

Particularistic Obligations: A Communitarian Examination

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If three children go hungry in a community, the members of many such communities are more distressed than if thousands starve in some far-away country. Moreover, people not only care more about members of their own communities, but they maintain that they are justified in doing so, that one has a higher level of obligation to one's "own kind" than to all others. Are such particularistic obligations justified, and on what grounds?

This question has been the subject of an immense amount of deliberation, which is not reviewed here. This exploration is limited to an examination of communitarian justifications for particularistic obligations, and only to those in a societal rather than political context. That is, it concerns the obligations of members of communities, not those of citizens of states.

Constitutive Arguments: Obligations We Owe Our Makers

Arguably the strongest communitarian argument in support of particularistic obligations is that they are an essential part of that which constitutes us. On closer examination, one notes that there are a couple of arguments that shade into one another but are distinct.

(a) Community is essential for our composition

For the purpose of this essay, I take for granted that particularistic relationships such as friendship, neighborliness, and love are good in

themselves. (Note that I do not assume that these values trump all others, including universal obligations.) As already suggested, these valued relationships bestow a measure of moral legitimation on the obligations that these relationships entail. However, before arguing that communities also accord such legitimation to particularistic obligations, one cannot take it for granted that communities per se are good. Indeed, many liberals view them rather critically as being ascribed (membership being predetermined at birth and hence at least initially involuntary), authoritarian, and oppressive. Hence, the value of communities—and which kinds of communities are valuable—and the normative obligations that follow need to be carefully scrutinized. To proceed, one must first define community. The definition of community here has two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chain-like individual relationships); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, to a particular culture.

One should note that there is a strong tendency to think about communities as if they were what social scientists call a dichotomous variable rather than a continuous one, one which can vary greatly in its thickness rather than merely being present or absent. Mountains of data was recently reviewed and augmented by Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama, and long before them by Robert Bellah and his associates, and scores upon scores of other sociologists from Ferdinand Tönnies, Emile Durkheim, and Martin Buber on. It all shows that when there is little or no community, people suffer physically (e.g., are more prone to have a great variety of major illnesses including heart attacks, ulcers, and high blood pressure, as well as recover from illness more slowly) and psychologically (e.g., are more prone to be depressed, have low self-esteem, or be disoriented). The absence of sufficient communal bonds is also a major reason why people feel detached, alienated, and powerless and either withdraw or act out in antisocial ways including joining gangs and militias (to find community) or abusing drugs and alcohol or each other.

One may object: Are there not fully functional individuals who are not members of any communities? The well-documented social science response is that when people are truly isolated, cut off from a

fabric of bonds of affection and shared values, they are deeply diminished. Indeed, it is the mark of the modern self that its development is stunted and truncated, that it shows the ill effects of deficient connectedness as well as moral anomie. Others have noted that modern loneliness makes people neurotic, selfish, or narcissistic.

In short, communities are essential for our full constitution. We can *survive* without them, but we can neither achieve nor sustain a full measure of what is considered a “fully functioning” human being without some measure of community. And thicker communities bode well for our constitution, although excessive community causes ills of its own.

(b) Identity is particularistic

Identity is profoundly tied to communities, and thus to particularistic obligations. As Joseph de Maistre put it, “There is no such thing as *man* in the world. In the course of my life I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians etc.; I know, too, thanks to Montesquieu, *that one can be a Persian*. But as for *man*, I declare that I have never met him in my life; if he exists, he is unknown to me.” We do not know who we are, which culture is ours, which heroes we ought to emulate, which demons we must avoid, what our origins are and much of our fate, unless we are linked up with one community or another (or with several).

Michael Sandel puts it well when he writes that we cannot understand ourselves but “as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic.” Charles Taylor observes that:

People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic, or an anarchist. Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to, as an Armenian, say, or a Québécois. What they are saying by this is that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. Put counterfactually, they are saying that were they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn't know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.

There is a tendency to collapse the contributions that community (and the particularistic obligations it entails) makes to our composition as humans with those it makes to our individual identities. The difference is that the first kind of contributions are to our existence as full-fledged human beings; the second concerns our sorting out what kind of human beings we are. The distinction is akin to the difference between learning to walk and determining in which direction we shall walk. The first concerns our physical and psychological health, our general capacity to function. The second concerns which particular relationships (out of a large universe of possible ones) in which we will become more deeply invested (say our ethnic group or our class, our country of origin or the one in which we currently live). It concerns how we are going to define ourselves (say, as conformist or rebellious), and which of the values that we find around us we shall particularly embrace to the point that they are going to become an integral part of our self. True, these two are connected: if our capacity to function is diminished, this will affect our ability to form and sustain our identity as well as which identity we shall be inclined to develop—and a strong identity will help nurture our ability to function. However, the fact that these two are mutually supportive does not render them a distinction without a difference.

Insofar as one's identity as a member of a community is constitutive of one's basic being as a moral agent, one has a responsibility to nurture the identity of the community itself through participation in its practices, concern for its past, present, and future members, and protection of its resources. Such responsibility may engender particularistic concern for the community above and beyond more universal obligations, and, in fact, one's understanding of universal moral obligations is itself a product of the community's role in identity formation.

To put it differently, particularistic obligations reflect a moral obligation to nurture the social environment in which people can develop, what might be called a "moral ecology." They compel us to apply to the social realm the environmental idea of stewardship toward nature, the notion that we are obligated at least not to leave the social ecology in a worse condition for future generations than it was when bequeathed to us. This argument is a specific application of

a general moral position that endorses symmetry: one could not reasonably claim that we are generally entitled (as distinct from occasionally or under special conditions, e.g., when on one's death-bed) to take and not to give, to diminish the total good and not to participate in refurbishing it, within the limits of our relative ability to do so.

I cannot stress enough that the obligation of stewardship toward the moral ecology does not arise because I will be harmed if I do not nurture it. There may be a sufficient stock of moral and social fortitude provided by others that the societal fabric may be sustained for a while even if I draw it down without then shoring it up (just as if I pollute a river, I may not be short of drinking water). Stewardship toward the social ecology arises because it is immoral to take and not to give, to diminish and not to restore (although how much I take and give depends on numerous conditions).

Although (partial) loss of community is one of the defining characteristics of modernity, there is no reason to overlook the fact that just as we can experience diminished community, we can face excessive communality. This is the case in Japan, where individuality is suppressed, rights are neglected, and autonomy is severely curbed. Community is to be considered as a good only when its social order is balanced with carefully laid protections of autonomy, when particularistic obligations are balanced with universal ones, especially to protect basic individual rights. In short, although communities and the particularistic obligations they entail are essential to our full functionality, both can be excessive.

Lawrence Blum, in commenting on this essay in a letter written in September 2001, posed a pivotal question. He asked whether these arguments apply to all communities, or only to good ones. Do people have obligations to bad communities, or only to those that "realize important human goods?" One possible response, Blum suggested, is to hold that "some communities will be sustaining for each individual, and particularistic obligations are being defended only in the sense that *each* individual will have *some* such obligations, not that any *specific forms* of such obligations (neighborhood, ethnic, etc.) are being defended *in general*."

Numerous social scientists and some communitarian philosophers would part ways here (this author included). Social scientists

tend to argue that antisocial communities (say, gangs) may be as sustaining as pro-social ones. Some communitarians, Michael Walzer for instance, have argued that communities are the final arbiters of what is good. I hold that communities do not have the final word about what is good, and that obligations they articulate are valid only if they do not violate what is otherwise justified as good (best deontologically). Further elaboration of this point requires a whole separate examination of how one separates true from false articulations of obligations (or good from bad ones) and whether they are universal or particularistic, this examination cannot be undertaken here.

Human Betterment

So far, I have made the argument that communities (and the particularistic obligations they entail) are essential for our constitution, for our ability to function as full human beings and as persons oriented by a particular identity. Next, I advance the argument that communities help make us into better people than we would be otherwise.

(a) Particularism nurtures free agency and universalism

Communities (when thick but not excessive) help make us relatively free agents and rational beings and can help us to live up to universal obligations. As Erich Fromm put it in his *Escape from Freedom*, and as numerous studies of behavior in crowds have shown, isolated people tend to be irrational, impulsive, and open to demagogical appeals and totalitarian movements. One could argue that these movements have risen only in societies and periods in which social integration has been greatly weakened. In contrast, as Tocqueville and the enormous literature on civil society holds, people well-woven into communities (including families and voluntary associations) are able to resist pressures by governments and the seductive appeal of demagogues. Moreover, community members are much more likely to have the psychological integrity and fortitude required for people to be able to engage in reasoned deliberations, make rational choices, act on judgment rather than on impulse, and act as relatively free agents. (I write “relatively” because even under ideal social conditions people can only approximate the liberal ideal,

and not very closely, but they certainly cannot do so absent particularistic relations.)

Liberals fear that communities inherently oppress individuality, as they often did in earlier periods and still do in some parts of the world. This fear is justified in reference to excessively thick and authoritarian communities, which existed mainly in earlier periods or in nonliberal societies, although even relatively thin communities tend to restrict the individuality of their members to some extent. Nonetheless, liberalism itself is dependent on the kind of persons found in communities.

David B. Wong adds that to learn to be duty-bound and to act universally, we first must have relationships of trust with others (i.e., particularistic relations). We are not born with universal obligations; they must be taught. We acquire respect for them from parents, educators, religious figures, spiritual leaders, or heads of social movements—all people with whom we have an intense particularistic involvement.

All this is especially evident when we consider our condition as children. Without those who cared for us, we would not have developed into “individuals,” but we would crawl on all fours and bark, be inarticulate and aggressive, snarling at each other. (This is not some Hobbesian heuristic but a statement based on empirical studies by Curtiss, Itard, Lane and Pillard, Singh and Zingg, and Candland.) Even as mature adults we require continued bonding with others to sustain our values in general, our universal commitments included.

(b) Communities help minimize the state (especially its application of coercion)

Communities' introduction and reenforcement of our moral commitments help make for a strong measure of a voluntary social order. There is a tendency to assume that once people are brought up properly, by strong families and good schools, possibly backed up by churches or other places of worship, they will be men and women of virtue. Actually, social science data leave little room for doubt that unless people's moral commitments are continually reenforced, they will deteriorate. The most effective way to reenforce them builds on the fact that people have a very powerful need for continuous ap-

proval by others—especially those to whom they have thick bonds of attachment. These bonds, in turn, are found most readily in communities (families and voluntary associations included). Communities, then, can strengthen adherence to social norms, especially when communities endorse pro-social values. Thus the role of the police and the courts can be minimized, and the state and its coercive means are less needed to maintain social order. Law and order can be largely replaced by the informal controls of communities.

(c) Particularistic bonds humanize us

Particularistic bonds, and hence obligations, protect us from the inhumanity that has often arisen in the past from strong commitments to abstract and general ideas, leading those who believed in these ideas to fight for the betterment of humanity but to care little about their fellow human beings. Particularistic obligations stopped many children during the Nazi era from spying on their parents and some Germans from turning in their Jewish friends, thus showing that even in a severely fragmented civic environment, particularistic bonds maintain considerable moral power. The history of the twentieth century, memories of the unfathomable suffering that totalitarian governments and movements inflicted on millions of people in the name of one universal cause or another (e.g., Stalinist socialism and some radical religious movements) reminds us how crucial such particularistic tempering is.

A related but not identical point is that justice is best served when we judge people and deal with them as whole people, whose particular circumstances we are bound to take into account, rather than merely as members of one or more categories. We should treat people as unique, concrete individuals, rather than incidents or members of abstract categories. Philip Selznick puts this point eloquently as follows: “[The] personal standpoint is not and cannot be embraced wholeheartedly. Judgment in the light of rule and principle has serious limitations from a moral point of view. That is so, fundamentally, because rule-centered [universal] judgment does not adequately appreciate the place of concreteness and particularity in moral experience.” He adds the following telling quote: “‘There is no general doctrine,’ wrote George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, ‘which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of

direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.” And he concludes that “the lesson is that impersonal precepts must be tempered and assessed in the light of very specific human outcomes.”

The merit of the obligation to take particularistic conditions into account is evident when mandatory sentences prevent judges from taking into account special circumstances, when admissions officers of colleges are expected to adhere strictly to standard guidelines, and in comparison to the Napoleonic legal and the common law traditions.

One may argue that particularistic considerations are not the same as particularistic obligations; the first deal with localized conditions, the second with moral commitments. However, note that the commitment to take into account context is, in part, a moral judgment reflecting particularism.

(d) Human flourishing

There is an immense literature on what constitutes a good life, human flourishing. John Cottingham, drawing on Aristotle, finds in it a ground for justifying some partiality. Cottingham writes, “If I am to count as making a moral judgement I must be prepared, at least in principle, to show how my prescription contributes to the overall blueprint for the good life—how it forms part of, or connects with, my vision of how life should be lived if it is to be worthwhile...[contributing to a] fulfilled or ‘flourishing’ life.”

In a very elementary sense, the connection between human flourishing and particularistic obligations is supported by the reasons already discussed: without stable and meaningful social attachments it is impossible to form and nurture fully functional human beings, individuals whose sense of self (or identity) is established, and who are able to act as reasonable, free agents. However, if one takes the term flourishing to mean a higher level of achievement, a greater realization of human potential, a life that is more virtuous than just fully functional—one finds that the relationship to particularistic obligations is a complex one, although clearly there is a connection.

A preliminary examination suggests that particularistic obligations may be compatible with, indeed highly supportive of, some

forms of flourishing, but not nearly as essential, possibly even a hindrance to some extent, to some others. Cottingham writes,

If I give no extra weight to the fact that this is *my* lover, *my* friend, *my* spouse, *my* child, if I assess these people's needs purely on their merits (in such a way as an impartial observer might do), then that special concern which constitutes the essence of love and friendship will be eliminated. Partiality to loved ones is justified because it is an essential ingredient in one of the highest human goods.

But this assumes that one recognizes these particular virtues as part of the good life.

If the center of human virtue is a life of contemplation or nirvana, or other forms of self-perfection, especially if one views them as virtues one practices individually rather than as a member of a community, particularistic obligations will play a relatively small role. The same might hold if the good life is one that seeks to promote justice, or a world order based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or on some other such universal principle.

Particularistic obligations become pivotal if one considers any of the following lives (or combinations thereof) as good: one dedicated to love and caring; tending to particular ill or poor persons (rather than to health care or distributive justice generally); nurturing communal bonds and bonds among communities, including conflict resolution and mediation; parenting and attending to our parents; and, more generally, dedication to the betterment of family life and that of particular communities.

All this is not to suggest that particularistic obligations play no role in societies centered around self-perfection. Human flourishing of any kind takes place within a societal context. People cannot work much to improve themselves unless they build or help nurture a context in which such labor is considered part of the good life. Thus, a life of learning can thrive in a Jewish *shtetl* or a Chinese *literati* society that celebrates such a life, but not in one that sees serving the poor and the ill as the main virtue. That is, whatever is considered the good society, whatever form human flourishing takes, it does not take place within a social vacuum. It thrives when it becomes the good around which a society—and the particularistic obligations it entails—is centered. Members must be committed not merely to the

particular community (or society), but also to its particular vision of the good—and they must be willing to absorb the costs and often the sacrifices that such visions entail. Thus for a group of *literati* to dedicate their life to philosophy, poetry, and brush painting—the other members of the far from affluent society must be willing to curtail their already meager consumption. Therefore, although some forms of human flourishing are more intimately associated with particularistic obligations than others, all draw on them and all add to their moral justification.

Conclusion

To be full-fledged human beings we require a certain environment, one rich in solid but not overbearing communities. These, in turn, are composed of bonds of affection, which cannot be universalized, and moral obligations to members. A measure of moral obligation to nurture the social environment in which people can develop well arises out of this understanding. That obligation is neither self-serving, utilitarian, nor consequentialist. The moral ecology particularist obligations help sustain may well be maintained for the duration of our lifetime, or even that of our children, even if we do not abide by these obligations and draw on the existing stock of trust and affection and moral commitments—as we draw them down. However, just as we are obligated to sustain the natural environment as a common good, so are we obligated to sustain the moral ecology. I call this a constitutive communitarian argument.

The same communal environment justifies our moral commitment not only because it enables people to fully function, but also because it makes us and others better than we would be otherwise. Communities provide the conditions under which people can act autonomously and curb the need for state coercion, provide for empathy that benefits not merely particularistic but also universal obligations, and contribute to human flourishing. None of these attributes—as significant and compelling as they may be—justify ignoring our universal obligations, but they provide a strong communitarian justification for those of us who honor additional commitments to our own communities.