

Communitarianism

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Communitarianism emphasizes the need to balance individual rights and interests with that of the community as a whole, and argues that individual people (or citizens) are shaped by the cultures and values of their communities. It rejects the notion of the image of humans as atomistic individuals. Communitarians claim values and beliefs are formed in public space, in which debate takes place. Both linguistic and non-linguistic traditions are communicated to children and form the backdrop against which individuals formulate and understand beliefs. Individuals do not necessarily accept majority beliefs but if an individual rejects a majority belief, he or she will do so for reasons that make sense within the community rather than simply any reason at all. In this sense, the rejection of a single majority belief relies on other majority beliefs.

Social capital

In the book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam observed that nearly every form of civic organization has undergone drops in membership exemplified by the fact that, while more people are bowling than in the 1950s, there are fewer bowling leagues. This results in a decline in "social capital", described by Putnam as "the collective value of all social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other". According to Putnam and his followers, social capital is a key component to building and maintaining democracy.

Communitarians seek to bolster social capital and the institutions of civil society. The Responsive Communitarian Platform described it thus:

"Many social goals . . . require partnership between public and private groups. Though government should not seek to replace local communities, it may need to empower them by strategies of support, including revenue-sharing and technical assistance. There is a great need for study and experimentation with creative use of the structures of civil society, and public-private cooperation, especially where the delivery of health, educational and social services are concerned."

Positive rights

Central to the communitarian philosophy is the concept of positive rights, which are rights or guarantees to certain things. These may include state subsidized education, state subsidized housing, a safe and clean environment, universal health care, and even the right to a job with the concomitant obligation of the government or individuals to provide one. To this end, Communitarians generally support social security programs, public works programs, and laws limiting such things as pollution.

A common objection is that by providing such rights, Communitarians violate the negative rights of the citizens; rights to *not* have something done for you. For example, taxation to pay for such programs as described above dispossesses individuals of property. Proponents of positive rights, by attributing the protection of negative rights to the society rather than the government, respond that individuals would not have any rights in the absence of societies—a central tenet of communitarianism—and thus have a personal responsibility to give something back to it.

Alternatively, some agree that negative rights may be violated by a government action, but argue that it is justifiable if the positive rights protected outweigh the negative rights lost. In the same vein, supporters of positive rights further argue that negative rights are irrelevant in their absence. Moreover, some Communitarians "experience this less as a case of being used for others' ends and more as a way of contributing to the purposes of a community I regard as my own"

Some people have argued that communitarianism's focus on social cohesion raises similarities with nationalistic communism, or various forms of authoritarianism, although supporters contend that there are substantial differences between communitarianism and authoritarianism, and that communitarianism has very little in common with Communism, which they see as not really valuing individual liberty at all.

For the most part, Communitarians emphasize the use of non-governmental, such as private businesses, churches, non-profits, or labor unions, in furthering their goals. The modern communitarian movement was first articulated by the Responsive Communitarian Platform, written in the United States by a group of ethicists, activists, and social scientists including Amitai Etzioni, Mary Ann Glendon, and William Galston. The Communitarian Network, founded in 1993 by Amitai Etzioni, is the best-known group advocating communitarianism. One of the network's many initiatives to reach out to a broader public is the transnational project Diversity within Unity, which advocates a communitarian approach towards immigration and minority rights in today's diversifying societies.

A think tank called the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies is also directed by Etzioni. Other voices of communitarianism include Don Eberly, director of the Civil Society Project and Robert Putnam.

Principal criticisms of communitarianism are:

1. That communitarianism leads necessarily to moral relativism.
2. That this relativism leads necessarily to a re-endorsement of the status quo in international politics, and
3. That such a position relies upon a discredited ontological argument that posits the foundational status of the community or state

Communitarianism and education

Arthur and Bailey(2000, pages 136-141) has suggested that the core ideas in the communitarian agenda can be reduced to ten themes:

1. The family should be the primary moral educator of children.
2. Character education includes the systematic teaching of virtues in schools.
3. The ethos of the community has an educative function in school life.
4. Schools should promote the rights and responsibilities inherent within citizenship.
5. Community service is an important part of a child's education in school.
6. A major purpose of the school curriculum is to teach social and political life-skills.
7. Schools should provide an active understanding of the common good.
8. Religious schools are able to operate a strong version of the communitarian perspective.
9. Many existing community-based education practices reflect the features of the communitarian perspective.
10. Schools should adopt a more democratic structure of operating.

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Appendix

The Responsive Communitarian Platform

Preamble

American men, women, and children are members of many communities—families; neighborhoods; innumerable social, religious, ethnic, work place, and professional associations; and the body politic itself. Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and overlapping communities to which all of us belong. Nor can any community long survive unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy, and resources to shared projects. The exclusive pursuit of private interest erodes the network of social environments on which we all depend, and is destructive to our shared experiment in democratic self-government. For these reasons, we hold that the rights of individuals cannot long be preserved without a communitarian perspective.

A communitarian perspective recognizes both individual human dignity and the social dimension of human existence.

A communitarian perspective recognizes that the preservation of individual liberty depends on the active maintenance of the institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect; where we acquire a lively sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, along with an appreciation of our own rights and the rights of others; where we develop the skills of self-government as well as the habit of governing ourselves, and learn to serve others— not just self.

A communitarian perspective recognizes that communities and polities, too, have obligations—including the duty to be responsive to their members and to foster participation and deliberation in social and political life.

A communitarian perspective does not dictate particular policies; rather it mandates attention to what is often ignored in contemporary policy debates: the social side of human nature; the responsibilities that must be borne by citizens, individually and collectively, in a regime of rights; the fragile ecology of families and their supporting communities; the ripple effects and long-term consequences of present decisions. The political views of the signers of this statement differ widely. We are united, however, in our conviction that a communitarian perspective must be brought to bear on the great moral, legal and social issues of our time.

Moral Voices

America's diverse communities of memory and mutual aid are rich resources of moral voices—voices that ought to be heeded in a society that increasingly threatens to become normless, self-centered, and driven by greed, special interests, and an unabashed quest for power.

Moral voices achieve their effect mainly through education and persuasion, rather than through coercion. Originating in communities, and sometimes embodied in law, they exhort, admonish, and appeal to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. They speak to our capacity for reasoned judgment and virtuous action. It is precisely because this important moral realm, which is neither one of random individual choice nor of government control, has been much neglected that we see an urgent need for a communitarian social movement to accord these voices their essential place.

Within History

The basic communitarian quest for balances between individuals and groups, rights and responsibilities, and among the institutions of state, market, and civil society is a constant, ongoing enterprise. Because this quest takes place within history and within varying social contexts, however, the evaluation of what is a proper moral stance will vary according to circumstances of time and place. If we were in China today, we would argue vigorously for more individual rights; in contemporary America, we emphasize individual and social responsibilities.

Not Majoritarian But Strongly Democratic

Communitarians are not majoritarian. The success of the democratic experiment in ordered liberty (rather than unlimited license) depends, not on fiat or force, but on building shared values, habits and practices that assure respect for one another's rights and regular fulfillment of personal, civic, and collective responsibilities. Successful policies are accepted because they are recognized to be legitimate, rather than imposed. We say to those who would impose civic or moral virtues by suppressing dissent (in the name of religion, patriotism, or any other cause), or censoring books, that their cure is ineffective, harmful, and morally untenable. At the same time divergent moral positions need not lead to cacophony. Out of genuine dialogue clear voices can arise, and shared aspirations can be identified and advanced.

Communitarians favor strong democracy. That is, we seek to make government more representative, more participatory, and more responsive to all members of the community. We seek to find ways to accord citizens more information, and more say, more often. We seek to curb the role of private money, special interests, and corruption in government. Similarly, we ask how "private governments," whether corporations, labor unions, or voluntary associations, can become more responsive to their members and to the needs of the community.

Communitarians do not exalt the group as such, nor do they hold that any set of group values is ipso facto good merely because such values originate in a community. Indeed, some communities (say, neo-Nazis) may foster reprehensible values. Moreover, communities that glorify their own members by vilifying those who do not belong are at best imperfect. Communitarians recognize—indeed, insist—that communal values must be judged by external and overriding criteria, based on shared human experience.

A responsive community is one whose moral standards reflect the basic human needs of all its members. To the extent that these needs compete with one another, the community's standards reflect the relative priority accorded by members to some needs over others. Although individuals differ in their needs, human nature is not totally malleable. Although individuals are deeply influenced by their communities, they have a capacity for independent judgment. The persistence of humane and democratic culture, as well as individual dissent, in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union demonstrate the limits of social indoctrination.

For a community to be truly responsive—not only to an elite group, a minority or even the majority, but to all its members and all their basic human needs—it will have to develop moral values which meet the following criteria: they must be non-discriminatory and applied equally to all members; they must be generalizable, justified in terms that are accessible and understandable: e.g., instead of claims based upon individual or group desires, citizens would draw on a common definition of justice; and, they must incorporate the full range of legitimate needs and values rather than focusing on any one category, be it individualism, autonomy, interpersonal caring, or social justice.

Restoring the Moral Voice

History has taught that it is a grave mistake to look to a charismatic leader to define and provide a moral voice for the polity. Nor can political institutions effectively embody moral voices unless they are sustained and criticized by an active citizenry concerned about the moral direction of the community. To rebuild America's moral foundations, to bring our regard for individuals and their rights into a better relationship with our sense of personal and collective responsibility, we must therefore begin with the institutions of civil society.

Start With the Family

The best place to start is where each new generation acquires its moral anchoring: at home, in the family. We must insist once again that bringing children into the world entails a moral responsibility to provide, not only material necessities, but also moral education and character formation.

Moral education is not a task that can be delegated to baby sitters, or even professional child-care centers. It requires close bonding of the kind that typically is formed only with parents, if it is formed at all.

Fathers and mothers, consumed by “making it” and consumerism, or preoccupied with personal advancement, who come home too late and too tired to attend to the needs of their children, cannot discharge their most elementary duty to their children and their fellow citizens.

It follows, that work places should provide maximum flexible opportunities to parents to preserve an important part of their time and energy, of their life, to attend to their educational-moral duties, for the sake of the next generation, its civic and moral character, and its capacity to contribute economically and socially to the commonweal. Experiments such as those with unpaid and paid parental leave, flextime, shared jobs, opportunities to work at home, and for parents to participate as volunteers and managers in child-care centers, should be extended and encouraged.

Above all, what we need is a change in orientation by both parents and work places. Child-raising is important, valuable work, work that must be honored rather than denigrated by both parents and the community.

Families headed by single parents experience particular difficulties. Some single parents struggle bravely and succeed in attending to the moral education of their children; while some married couples shamefully neglect their moral duties toward their offspring. However, the weight of the historical, sociological, and psychological evidence suggests that on average two-parent families are better able to discharge their child-raising duties if only because there are more hands—and voices—available for the task. Indeed, couples often do better when they

are further backed up by a wider circle of relatives. The issue has been wrongly framed when one asks what portion of parental duties grandparents or other helpers can assume. Their assistance is needed in addition to, not as a substitute for, parental care. Child-raising is by nature labor-intensive. There are no labor-saving technologies, and shortcuts in this area produce woefully deficient human beings, to their detriment and ours.

It follows that widespread divorce, when there are children involved, especially when they are in their formative years, is indicative of a serious social problem. Though divorces are necessary in some situations, many are avoidable and are not in the interest of the children, the community, and probably not of most adults either. Divorce laws should be modified, not to prevent divorce, but to signal society's concern.

Schools—The Second Line of Defense

Unfortunately, millions of American families have weakened to the point where their capacity to provide moral education is gravely impaired. And the fact is that communities have only a limited say over what families do. At best, it will take years before a change in the moral climate restores parenting to its proper status and function for many Americans.

Thus, by default, schools now play a major role, for better or worse, in character formation and moral education. Personal and communal responsibility come together here, for education requires the commitment of all citizens, not merely those who have children in school.

We strongly urge that all educational institutions, from kindergartens to universities, recognize and take seriously the grave responsibility to provide moral education. Suggestions that schools participate actively in moral education are often opposed. The specter of religious indoctrination is quickly evoked, and the question is posed: "Whose morals are you going to teach?"

Our response is straightforward: we ought to teach those values Americans share, for example, that the dignity of all persons ought to be respected, that tolerance is a virtue and discrimination abhorrent, that peaceful resolution of conflicts is superior to violence, that generally truth-telling is morally superior to lying, that democratic government is morally superior to totalitarianism and authoritarianism, that one ought to give a day's work for a day's pay, that saving for one's own and one's country's future is better than squandering one's income and relying on others to attend to one's future needs.

The fear that our children will be "brainwashed" by a few educators is farfetched. On the contrary, to silence the schools in moral matters simply means that the youngsters are left exposed to all other voices and values but those of their educators. For, one way or another, moral education does take place in schools. The only question is whether schools and teachers will passively stand by, or take an active and responsible role.

Within Communities

A Matter of Orientation

The ancient Greeks understood this well: A person who is completely private is lost to civic life. The exclusive pursuit of one's self-interest is not even a good prescription for conduct in the marketplace; for no social, political, economic, or moral order can survive that way. Some measure of caring, sharing, and being our brother's and sister's keeper, is essential if we are not all to fall back on an ever more expansive government, bureaucratized welfare agencies, and swollen regulations, police, courts, and jails.

Generally, no social task should be assigned to an institution that is larger than necessary to do the job. What can be done by families, should not be assigned to an intermediate group—school etc. What can be done at the local level should not be passed on to the state or federal level, and so on. There are, of course, plenty of urgent tasks—environmental ones—that do require national and even international action. But to remove tasks to higher

levels than is necessary weakens the constituent communities. This principle holds for duties of attending to the sick, troubled, delinquent, homeless and new immigrants; and for public safety, public health and protection of the environment—from a neighborhood crime-watch to CPR to sorting the garbage. The government should step in only to the extent that other social subsystems fail, rather than seek to replace them.

Many social goals require partnership between public and private groups. Though government should not seek to replace local communities, it may need to empower them by strategies of support, including revenue-sharing and technical assistance. There is a great need for study and experimentation with creative use of the structures of civil society, and public-private cooperation, especially where the delivery of health, educational and social services are concerned.

Last, but not least, we should not hesitate to speak up and express our moral concerns to others when it comes to issues we care about deeply and share with one another. It might be debatable whether or not we should encourage our neighbors to keep their lawns green (which may well be environmentally unsound), but there should be little doubt that we should expect one another to attend to our children, and vulnerable community members. Those who neglect these duties, should be explicitly considered poor members of the community.

National and local service, as well as volunteer work, is desirable to build and express a civil commitment. Such activities, bringing together people from different backgrounds and enabling and encouraging them to work together, build community and foster mutual respect and tolerance.

Duties to the Polity

Being informed about public affairs is a prerequisite for keeping the polity from being controlled by demagogues, for taking action when needed in one's own interests and that of others, for achieving justice and the shared future.

Voting is one tool for keeping the polity reflective of its constituent communities. Those who feel that none of the candidates reflect their views ought to seek out other like-minded citizens and seek to field their own candidate rather than retreat from the polity. Still, some persons may discharge their community responsibilities by being involved in non-political activities, say, in volunteer work. Just as the polity is but one facet of interdependent social life, so voting and political activity are not the only ways to be responsible members of society. A good citizen is involved in a community or communities, but not necessarily active in the polity.

Paying one's taxes, encouraging others to pay their fair share, and serving on juries are fully obligatory. One of the most telling ills of our time is the expectation of many Americans that they are entitled to ever more public services without paying for them (as reflected in public opinion polls that show demands to slash government and taxes but also to expand practically every conceivable government function). We all take for granted the right to be tried before a jury of our peers, but, all too often we are unwilling to serve on juries ourselves.

Cleaning Up the Polity

We need to revitalize public life so that the two-thirds of our citizens who now say they feel alienated or that the polity is not theirs, will again be engaged in it.

Campaign contributions to members of Congress and state legislatures, speaking fees, and bribes have become so pervasive that in many areas of public policy and on numerous occasions the public interest is ignored as legislators pay off their debts to special interests. Detailed rationalizations have been spun to justify the system. It is said that giving money to politicians is a form of democratic participation. In fact, the rich can "participate" in this way so much more effectively than the poor, that the democratic principle of one-person one-vote is severely compromised. It is said that money buys only access to the politician's ear; but even if money does not buy commitment, access should not be allotted according to the depth of one's pockets. It is said that every

group has its pool of money and hence as they all grease Congress, all Americans are served. But those who cannot grease at all or not as well, lose out and so do long-run public goals that are not underwritten by any particular interest groups.

To establish conditions under which elected officials will be able to respond to the public interest, to the genuine needs of all citizens, and to their own consciences requires that the role of private money in public life be reduced as much as possible. All candidates should receive some public support, as presidential candidates already do, as well as some access to radio and TV.

To achieve this major renewal and revitalization of public life, to reinstitute the prerequisites for attending to the public interest, requires a major social movement, akin to the progressive movement of the beginning of the century. For even good causes can become special interests if they are not part of such a movement, keeping their strategies and aims in constant dialogue with larger aims and multiple ends. Citizens who care about the integrity of the polity either on the local, state, or national level, should band with their fellows to form a neo-progressive communitarian movement. They should persevere until elected officials are beholden—not to special interests—but only to the voters and to their own consciences.

Freedom of Speech

The First Amendment is as dear to communitarians as it is to libertarians and many other Americans. Suggestions that it should be curbed to bar verbal expressions of racism, sexism, and other slurs seem to us to endanger the essence of the First Amendment, which is most needed when what some people say is disconcerting to some others. However, one should not ignore the victims of such abuse. Whenever individuals or members of a group are harassed, many non-legal measures are appropriate to express disapproval of hateful expressions and to promote tolerance among the members of the polity. For example, a college campus faced with a rash of incidents indicating bigotry, may conduct a teach-in on intergroup understanding. This, and much more, can be done without compromising the First Amendment.

Social Justice

At the heart of the communitarian understanding of social justice is the idea of reciprocity: each member of the community owes something to all the rest, and the community owes something to each of its members. Justice requires responsible individuals in a responsive community.

Members of the community have a responsibility, to the greatest extent possible, to provide for themselves and their families: honorable work contributes to the commonwealth and to the community's ability to fulfill its essential tasks. Beyond self-support, individuals have a responsibility for the material and moral well-being of others. This does not mean heroic self-sacrifice; it means the constant self-awareness that no one of us is an island unaffected by the fate of others.

For its part, the community is responsible for protecting each of us against catastrophe, natural or man-made; for ensuring the basic needs of all who genuinely cannot provide for themselves; for appropriately recognizing the distinctive contributions of individuals to the community; and for safeguarding a zone within which individuals may define their own lives through free exchange and choice.

Public Safety and Public Health

The American moral and legal tradition has always acknowledged the need to balance individual rights with the need to protect the safety and health of the public. The Fourth Amendment, for example, guards against unreasonable searches but allows for reasonable ones.

We differ with the ACLU and other radical libertarians who oppose sobriety checkpoints, screening gates at airports, drug and alcohol testing for people who directly affect public safety (pilots, train engineers, etc.). Given the minimal intrusion involved (an average sobriety checkpoint lasts ninety seconds), the importance of the interests at stake (we have lost more lives, many due to drunken drivers, on the road each year than in the war in Vietnam), and the fact that such measures in the past have not led us down a slippery slope, these and similar reasonable measures should receive full public support.

There is little sense in gun registration. What we need to significantly enhance public safety is domestic disarmament of the kind that exists in practically all democracies. The National Rifle Association suggestion that criminals not guns kill people, ignores the fact that thousands are killed each year, many of them children, from accidental discharge of guns, and that people—whether criminal, insane, or temporarily carried away by impulse—kill and are much more likely to do so when armed than when disarmed. The Second Amendment, behind which NRA hides, is subject to a variety of interpretations, but the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled, for over a hundred years, that it does not prevent laws that bar guns. We join with those who read the Second Amendment the way it was written, as a communitarian clause, calling for community militias, not individual gun slingers.

When it comes to public health, people who carry sexually transmitted diseases, especially when the illness is nearly always fatal, such as AIDS, should be expected to disclose their illness to previous sexual contacts or help health authorities to inform them, to warn all prospective sexual contacts, and inform all health care personnel with whom they come in contact. It is their contribution to help stem the epidemic. At the same time, the carriers' rights against wanton violation of privacy, discrimination in housing, employment and insurance should be scrupulously protected.

The Human Community

Our communitarianism is not particularism. We believe that the responsive community is the best form of human organization yet devised for respecting human dignity and safeguarding human decency, and the way of life most open to needed self-revision through shared deliberation. We believe that the human species as a whole would be well-served by the movement, as circumstances permit, of all polities toward strongly democratic communities. We are acutely aware of the ways in which this movement will be (and ought to be) affected by important material, cultural, and political differences among nations and peoples. And we know that enduring responsive communities cannot be created through fiat or coercion, but only through genuine public conviction.

We are heartened by the widespread invocation of democratic principles by the nations and peoples now emerging from generations of repression; we see the institutionalization of these principles as the best possible bulwark against the excesses of ethnic and national particularism that could well produce new forms of repression.

Although it may seem utopian, we believe that in the multiplication of strongly democratic communities around the world lies our best hope for the emergence of a global community that can deal concertedly with matters of general concern to our species as a whole: with war and strife, with violations of basic rights, with environmental degradation, and with the extreme material deprivation that stunts the bodies, minds, and spirits of children. Our communitarian concern may begin with ourselves and our families, but it rises inexorably to the long-imagined community of humankind.

In Conclusion

A Question of Responsibility

Although some of the responsibilities identified in this manifesto are expressed in legal terms, and the law does play a significant role not only in regulating society, but also in indicating which values it holds dear, our first and foremost purpose is to affirm the moral commitments of parents, young persons, neighbors, and citizens, to affirm the importance of the communities within which such commitments take shape and are transmitted from one generation to the next. This is not primarily a legal matter. On the contrary, when a community reaches the point at which these responsibilities are largely enforced by the powers of the state, it is in deep moral crisis. If communities are to function well, most members most of the time must discharge their responsibilities because they are committed to do so, not because they fear lawsuits, penalties, or jails. Nevertheless, the state and its agencies must take care not to harm the structures of civil society on which we all depend. Social environments, like natural environments, cannot be taken for granted.

It has been argued by libertarians that responsibilities are a personal matter, that individuals are to judge which responsibilities they accept as theirs. As we see it, responsibilities are anchored in community. Reflecting the diverse moral voices of their citizens, responsive communities define what is expected of people; they educate their members to accept these values; and they praise them when they do and frown upon them when they do not. Although the ultimate foundation of morality may be commitments of individual conscience, it is communities that help introduce and sustain these commitments. Hence the urgent need for communities to articulate the responsibilities they expect their members to discharge, especially in times, such as our own, in which the understanding of these responsibilities has weakened and their reach has grown unclear.

Further Work

This is only a beginning. This platform is but a point in dialogue, part of an ongoing process of deliberation. It should not be viewed as a series of final conclusions but ideas for additional discussion. We do not claim to have the answers to all that troubles America these days. However, we are heartened by the groundswell of support that our initial efforts have brought to the communitarian perspective. If more and more Americans come forward and join together to form active communities that seek to reinvigorate the moral and social order, we will be able to deal better with many of our communities' problems while reducing our reliance on governmental regulation, controls, and force. We will have a greater opportunity to work out shared public policy based on broad consensus and shared moral and legal traditions. And we will have many more ways to make our society a place in which individual rights are vigilantly maintained, while the seedbeds of civic virtue are patiently nurtured.