

# Shared Meanings and Individual Rights: Reconciling the Liberal Communitarian Debate

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## Abstract

This paper endeavours the debate between communitarianism and liberalism which developed in 1980s, revolves around a fundamental tension: whether justice should prioritise individual rights and autonomy or shared meanings, communal attachments, and the common good. This paper will focus on the probability of reconciling these apparently opposed traditions by analysing that individual rights and shared cultural understandings are not mutually exclusive but interdependent elements of a coherent theory of justice. This paper examines the communitarian critique of liberal individualism and emphasizes on how shared meanings, cultural values, and social relationships influence the interpretation of justice. Communitarians argue that justice cannot be understood as an abstract, universal principle detached from social life; rather, it emerges from historically grounded communities and their collective understandings of the common good. Thinkers such as Michael Walzer observes that justice must be interpreted through the cultural meanings of social goods within particular societies, while Will Kymlicka argues the importance of multiculturalism and communal belonging to shape political identity and rights. Methodologically, the conflict concerns whether justice requires universal, ahistorical principles or cultural interpretation. We can see Walzer's sphere of justice and concept of complex equality illustrate the communitarian position that justice must begin from shared understandings within particular communities rather than external philosophical standards. However, this cultural relativism raises questions about marginalization and whether shared understandings truly represent all community members. The paper eventually suggests that meaningful reconciliation requires acknowledging both the social constitution of individuals and the importance of protecting individual rights within multicultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Shared meanings, Individual Rights, Multiculturalism, Liberalism, Communitarianism, Justice.

## Introduction

Kymlicka, in his *Community and Multiculturalism*, mentioned that The Communitarians Critique of Liberalism emerged in the 1980s when communitarian claimed that community could replace the importance of the principles of liberal justice. Thinkers think that there is a

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compatible relationship regarding justice but still need to modify the concept of justice in terms of communitarianism and liberalism, which is what justice is. To define justice, communitarians mention two types of insertion; justice should be the source of principles of justice, which is based on the understanding of society, not on ahistorical and any kind of universal notion. Another type describes that the community should play a crucial role in the content of justice, which places more emphasis on the common good rather than individual rights.

David Morrice in his the liberal-communitarian debate in contemporary political philosophy and its significance for international relations points out that community is the moral reality which talks about all individual and hold down their moral integrity and this community must be concerns with the community of humanity which will justify whether the universal community of humanity requires and uphold the world government. "Contemporary liberal political thought emerges as the mainstream in the revival of normative political philosophy after the dark ages of positivism and behaviourism, when it was generally held that normative analysis was intellectually impossible and politically redundant." Liberal political thought started with the rights of the individual and the freedom of the individual rather than any particular community or cultural groups and focuses on the communitarian approach in the society which we see in John Rawls's A theory of Justice. Basically, deontological liberals, atomistic or individual liberalist are the main target of communitarian criticism. John Rawls tries to clarify his views that his position is clear because he does not vulnerable to criticise the liberal theory for him, he acknowledges as the part of the communitarian issues.

### **The Communitarian Critique of Liberal Individualism**

Liberals maintain that individual has an identity and value prior as well as the independent of society. For instance, Rawls argues that validity and the acceptability of principles of justice are proved as the abstract choice which is objective so that need a rational being in an original position behind the veil of ignorance where they will be unaware of the social reality and their identities. Nozick also asserts that individual possessed of rights prior to political society in his entitle theory of justice. But against the liberal points of view, communitarian argues that individual is constituted by the communities in which they live and the values which carries by the different communities make some impact on the individual behaviour, living together to denote a meaning of the particular community's values. As we have seen that individual is embedded in their communities and they are encumbered by the communities as mentioned by Alasdair MacIntyre. "I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given way of my life, my moral starting point." Michael Sandel believes that individual can never have identity and value prior and the independent of his or her community. He claims in his Liberalism and the Limits of justice that community not only describe that what they have the fellow citizens bit also what they actually are which is not base on the relationship of choosing but an attachment they discover which is not just an attribute but a constituent of their identity.

Charles Taylor mentions liberalism as the atomistic theory which claims there will be the primacy to the individual rights and holds the society and it is to be said that state is being constituted by individual for the fulfilment of their concern rights. Taylor was against of the

theory of atomism, he asserts and taking the position of communitarian that humans are rational beings and individual can develop himself or herself in the context of society where they can extend their abilities which is based on rationality and mortality. “The claim is that living in society is a necessary condition of the development of rationality, in some sense of this property, or of becoming a moral agent in the full sense of the term, or of becoming a fully responsible autonomous being.” Taylor tries to say that being a rational being and very natural of humanity, we have capacity for complex thinking, moral reasoning and self-control which can not be possible in the isolation. This type of idea we can also find in Plato’s political philosophy where he is against the isolation of the individual and promoting the importance of a human in playing a role in the society, so that he did not propos the idea of private property, he opposed that right. As we are fundamentally social creatures so we need the social interaction which makes ourselves purified creatures who can help others at the time of need.

### **The Limits of Liberal Justice in Communitarian Thought**

According to Rawls ‘justice is the first virtue of social institutions’, on the other hand Sandel claims that justice is not the first virtue of society but it is to be valued for it’s own sake rather than remedial justice which claims that one should overcome from the vices and cultivate virtuous traits as the flowing remedy in social life. Rawls tries to describe justice on the basis of circumstances whereas. “If people responded spontaneously to the needs of others out of love or shared goals, then there would be no need to claim one’s rights. Hence an increased concern with justice can, in some circumstances, reflect a worsening of the moral situation, rather than a moral improvement.” For Kymlicka sense of love and belongingness important for establish the justice among the community so the moral situation is needed rather than moral ameliorations. Sandel points out here about family which is the primary unit of any social institutions where justice is not matter but sense of love is being considered but because of the preoccupation of justice it destroys the love and lead to the more conflicts.

Though justice mediate between different conflicts but it is also true that it leads to conflicts as well and set back the expression of sociability. “Justice does not displace love or solidarity, and nothing in the idea of justice precludes people from choosing to forego their rightful claims in order to help others.” Kymlicka tries to say that justice is for the sake of love and rightful activities which can bring the happiness in a community and this would be totally voluntarily and the decisions will be genuine as if no one can force others to accept a subordinate position. Justice teaches loving relationship but also ensure whether they are corrupted by the domination or not. Communitarians believe that there is the common good or community interest which is grater than individual goods or interests and that is the state should uphold common good rather than individual liberalism. Charles Taylor argues that a good society can exist only on the basis of a common good. Michael Sandel says on communitarian in his Liberalism and the Limits of Justice ‘when politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we can not know alone’.

### **Community, Culture, and the Interpretation of Justice**

“Communitarians assert that liberal has misinterpreted to justice as ahistorical and external criterion for critical way of the lives in the society. For example, utilitarians, liberal egalitarians

and libertarians might disagree with the content of justice given by the communitarians but it is true that they confess that this is way to live in a society.”<sup>1</sup> “Indeed, this is sometimes seen by liberals as the point of discussing justice – it provides a standpoint for questioning our beliefs and for ensuring that they are not merely local prejudices.”<sup>2</sup> For Kymlicka tries to say that liberals describe the justice from the questioning standpoint of beliefs but not any kind of superstition. Beliefs can give a good position to an individual where he can run himself in his adversity or problems. As Ronald Dworkin points out that our struggle against all the impulses which drags us back into our own culture, in order to not much acceptance of contribution of any political theory, it helps to recognize which is our traditional distinctions and discriminations are genuine and which is bogus. According to Dworkin, “justice should be our critic, not our mirror”.

Michael Walzer in his Sphere of Justice mentions that “there is no such things as a perspective external to the community, there is no path outside of our history and culture. For him, the only way to define justice is to see how each particular community understands the value of social goods”.<sup>3</sup> According to Walser, ‘complex equality’ is needed to the cultural behaviour of others in recent western politics. “Complex equality is a system of distribution that doesn’t try to equalize all goods but rather seeks to ensure that inequalities in one sphere” which is wealth but it doesn’t engirdle others spheres like health care, political power etc. “A society is just if it acts in accordance with the shared understandings of its members, as embodied in its characteristic practices and institutions. Hence identifying principles of justice is more a matter of cultural interpretation than of philosophical argument.” Kymlicka maintains that justice is not kind of abstract philosophical argument rather it shared the cultural values and social practices.

Justice principles explain that cultural values have significance over the individual right which is based our logical or philosophical argument but it is not the case when we interpret a culture. Walzer's idea of justice is a type of cultural relativism. In order to describe cultural relativism, communitarians raise two common objections to define justice. Firstly, cultural relativism violates our profound shared understanding, for example, slavery is wrong if we don’t prove it but it is not the adequate notion of justice. But that is not the case how mostly people claim of justice. There is the causal relation between slavery and wrongness, we disapprove slavery because it is wrong. Secondly, there may not be many shared understanding about justice, it is not only the voice of the vocal and powerful one but also the weak and the marginalized. “For communitarians the task of political philosophy is not to establish the validity of non-existent objective or neutral universal principles, but to make explicit the shared values and meanings of the community.”

Communitarians always try to establish the human values which is related to the community, shared values and their shared understandings. Communitarians critique to liberalism tends towards the notion of multiculturalism because without multicultural society it is quite difficult to define a particular community and what are those common goods which are suited for them as principles of justice. Kymlicka in his Multicultural Citizenship claims that a state is based on the historical culture, communal harmony, languages, personal identity, political life etc. which makes a multination state.

## Conclusion

The liberal-communitarian debate of the 1980s elucidate a profound tension in contemporary political philosophy: the liberal insistence on the priority of individual rights and an ahistorical conception of justice versus the communitarian highlight on embedded selves, shared meanings, and the common good. It has been exhibited that these two traditions are not irreconcilable opposites but complementary approaches for each other, when properly synthesised, produced a more comprehensive and humane account of justice.

Liberals such as Rawls and Nozick rightly defend the integrity of individual rights and the need for impartial principles that protect autonomy. Yet communitarians—Sandel, Taylor, MacIntyre, and Walzer—adequately remind us that the self is not an atomistic chooser but is constituted by the communities, traditions, and cultural practices in which it evolves. Rationality, moral agency, and even the capacity for justice itself emerges only through social relations and responsibilities. Justice, therefore, cannot be treated merely as the “first virtue” of institutions; it must coexist with love, solidarity, and virtuous character that remedial rights alone cannot supply.

Walzer’s argues that justice is a matter of cultural interpretation rather than abstract philosophical deduction. Principles of justice obtain legitimacy when they manifest a community’s shared understandings of social goods. This cultural understanding generally leads to multiculturalism. As Kymlicka argues in *Multicultural Citizenship*, a just state must recognise both individual rights and the historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts within the liberal framework that give those rights concrete meaning.

Thus, a reconciled liberal-communitarian position neither dissolves the individual into the collective nor isolates the self from society. It affirms that individual rights gain their fullest moral relevance explicitly within communities that nurture shared meanings. In an era of globalisation and cultural pluralism, this synthesis offers a engaging normative foundation for addressing multicultural conflicts, promoting both personal freedom and collective harmony. By integrating rights with responsibilities, autonomy with attachment, and justice with solidarity, political philosophy can move beyond unproductive opposition toward a genuinely inclusive vision of the just society—one that is neither purely liberal nor purely communitarian, but authentically human.

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