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THE PERILS OF COMMUNITARIANISM FOR TEACHING ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM¹

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Although communitarian themes can be traced back through Heidegger and Hegel to Aristotle, the recent communitarian critique of liberalism has been an especially fascinating exchange in political philosophy.

What are the implications of the communitarian alternative to liberalism for Ethics Across the Curriculum? Upon careful consideration, I have concluded that the communitarian conception of “community” and “community values” is inconsistent with the fundamental presupposition—that is, normative perspectivism—of Ethics Across the Curriculum.

To make this argument, I first briefly recapitulate the main features of communitarian political theory, and second, recount a case in which a well-respected Ethics Across the Curriculum program came under fire for subverting “community values” and “abusing students’ religious beliefs.” Third, I analyze the intractable problems that ensue by defining a “community” based on consensus and shared values, and conclude by pointing to the failure of communitarianism to provide a workable foundation for Ethics Across the Curriculum in particular, and post-secondary education in general.

COMMUNITARIANISM: A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

As communitarianism over the last several decades has been in large part a critique of liberalism, especially since the publication of John Rawls’ pathbreaking 1971 *A Theory of Justice*, a sketch of the basic features of liberalism is in order.

The fundamental tenet of liberalism is that each individual has rights and liberties (hence the word ‘liberal’) insofar as the exercising of those freedoms does not violate the rights of others.² Positively, then, the role

of the state is to safeguard rights and liberties, and negatively, not to breach them. In relation to the former role, the purpose of civil government is to protect the right to, in the words of John Locke, “life, liberty, and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men.”³ In relation to the latter role, as Thomas Hobbes famously put it, liberties “depend on the silence of the law.”⁴

As the political structure of the United States is that of a liberal republic with origins in British political philosophy, the founders of our country—most notably Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson—secured individual rights such as the freedom of association, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of lifestyle, and the freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights.

The political philosophy of Rawls falls squarely within the liberal tradition. A central claim of *A Theory of Justice* is that a just society does not advance any particular conception of moral goodness, but instead provides a value-neutral social structure in which individuals choose (or even *create*, in a Nietzschean sense) their own values. The freedom to select one’s values precedes and is absolutely divorced from notions of social goodness. Like Mill and Kant, Rawls conceives of individuals as rational and autonomous selves who exercise free will independently of temporal conditions.

Communitarians contend that liberalism is based on an overly individualistic ontology of the self,⁵ resulting in a flawed political philosophy. The self is not an atomistic Cartesian *res cogitans* (“thinking thing”) which exists prior to and independently of a social framework; no asocial Rawlsian self has the luxury of viewing possible social arrangements from behind a “veil of ignorance.”⁶ Rather, selves are bearers of history.⁷ Since a self is relational to other selves in a socio-historical framework, a holistic conception of the *polis* affords the best political philosophy.

Thus, for liberal political philosophers, the source of justice is individual rights and liberties; for communitarian political philosophers, the source of justice is the communal good. For liberals, individual rights trump the common good; for communitarians, the common good trumps individual rights. One does not have to look far for examples of the tension between individual freedom and the communal good. Clitorrectomy is justified on the grounds that it discourages promiscuity and hence promotes the common good, yet the possibility of orgasm is forever made impossible for the individuals who have undergone the procedure. And should individuals be able to purchase and consume

pornography and alcohol, even if doing so sometimes interferes with social welfare?

In summary, on the communitarian model, a morally good community is a necessary condition for raising morally good citizens. Persons do not create but inherit particular conceptions of social goodness from the society they are born into.⁸ In order to identify those character traits which ought to be nurtured and those traits which ought to be censured, public policy makers need to identify those values which the good community venerates and those values which the good community condemns.

IS ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM SUBVERSIVE TO "COMMUNITY VALUES"? A CASE STUDY

Not long ago, one of the original and most respected Ethics Across the Curriculum programs was criticized—caustically—for allegedly subverting the values of the religiously homogenous community in which the program is located. The institution and the players in the controversy are irrelevant to our discussion here; what is relevant is the nature of the criticism.

The controversy erupted when instructors of an interdisciplinary humanities course built on the Ethics Across the Curriculum model were accused of harboring “anti-religious” and “anti-conservative” agendas. The bone of contention was that many of the topics covered in the course address contemporary controversial moral topics, such as gay rights, capital punishment, gun control, immigration policy, feminism, public policy on the environment, biodiversity, the connection or disconnection between ethics and religion, global warming, militarism, the rights of property owners, the separation of church and state, the ethical implications of the human genome project, and so on. Alternative positions on some of these issues, it was asserted, are incommensurable with “community values.” According to the critics of the program, the curriculum ought to be cleansed of course material in order to avoid the “abuse of...students’ values.”

What was the motivation behind this attack on Ethics Across the Curriculum? Many felt that students get their values from church and the role of a public institution is to give students career-specific skills enabling them to compete on the job market. Religion, on this view, provides the answers to moral questions, and to discuss issues such as capital punishment or gay rights—which people in the area are overwhelmingly

for and against, respectively—is inappropriate. According to this group, the “community” has already identified the correct answers to most contemporary moral controversies. These adversaries of Ethics Across the Curriculum expressed fear that malleable young students would veer from the straight and true path by exposure to an array of different perspectives on tough moral issues.

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFYING “COMMUNITY VALUES”

Assuming for the moment that the community provides the proper framework for the inculcation of moral values, then by identifying the ties that bind the morally good community we will know which values to nurture and which values to snub. To complete this project, first we need to determine the ontology of *community*.

Colloquially, the word ‘community’ refers to a collection of individuals based on language, ethnicity, religion, or some other social affiliation. Communitarian political philosophers, however, do not limit their use of the word to descriptive, sociological meanings: for them, “community” is a normative term.⁹

Surprisingly, however, given the ubiquitous declarations of the “importance of the community” in communitarian treatises, there is a notable paucity of analysis as to exactly what “community” means in its normative instantiations.¹⁰ Unhelpfully, communitarian writers usually offer examples rather than analyses: communities, for Amitai Etzioni, are like Chinese nesting boxes, one inhabiting the inside of another.¹¹ In a similar vein, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel describe various social groupings such as families, tribes, neighborhoods, firms, cities, nations, and so on, as communities.¹² Such social groups are communities in part, according to Sandel, due to “shared final ends.”¹³ Charles Taylor sees communities as having shared symbols, common meanings, or at minimum some kind of sharing understanding.¹⁴ In all of these examples, the criteria for delimiting morally praiseworthy communities from morally blameworthy communities (or whether morally blameworthy communities are in fact synonymous with non-communities) remains unspecified.

Despite the lack of careful analysis and definition of the normative sense of “community” in communitarian political philosophy, the subtext is that public policy ought to be framed by shared values which bond morally praiseworthy communities. Thus the necessary condition for

forging a communitarian political agenda is to identify morally good communities and then ferret out their shared values. One possible methodology is to define the community negatively—that is, to describe what the morally good community is *not* rather than what it *is*. This method is common in jingoistic rhetoric: the community is defined by contrasting it with an antagonistic *other*.

Another option is to associate the morally good community with a hegemonic group: the will of the people is closely associated with leadership. To hold a belief contrary to authority is to lose one's identity as a member of that social group—to become an outcast, an *other*. Anthropological evidence suggests that “truth” within many social organizations is couched in terms of a clearly delineated authoritative chain of command, for example, militaries and churches. “Truth” is determined less by epistemological criteria than by the maintenance of *power*. Hence the potential problem with identifying the will of the community with a hegemonic group is that the powerful get to determine what is “true.” As Michel Foucault points out, “Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.”¹⁵ Truth, from this standpoint, is the product of a hierarchy of power.

Either method yields the same result: a political order can be founded by abstracting a “community” from a larger field (namely, an “other”). Hobbes makes the point by contrasting a unitary “people” from a disparate “multitude” in the formation of a *body politic*:

The *People* is something that is one, having one will, and to whom one action may be attributed; none of these can properly be said of a Multitude[;] for the *People* wills by the will of *one man*; but the Multitude are Citizens, that is to say, Subjects[.] The common sort of men, and others who little consider these truths, do always speak of a *great number* of men, as of the *People*, that is to say, the *City*; they say that the *City* hath rebelled against the *King* (which is impossible) and that the *People* will [stir up] the *Citizens* against the *City*, that is to say, the *Multitude* against the *People*.¹⁶

While the people/multitude (or community/other) dialectic may achieve its desired political ends, somebody always gets left out of the social order.

In fact, the criterion of identifying a community based on simple similarity is not self-sufficient: a community can only be identified by

contrasting it to something else which it is not. As Jacques Derrida says of Plato's utopia: "The city's body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts...by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression[.] Yet the representative of the outside is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside[.]"¹⁷ The community must always be contrasted with what it is not. In the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it."¹⁸

Whether the community is defined in terms of geography, religion, language, vocation, or race, the definition is always subject to exception and stipulation. Even relatively cohesive religious communities do not enjoy consensus on primary values. In Afghanistan, for example, former Taliban soldiers argue that educating females is un-Islamic, while other Muslims argue such education furthers the common good, citing the fact that Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah, was an educated and highly-successful businesswoman, and that the prophet advocated the education of his daughters, most notably Fatima.¹⁹ Amongst the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS or Mormon) membership, there is disagreement on core political values. Many Mormons in Utah assume that to be a good Mormon, one must vote Republican. However, Mormons on the East Coast tend to vote Democrat because helping the downtrodden through social programs is considered genuinely Christian. So even within the LDS community, there is no consensus on which party-line to tow.

So what gives any "community" its identity other than arbitrary criteria set by a particular political agenda? It's not clear. Like the term *ecosystem*, the term *community* seems to be more of a conceptual tool rather than an ontological reality. For instance, consider a pond as an ecosystem. Morphometrically, a pond is defined as a body of water circumscribed by land. But strictly speaking, this is not entirely true; streams flowing into and out of a pond affect its physical-chemical characteristics, charging and discharging sediment, oxygen, nitrogen, affecting temperature, and so on. At the bottom of the pond, mud is both aqua and terra; there is no clearly defined boundary where the pond ends and mantle begins. The pond contains biota (zooplankton, phytoplankton, fish, etc.) in an analyz-

able food-web structure, but some organisms alter feeding relationships by transgressing the boundary: frogs hop to shore, and fish jump out of the water to snatch insects from the air. Therefore, the “boundary” of a pond, like all ecosystems, is fuzzy and indeterminate. Ecosystems, properly speaking, are artifice.

Similarly, communities in the normative sense may not exist anywhere except in the eyes of their political beholders. Since the sum of individuals living together in a particular location at a particular time will never universally share the same values, the notion of a community based on shared values is an artifice based on exclusion. The “community” is not a self-sufficient entity, but a precipitate from a plane of multiplicity.

In short, communitarian political philosophers have not delineated adequately the ontological makeup of the morally good community. Since identifying the “community values” which characterize the morally-good community is so problematic, communitarianism cannot provide the basis for a meaningful, substantive political philosophy.

CONCLUSION: THE PERILS OF COMMUNITARIANISM FOR TEACHING ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

What can we learn by bringing the attack on the Ethics Across the Curriculum program into focus through the lens of the foregoing remarks?

The case highlights in stark fashion the serious shortfalls of using communitarianism as a theoretical framework for making policy decisions about public education and curriculum development. If we were to use such a framework, basing the curriculum on “community values,” we would be compelled to conclude that if the majority of “morally good” members of a religiously homogenous community shun the theory of evolution by natural selection in favor of creationism, and consider teaching evolution an odious threat to “community values,” then evolution ought not be taught in biology courses. Likewise, if the majority of members of a religiously homogenous community believe that the age of the Earth is in the order of several thousand years (dismissing fossils in the lower reaches of the Grand Canyon as the handiwork of Satan aimed—like the melody of the Pied Piper—at leading the righteous astray²⁰), then the formation of sedimentary rock and the physics of plate tectonics and isostatic uplift ought not be taught in geology courses. Practically speaking, basing the curriculum on “community values” could result in loss of accreditation.

I am not arguing that evolutionary law and geologic time are above criticism; I am arguing that the discussion ought not be preempted *a priori* by appeal to majority consensus. In cases where there is a clear majority consensus, moving from the premise that “the morally good community holds X” to the conclusion “X is right” is a textbook example of a logical fallacy: the majority is often wrong. As Socrates poignantly says to Crito, in questions of ethics, one ought not listen to the “opinions of the masses,” but to right reason.²¹

One might object that I am simply appealing to the authority of another community—the community of scholars. Yet the intelligentsia has the attributes more of a *multitude* than a *people*: the community of academics consists of theists, atheists, agnostics, Marxists, critical theorists, liberals, Darwinians, communitarians, feminists, nonanthropocentrists, revisionists, structuralists, poststructuralists, gay theorists, and so on, who share a common goal—the quest for understanding the human condition—more than any shared moral vision. Individuals from radically disparate points of view have arrived at a kind of compromise on what a quality liberal arts curriculum looks like. To foist on the multitude some supposed set of “community values” is to negate the perspectivism which Ethics Across the Curriculum seeks to foster.

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NOTES

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² See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 13.

³ *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 7, “Of Political or Civil Society,” 87, p. 46.

⁴ *Leviathan*, Chapter 21, “Of the Liberty of Subjects,” p. 120.

⁵ Daniel Bell, *Communitarianism and its Critics*, p. 4.

⁶ For a description of the “veil of ignorance,” see *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 136-42.

⁷ Bell, *Communitarianism and its Critics*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Khatchadourian, *Community and Communitarianism*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ See Frazer, *The Problems of Communitarian Politics*, p. 47.

¹¹ *The Spirit of Community*, p. 32.

¹² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 221; Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 172.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 39, p. 96.

¹⁵ "Truth and Power." In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, p. 131.

¹⁶ *De Cive*, Chapter XII, section 8, pp. 151-52.

¹⁷ *Plato's Pharmacy*. In *Dissemination*, p. 133.

¹⁸ *Empire*, p. 103.

¹⁹ David Rohde, "Attacks on Schools for Girls Hint at Lingering Split in Afghanistan."

²⁰ Although not couched in exactly those terms, George Price makes similar claims in *The New Geology*, pp. 606-09, pp. 679-80, pp. 686-88, pp. 693ff.

²¹ *Crito* 48a ff. In Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.). *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, p. 33.

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