The Idea of a Communitarian Morality

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During the past few years, and especially since the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in 1981, we have seen a renewed attack on the premises of liberalism.[1] There is nothing new about such criticism. A long list of writers—Hegel, Marx, Dewey, and many others, including several Popes—have recoiled in various ways from what seemed to be an impoverished morality and an inadequate understanding of human society. The contemporary criticism has raised some new issues and has been sparked, in no small degree, by a spate of impressive writing in legal, moral, and social philosophy—writing that has reaffirmed the liberal faith in moral autonomy and in the imperatives of rationality. I refer, of course, to the work of John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Ronald Dworkin.

The new critics are called communitarian, an echo of similar views expressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by English liberals like John A. Hobson and L.T. Hobhouse, and American pragmatists, especially John Dewey. Yet the communitarian idea is vague; in contemporary writing it is more often alluded to and hinted at than explicated. Furthermore, there are communitarians on both left and right. The quest for a communitarian morality is a meeting ground for conservatives, socialists, anarchists, and more ambiguously, welfare liberals. Serious issues of social policy are at stake. It seems important, therefore, to explore what a communitarian morality may entail. For if we shoot these arrows of the spirit we should know, as best we can, where they will light.

The most interesting aspect of this new writing is the tension it reveals within contemporary or welfare liberalism. Among welfare liberals—for whom Rawls and Dworkin are philosophical spokesmen—we

1. In addition to MacIntyre, the writers I have in mind include Benjamin Barber, Robert Bellah, Michael Sandel, William M. Sullivan, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Robert Paul Wolff, and Roberto Unger.

see a communitarian sensibility combined with classical premises of rationality, autonomy, and self-interest. This comes out most clearly, perhaps, in the way Rawls deals with equality and social justice.

In a doctrine he calls the "difference principle," Rawls asserts that social and economic inequalities may be necessary and desirable, but their moral worth must be judged by what they contribute to the welfare of the least advantaged. This principle strongly echoes the Judeo-Christian association of righteousness with concern for the poor and powerless, for "the least of these my brethren."[2] But the premises are different. The difference principle is founded in rationality and reciprocal advantage, not in sympathy and benevolence.[3] Indeed, Rawls makes a special point of insisting that his argument is more cogent than classical utilitarianism because the latter presumes an unrealistic benevolence.[4] Yet the difference principle, as Rawls understands it, is an expression of human solidarity. Within his theory of justice, the abstract ideal of fraternity takes on a new and more specific meaning.[5] What began as a shrewd calculation—a hedge against unfavorable outcomes—generates a spirit of brotherhood and is a building block of community.

This way of thinking faithfully reflects the troubled ethos of welfare liberalism. Viewed historically, welfare liberals differ from their laissez-faire forebears in that they seek a richer meaning of autonomy and rationality, one more generous in spirit and more faithful to psychological and social reality. Theirs is a quest for *substantive* freedom, *substantive* rationality, and *substantive* justice. This means, for example, that mere freedom from restraint is not an acceptable criterion of liberation. Such freedom may deny to most people the social support they need for genuine autonomy when they face psychological or economic dependency, and it may leave them without effective protection from the powerful and the greedy. Similarly, genuine rationality cannot be realized if it is limited to individual action for individuated goals; rational cooperation for collective goals is necessary if the underlying value—reasoned pursuit of human well-being—is to be achieved. Justice is illusory if it overlooks the social conditions that distort legal outcomes, such as inequality or the interplay of private and public power.

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2. *Matthew* 25:40.

3. Rawl⌐ imagines a social contract in which free, equal, and rational persons agree on the terms of their future cooperation by choosing principles of justice. Behind a veil of ignorance about their individual circumstances, they choose the least bad or safest alternatives. No one can be sure of not ending up highly vulnerable to loss of liberty or at the bottom of the social ladder. Therefore he or she wants to insure against the worst alternative. The outcome is a set of principles—compelled by rationality—that protect the interests of the least advantaged and the basic liberties of all. *See* J. RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE 13-15 (1971).

4. *See id.* at 178.

5. *See id.* at 105.

Thus welfare liberalism strains toward a communitarian perspective. But it is held back by an irrepressible commitment to the idea that individuals must decide for themselves what it means to be free and what ends should be pursued. The continuity of classical and welfare liberalism is here vigorously reaffirmed. The individual is the proper locus of moral choice. The political community should be neutral with respect to ends; it should not say what is the good life; it should provide only a framework for discourse and a vehicle for registering individual preferences.

Modern liberals are by no means consistent on this issue; they do not wholeheartedly embrace the concept of a neutral, uncommitted state. But they are easy prey to the transition from a well-meaning doctrine of individual choice, and respect for diversity, to a subjective view of the good with its corollary that values are radically relative to interests and situations. The public interest becomes epiphenomenal; only special interests are real. The result is an erosion of confidence in collective judgment and an impoverishment of the public realm.

The Relevance of Sociology

It seems appropriate on this occasion to highlight the connection between sociological understanding and the communitarian perspective. It will come as no surprise to learn that I am attracted to that perspective in large part because I appreciate (and embrace) the basic postulates of modern sociology. The connections are fairly obvious, but we should review them briefly and dispel some misconceptions. First is the concept of a social self. Sociologists have long rejected the atomistic view of man put forward in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Society is not made up of preformed, wholly competent individuals endowed by nature with reason and self-consciousness. In the beginning is society, not the individual. To say that humans are social animals is to say that they depend on others for psychological sustenance, including the formation of their personalities. This is the theoretical foundation of what I shall later call the "implicated self."

I want to emphasize here that in the sociological canon the social self is not necessarily a subordinate or heteronomous self. The self is a social product, but that product is a unique person. That person may be, from the standpoint of others, independent and even perverse. In the idiom of George Herbert Mead, the "I," which he contrasted with the socially determined "me," is the agency of reflective morality. As such, the "I" is not a sport or freak; neither is it the gift of abstract reason. It is a viable but precarious outcome of social interaction—which may enhance or distort communication, enlarge or cramp perspectives. Moral competence therefore depends on the nature and quality of social

participation. A practical lesson is that morality is to be taught and encouraged, not mainly by precept, but by enlarging opportunities for communication, interdependence, and responsibility.

A second theme is the salience of person-centered experience and person-centered relationships for growth, mental health, and moral competence. In sociology it is the person who counts, not the abstract individual. The human actor is an irreducibly concrete and valued being whose ontological primacy is not diminished by the attention we give to groups, categories, classes, or systems. Many think that the sociological quest for cultural and structural explanations diminishes the importance of individual persons. That sometimes happens, to be sure. But sociology has been a major resource for criticizing abstract models of human conduct in economics, law, and other disciplines. Furthermore, much of sociology, as it bears on industrial, organizational, educational, military, and political life, is concerned with exploring how persons in their wholeness affect the rationality of specialized systems; and conversely with the fate of persons in institutional settings, whether those settings create opportunity for harmony of self and work or, instead, are a source of alienation and suffocation of spirit.

There has been much learned discussion of the concept of "person," and as usual George Orwell has some wisdom to offer. In *Homage to Catalonia*, where he recounted his experiences during the Spanish Civil War, Orwell tells the following story:

> Early one morning another man and I had gone out to snipe at the Fascists in the trenches outside Huesca. . . . At this moment, a man . . . jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting him. It is true that I am a poor shot . . . and also that I was thinking chiefly about getting back to our trench . . . . Still, I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists'; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist', he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him.[6]

God forbid I should be frivolous about such a weighty topic. Orwell's cautionary tale is no substitute for analytical precision in defining what we should mean by "person" in moral theory. It does suggest that an adequate concept of the person, as an object of moral concern, will look to more than rationality, more even than socially defined identity, and certainly more than moral agency. In sociology at its best, and in a communitarian morality as well, the person is a vividly realized organic unity; the premise is that only when we respond to the concreteness of persons do we vindicate their humanity. To treat persons as ends,

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6. G. ORWELL, HOMAGE TO CATALONIA 230-31 (Penguin Books ed. 1966).

and not as means only, requires that they be appreciated directly, in their uniqueness, warts and all. (For people who are interested in moral philosophy I would say, as a brief aside, that we should be more careful to distinguish what it means to be a moral actor from what it means to be an object of moral concern.)

Another theme that bears on the communitarian perspective is what we might call the *principle of continuity*. Sociological interpretation is not comfortable with clear lines drawn between one human activity and another, one social sphere and another. In sociological jurisprudence we are uneasy with the separation of law and politics, law and economics, law and morality. The same may be said of any other social sphere, whether it be education, technology, science, business, or national security. Every practice and every institution is seen as "in society," fatefully conditioned by larger contexts of culture and social organization. Sociology looks to the continuities of life, to how things fit together and are interdependent, and finds in those continuities the primordial sources of obligation and responsibility. This does not deny, of course, the importance of autonomy for technical competence or even for the moral integrity of specialized institutions. It does say that without attention to fundamental continuities autonomy can degenerate into a perverse and self-defeating isolation.

Finally, I should say a few words about the concept of community itself. This is not a well-developed idea. Like so many other key ideas in philosophy and social science, it remains vague and elusive. Still, a few connotations are worth noting. A community is not a special purpose organization. It is a comprehensive *framework* for social life. I emphasize "framework" because, although in a genuine community there must be a minimum of integration, including shared symbolic experience, we also expect to find relatively self-regulating activities, groups, and institutions. Put another way, communities are, ideally, settings within which *mediated* participation takes place. The individual is bound into a community by way of participation in more limited, more person-centered groups. The community is a locus of commitment, to be sure, but within it is preserved a substantial degree of autonomy and rationality. Compare, for example, the way people relate to a charismatic leader in a mass organization, where both autonomy and rationality are at risk. A community cannot be formed when the conditions of commitment are too weak, but it may turn into a parody of itself if commitment to a distant symbol or to leadership undermines the continuities and dissolves the bonds of person-centered life; or if, as in some "intentional" communities, the structure is so tight that it finds all social differentiation offensive, even special friendships. The "total institution" analyzed by Erving

Goffman,[7] though certainly a framework for the entire round of life, is in some forms at least a caricature of community, not its fulfillment. Nor do we suppose that what Edward Banfield called "amoral familism"— "[m]aximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise"[8]—is a paradigm of community.

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In these comments I have stressed the moral relevance of sociological inquiry. This may seem strange to some, given sociology's long, painful, often stumbling march toward scientific respectability (defined as the pursuit of objective knowledge). I share that aspiration. To emphasize the moral relevance of sociology is not an invitation to self-indulgence or, for that matter, to hermeneutic ecstasy. In the proper quest for objectivity, especially for freedom from ideological bias, we may have separated ourselves from our most important intellectual roots. As we lose moral focus we may also lose the coherence of our discipline and its dignity as well.

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In what follows I propose to unpack the meaning of "communitarian morality" by identifying three main themes: morality and selfhood, character and civic virtue, and the community of reason. These themes are closely connected and the values they express reinforce one another.

Morality and Selfhood

A communitarian morality takes as its starting point what I shall call the implicated self. Consider the case of the notorious Mrs. Jellyby in Charles Dickens's novel, *Bleak House*. Mrs. Jellyby practiced what Dickens called "telescopic philanthropy." She was indifferent to the chaos in her household and to the welfare of her husband and children. All her philanthropic energies were directed to furthering the prosperity of an African people who lived on the left bank of the Niger. Mrs. Jellyby is described as "a pretty, very diminutive, plump woman . . . with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if . . . they could see nothing nearer than Africa!"[9]

Telescopic philanthropy is still philanthropy, which may be better than nothing from a moral point of view. But charity begins at home. As a general rule, we doubt the authenticity of sentiments that slight the interests of those with whom one is directly involved. Mrs. Jellyby is a

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7. *See* E. GOFFMAN, ASYLUMS (Anchor Books ed. 1961).
8. E. BANFIELD, THE MORAL BASIS OF A BACKWARD SOCIETY 85 (1958).
9. C. DICKENS, BLEAK HOUSE 85 (Penguin Books ed. 1971).

comic figure, as well as an object of skepticism and scorn. We would not have the same response if she were devoted to her family's health and comfort at the cost of neglecting her African friends. At best she seems to have her priorities wrong.

If we ask for what and to whom we are responsible, the answer must depend to a large extent on a personal history and on a recognition of how we directly affect the lives and situations of others. These effects flow from our presence and from our actions, but not necessarily from explicit choices. Responsibility presumes choice, but not unconditioned choice. We choose from among limited options; and *what* we have chosen is not truly known until the consequences appear. Parents are responsible for the children they have, not for those they might have liked to have or only for those they chose to have.

A morality of the implicated self builds on the understanding that our deepest and most important obligations flow from identity and relatedness, rather than from consent. Consent suggests agreement, bargaining, reciprocity, specificity. The obligations I have in mind are characteristically open-ended and unspecific; they are often unilateral; and they are largely involuntary, at least in detail.

It has long been understood that there is, as Emile Durkheim put it, a noncontractual element in contract, and that the emphasis on consent in modern political theory reveals a want of sociological awareness. Hanna Pitkin once wrote

> [I]t is easy to confuse the fact that promises and contracts are self-assumed, with the idea that the *obligation to keep* them is self-assumed as well. . . . The making of particular promises or contracts presupposes the social institution of promising or contracts, and the obligation to keep promises cannot itself be founded on a promise.[10]

Thus contractual obligation reaches back, beyond consent, to more fundamental and less voluntary commitments.

Even if you like the idea of a social contract, remember that in its classic form it does not call for consent in depth, that is, with respect to specific rights and obligations. A social contract is a *constitutive* contract. Its function is to create a political community by founding the legitimacy of government on the consent of the governed. Once the community is formed it has a logic and dynamic of its own. Even the fundamental obligations of government and citizenry—obligations of loyalty, self-restraint, and care—flow from the nature of the community and of its historical premises, not from the terms of an agreement.

This line of reasoning has cast doubt on the *centrality* of consent for moral and political theory. It does not follow, of course, that consent is

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irrelevant or that contract and reciprocity do not play a significant role in private and public affairs. Of course they facilitate cooperation; of course they enhance the responsibility and responsiveness of government. The point is rather that some kinds of obligation are *not* founded on consent and that these are the more solid building blocks of a moral order.

The principle of limited commitment founded on consent is alive and well in the law (and practice) of contract. It works best when purposes are clearly defined, when circumstances do not vary, and when the duration of a relationship is short. The principle loses ground, however, as purposes multiply or become more general, as circumstances are routinely subject to change, and as a continuing relationship is contemplated. As we move in a more complex direction we enter a world of open-ended obligations that depend less on specific agreements and more on understanding the nature of the relationship and the values at stake.

Consider, for example, the embarrassed discovery that something is wrong with the way our newly liberalized law of divorce is conceived and administered. In her recently published study, *The Divorce Revolution*,[11] Lenore Weitzman has documented the unintended and often harmful effects of abandoning the discredited fault principle and embracing a more neutral breakdown principle. Something unforeseen happened on the way to this desirable outcome. The imagery of contract intervened and with it the idea that the parties should be treated as equals—not only as equal before the law, not only as entitled to equality of concern and respect, but in a very direct, result-oriented way, namely, that they should share equally in the allocation of marital assets. This equality, it turns out, often runs counter to social reality: including the economic vulnerability of women in our society, the needs of children, and the opportunities of ex-husbands and fathers to avoid responsibility. The new law reflected and reinforced the movement for feminine equality and independence. But it retreated from the idea that our law should have special concern for institutions with the historic function of making males responsible for their families; and for creating units within which, between spouses and among parents and children, a principle of open-ended obligation prevails. The result is an impoverished moral order.

The morality of open-ended obligation, grounded in an implicated self, is not limited to these intimate or personal relations. It applies as well to institutions, including the business enterprise. The controversy over corporate responsibility is a struggle for and against open-ended obligation. Peter Drucker, who long ago began thinking about the corporation as a social institution, and therefore about its legitimacy, has

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11. *See generally* L. WEITZMAN, THE DIVORCE REVOLUTION at ix-xviii (1985) (a study of the effects of no-fault divorce in the United States).

raised this question in connection with the recent rash of corporate takeovers:

> The question being most hotly debated currently is whether hostile take-overs are good or bad for shareholders. But what other groups may have a legitimate stake in the fight for the control and survival of the enter-prise is probably more important, though less discussed. Does the mod-ern, publicly-owned, large enterprise exist *exclusively* for the shareholders? This is, of course, what orthodox "capitalism" asserts. But the term "free enterprise" was coined forty or fifty years ago to assert that the shareholder interest, while important, is only one interest and that the enterprise has functions well beyond that of producing returns for the shareholder—functions as an employer, as a citizen of the com-munity, as a customer, and as a supplier.[12]

We need, Drucker says, to find a way "to protect the going concern against hostile takeovers which subordinate all other interests—employ-ees, the enterprise's long-range growth and prosperity, and the country's competitive position in an increasingly competitive world economy—to short-term speculative gain."[13] This is a good example of communitar-ian morality at work. It reflects an ethos of open-ended obligation, not of sharply defined commitment.

I conclude this discussion on a delicate note, but one that should not be evaded. A morality of the implicated self has a very practical effect on how we understand the *reach* of individual responsibility. If the self as a biological and social formation is decisively affected by circumstances not chosen, among which are memberships in family and community, then the boundaries between individual and collective responsibility are indis-tinct. They cannot be nicely limited by the criterion of free choice. Peo-ple who are nourished by a community, and "accept" what they never dreamed of choosing, have no standing to deny at least some responsibil-ity for what the community is and what it has done. Contemporary Americans take pride in their political traditions and achievements; con-temporary Germans are proud of their musical, literary, and scientific heritage. By the same token, Americans must take responsibility for the devastation of slavery, which extends to our generation and beyond; and Germans must take responsibility for the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. This does not settle what collective responsibility entails. But the princi-ple cannot be dismissed as primitive or irrational or as simply a danger-ous thought.

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12. Drucker, *The Problem of Corporate Takeovers—What is to be Done?*, THE PUBLIC INTEREST, Winter 1986, at 22 (emphasis in original).

13. *Id.* at 24.

Character and Civic Virtue

A communitarian morality, as I have thus far described it, is not at its core a philosophy of liberation. The central value is not freedom or independence but *belonging*. (This is where it most sharply departs from the liberal tradition.) At the same time, what it means to belong must encompass respect for the integrity of the person. The claim is that personhood is best served in and through social participation. But what *kind* of participation? That is the crux.

Some of the communitarian writings have given much attention to "civic republicanism," "civic humanism," and "classical republicanism."[14] The republican ethic, Michael Sandel has said, "seeks to cultivate civic virtue, and to orient citizens to a common good beyond the sum of individual interests."[15] Who can be against civic virtue? This depends on what it means and what it asks of us.

A classic text for our time is well-known to all: "And so, my fellow-Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." These lines are repeated so often in ceremonial contexts that they are in danger of being emptied of meaning. Yet they faithfully reflect a vital strand of communitarian morality. I refer to the priority of duty over wants, including claims of right. We could trivialize the issue by thinking of rights and duties as strictly correlative. (If one person has a right, someone else has a duty.) But in a larger sense, viewed from the standpoint of public policy and individual character, we can and do give a different weight to our sense of duty than to our claims of right. We differ in our readiness to accept the one and assert the other.

From a moral point of view, and from a sociological point of view as well, duty is what roles are about and what membership is about. Insofar as roles are clearly defined, they are so characteristically in light of duties and obligations. That is because roles are tied to functions or tasks and these require, first of all, an understanding of and commitment to appropriate conduct. When we become parents, or accept membership in, say, the academic community, we have uppermost in our minds what our responsibilities are and not what our rights are.

Of course rights are important. A communitarian morality is not rights-*centered,* but it is not opposed to rights or indifferent to them or casual about them. From the perspective of community, however, rights are derivative and secondary. Duties tell us what we must do; they summon us to action. Rights, however, as Jeremy Waldron points out, "do not provide reasons for acting, at least not for the people who have

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14. *See, e.g.,* W. SULLIVAN, RECONSTRUCTING PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY (1982); R. BELLAH, HABITS OF THE HEART (1985).

15. Sandel, *The State and the Soul,* THE NEW REPUBLIC, June 10, 1985, at 39.

them."[16] We may or may not invoke the rights we have or think we have. That decision tells us a great deal about character and civic virtue. There is a vital difference between invoking rights out of a sense of duty, as a form of responsible conduct, and doing so out of narrow self-interest.

Liberalism is much preoccupied with rights, understandably so, because it is a philosophy of liberation, not of belonging. This preoccupation has merit, but it too easily separates liberty from association and therefore from discipline and duty. In the process rights become abstract, unsituated, and absolute. Furthermore, it becomes hard to distinguish among *kinds* of rights. A moral community must recognize baseline or, if you prefer, natural rights, which derive from our understanding of what personhood requires. But these rights do not define the community. More specific rights, such as academic freedom, are determined in the light of the purposes they serve. Though they may be jealously guarded, and properly so, they must ultimately yield to the sovereignty of purpose.

You have heard it said: Rights trump utilities.[17] The words have a compelling ring, but the ring can numb the mind. For this is only a matter of definition. It is a way of saying that rights are not meaningful if they are susceptible to being overriden by every collective goal or interest. As Dworkin says, "It follows from the definition of a right that it cannot be outweighed by all social goals. . . . but only by a goal of special urgency."[18]

A preoccupation with rights does not save us from the need to examine a community's commitments in order to decide what array of rights is appropriate and how far they should be indefeasible. Once we do that, of course, the defense of those rights becomes a defense of community.

Although our duties are prior to the claims of right we assert for *ourselves,* doing one's duty entails respect for the rights of others. A duty-based community is not, as I have said, insensitive to claims of right. But the morality it encourages asks that persons look first to their duties and only then to their claims. President Kennedy's rhetoric was not empty. It might be controversial, from a liberal point of view, but I think he meant what he said and that the sentiment reflects a sound theory of what civic virtue requires.

On the other hand, it is far from a complete doctrine. A proper gloss on the Kennedy text must look closely at the meaning of membership and the quality of participation. The excluded and the oppressed may well ask: how can we give to a country to which we do not fully

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16. Waldron, *A Right to Do Wrong*, 92 ETHICS 28 (Oct. 1981).
17. *See,* R. DWORKIN, TAKING RIGHTS SERIOUSLY at xi (1977).
18. *Id.* at 92.

belong, with which we cannot identify? For them the call to civic virtue strikes a hollow note.

Civic virtue becomes empty symbolism if unsupported by the continuities of social life. People must have the *resources* that make character possible and participation effective. It is easy to give lipservice to this proposition. If it were taken to heart, however, there would be a radical revision of American priorities. We would not hear so much about a safety net, for the safety net is compatible with a two-tiered majoritarian democracy within which an impoverished and powerless minority lives side by side with an affluent majority that has the votes and therefore the power to do as it pleases.

I agree with Irving Kristol when he says that "people only respect a society which makes demands on them, which insists that they become better than they are. Without such a moral conception of the self, without a vivid idea as to the kind of person a citizen is supposed to become, there can be no self-government"[19]—by which he means, quite properly, not only democratic decisionmaking but also government of the self.

The question is how this high-minded doctrine is to be applied in practice. I have read with very mixed feelings a recent book by Lawrence Mead called *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*.[20] I repeat: the social obligations of *citizenship*. The main thesis is that welfare benefits given to the poor should be tied to obligations, specifically the obligation to work. Able-bodied welfare recipients should be required to take jobs, however menial, however poorly paid, as a condition of receiving public assistance. He says,

> Work, at least in low-wage jobs, no longer serves the individual's interests as clearly as it does society's. . . . Work must be treated as a public obligation, akin to paying taxes or obeying the law.
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> . . . .
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> Low-wage work apparently must be mandated, just as a draft has sometimes been necessary to staff the military.[21]

All this is said in the name of what the author calls the "civic conception" and "the participatory ideal."

Now there is broad agreement that welfare dependency is an evil, that having a job is very much better than being on welfare, and that basing the welfare state on entitlements alone has serious drawbacks. Moreover, many communitarian liberals—I among them—believe that a properly organized program of compulsory national service would be good for the country and for those who would serve. But such proposals have moral worth only if they are coupled with steadfast commitment to

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19. I. KRISTOL, REPUBLICAN VIRTUE VS. SERVILE INSTITUTIONS 13 (1974).
20. L. MEAD, BEYOND ENTITLEMENT: THE SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS OF CITIZENSHIP (1986).
21. *Id.* at 82, 84.

human dignity. Everything depends on how authority is used and what compulsion is for. It is by no means clear that work alone—any kind of work under any conditions—will nurture self-respect and independence. There is something at once utopian and cynical about a strategy that hopes to deal with the most wounding reality of American life without substantial new costs to the community as a whole.

It may well be that work *should* be mandated for welfare recipients so they can mitigate their dependency. But for many adults and young people it is already too late. This shows up in the difficulty of administering work-requirement programs. The highest priority of social policy is to reach young *children* and provide *them* with new and better environments, new and better opportunities.

These issues are important. We need new and more realistic policies. But the idea that compelling people to work for low pay under miserable conditions is to be celebrated as a "participatory ideal" and a "civic conception" is very hard to swallow. This is because civic virtue presumes there *is* a community. Civic virtue is best understood as a way of fulfilling the *promise* of community. We should not confuse what needs to be done to achieve elementary social integration with the way of life we call democracy.

The Community of Reason

My final theme speaks directly to the intellectual foundations of a communitarian morality. This I shall call the "community of reason," a phrase I borrow from the Stoic tradition.[22] The concept of reason I have in mind does indeed call on premodern roots, but perhaps we can turn it to good account as a postmodern, postrationalist sensibility. Three connotations are of special importance for a communitarian morality.

First and fundamental is the idea that the rational action of individuals and groups must be *anchored* in some way. The exercise of rationality must be guided by an objective order within which aspirations are defined, preferences are regulated, and the interplay of means and ends is respected. The life of reason is not Promethean, nor is it well represented by the rational calculator who works out the most efficient way of achieving wholly self-chosen ends. If reason is constitutive of a moral community, it is so in some other way.

A concept of anchored rationality is implicit in what Edmund Burke called "concrete" reason, which he opposed to the "abstract" reason of the revolutionary leaders in France. Against efforts to remake society in accordance with schemes devised by inevitably shortsighted individuals

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22. *See* A.A. Long, *Greek Ethics After MacIntyre and The Stoic Community of Reason*, 3 ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY 184-99 (1983).

and groups, Burke recommended reliance on tradition and on the hard-won lessons of history.[23]

Concrete reason is, in part, the funded experience of the political community. Science and critical thought are not alien to it, but, said Burke, "The science of constructing a commonwealth . . . is, like any other experimental science, not to be taught *à priori*."[24] When human needs and aspirations are at issue, only those ideas and programs make sense that are securely founded in the continuities of biological and social life. True reason is not counterposed to impulse or passion; rather, it builds upon them, is nourished by them, and seeks to lead them into constructive and life-enhancing paths.

Max Horkheimer, leader of the Frankfurt school of "critical theory," argued that in modern thought "objective reason" has given way to "subjective reason." Objective reason is the pre-Enlightenment conception that reason is "a structure inherent in reality."[25] "Its objective structure, and not just man and his purposes, was to be the measuring rod for individual thoughts and actions."[26] Subjective reason, on the other hand, is instrumental and technical. It does not find reason in the *world* but only in individuals seeking the best way to attain their ends, whatever these may be. As a result, said Horkheimer, "[j]ustice, equality, happiness, tolerance . . . [which] were in preceding centuries supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason, have lost their intellectual roots. They are still aims and ends, but there is no rational agency authorized to appraise and link them to an objective reality."[27] As against modern subjective reason Horkheimer preferred the objectivism of the past. In this, and in his attack on instrumental reason as a major source of alienation and domination, he agreed with many conservative critics of modern thought and culture.

A similar perspective has great appeal today among environmentalists. Ecological awareness encourages respect for the integrity, autonomy, and fragility of ecosystems. The rule is: handle with care. Behind the rule lies a profound appreciation for the continuity of man and nature and for the importance of tailoring human aspirations to the requirements of those natural systems whose well-being is intimately connected with our own. The presumption of mankind, and the hard revenge of nature, are nowhere more clearly revealed than in the rationalist effort to manipulate the environment without restraint.

There is a vast difference between the physicist who "accepts"

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23. *See* C. PARKIN, THE MORAL BASIS OF BURKE'S POLITICAL THOUGHT 83ff (1956).
24. E. BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 58 (Dent ed. 1910).
25. M. HORKHEIMER, ECLIPSE OF REASON 11 (1947).
26. *Id.* at 4.
27. *Id.* at 23.

$E=mc^2$ or the biologist who "accepts" the structure of DNA, and the ecologists who *defer* to organisms and their environments. The former take the laws of physics or molecular biology as technical opportunities and constraints within which the release of energy or genetic recombination can go forward. The latter invest the world with value and thereby establish a moral bond between scientist and subject matter. The ecological model adds a contemporary note to the classical understanding of how human beings relate to the world of nature. (I should say, I suppose, lest people jump out of their seats, that in this context "nature" is a selective idea. It does not refer to every regularity or disturbance in the physical or biological world but only to what has intrinsic worth to us as animals and as human animals.)

Perhaps the greatest significance of this perspective as a practical matter is that to *maximize* any discrete value, goal, or utility is *prima facie* offensive to the community of reason. There is a modern tendency to associate rationality with maximizing gains of one sort or another, whether they be profits, payloads, Nielsen ratings, or missiles. But anchored rationality has the effect of multiplying commitments. The pursuit of any given end is restrained by taking account of consequences for *other* ends whose fate we care about but that might be ignored or slighted. The language of maximization is or should be an early warning that rationality, detached from reason, is out of control.

A second connotation of "reason"—a corollary of the idea of anchored rationality—is that the choice of ends as well as means is governed by what we learn in the course of objective inquiry. To think of ends as necessarily nonrational or as brute givens is at best a premature abandonment of reason. To appreciate this point we need reach no further back than John Dewey's philosophy. Dewey taught that the prime objective of moral inquiry is to discover what is worth having, doing, or being; and that the most important human and institutional choices are character-defining choices.[28]

Dewey also emphasized the continuity of fact and value. It is elementary, he knew, that we should clearly understand the difference between what the world is like and what we would like it to be. From this *distinction*, which is a matter of logic, it does not follow that fact and value, as aspects of *existence*, belong to such different realms that a wall of separation should be raised between them. To do so is to frustrate the use of intelligence to determine what is good to have and therefore what is right to do.

Thirdly, reason connotes prudence or practical wisdom. In the governance of human affairs, reason is flexible, substantive, and circumstan-

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28. *See* J. DEWEY, THEORY OF VALUATION 33ff (1939).

tial. It applies general principles in a spirit of restraint and with respect for the values at stake in particular situations. Reason recoils from mechanical, rule-bound, or ideological thinking. There is no headlong leap from thought to action, from rule to fact. In Oakeshott's image, there is no pursuit of virtue "as the crow flies."[29]

Prudence is not a call to expedience or opportunism; neither is it a narrowly technical assessment of how to reach a given end. Rather, prudence is the will and the capacity to make moral judgments in concrete settings, and to do so in ways that take account of what the *situation* requires, not what an abstraction demands. In prudential judgment, rules and principles are filtered through the fabric of social life. There is due regard for human shortsightedness and unintended effects, for alternative options, competing interests, and multiple values.

These elements of the ideal of reason are, I believe, vital underpinnings of a communitarian morality. They express, in our ways of thinking, the experience of belonging, that is, of participation as implicated selves. Such an ethic cannot survive if there is a sharp disjunction of fact and value; if what we take to be good for a community, institution, or person is thought to be merely subjective and arbitrary; if values come down to individual preferences. We dissolve community if there are no objective touchstones of good sense and sound judgment.

One way of reaching beyond individual preference, without seeming to be committed to the objectivity of values, is to take seriously the shared *beliefs* we hold regarding what is good for a community or institution. These beliefs may be inescapably culture bound, but insofar as we identify with them they form the basis for decisions that override our current preferences or proximate interests. In them, we might find, relative to individuals, an objective order of sorts.

Is this enough to constitute a "community of reason"? I think not. There is no way we can be content with unreflective conventional morality. Every received code of conduct must be subject to reconstruction in light of more satisfactory standards. Therefore a community of reason is committed to critical or reflective morality. The question is what this means, and how how it bears on anchored rationality and the implicated self.

Critical morality is not made up out of whole cloth; it is not a rootless figment of the moral imagination. Rather, it is grounded in the experience and ethos of a particular culture and, at the same time, reaches within and beyond that experience for objectively warranted principles of criticism. We have no real choice. The *pre*-judgments that form our minds are necessary starting points for moral reflection. Indeed they are

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29. M. OAKESHOTT, RATIONALISM IN POLITICS 69 (1962).

more than starting points. They are necessary to reflection because they are, in varying degrees, vehicles of congealed meaning and tacit understanding.

That prejudgment can also be prejudicial, in the modern sense of biased or bigoted, or a reflex of ignorance, or shortsighted underlines the need for criticism and reconstruction. But it does not cancel the claim of a received morality to respectful and sympathetic examination. That is so because we draw our primary moral sustenance from the experience of belonging to a particular culture. There is much to be gained, in strength and subtlety, from intimate acquaintance with a distinctive morality. The communicant experiences a tradition from within; appreciates the spirit as well as the letter of a rule; draws self-confidence from a familiar idiom; teaches by way of narrative and example; brings general principles to bear without rudely imposing an external ethic.

If a people's uniqueness has something worthwhile to offer, its contribution will be most complete and most enduring if its agents are faithful to their origins. In an international assembly of scholars or judges, or in an ecumenical gathering of religious leaders, we do not ask the participants to shed their distinctive identities. On the contrary, we hope to gain from their diversity.

From the standpoint of critical morality, however, parochial experience may not be taken as final or treated as an unqualified end in itself. There must be a corollary commitment to press the particular into the service of the general, that is, to draw from one's special history a universal message. To do so is, inevitably, to create a basis for criticizing one's own heritage, not only from within but also from the standpoint of others' experiences and more comprehensive interests.

This is a two-step process. The first is inward looking. It consists of examining the received culture to identify its moral premises. The latter serve as principles of criticism by means of which particular rules or practices can be assessed, revised, or rejected. In constitutional adjudication, for example, the initial quest is not for abstract or universal concepts but for historically given starting points: the constitutional text if there is one, its historical gloss, its logic. In a living political community these starting points for moral and legal reasoning are not static; they require continuous review and clarification.

But the clarification of premises knows no near stopping place. The more demanding we are from the standpoint of rational argument, the harder it is to remain within the bounds of a particular tradition. Consider the values at stake in the law of due process. These include: *truth-finding*—in a confrontation with government, and in the resolution of private disputes, every person has the right to such protection as the truth may give, limited, to be sure, by other values, such as the protection

of privileged communications; *legitimacy*—legal process presumes a proper tribunal or officer acting within a defined scope of authority and in accordance with accepted law; *fairness*—the right to be judged according to rational principles, without caprice, without prejudice, without disregard of consequences; *personal dignity*—protection of minimum rights of personality, as, for example, against forced confessions; and *responsible governance*—the demand that government heed affected interests as it pursues its own purposes. The underlying message is that arbitrary power is to be minimized and controlled.

The premises of due process and of any other branch of law are normally presented as elements of a distinctive heritage. From the point of view of the courts, this is necessary to their legitimacy. But the value premises do not specify particular procedures, institutional forms, or even broad patterns or styles, such as partisan advocacy within an adversary system. The right to be heard in one's cause is implied, but not trial by jury or (arguably) a right against self-incrimination. In deciding whether particular procedures are "necessary," elements of fairness, history, tradition, and circumstance loom large. But the ends of justice, and many of the means to those ends, have a different and more universal character. They are not bound to a particular history. Rather, they derive from our general knowledge of human nature, society, law, and government. They belong to the theory of political community, not to the unique experience of a people.

This movement from the particular to the general—from conventional to critical morality, from a distinctive heritage to universal values—must be understood in light of the preceding discussion. The process is dialectical or reflexive; there is, as it were, a return to the concrete. The discovery of general principles does not excuse us from the demands of anchored rationality. Such principles are not alien to the community of reason, because they vindicate the objectivity of genuine, life-enhancing values. At the same time, every system of morality must be judged concretely, by particular outcomes. This primacy of the particular reaffirms our appreciation of contingency and circumstance, including the compromises and tradeoffs every community must make and the special vision any community may have.

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I conclude on a note of caution and of challenge. The caution is this: there is always a danger that the very process of clarifying a perspective, and spelling out its implications, will transform it into a burdensome and even dangerous ideology. We cannot avoid ideology, if by that we mean a doctrine that purports to identify a comprehensive moral and social reality. Without ideology in that sense we may well suffer a failure

of insight, awareness, and courage. But we should be on guard against shifting the locus of our commitment from genuine objects of moral concern—above all the fate of other persons and of our own integrity—to any system of ideas, including this one. The ideologue seeks an iron logic. Who says *A*, he thunders, must say *B*. But that is not the only way to act in accord with principle. There is a difference between the coherence of ideas, so dear to philosophers, and the coherence of our lives or the coherence of practical judgment.

The challenge is this: the quest for a communitarian morality must recognize the great contribution liberalism has made to our civilization—in reinforcing values of political and economic liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, respect for diversity, academic freedom, and perhaps much else. To assimilate these achievements within a new framework of justification, and to say how they may need to be reconstructed, are tasks hardly begun by those who think that the promise of community should be the master ideal of modern liberalism.