

communitarianism

A social philosophy that favors social formulations of the good, communitarianism is often contrasted with **liberalism**, which assumes that the good should be determined by each individual. To the extent that social **institutions** and policies are required, these should be based on voluntary agreements among the individuals involved, expressing their preferences. In contrast, communitarians view institutions and policies as reflecting in part **values** passed from **generation** to generation. These values become part of the self through internalization, and are modified by persuasion, religious or political indoctrination, leadership, and moral dialogues.

In the 1980s communitarianism was largely advanced by Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer. They criticized liberalism for its

failure to realize that people are socially "embedded," overlooking that people can have a strong attachment to their societies. They lamented liberalism's focus on the individualistic concept of self-interest.

Asian communitarians argue that, to maintain social harmony, individual rights and political liberties must be curtailed. Some seek to rely heavily on the state to maintain social order (for instance, leaders and champions of the regimes in Singapore and Malaysia), and some on strong social bonds and moral culture (as does Japan). Asian communitarians also hold that the West's notion of liberty actually amounts to "anarchy"; that strong economic growth requires limiting freedoms; and that the West uses its idea of legal and political rights to chastise other cultures that have inherent values of their own.

In 1990, a new school of communitarianism was founded. Among its leading scholars are William A. Galston (political theory), Mary Ann Glendon (law), Thomas Spragens, Jr. (political science), Alan Ehrenhalt (writer), and sociologists Philip Selznick, Robert Bellah and his associates, and Amitai Etzioni who wrote books that, in 1990, laid the foundations for responsive (democratic) communitarianism. Key communitarian texts include *Habits of the Heart* (1985) by Robert Bellah and colleagues, *The Spirit of Community* (1993) and *The New Golden Rule* (1996) by Amitai Etzioni, *Communitarianism and Its Critics* (1993) by Daniel Bell, and *The Communitarian Persuasion* by Philip Selznick (2002).

Responsive communitarians, a group founded by Amitai Etzioni, assume that societies have multiple and not wholly compatible needs, in contrast to philosophies built on one core principle, such as liberty for libertarianism. Responsive communitarianism assumes that a good society is based on a balance between liberty and social order, and between particularistic (communal) and society-wide values and bonds. This school stresses responsibilities people have for their families, kin, communities, and societies - above and beyond the universal rights all individuals command, the focus of liberalism.

While a carefully crafted balance between liberty and social order defines a generic concept of the good society, communitarians point out that the historical-social conditions of specific societies determine the rather different ways a given society in a given era may need to change to attain the same balance. Thus, contemporary Japan requires much greater tolerance for individual rights, while in the American society excessive individualism needs to be curbed.

Communitarians pay special attention to social institutions. Several of these form the moral infrastructure of society: families, schools, communities, and the community of communities. Infants are born into families whose societal role is to introduce values and begin the development of the moral self. The role of schools is to develop the moral self and to remedy moral development if it was neglected or distorted by the family.

Communitarians emphasize that children reared in well-functioning families and schools will still not be sufficiently equipped for membership in a good, communitarian society. This is a point ignored by those social philosophers who assume that, once people have acquired virtue and are habituated, they will be adequately guided by their inner moral compass. In contrast, communitarians assume that commitments to moral values tend to deteriorate, unless these are continuously reinforced. A major societal role of communities is to reinforce these commitments in their members. This is achieved by the community's "moral voice," the informal sanctioning of others, built into a web of informal affect-laden relationships, that communities provide.

Within this context, responsive communitarians point out that, if a society has communities whose social webs are intact, who share a moral culture, and whose members are willing to raise their moral voice, such a society can rest its social order largely on moral commitments rather than on the coercive state. That is, the moral voice can reduce the inevitable tension between liberty and social order and enhance both.

In the same vein, communitarians argue that, while everyone's right to free speech should be respected, some speech - seen from the community's viewpoint - is morally highly offensive and, when children are exposed, damaging. For instance, the (legal) right to speak does not render verbal expressions of hate (morally) right.

While sociologists made numerous contributions to altered communitarian thinking, this philosophy challenged sociology to face issues raised by cross-cultural moral judgments. Sociologists tend to treat all values as conceptually equal; thus sociologists refer to racist Nazi beliefs and those of free societies by the same "neutral" term, calling both "values." Communitarians use the term "virtue" to indicate that some values have a high moral standing because they are compatible with the good society, while other values are not and hence are "aberrant" rather than virtuous.

In the same vein, communitarians reject the claim of cultural relativism that all cultures

command basically the same moral standing, and do not shy away from passing cross-cultural moral judgments. Thus, they view female circumcision, sex slaves, and traditional *hudud* laws (such as chopping off the right hand of thieves) as violations of liberty and individual rights, and abandoning children, violating implicit contracts building into communal mutuality, or neglecting the environment as evidence of a lack of commitment to social order and neglect of social responsibilities.

Communitarian terms became part of the public vocabulary in the 1990s, especially references to assuming social responsibilities to match individual rights, while the term communitarianism itself is used much less often. The number of articles about communitarian thinking in the popular press increased during the last decade of the twentieth century.

AMITAI ETZIONI