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Every relationship is a mutual action—Ferdinand Tönnies

INTRODUCTION: A DEFINITION AND EXAMPLES

Communitarianism is the social strategy that distinguishes peace-loving virtues from greed-hoarding impulses. Communitarianism argues for the former because, in the main, human experience has shown that people prosper when tribalism and egoism give way to generosity and fair-play as first order responses. Even Genghis Khan, the Asian general whose total-war ferocity shook the thirteenth century, demonstrated that consistent fairness and truth telling built empire faster and with less bloodshed than any medieval code of honor, encrusted with class and heavy with elitism and privilege (Weatherford, 2004, p. xix). Community grows under a regime of predictable good will tending toward fearless communication of dissent and negotiated hierarchies of function attentive to the advantage of the least powerful members.

Communitarianism is both ontology and praxis. As a way of being, it is evident primarily in the middle-range bonds of trust and loyalty that come voluntarily to persons who understand that fulfillment, happiness, and eudaemonia evolve through relationships and never in isolation from them. The practice of communitarianism varies from sports fandom to blogging to church or party membership. In every way not forced by the state that people combine for cooperative action and sustain their mutual effort without corruption, communitarianism is evident. Communitarians claim that such praxis is a non-negotiable priority in any successful life. This practice is ideally first experienced in family (Kirkpatrick, 1986, p. 173). Actions that typify family-care then extend to larger and more diverse groups by those who properly understand their identity and vocation. The number of sociologists and commentators who have exploited this movement from family-care to community is legion. Ferdinand Tönnies captures the heart of it in his classic distinction between Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft (Tönnies, 1963, p. 33).

The identity of the individual in communitarian theory emerges as an ontological recognition of the primacy of relationships. The communitarian “is a person whose identity and fulfillment are inextricably bound up with relations and communities. Other people are constitutive of rather than instrumental to my identity and well-being as a person” (Fergusson, 1998, p. 143).
This reorientation, as Ernst Cassirer (1954) clarified, agitates against the Enlightenment notion of the autonomous individual, who may for purposes of survival or economic improvement freely choose to align with others. Rather, communitarianism insists that mutuality defines and constitutes the person. Without relationships, and therefore communicative sharing, the idea of personhood vanishes. Understanding and defining oneself as a person requires knowing and sharing that “self” with others. Under a communitarian rubric, the person is not incorporated or absorbed in the Other, as in communalism, but establishes a distinctive ontological identity in nexus with others, never isolated or free-floating. John MacMurray explains:

The self is constituted by its relation to the other; this relationship is necessarily personal ... the idea of an isolated agent is self-contradictory. Any agent is necessarily in relation to the other.

(quoted in Kirkpatrick, 1986, p. 173)

These ideals, both ontological and workaday, are obviously tenuous, fragile, and sometime invisible. The distinguished commentator Peggy Noonan has observed “what used to be a sorry pretense of community in the public sphere is presently a spirit of maximalism—let’s rub their faces in it” (Noonan, 2019, p. A17).

David Brooks, another steady observer of the commonweal, adds: “Our society suffers from a crisis of connection, a crisis of solidarity. [We have] become a conspiracy against joy...with too little emphasis on the bonding parts of our consciousness, the heart and soul” (Brooks, 2019, pp. xvi, xxii).

It does appear that the communitarian impulse is most evident when a group faces stress, opposition, or danger. War grows the communitarian impulse, in a limited sense, as small units of combatants on both sides pledge life and limb to the survival and success of the unit (Brooks, 2019, p. xxv). Political wars show similar tendencies to forego personal interests for party unity. Religious wars, or wars of the state against religion such as the Chinese and Myanmar governments, among others, have recently conducted, also draw selfless action from the oppressed in a style communitarians recognize.

Thus the sociological realities of communitarianism betray its ontological ideals, which include transparency, nonviolence, and mutual care (Christians, 2019a, pp. 101ff.). This fault-line has never been successfully patched together, but communitarian idealists press on.

APPLICATION TO THE MASS MEDIA

Inklings of communitarianism as a basis for an ethic of mass media show in the establishment of public broadcasting agencies, independent of government and mandated to public service. The BBC and particularly its World Service exhibited early ambitions to serve the common good. Consider that long after British colonial control in Africa and Asia ended, the BBC has been a media mainstay across those continents. In the U.S., broadcasting and later the motion picture industry demonstrated that public service regulation—or with the Hays’ Office, industry self-regulation—seemed a foothold for communitarian sentiments as “the Invisible Empire of the Air” (inventor Lee De Forest’s term) and screen developed their immense influence and fortunes (Lewis, 1991, p. 1). Recent work on the Al Jazeera network points out unique features of communitarianism—cosmopolitan ethics, human dignity, nonviolence and peace journalism—though the network remains a work in progress, not a completed model (Christians, 2019b, pp. 221–236).
The most impressive prelude to communitarianism, in terms of anchoring media responsibility, was the Commission on Freedom of the Press chaired by Robert Maynard Hutchins in the 1940s. The commission’s findings were published in *A Free and Responsible Press* in 1947 and given academic currency by the worldwide influence of that little after-thought book by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in 1956, *Four Theories of the Press*. The University of Illinois scholars called Hutchins’s work the social responsibility theory of the press, highlighting the commissioners’ call for a media that would serve the public, challenge state power, and give voice to those on the margins.

Among the leaders of academe, business, and public policy whom Hutchins recruited to his panel, none wrote more on the moral life and media than William Ernest Hocking, who celebrated communication as the essential human responsibility. No person can live a truly human life in seclusion, ignoring the commonweal, Hocking contended (see Christians and Fackler, 2014). Consciousness and thought require the filling of the space between, the zone of the relation.

Whatever one’s final philosophy, it can never be held as a purely private result. As a supposed body of truth about the living world, there is inseparable from it the impulse to knead it into the self-consciousness of the world.

(Hocking, 1926, p. 319)

Hocking’s colleague on the commission, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, joined paradox and promise to his vision for social justice through value-rich mediated news and entertainment. Love—other-minded care—was the ultimate social norm, he insisted. To be effective in public affairs, love must find expression in norms of justice (Niebuhr, 1957, p. xiii).

Of the five goals for mass media reform recommended by the Hutchins commission, the second and fourth were most coherent with later communitarian themes: to be (2) a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, and provide (4) the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society (Leigh, 1947, pp. 23, 27). These commonplace recommendations were assailed by mid-twentieth-century media chiefs but embraced by subsequent generations around the world (Christians and Nordenstreng, 2004). Responsibility with a communitarian inflection has likewise become an international phenomenon, with its core meaning of duty to others understood across cultures and enriched in depth and application by the world’s diversity (Sizoo, 2010). Clemencia Rodriguez demonstrates that community-based journalism in Colombia can “trigger communal processes” to find meaning and solidarity when facing war and terrorism (2011). The idea of “intermediary associations” in Confucius has attracted Asian scholars to communitarianism for connecting Confucian thought to the values and practices of citizenship (de Bary, 1998).

Among social responsibility advocates, Hutchins is remembered as a champion of the Great Conversation, values-based dialogue that extends from the beginning of human ethical reflection to a present sorely in need of ethical refreshment. No obscurantist, Hutchins wanted “the voices of the Great Conversation to be heard again because we think they may help us to learn to live better now” (Hutchins, 1954, p. 3). Hutchins’s optimism about a renewal of civil discourse was mirrored by each of his commissioners. Archibald MacLeish, the longest surviving member, made repeated reference to the relation-between as “imagination,” the basis of human dignity.

The real defense of freedom is imagination, that feeling-life of the mind which naturally knows because it involves itself in its knowing, puts itself in the place where its thought goes.

(MacLeish, 1958, p. 20)
Following the thinking of Hocking, Niebuhr, and Hutchins, communitarians challenge modern Western notions of press and public, built as they are on Lockean and capitalist presuppositions. Western moral systems, assuming an individualist base, require that the press tell the truth in order that well-informed decision-makers (voters and policy makers) have access to accurate, current, and unbiased data (Ward, 2015). Communitarianism reorganizes these requirements: truth celebrates values hammered out through dialogue, debate, and compromise. The press is the most influential means of publicizing the dialogue on values. In classical liberal media theory, one might legitimately claim that speech rights are absolute—a natural right. Conscience is the supreme moral guide and unfettered speech the first requirement of an open marketplace of ideas. A communitarian speaking about media responsibility would consult as a first priority the needs, wants, ambitions, and wisdom of his or her community. Public or civic journalism reflects this second-effort at democratic cooperation (Rosen, 1999, p. 19).

Over its history, communitarianism wrestles with its identity and direction in the face of a dominant atomistic-contractarian model of community, or anti-community, as Kirkpatrick explains (1986, p. 137). Kwame Appiah (2006) prefers the term “cosmopolitanism” and cites the Cynics of the fourth century B.C. as the first who were self-consciously “citizens of the cosmos.” Local loyalties were insufficiently tribal to account for the moral obligations borne by all humans for all others. Appiah points to the first-order obligation of developing “habits of coexistence: conversations in its older meaning, of living together, association” (Appiah, 2006, p. xix). We the Cosmopolitans (2014) elaborates by demonstrating that the morality and humanity of communal relations make it possible to be at home in the world.

Appiah’s roots in the Akan culture of West Africa serve as a bridge between Western scholars dealing with the wreckage of Enlightenment individualism and African scholars exploring the depth of intersubjectivity, which appears as self-evident truth in that region, unencumbered by Enlightenment bias. Another Akan scholar, Kwasi Wiredu, situates communitarianism in the immediate life-world of harmonized interests and mutual well-being. Had the ancient Akan people written a classic ethics, mutual aid would have been the keynote, not rationalist appeals to duty or injunction revealed by special circumstance, as in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Wiredu, 1996, p. 99).

In similar terms, as Nigerian scholar Joseph Oládèjo Fáníran explains, in Yorùbá culture of southwestern Nigeria “community rituals create solidarity by enabling participants to have a subjective experience of sharing the same meaningful world” (2014, p. 149). The communal is a shared human bond that develops an unshakable responsibility for the solidarity of the community. For the Yorùbá, myths and rituals express unquestioned beliefs about the idea of community, which then is the foundation of values, cosmology, ontology and ways of life. They speak in their own terms about African distinctiveness from the beginning. Africans “from all sides regard community as nothing less than ‘the way things are,’ a presupposition, a prima facie truth. To speak meaningfully is to address social reality in communitarian terms” (Fackler, 2003, p. 320).

The Congolese scholar Benezet Bujo contends that loyalty based on clan and tribe rightly enlarges to a “world community [of] every single human person.” Using the rhetorical style of his own region, Bujo cites an adage from Burundi:

“If one member of the family has eaten dog-meat, all the members of the clan are disgraced.” To eat the flesh of a dog is disgraceful for the Burundi; one who does so should not think that he alone can bear responsibility as an individual for this deed … the wicked conduct of one member infringes the dignity of all.

(Bujo, 2001, p. 115)
Without doubt the history of violence in Africa is as brutal and malicious as the record of any other region, yet Bujo’s starting point for the development of personhood remains fixed at a relational nexus. A child’s sense of self and other begins with the first encounter and depends entirely on the care of others. A name is rendered based on relational realities. One grows into care-providing roles, without surrendering the need for care oneself. Violations of the social bond are reckoned as morally blameworthy, and celebrations as communal joy. Large-scale violations—wars in the Sudan and northern Uganda for instance—must be forgotten and people reconciled as sine qua non to a future. The minuscule and debatable distinction between Hutu and Tutsi which has turned rivers red in Burundi and Rwanda must evaporate as Bujo’s communitarianism translates into social policy there. Communitarian ontology cannot abide perpetual exclusion. Nor can it coherently ordain a cultural hierarchy justifying hegemony or economic domination. Neither colonialism nor traditional culture’s gender stereotypes survive communitarian critique. In Native American and other non-Western cultures, the embrace of the Other characteristic of communitarianism includes one’s forebears and unobservable “spirits and life essences” not excluding animals, birds, even rivers and mountains (Brown, 2004, p. 172).

In the 1980s a surge of interest in communications studies followed the work of Charles Taylor, Robert Bellah, and the translations of Jacques Ellul’s seminal works. In each scholar’s core was the notion that Enlightenment liberalism had sacrificed fundamental human connectedness. The result was a new sense of boredom and disconnect. Novelist Walker Percy described it as “lost in the cosmos” (Percy, 1984, p. 73). For Taylor, the intellectual life of the West, wrapped so tightly in bonds of empiricism, rationalism, and individual rights, had narrowed its “horizons,” diminishing its notion of humanity (Taylor, 1989, p. 27). For Ellul, the drive to efficiency (la technique) characterized all modern bureaucracy, abrogating any possibility of genuine freedom and cooperation (Ellul, 1964, p. 6). As summarized by the title, Our Battle for the Human Spirit, Willem Vanderburg (2016) describes Ellul’s world as one of alienation and dysfunction, with the technique of non-life overwhelming cultural bonds and social relations. Bellah’s revealing interviews portrayed a culture groping for meaningful relationships, unsatisfied with the status symbols of rationalistic success (Bellah, 1996, p. 3). Later Robert Putnam described the loss of social capital in the economized West as he mused over the demise of team sports and a new entertainment market in privatized game-playing. He noted that a “generalized game playing” (I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me) born of community trust no longer typifies American life (Putnam, 2000, p. 21).

In communication studies, Good News: Social Ethics and the Press (1993) sought an alternative theory of the self on which to construct and apply the values of progressive democratic media systems. For Christians, Fackler, and Ferré (1993), mere tinkering with questions of order, freedom, or tradition failed to address root problems. They pressed toward an ontological breakthrough that affirmed the primacy of relationship and refuted the stand-alone person who then chooses his or her social connections based on market potential or other pragmatic calculations.

The ontology of Good News required that common problems of communication ethics and liberal speech/press law be completely reformulated to accommodate persons-in-community. It urged that media operators recast their social vocation, but stopped short of offering to the press a nuanced format or stipulating a code of communitarian media ethics. Rather, Good News provided broad parameters intending to reset the principles by which press and public would come to understand their democratic responsibilities. Mutuality replaced individual rights as a first principle. Freedom to speak could no longer start from assertions of the untamed conscience, but

In an elaboration of the communitarian perspective and its theoretical bases, Christians, Fackler, and Ferré (2012) published an Oxford sequel, *Ethics for Public Communication*. Following its subtitle, *Defining Moments in Media History*, the communitarian model is centered on critical episodes in the world media that signal a democratic tipping point. With community bonds the framework rather than individual autonomy, the relations that humans share define the moral life. For the news media, how the moral order works in communities is the issue, not first of all what journalism professionals self‐define as virtuous. The media’s mission in communitarianism is revitalized citizenship. As the authors summarize their purpose: “We offer in these chapters a vision of community that is proactive, pro-progress, pro-health, and pro-creativity. We present it as a new vision of media ethics in today’s complicated world” (p. vii).

**A THEORETICAL CRITIQUE AND HISTORIC COUNTERPOINT**

In 2019 Clifford Christians published his *magnum opus*, a wide-ranging survey of scholarship focused on three aspects of communitarian ethics, with examples of media performance which approximate his ideal. Notwithstanding the remake of the species that his vision entails, Christians has provided the most challenging, research-rich argument to date for communitarianism applied to media practice and to human communication at large. In a section titled “Communitarian Democracy,” Christians notes that community is frequently regional and local, but the communitarian worldview is inclusive and borderless, emerging in non-Western democracies, Africa, and Latin America, fuelled in the former instance by traditions of *ubuntu* and in the latter by liberation theology and the ethics of being, otherwise called the sacredness of life. (Christians, 2019a, p. 111).

As communitarian media ethics took on theoretical density and settled on broad claims of human dignity and the non‐negotiable obligation of truth telling, libertarian critics rushed to the barricades. Early on, John C. Merrill, a classical liberal who promoted ethics as individual choice and personal reason, was a prolific opponent of the trend to situate journalistic responsibility in communitarian terms.

The twentieth century has spawned a new breed of articulate and very vocal [moral guides] who claim to know what the press should be to be responsible to society. They have shifted, and are continuing to shift, the concept of press freedom from an emphasis on individual media freedom to a stress on a kind of social freedom to have a responsible press.

(Merrill, 1989, p. 28)

In startling cold-war era rhetoric, Merrill drove home his worries over a communitarian turn in American media ethics (1989, p. 214):

Absolutes and universal norms are fit only for “operatniks” functioning in an authoritarian system and not for self-valuing journalists in “open” societies.

In an effort to revive the Enlightenment liberalism of Locke, Voltaire, Mill, and Jefferson, Merrill found in communitarianism an effort to give a humane face to the profit-based corporate journalism driven by accountants and edited, as it were, by attorneys. “This new trend was attempting to inject the public into editorial decision-making and to shift journalism’s stance from one of neutrality and non-involvement to one of advocacy and involvement.” Finally, it’s “only a new way of trying to succeed … Nothing new here” (Merrill, 1998, p. 2).
Another strident critic of the communitarian turn, Carl Hausman, ventured that the pomposity and moral judgmentalism in the Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning textbook was offensive to working journalists, however convincing the book’s arguments might be to a “college freshman” (Hausman, 1992, p. 176).

But of course, it was not college freshmen alone who were turning their intellectual and practical attention toward communitarian theory. While communitarianism has ancient roots, there was indeed something new here. Paradigms were changing; seasoned verities concerning reason and abstract principle were giving way to new combinations of theory and praxis, often in response to human suffering unexplained by abstractions of rationalism. A new millennium’s hope of economic prosperity and global friendship seemed like shallow rhetoric. Following the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, shallowness gave way to the heated rhetoric of the War on Terror. Prospects for peace grew increasingly elusive and the systematic coherence of rationalist polity showed itself to be a human wrecking-ball. Trust diminished, well past already low levels across geographic and ideological divides. No strong solutions presented to growing tensions and bloodshed in regions of the Middle East. Federico Mayor, former head of UNESCO, reflecting on a new millennium and the task ahead for human development, said:

We cannot fail to observe the increase in soul-sickness at the very heart of the most prosperous societies and social categories which seem best protected from misfortune. The heart itself seems prey to a curious void. Indifference and passivity grow. There is an ethical desert. Passions and emotions are blunted. People’s eyes are empty and solidarity evaporates. Grey areas expand. Amnesia wins out. The future seems unreadable. We witness the divorce between forecast and plan. Long-term vision is discredited. Now and then we are truly sick at heart. Will the twenty-first century be the century of artificial paradises, real hell and the overwhelming increase in depression hinted at by present statistics? Will it be characterized by massacres, anomie, violence, pandemics…. (Mayor, 2001, p. 5)

Then this champion of world development challenges readers: “The moment of truth has arrived—the fate of the human race itself may be at stake, so weighty will be the combination of dangers jeopardizing our future” (Mayor, 2001, p. 5).

These extended quotations are meant to convey the passion of world observers for whom a communitarian ethos is a choice for survival, if perhaps also human prosperity. The urgency of the debate as Mayor expresses it carries implications far beyond published treatises or academic theories. Peoples and regions wait for participatory democracy, free and open public expression of core values, and the robust vitalizing power of hope. Mayor forbids that we consign communitarianism to academic discourse while political dialogue crumbles and resources for health and nutrition are wasted by corruption and environmental degradation.

COMMUNITARIANISM UNDERSTOOD IN CONTRAST TO CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

Essential progress, however, cannot sidestep intellectual attention, particularly as communitarianism challenges liberalism’s cultural values and reorients Western notions of personhood and primary loyalties.

Agnes Heller, building on Hannah Arendt’s reflections on totalitarianism, began in the 1980s to develop a social ethic around a community’s commitment to a common good. Heller departed from the model of social ethics built on autonomous moral agents applying rules

Jean Bethke Elshtain reacts to a communitarianism that insists on social sameness forced upon civil society in the interests, supposedly, of the many faces of the oppressed. A healthy community is well aware of its differences and rightly celebrates those civic practices which promote democratic dialogue and principled compromise over bland appeals to eliminate color, gender, or lifestyle. At the center of communitarianism is not uniformity, but core values that affirm the dignity of the other with this first response: listen and learn. Good education explores human variability while “cultivating civic sentiments”—making relationships valuable (Ehsltain, 1998, p. 264).

Philip Selznick laments that communitarian responsibility and accountability are second-tier values in most thinking about how to do corporate life better. He presents re-energized themes of mutuality and stewardship as antidotes to a civic culture too stressed over the breakup of personal virtues and too sentimentally fixed on personal care to face the systemic malaise that seems to characterize contemporary life. “Obligations are … supported by love, but they arise and persist even when love is absent or hard to sustain” (Selznik, 1998, p. 62).

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Progress in academic theory building, essential to cultural and knowledge revolutions, is never a blueprint. As the end of the second decade of the new millennium looms, communitarianism appears vulnerable to an array of counter-community forces. One need only note the resistance to the Kurdish quest for a homeland, the Syrian debacle, gas attacks on civilians, the barbarity of Boko Haram, the senseless killing of journalist Jamal Khasho’ggi, and the circus-saga of American politics post-2016 as discouraging and tragic examples of the loathing which communitarianism tries so arduously to counterbalance. No matter the weight of media violence (real and creative) or the righteous fury of a jihadist, murder cannot be a communitarian response to unfairness or long-held grievance. The world seems more tense, more divided, more in need of peaceful, negotiated, dialogical resolution that ever. Communitarianism still appears to be a theory without global application. Aside from armed conflict and strategic terror—if shooting wars miraculously ceased—communitarianism would still confront the immensely influential and entrenched global business movement that acts in every way as aggressively and totalizingly as the several armies facing off in the War on Terror. Media convergence offers programming in new bundles, but not more or better anything, just reconfigured and sold in packages advertised as new symbols of success. The integrated capability of information technology may not spell a more integrated social planet. Why should it? Fortunes are in the balance, and fortunes matter at every level of power. Communitarianism as a theoretical module opposing globalized fortune building or cultural sameness, globalized persons-as-consumers, appears pathetically short on persuasive appeal.

Communitarianism faces an entrenched ideology in radical religion. To the degree that the Bishop Tutus and Gandhis and Dalai Lamas—peace-seeking leaders of religious movements—weigh in on the side of generosity and reconciliation, the world’s competing faiths may have a season when relations between their peoples move closely to approximate the ideals which constitute the public core of their respective teachings. But sentiments are fragile. When
Pope Benedict XVI quoted a medieval expositor critical of Islamic extremism in a speech in September 2006, he claimed only to be delivering an academic lecture. Around the world the reaction to this segment of his speech shows how easily (or naively) a scratch becomes a laceration. Fires destroyed properties and attacks on persons placated the bruised honor of Islamic movements. In central Africa, captured teenagers are still sent into shopping centers strapped in crude bombs—unwilling suicide martyrs—often begging nearby police to defuse the bomb and save them (Parkinson and Hinshaw, 2019, p. 1). In such times, the bonds of sympathy touted as fundamental to communitarian relations appear as flimsy as a British parliamentarian’s outspoken preference that Muslim women unveil their faces when they meet him. A world of edgy, intimidated religionists appears to be on the alert for infractions that permit a show of loyalty by drawing all but unbridgeable boundaries between faiths. Salman Rushdie survived his fatwa, but fatwa or its equivalent as tools of social negotiation, will almost surely survive him. Opposed to them are democratic rhetoricians who placate millions with redundancy and post-Cold-War belligerence.

Other critics have renewed perennial questions concerning communitarianism’s subtle de-construction of the West’s most treasured value, freedom. Does communitarianism subvert liberty? Insofar as liberty has been understood since the Enlightenment as the right to self-ownership, communitarianism would appear to challenge and redesign. The assumed natural rights of the liberal tradition and the freedom to express those rights in a manner suiting the self are nearly synonymous with the West’s shake-out of feudalism. For communitarian critic Charles Fried (2007), the conceptual question opens a host of political dilemmas: Is state prohibition of prostitution an infringement of the liberty of contract (a sale negotiated to each party’s free consent)? Do anti-sex-for-sale laws reflect a community’s protection of unfairly victimized weak-side bargainers on the one hand, and the long-term payees of unwanted pregnancies on the other?

Equally difficult are questions of virtual behavior: on what basis other than a community’s interest in negotiated ideas of sexual purity may it impose restrictions on liberty to access graphics or other mediated forms of sex? When the restraint on liberty smacks at a biological drive so human that without it survival is jeopardized, has the community clearly overstepped? That overstep is as common as the librarian’s software filter, and the FCC’s imposing a tax on entertainment which draws its audience specifically in proportion to its sexual arousal. Are not all of these rules and laws examples of communitarianism’s reduction of free space to an inch before another’s nose? The common square is flattened when sensitivities as different as music preferences steal variety and entrepreneurship, replacing color with a sheen of gray. In a communitarian world, Fried implies, the worst crime is offense against a hypersensitive victims’ advocate (Fried, 2007, p. 125).

Indeed, communitarianism may appear counter-intuitive. Martha Nussbaum notes that living bodies go “from here to there, from birth to death, never fused with any other—we are hungry and joyful and loving and needy one by one … and always continue to have separate brains and voices and stomachs” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 62). We seem to carry on, each one, much as the liberal vision of individualism describes it. The hunger of the one must be relieved before hunger is relieved. No communal hunger program succeeds without very distinct bodies receiving bread. Communitarians appear to be amassing a crowd and calling the group a new reality. But hunger is felt by persons alone.

In the shadow of militarism, profit monopolies, religionists bent on mutual annihilation, and classical liberals suspicious of group-think, what are the chances communitarianism will provide the tipping point for peaceable societies and sustainable progress?
COMMUNITARIANISM AND HISTORIC SYNTHESIS

Communitarianism has emerged in recent decades with the earmarks of a historical synthesis that bodes well for its enduring appeal. The crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled the end of collectivism, the idea that personal identities must be submerged into the greater identity of the state. Historical work on the regimes of the late Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung darkens the prospect that collectivism will soon appear by popular choice (Chang and Halliday, 2005, p. 3). Likewise, atomistic individualism touted so enthusiastically in Ayn Rand’s objectivism, for instance, has seen its day.

People intellectually aligned with the Enlightenment’s revolt against medieval monarchies now see that the great democratic virtues of liberty and choice are won only by coalitions and “middle range” associations not dissimilar from de Tocqueville’s vision. How then should persons be understood? Communitarianism provides a synthesis that promotes the relation-between as prior to selfhood, without losing selfhood.

The communitarian vision has been understood here as an emerging synthesis in which liberal individualism and tribalism each share their margins and nurture their overlapping fringes. The liberal takes membership in a wider world to be the project by which conscience is shaped by moral norms. The tribalist recognizes that norms once considered distinctive in fact are shared, that norms celebrated by one’s own village—the village identity—are reflected, mirrored, and perhaps even developed among neighbors upstream (Cooper, 1989, p. 269). In that case, why not trade? Why not marry? Why not share literature, make speeches, inquire, talk?

At the same time, the communitarian vision claims a distinctiveness and therefore an identity apart from liberalism and tribalism, a moral center which depends on neither and cannot be reduced to the best of each. That distinctiveness is communitarianism’s assertion concerning the ontological point of departure: the relation between, which generates language and norms. Communitarianism is centered neither on the individual nor the collective, but inexorably on the integuments everywhere apparent in social institutions of all varieties and sizes. “Why talk?” was a published conversation by communications scholar Walter Ong, who answered his question in communitarian terms before the intellectual movement which employs that name congealed (Altree, 1973, p. 1).

But communitarianism has yet to reach a “tipping point.” It remains a moment of skeptical interest in the West, a forbidden zone of distrust and danger in parts of the world, and the best explanation for political corruption in urban densities from Chicago to Kinshasa.

What climate change must communitarianism experience for its peace-building potential to rise above the distrust, nepotism, and ennui situated for centuries at the very nexus which communitarianism projects as its first-order foundation? Is there an intellectual future beyond a few books, a small movement, an occasional conference or rhetorical appeal to brother/sisterhood? In this essay, communitarianism’s trajectory is cast in terms of three concluding claims.

Communitarianism must provide an account of the conscience. When a child asks about the location of the soul, pointing to her head or chest or abdomen, wondering where to probe the organ’s contours, adult respondents resort to some version of “none of the above” and “all of the above.” Conscience carries the same locational vagaries and sensate certainties. The contemplative person understands that personhood is equivalent to soul-awareness, the maturity of moral judgment, expansion of sympathy, prioritizing of values, exercise of choice and courage, reflective self-sacrifice, the sense that one’s life matters, that one cannot resign from moral accountability, that moral choice sets personal direction and creates a profile that one increasingly recognizes to be the self, the “I am.”
Communitarianism cannot situate conscience into disembodied space, the relation-between, but it can and must reorient there. Moral judgment moves us toward a future, Aristotle observed. The vegetative soul reproduces, the appetitive soul does that plus transports itself and communicates; the contemplative soul alone uses symbols to grasp the meaning of things. Humans have no other planet-sharing genus quite like themselves: hungry for explanation, restless without verstehen, searching for shalom among the details and the macrocosms. Communitarianism insists that the orientation of the conscience be the relation of the self to other selves and to the world as it presents in ritual, social organization, literature—all moments of the quest. Communitarianism stands in dialogical contrariness to orientations fixed on the self and protests those which headily despise the other in idol worship of aggrandized self (from Nietzsche to modern consumerists.) Communitarianism insists that moral judgment serve the relation-between, embracing the other and conditioning the happiness of the self to the prosperity of that space-between. The purpose of the quest is enriched mutuality. The proper orientation of the soul—however deeply selfhood is nourished, protected, or educated—is outbound, stewardly, restless, at the other end of the day, at peace.

Second, communitarianism must articulate a persuasive moral claim beyond consensus or tradition. Michael J. Sandel (2005) makes this point in his distinction between the “free speech” claims of Martin Luther King’s Selma march and the “free speech” claims of the American Nazi Party’s effort to parade their swastikas through Skokie, Illinois. Sandel notes that liberals (who concede no discrimination to conceptions of the good in the judgment of rights) and communitarians (who concede the good to majoritarian will) cannot distinguish between these two events. But “common sense” makes the first proper and the second improper, because common sense sees the moral purpose of each and comes to moral judgment before rights are assigned. (Sandel, 2005, p. 258; see 1998).

The Enlightenment insisted that moral trust is accessible to all persons of rational temper. Sociologists or poll-takers might discern majoritarian trends, but no one (children and the mentally handicapped excepted) was absent the capacity to apprehend the fixed truths which sovereignly guide moral judgment. Post-modernity abandons fixed truths. Contemporary tribalism has polarized fixed truths into dichotomies which now justify torture, genocide, strategic ruination, political favoritism, and a world order festering with rhetorical stake-planting and wall-building. The public square is now a kill-zone; the public debate a rant. Accessible moral truth a hand-me-down from leader to follower accompanied by requisite goods bearing the value sufficient to sustain life another day. Between relativism and fundamentalism, moral foundations quiver, truth evaporates, consensus declines.

Communitarianism insists that the wisdom accumulated from centuries of reflection, and the orientation of conscience toward mutuality, are grand moral claims in a sustaining pattern of norms that offer the best middle-range account of moral obligation and accountability. That claim must be situated in an appeal to human dignity and directed toward life. Life must be prized, violence must be loss.

At this point the argument warrants a word concerning religious claims, lest the vast majority of theists in our world conclude, wrongly, that their commitments are out-of-step with a communitarian convergence. Comparing the claims and histories of world religions is well beyond the scope of this chapter, and the casual assertion that all faiths converge around a few ineluctable moral verities is naïve. Nonetheless, from major faith to upstart cult, morality and spirituality are cousins of the first order. One cannot conceive a religious movement shorn of moral teaching, nor a valued moral doctrine not also embedded in a world faith. What is the communitarian to do with such a potpourri: sample it, transcend it, avoid it?
Commonly, the communitarian secularist prefers the rhetoric of public policy (justice, fairness, equity) over the religious counterpart (divine command, *agape*, sharia). There appears a rising volume among secularists concerning the negative impact of religion on community-building, especially as Europe and the United States stumble at exporting democracy to the Middle East and tensions rise with violence. The secularist has precious little language in common with Muslim culture, and increasingly a language intolerant of the theology and ethics of the Christian West. Dialogue requires that the religiously committed move decisively toward the rhetoric of equity if any talk will occur.

In Christian intellectual circles, the communitarian vision enjoys a developed theological apparatus and a common language. The trinitarian basis of Christian theology is itself an appeal to communitarian mutuality as explanation of the character of the godhead. This plays out in the Old and New Testament as dialogical ethics which reaches beyond the Trinity in covenantal communication with humankind. Divine commands so eminent in Christian ethics (the Ten Commandments) are famously interpreted by communities of faith operating within wider cultures. Moral accountability is situated in community norms considered under the guidance of the living presence of deity. In this context, the communitarian vision flourishes. The same happens, no doubt, in other faith contexts.

Third, communitarianism must offer hope. In his remarkable essay on hope, political scientist (Tinder, 1999) notes the common human “ability and desire to reach out to the remote past and the remote future” in order to understand the potential of one’s life. It would seem a limitless task, nearly impossible. Yet we persist, because at the end of the journey, there lies the promise of universal peace. Historians, poets, and neuroscientists describe a similar human bent: the practice of universal norms discovered through stories re-enacted and told through time and across space (Gazzaniga, 2005, p. 161). We must speak to and about each other to discover the quite common moral convictions which sustain and enrich life. James Q. Wilson (1993) observes:

> The idea of autonomous individuals choosing everything—their beliefs and values, their history and traditions, their social forms and family structures—is a vainglorious idea, one that could be invented only by thinkers who felt compelled to construct society out of theories.

(p. 234)

We build culture with words primarily, but also in architecture, public policy, sculpture, film—all means of symbolic constructions wanting to connect, and the reason is hope, or as Kierkegaard put it, “a passion for what is possible.”

(Moltmann, 1967, p. 20)

Communitarianism is robust with hope, if delicately humble on past performance. History and daily journalism focus on the terrible breakdowns in the relation-between: personal disregard, institutional corruption, state-guided violence against faceless populations. The history of communitarian *shalom* would take fewer pages indeed. But no one thinking about people and values believes the last chapter is yet written. Hope carries each of us past “the existing situation and seeks for opportunities of bringing history into ever better correspondence to the promised future” (Moltmann, 1967, p. 330). We need to take the argument much further here. Each reader will reflect on texts, conversations, or meetings where present circumstance shifted toward a promise unrealized but tangible. Like a magnet pulling ions, hope lifts the line of sight from London’s fog to Norway’s crisp fjordic vistas. Hope breeds passion. Scholars rarely weep while reading their work publicly, but those gathered at the James Carey symposium at the University of Illinois in October 2006 did, remembering a generative presence and rehearsing key communicational
concepts about which, when he died, Carey had not yet said the last word. It was a festival of hope and a celebration of intellectual community. Readers will each have their stories.

Communitarians are those who will trudge through the history of race to find a moment of mutuality between human stock of differing hues. They will tremble at the grotesque failures of mutuality, even in the last century, but insist that the future is not written by the past, even to the point of believing that mutual regard will be the flower that brings a point of color to the weed bed of human failure. Hope leads forward, overriding vengeance and pressing for peace.

On the fiftieth anniversary of Japan’s entering the Bretton Woods accords, linking that nation’s economic future to the rest of the world, ending its isolation and making it a member nation, Mieko Nishimizu (2002, quoted in Senger, 2006) acknowledged the change of era that his national history represented:

The future … differs from the past most notably in that the Earth itself is the relevant unit with which to frame and measure that future. Discriminating issues that shape the future are all fundamentally global. We belong to one inescapable network of mutuality: mutuality of ecosystems; mutuality of freer movement of information, ideas, people, capital, goods and services; and mutuality of peace and security. We are tied indeed in a single fabric of destiny on Planet Earth.

(p. 32)

Communitarianism provides ontological footing to claims such as this; and moral direction, albeit largely experimental and frequently flawed, for how such claims may play out.

REFERENCES


