

Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Good: A Dialogue on Communitarianism and Classical Liberalism

Amitai Etzioni and Jonathan Marks

The following dialogue between Jonathan Marks, a historian of political thought, and Amitai Etzioni, the editor of The Responsive Community, was conducted by email over the course of several months.

AMITAI ETZIONI: Professor Marks, you have written in the past that responsive or new communitarianism, which stresses the importance of values over laws and of dialogues over coercion, is quite compatible with liberalism. But liberals, while they mainly oppose the imposition of shared moral formulations of the good by the state, also fear socially shared moral understandings. They fear that such shared moral values will spill over into legislation and hence coercion, and believe that social pressure can itself be coercive. Hence they tend to hold that it is best for each person to formulate his own conception of the good.

JONATHAN MARKS: It is true that certain contemporary liberals, like John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, sometimes write as if liberal societies must not side with any one conception of the good life. The liberal tradition, however, is another matter. John Locke knew well that citizens of liberal commercial societies have to understand peace, prosperity, and freedom as, at least in part, common goods to be secured through a common undertaking. He knew the importance of values and devoted his works not only to describing new liberal institutions, but also to persuading his audience to adopt the new values that would support and ease the work of such institutions. John Stuart Mill, who was acutely aware of the power of majority

opinion, nonetheless did not attempt to do away with shared moral understandings. Instead, he championed a new moral understanding that celebrated not only philosophers and scientists, but human beings altogether as thinkers mutually engaged in the pursuit of the truth and of the best ways of life. Mill consequently praised both theoretical and practical innovators, and he ridiculed traditionalists. Anticipating the communitarian emphasis on moral dialogue, he imagined nothing less than an intellectually active people. Although Locke and Mill wrote a long time ago, their formulations of liberalism, unlike those of Rawls and Dworkin, have made lasting and deep impressions on liberal thought and discourse. It therefore seems to me that communitarians ought to turn their attention more than they have thus far to the liberal tradition and consider whether or not it really shares the deficiencies of contemporary liberal theory.

AE: Let's assume for the moment that the views you quote represent "true" or real liberalism, at least in its classical form, as distinct from either Dworkin or Rawls. Still, the values Locke does champion do not concern the moral fabric of society, its moral culture, and they tend to be rather individualistic. Peace is, of course, the core value for Locke, but he prioritizes it out of concern for the individual's well-being and not as some kind of common good. The same holds for prosperity. Liberty is liberalism's core value, often the one that justifies all others. Liberalism focuses on the rights individuals have and on preventing the state from infringing upon them rather than on duties or responsibilities they have to the common good.

Mill explicitly refuses to accord any standing to values that refer to the community rather than to individuals. Mocking traditionalists and cheering innovators may still make you a sterling liberal as long as you're cheering liberty and rights, and paying no attention to the common good. Communitarians are not against liberty, but they seek to balance it with concern for other shared goods.

JM: I don't want to deny that liberalism is profoundly individualistic. But I think liberal values nonetheless concern the moral fabric of society and the common good. The new moral understanding Mill champions is guided by a new moral standard: the permanent interests of man as a progressive being. The pursuit of the truth and of the best ways of life is a collective undertaking, not only of individuals

but also of generations. Each generation is responsible for increasing humanity's stock of uncontested truths and for exposing falsehoods. Closed-mindedness is, for Mill, both a moral failing and an intellectual one, as well as a disservice to oneself and to others. Similarly, there is a moral dimension to Locke's praise of the rational and industrious and his condemnation of the quarrelsome and contentious. The rational and industrious are praiseworthy not merely because they are efficient maximizers of profit, but also because their work draws human beings out of a state of relative poverty and brutishness and into a state of relative prosperity and civilization. The quarrelsome and contentious are blameworthy not because they never prosper—they frequently do—but because they are troublemakers who stand in the way of prosperity and civilization. They stand, in other words, in the way of the common good.

Also, I think it is important not to equate liberalism's emphasis on rights with indifference to responsibility or virtue. Liberal citizenship requires vigilance to detect threats to freedom and courage to fight them off. It requires moderation because we will often be tempted to disregard the rule of law, the rights of others, and the importance of peace in order to advance our own interests or partisan convictions. Such virtues may be less dazzling than Spartan virtues, but they are not unimpressive. I find Steven Kautz's portrayal of the liberal person in *Liberalism and Community* entirely persuasive on that point.

AE: Your last comment moves us even closer to what is needed—distinguishing between personal and social virtues, between liberal and communitarian ones. To define them first, what some liberals call virtues are personal attributes associated with being a good citizen (e.g., voting, keeping up with public affairs, serving on a jury) and with enabling a society whose bonds are based on a very thin, if any, shared moral culture to function (tolerance, self-restraint, open-mindedness). Or virtues are attributes that help each individual to prosper (e.g., industriousness). (Social conservatives and communitarians might well be reluctant to call these virtues in the first place.)

In any case, what is lacking here is the moral foundation for other-regard and for the common good, for caring and sharing, for making sacrifices for our friends and other members of the community. How can a liberal justify the obligation to take care of our aging

parents or to protect the environment for future generations? How can a liberal justify a relatively high and rising minimum wage, not as something that benefits the economy and hence oneself, but as necessary for a minimal amount of social justice? (You may say Rawls does, but aside from the fact that he greatly differs here from all the liberals that preceded him, his “basis” is again the individual’s interest—what if I find myself in this position?—not a moral one.) How can a liberal justify giving foreign aid even if it does not serve us a bit—not because it is the “rational” thing to do but because it is a good act?

You mention Spartan virtues to contrast them with liberal values, which to reiterate are thin and citizen-centered (rather than being centered on being a member of a good society), and you seem to suggest that communitarians do hold Spartan values—that is, highly austere, authoritarian, and aggressive ones. Reference to Spartan values helps clarify that once one recognizes the category of shared moral understanding and social virtues, one must make other distinctions, because not all shared values are communitarian. Two characteristics separate communitarian shared values from social conservative and authoritarian ones (including theocratic ones such as those of fundamentalists). First, communitarianism advocates a core of shared values, rather than a broad and inclusive body of religious or ideological tenets that delineate what one ought to eat and ought not to drink, the direction in which to bow to God, when one can have sex, and so on, which makes them oppressive and leaves little room for individual freedom. Second, authoritarian values tend to be coercive while communitarianism emphasizes the role of persuasion. It is not an accident that communitarian values are thicker than liberal ones but much less encompassing than social conservative (not to mention fundamentalist) ones and that they rely on persuasion. This reflects that responsive communitarians favor a balance between autonomy and social order, and do not merely value order.

JM: It is true that liberalism derives duties from rights. Nonetheless, liberalism does not promote indifference to others. The quintessential liberal premise is the natural equality and freedom of human beings, which the revolutionaries of 1776 affirmed when they declared that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That declaration within the Declaration applies not

just to members of our family or tribe, but to everyone. When Americans reflect on it, they extend their moral horizon to encompass the whole of humanity and the dignity of all human beings. When they embrace this declaration, they embrace a moral and political principle that extends beyond their own borders and lifetimes. This universalism of the Declaration, which responsive communitarians share but many communitarians reject, is the basis of the sentiment and the virtue of humanity. If humanity does not make liberals as charitable as good Christians, it does, at least, restrain them from being unjust, cruel, and indifferent to others. I should add that liberals, impressed as they are with the capacity of reason to relieve political, economic, and physical ills, are disposed to act energetically on their humane sentiments and their interests to relieve such ills. I cannot say what the liberal virtue of humanity dictates about wages, the environment, or foreign aid, but it does not leave liberals unconcerned about workers, future generations, or poor nations.

That said, you are right that liberalism teaches rational self-interest more than anything else. The liberal abhors cruelty, for example, not only because he is humane, but to a great extent because of the threat the cruel pose to him and to the community, which he values insofar as his happiness depends on it. The liberal worries about the poor not only because of his humanity, but to a great extent because of the threat that the conflict between the rich and the poor poses to the community and thus to him. Liberal morality never breaks free of a prudent regard for one's own good or security, but it seems to me that one cannot ask more of human nature. Besides, even the virtue of humanity must be restrained if it is not to eventuate in utopian and dangerous policies.

I am describing liberalism in the best case. I agree with critics from Tocqueville on who argue that liberalism, left to its own devices, can foster narrow and ignoble selfishness. I even agree that liberals sometimes need to take counsel from other philosophic and political traditions to remedy liberalism's deficiencies; you may well be right, for example, that liberalism is bad at accounting for friendship. But I also think that we must not deny liberalism's revolutionary and fragile achievement, an achievement of both principle and practice. One surely denies this achievement when one claims that liberalism

is morally empty and even corrosive, as communitarians, in my view, too often imply. I know from your essay “The Monochrome Society” that you think the moral framework that holds together American society is the American creed, which includes the Constitution and Bill of Rights, as well as tolerance. I think it is hard to deny that the American creed owes much to liberalism, even if J. G. A. Pocock and company are right to argue that previous historians overstated liberalism’s influence, and understated republicanism’s influence, on the Founders. But if this is so, how can one maintain that liberalism is thin?

AE: You are very eloquent regarding liberals’ regard for others, including all human beings. But isn’t there a difference between acknowledging that all human beings have certain rights and suggesting that we have some obligations toward them, responsibilities for them? One may say that respecting rights is an obligation, but this merely takes two terms and pretends that there is no difference between them. From the claim that, say, everyone has a right to free speech, it follows that I should not act to curb it, but do I have an obligation to promote a world in which free speech can flourish? I should not violate anyone’s right to vote, but do I have a duty to promote democracy? Moreover, the rights about which we are speaking are legal and political, not social and economic. Hence they do not encompass any duties to poor people, the sick, and other vulnerable members of humanity. You say liberals are not “as charitable as good Christians”; are there any *liberal reasons* for one to be charitable at all? You speak about the rights of specific individuals, not concern for the common good, not a commitment to protect, for example, the environment. Hence, as you in effect acknowledge in the second part of your comment, there is a great need for a major communitarian wing to be added to the liberal construction.

I find your comment about human nature particularly helpful. If people were indeed selfish by nature, made self-centered by their Creator, communitarian philosophy would be naive whistling in the dark, if not delusional. However, human beings are actually social creatures by nature; they are bound to one another profoundly. They are more content and flourish better when they are members in good standing of families and communities. Therefore, other-regarding

acts are neither altruistic nor a way of serving one's own interests, but a form of mutuality in which both sides—or better, all sides—gain simultaneously. Loving our children, spouses, parents, and, in less profound ways, our friends and other community members—and discharging our moral duties—makes us better. A liberal may say (as some economists do) that loving and acting in line with one's moral commitments is self-interested because such acts yield psychic benefits for the actor. But if one equates other-regarding acts—staying up nights to help a sick child, spouse, or friend, sitting with someone during chemotherapy, sharing grief, and so on—with selling people Tupperware, then we are flattening all important distinctions in human life and reducing them to one simplistic notion. Other-regarding acts (including not only those performed for specific persons, but also those performed for the common good and general respect for moral values) feel very different from self-regarding acts (as we know from introspection), entail clearly distinguishable forms of behavior, and have radically different consequences.

So far my comments have been generic. Let me put them in the context of American history. While the Constitution provides the basic framework that holds together American society, it is not enough. It is true that the American creed owes much to liberalism, but as Tocqueville and others have pointed out, a successful American democratic system needs the support of an underlying civic morality. Even amidst the religious and economic diversity of 18th-century America, the Framers could count on a largely homogenous moral culture to cultivate a shared set of goods. The liberalism embodied in our political system was designed to adjudicate among fewer and stronger influences on moral life than we have today.

In the absence of a strong sense of the common good, liberalism itself has transformed into an ideology with its own understanding of the good—a point you admit when you state that it teaches rational self-interest. As such, a philosophy that originally presumed a neutral stance with regard to questions of the good has increasingly come to embrace liberty and rational self-interest as goods in and of themselves. Liberalism as a system cultivates the virtues appropriate to the successful negotiation of that system, and the result has been an overemphasis on individual liberty and self-interest. As those virtues

become entrenched and institutionalized in organizations such as the ACLU, any attempt to shore up the shared moral foundation of a society is interpreted as a threat to individual liberty.

You presume that we cannot expect more of people than rational self-interest, but I would argue that in the past we did just that. Both political and religious systems have asked adherents to sacrifice self-interest for the greater good, often without even a long-term, tangible reward for the one sacrificing. While responsive communitarians emphatically do not want a return to the old religious hegemony or any kind of political authoritarianism, we do believe that shared understanding of the good is possible across society and that human nature can be cultivated to recognize—and even make sacrifices for—that good. Human nature, then, is malleable, but in the moral cacophony encouraged by liberalism’s dominant approach to rational self-interest, it is difficult to find and then cultivate an understanding of the common good. You mention, for instance, that liberalism would need to turn to other traditions to account for friendship. This is an important deficiency, for when liberalism oversteps its bounds and operates as not just a *political* but a *moral* system, the conditions for civil society recognized as early as Aristotle—namely, friendship and broader affect-laden relationships—begin to erode. That erosion has progressed to a crisis point today.

JM: I appreciate your willingness to discuss human nature. One of the many things that distinguishes your thinking from, say, Benjamin Barber’s, or Michael Sandel’s, is your insistence that the argument for community must be founded on a definite understanding of human nature and even on self-evident truths. It seems to me that responsive communitarians and liberals in the tradition I have described can and should make common cause against relativism, which denies that one can have a serious debate about human nature and self-evident truths.

Let me point out one other matter I think we agree about. The well-being of liberal societies requires contributions from other traditions. Tocqueville is a model for me as he appears to be for you. He saw clearly and early on that modern democracy, what we call liberal democracy, has, like any political order, characteristic vices, and that a tendency toward radical individualism is among the most impor-

tant of these. He saw that liberal democracies are in need of outside help, from religion for example, to temper their individualism and strengthen the moral bonds their health requires. As the example of religion suggests, there are different kinds of outside help, and you have engaged in spirited debates with social conservatives about what kind is most likely to preserve a balance between autonomy and order.

I think our most important disagreement concerns your claim that liberalism was originally intended to be neutral about the good life. Let me give you one more example from Locke, which also places liberalism in a historical context. Locke wrote "A Letter Concerning Toleration" in an England and Europe in which religious differences provoked wars within and between states. To attempt to soften those differences, Locke could not appeal to self-interest alone. The duty to convert unbelievers could hardly be abandoned for consideration of worldly self-interest. Locke therefore insisted, in effect, that God himself decrees that each individual should investigate and decide for himself what true religion is, that every individual is his own supreme and absolute authority in religious matters, and that the care for an individual's salvation finally belongs to the individual alone. To place such extraordinary weight on the side of individuals rationally investigating and judging the truth for themselves, and deciding what to believe and do accordingly, is hardly to be neutral on the question of the good life. While Locke leaves it to individuals to decide what religion to choose, he insures that all religious believers, if they are persuaded by him, will share a common moral understanding according to which human dignity depends upon accepting only that authority to which one freely consents. Lockean liberalism, while it does not outlaw the belief that one is not capable of judging the truth and that submitting to the authority of others is the only route to salvation, is plainly not neutral with respect to this belief or the way of life it implies. This failure of neutrality is not, in my view, accidental, but quite deliberate. Locke thought his understanding of human dignity was both better at securing peace and simply better than rival views. Madison and Jefferson, by the way, followed Locke in their own writing about religion in the American context.

But does the moral understanding liberalism promotes entail obligations to others? I think that it does. If I am right that liberals

believe not only in peace and prosperity but also in the dignity of all human beings, then only a hypocritical liberal would insist that he has only negative duties. Only a hypocritical liberal would insist that, to use your example, he can be concerned only with not violating others' right to free speech and need not promote a world in which free speech can flourish, or that he can be concerned only with not violating rights and need not promote a world in which people can exercise their rights. It is true that liberals emphasize rights and rational self-interest over duties, regarding this emphasis as the surest direct safeguard of dignity and the surest route to the peaceful, prosperous, industrious, and intellectually active society in which human beings can lead civilized lives. It is also true that liberals will consequently, as I mentioned, be less charitable than good Christians and less well-disposed toward an ethic of sharing and caring than good communitarians. But this stance does not lead liberals to suppose that refraining from violating rights is the sum total of human virtue or that refraining from violating rights suffices for securing human dignity.

I agree with you that the conditions for civil society have eroded and that this erosion must be addressed. However, if the deficiencies of liberalism must take some of the blame for this lamentable state of affairs, I think that neglect of the liberal tradition, even among people who today call themselves liberals, deserves some of the blame, too. That is why, even though I share your opposition to Rawls and Dworkin and resist, just as you do, the reductionism of the economists you mentioned, I am so eager to distinguish the liberal tradition as a whole from these relatively recent and impoverished manifestations of it. Classical liberals and responsive communitarians, however much they disagree about the desired content of a shared moral understanding in the United States, are mutually concerned with reviving serious thinking about such a moral understanding.

AE: This is a good place to close. You are right that we have *relatively* little reason to quarrel with classical liberals. Our main differences, at least concerning shared formulations of the good, are with contemporary liberals. Some liberals hold out for complete state neutrality and are so fearful that socially shared understandings will lead to state-imposed ones that they oppose the former in addition to the latter. Indeed, there is a very regrettable tendency to treat state and society

as if they were one and the same thing, as if citizenship and membership in society were synonymous. Finally, there are a fair number of liberals who advocate a thin shared conception of the good; they see the merit of some virtues but either tie them to the liberal agenda and not to the common good (e.g., tying them to following public affairs and thinking critically) or connect them to a rather limited list of values (e.g., security). In any case, what is wrong with having two schools that differ and thus help highlight the core issues we face?

What Is Public Service?

In a recent study by Paul C. Light of the Brookings Institution, college seniors were asked to define “public service.” According to the study:

Seniors defined public service almost entirely in terms of helping people. Asked what the words “public service” meant to them, 36 percent said helping people, 30 percent said helping the community, nation, or society, and 15 percent said doing something selfless. Only five percent defined public service as working for government or the military, and just two percent said working for a nonprofit.

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