life, not because of selfish individualism (Rawls, 1985, p. 245; Gutmann, 1985, p. 314). Nevertheless, the liberal commitment to the right of individuals to choose the good may be at least partially accommodated by communitarians under these conditions: the community's definition of the good—the common good—must leave considerable space for persons to choose an individual good; a wide variety of voluntary communities must be permitted at the subpolitical level; moreover, dissent by individuals from the dominant communal conception of the good must be protected, and the dissenters must be respected as equal members of the community.

Communitarians should recognize that, since actual communities are not necessarily created by people who act as responsible moral agents, societies with strong communal bonds must guard against the tyrannical imposition of dominant prejudices. Likewise, liberals should acknowledge that people will act as selfish individuals unless they are drawn out of their private worlds within a communal order with some shared conception of the good. Political participation that is based on the commitment to a common membership can both broaden the citizens' consensus about the good and help educate them to be responsible moral agents.

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