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0521631297 - Community, Solidarity and Belonging: Levels of Community and their Normative Significance

Andrew Mason

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Introduction

‘Community’ is a term used with alarming frequency. People talk of international community, which some think has been made possible by the end of the Cold War; of national community, which politicians often promise to rebuild in the face of increasing crime and lawlessness or in reaction to the fear that it is being eroded by immigration; of the local or neighbourhood communities which are sometimes said to be threatened by gentrification or (like London’s Docklands) redevelopment. Some also speak of the business community’s attitude towards a rise in interest rates, or the gay community’s support for legislation which equalized the age of consent for heterosexuals and homosexuals. Faced with this array of putative communities, it is hard not to become suspicious that the term is being used unreflectively, or that it is being used purely emotively, to induce support for social arrangements or policies which the speaker or writer happens to favour.

There is, no doubt, something in these suspicions. But they should not prejudice attempts to sort out from the mire of ordinary usage a coherent concept (or set of concepts) which may help to illuminate our linguistic practices and the nature of our social lives. If ordinary usage is to be trusted at all, it would appear that communities can be of different *kinds*. For instance, there may be religious communities, ethnic communities, national communities, moral communities or linguistic communities. Not only can communities be of different kinds they may also exist at different *levels*. So, for instance, it is possible in principle for there to be a religious community below the level of the state, involving just some of its citizens, or at the level of the state, involving all or the vast majority of its citizens and partially constituted by its major institutions, or above the level of the state, involving citizens from a number of different states.

These observations settle very little, if anything, about the nature of community, but nevertheless they indicate some of the difficulties of giving an analysis of community in general, and some of the limitations of such an exercise. For an analysis of community in general must in some way abstract from these different kinds of community; so too any account

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of the value of community in general must abstract from the value of different kinds of community. Although I think this sort of abstraction is worthwhile, it will leave partially unanswered questions about the nature and value of particular kinds of community at particular levels. Indeed one of the central questions for political philosophers is the following: what kind of community, if any, is valuable at the level of the state, and what steps, if any, may the state legitimately take to promote it?

This question provokes a barrage of others which are related to it. If the state can legitimately build some kind of political community, is it entitled to restrict the practices of communities below the level of the state in order to do so? (Note that I use the expression ‘political community’ to mean community at the level of the state, rather than to designate a particular kind of community.) What jurisdiction, if any, do international bodies, or other states, have in relation to the ‘internal’ affairs of a political community? For example, are they entitled to intervene in those affairs in order to promote some kind of community at the global level? In short, there are a variety of ways in which levels and kinds of communities can come into conflict with one another, and a host of questions about how, if at all, these conflicts should be resolved, in so far as it is within any individual’s or group’s power to do so.

During the 1980s a series of books and articles appeared which came to be referred to as communitarian,¹ and we might have expected them to provide some help with these questions. Communitarianism, however, was primarily a reaction to the perceived weaknesses of liberalism and there has been no systematic attempt within it to answer questions of the sort I have raised.² One striking omission from communitarian writings was any detailed or comprehensive exploration of the nature of community and its value. Unlike other central political concepts such as freedom, justice and equality, the concept of community has still not received the analytical attention it deserves.³

¹ The summary of the communitarian critique of liberalism which follows is indebted to S. Caney, ‘Liberalism and Communitarianism: a Misconceived Debate’, *Political Studies*, vol. 40, 1992, pp. 273–89. See also S. Mulhall and A. Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, revd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

² Those who examine the debate between liberals and communitarians should not expect to find a set of doctrines that all communitarians endorse and which distinguish them from liberals. But they will find a family of more or less well-connected themes which communitarian writers draw upon, sometimes with different emphases. Even though the various criticisms of liberal theory display less unity than one might initially have expected, and despite the resistance several of those labelled as communitarians have shown to the term, there is some justification for grouping them together.

³ The observation that ‘community’ has received relatively little careful attention was made by Raymond Plant, ‘Community: Concept, Conception, and Ideology’, *Politics and Society*, vol. 8, 1978, p. 78. It remains true. See also R. Goodin, *Reasons for Welfare: The Political Theory of the Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 71;

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On many occasions communitarian theorists also seemed unclear about whether they thought political means should be used to protect or promote community of some kind at the level of the state, and even when they were unambiguous on this matter they often took up different positions among themselves. Alasdair MacIntyre has now said explicitly that he thinks community should be sought at the local level rather than above it.⁴ Michael Sandel thinks that the defence of some principles of social justice, such as Rawls's Difference Principle, presupposes the existence of a 'constitutive' political community, that is, a political community in which citizens conceive their identity as defined to some extent by their membership of it.⁵ But he appears sceptical about its practicality in modern states.⁶ Michael Walzer's idea that justice within the state requires goods to be distributed in accordance with shared understandings presupposes that its citizens are part of a community, sharing a way of life in which goods have particular meanings.⁷ Charles Taylor has expressed sympathy for the view that community is important at the level of the state: he has suggested that free regimes are unlikely to be sustainable in the absence of 'patriotic identification', that is, unless citizens identify with the polity's particular historical community, founded upon particular values.⁸

This book aims to make a contribution to the discussion of these issues. It provides an analysis of the notion of community, and explores its value. It then focuses on three inter-related questions which the concept of community raises for political philosophers: what kind of community, if any, is valuable at the level of the state, and what steps, if any, is the state entitled to take to protect or promote it? When political community of some valuable kind comes into conflict with the existence of communities below the level of the state, or the preservation of their current character, how should this conflict be resolved? When political community comes

J. Waldron, 'Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative', in W. Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 95.

⁴ A. MacIntyre, 'A Partial Response to My Critics', in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 302–3. MacIntyre assumes that a commitment to community at the level of the state is constitutive of communitarian thought and distances himself from communitarianism for that reason.

⁵ See M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), especially pp. 79–82, 150.

⁶ See Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self', in S. Avineri and A. de-Shalit (eds.), *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 26–7.

⁷ See M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), especially pp. 28–9.

⁸ See C. Taylor, 'Cross-Purposes: The Liberal–Communitarian Debate', in his *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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into conflict with the realization or promotion of a global community of some valuable kind, how should such conflict be resolved (assuming that the very idea of global community is intelligible)? My guiding assumption is that in order to understand the normative significance of community at the level of the state, we have to understand its relationship to community above and below it.

1. The structure of the book

Part I of the book (comprising Chapters 1 and 2) attempts to unravel some of the complexities which surround the nature and value of community, in so far as it is possible to explore these issues in a general way. The discussion in these chapters forms the background against which subsequent arguments are developed, but those with less interest in the more general philosophical issues that I take up in them may prefer to move straight to Part 2.

In Chapter 1 I argue that the notion of community is fundamentally ambiguous. In political theory, and also in ordinary usage, the term is used to characterize two very different kinds of relationship. On the one hand, it is used to refer to groups whose members share values and a way of life, identify with the group and its practices, and acknowledge each other as members. I call this the ordinary concept of community. Versions of it have dominated much of recent Anglo-American political philosophy. On the other hand, 'community' is also used in a way that restricts its application to groups whose members are mutually concerned and do not exploit one another, or behave unjustly towards each other, at least not in any systematic way. I call this the moralized concept of community. I shall suggest that it is not uncommon for people to trade on this ambiguity by describing as a community in the moralized sense a set of social relationships which do not go beyond community in the ordinary sense. As a result, cynicism about the way in which the term may be used to dress up relationships which the speaker or writer happens to like, or which serve his interests, may sometimes be appropriate.

Chapter 2 explores the various sources and kinds of value that may be possessed by communities: it argues that community can have non-instrumental value in virtue of the cooperative activity which constitutes it, and that it may also possess considerable instrumental value because it can satisfy people's needs (or desires) to belong, or be recognized by others, and thereby help secure various other goods. I also address the question of whether the value possessed by a community can be, or must be, reducible to the value it has for individuals. I make no attempt to

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resolve that issue, arguing instead that it is not as important as it may appear. Much of what liberals, communitarians and others have wanted to say about the value of community, and its relation to other values, can be expressed whichever way we move on the question of whether the value of social phenomena is reducible without remainder.

The limits of any general examination of the nature and value of community become clear in Chapters 1 and 2. As I have already observed, community can in principle be realized at different levels and its value may in various ways be affected by the level at which it occurs. Not only might community be realizable at different levels, these levels might in various ways come into conflict with one another. Part 2 of the book explores the important question of what kind of community, if any, should be valued at the level of the state, and what sort of means might legitimately be used to sustain it in the face of conflict with communities below the level of the state.

Most liberals have thought that community at the level of the state could not be achieved without oppression, *if* community is understood to involve a commitment to some ‘thick’ conception of the good. Indeed Rawls denies that a society organized in accordance with the principles of justice he favours is a community, ‘if we mean by a community a society governed by a shared comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine’.⁹ Many liberals have nevertheless thought that there is a notion of political community available to them, based upon the ideal of public justification. According to the dominant liberal conception, citizens form a political community when they identify with their major institutions because these institutions embody a commitment to principles which are justified to all. In its contractualist form, this generates a version of the moralized concept: citizens in such a community are mutually concerned because they possess a non-instrumental desire to justify their institutions to one another, and the institutions they favour are just because they are based upon principles that are justifiable to all.

In Chapter 3, I lay out the dominant liberal view of political community and explore its counterpart conception of how conflict between community at the level of the state and below it should be resolved. Liberals have sought to draw the legitimate limits of community below the level of the state in terms of respect for basic rights. At their most strident, they have claimed that any community’s practices which violate basic rights should be ended, forcibly if necessary. As a result, liberals have sometimes been accused of cultural imperialism on the grounds that they seek to impose their principles on communities which do not share them, claiming that

⁹ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 40.

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these principles are universally valid when they are in reality culturally specific. I explore the resources which liberalism can draw upon in making a case for the involvement of minority communities in the process of defining the basic rights and for showing greater forbearance when basic rights are being violated. I argue that liberals should accept that in practice the authority to adopt a set of proposed rights as basic depends upon that set's being the outcome of a political process in which everyone has a voice. When the outcome of that process is nevertheless the adoption of a set of rights which some reject, those rights should not automatically be forced upon dissenters; when doing so would lead to more injustice, or to a great sacrifice of other important values, then there are grounds for forbearance. Respect for communal autonomy also gives reason to allow minority communities to select any reasonable interpretation of the basic rights which they believe best suit their practices.

Chapters 4 and 5 subject the dominant liberal conception of political community to critical scrutiny. Chapter 4 considers what I call the republican challenge to it, viz., that we need to develop a thicker conception of community at the level of the state, based around the good of citizenship. According to one form of this challenge, citizenship involves special obligations, the fulfilment of which contributes to the good of citizenship and is necessary for the realization of political community, properly conceived. I consider whether the republican conception of political community can escape the liberal charge that such a community would be oppressive towards those who, quite reasonably, do not regard political participation as an essential ingredient of the good life. I argue that in at least one of its forms, the republican conception of political community is not vulnerable to this objection, for it claims merely that political participation is a possible ingredient of the good life.

In Chapter 5 I consider the different argument, developed by liberal nationalists, that the viability of the dominant liberal conception of political community depends upon the existence of a non-political unity such as that provided by a shared national identity. In consequence, this argument continues, liberals have favoured policies which are too permissive towards communities below the level of the state, because sustaining the shared national identity necessary for a viable political community may require a policy of assimilation which goes beyond what liberals have been willing to support. Liberals have generally objected to such a policy on the grounds that it poses an unjustifiable threat to individual liberty, but I argue that it need not do so.

In response to the liberal-nationalist, however, I suggest that the various benefits which he or she thinks are made possible by a shared national identity – stability, a politics of the common good and the kind of

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redistributive policies required by social justice – may be achievable in the absence of such an identity, provided that there is a widespread sense of belonging to the polity. As part of my response to the liberal-nationalist, I develop an ideal of inclusive political community, which I claim is a better regulative ideal than that provided by either the liberal or the republican conception. Citizens form an inclusive political community if they live in a polity governed by liberal institutions, and even those who do not endorse liberal principles have a sense of belonging to it. The idea is that those who reject liberal principles may nevertheless feel at home in such a polity, and identify with liberal institutions, because they have their own reasons for doing so, and because they are given a voice in the running of that polity. I go on to suggest how such a sense of belonging might be fostered by various forms of legal and political recognition and accommodation of cultural difference.

Chapter 6 addresses the question of whether these forms of legal and political recognition are likely to be sufficient to foster a widespread sense of belonging and argues that the educational system also has an important role to play. It suggests that multicultural education may be able to promote the mutual valuing of cultures, and in this way facilitate the changes in practices and institutions which seem necessary for such a sense of belonging to emerge. It distinguishes between two models of multicultural education, the neutralist and the pluralist model. The neutralist model requires that children be introduced to the ideas, practices and values of a number of different cultures, but insists that teachers should present them without judgement. The pluralist model also requires that children be introduced to a number of different cultures, but allows that schools may teach them from a particular evaluative perspective. I argue that the pluralist model is best suited to promoting an overall sense of belonging but only if it is constrained in various ways. Children must be taught in such a way that they become aware of themselves and each other as future fellow citizens of the particular liberal-democratic state in which they live, and each school's curriculum must be informed by a presumption of the value of other cultures. Schools must also be required to conform to liberal principles such as equality of opportunity, although within the bounds of reasonableness they should be allowed to interpret those principles to suit their practices.

The ideal of inclusive political community which I defend in Chapters 5 and 6 has an important regulative role. But the citizens of actual states rarely form communities that embody this ideal. To the extent that the boundaries of actual states do coincide with the boundaries of communities, these communities are likely to be communities in the bare ordinary sense of the term and many lack liberal institutions. Indeed some are

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committed to illiberal practices, and may even systematically violate basic rights. This raises the spectre of conflict between community at the level of the state, and global community, where the latter but not the former is understood as community in the moralized sense. So understood, global community is a vision of persons united together as participants in a way of life that enables them to be mutually concerned and enjoy just relationships with one another. It provides the focus for the chapters in Part III.

In Chapter 7, I defend the coherence of the ideal of global community and explore the apparent conflict between the realization or promotion of liberal conceptions of it and the existence of a plurality of political communities in the ordinary sense. If we suppose that respect for political community requires the adoption of a principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states, then this appears to stand in the way of promoting global community between individuals, for it deprives any state of the warrant to act on behalf of those who are being oppressed in some other political community. In effect the principle of non-intervention resolves the conflict between liberal ideals of global community and political community in the ordinary sense in favour of the latter. I argue that, on the contrary, the principle of non-intervention should be reformed to allow ‘humanitarian intervention’ in some cases, and that the resolution of conflict between these ideals of global community and political community in the ordinary sense should favour the former more than current practice does.

In Chapter 8, I consider the possibility of systemic conflict between global community and a plurality of political communities in the ordinary sense. In particular, I focus on a long-standing controversy in international relations theory concerning whether the structure of the state system, i.e., the existence of a plurality of political communities in the absence of an overarching authority, places serious obstacles in the way of global community. Against those realists and neo-realists who maintain that it always does, I argue that under favourable circumstances it need not. I consider various accounts of what changes would need to occur for circumstances to be or become favourable, without attempting to defend any particular one of them.

Generally speaking, Part 2 of the book (Chapters 3–6) is concerned with political community in the moralized sense and its relationship to communities in the ordinary sense below the level of the state, whereas Part 2 (Chapters 7–8) is concerned with aspects of global community in the moralized sense and their relationship to political community in the ordinary sense.

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2. The liberal–communitarian debate

Throughout Parts 2 and 3, I shall presuppose a liberal perspective. By ‘liberalism’, I mean a commitment to a set of individual rights which are to be given a high priority in the design of institutions and the choice of policies. I treat the question of what rights are included in this set as, within limits, a matter for discussion within liberalism. Some favour a limited set which is exhausted by a right to freedom of association (which they think implies a right of exit from a community) and a right against cruel or inhuman treatment. Others favour a more extensive set, involving rights to a variety of freedoms such as freedom of conscience and religious practice, freedom to engage in consensual sexual relationships, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of the person, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure. In Chapter 3, I shall suggest that liberals should favour a relatively extensive list such as this one. But a commitment to even the restricted set might seem to beg a whole range of questions in relation to communitarian thought. Let me briefly survey the debate between so-called liberals and communitarians in order to make it clear why I start from the place I do.

Communitarians argued that liberals presuppose a conception of the self which separates it from its ends and attachments, whereas in reality we are constituted by those ends and attachments.¹⁰ They argued that liberals ignore the fact that personal autonomy has various preconditions; people cannot develop the capacity to reflect and choose, nor possess a range of options from which to choose, unless they live in a culture which fosters that capacity¹¹ and sustains the social forms in which those options are embedded.¹² They argued that liberals underestimate the value of community; that liberals fail to appreciate the importance of a sense of belonging, and the virtues of citizenship, and fail to recognize the way in which talk of rights, rather than of responsibilities and duties undermines them.¹³ They argued that the aspiration to create a universal political morality fails to appreciate that political morality must respond to our

¹⁰ See, e.g., Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 150; A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 220. This is a pervasive theme in communitarian writings. See Caney, ‘Liberalism and Communitarianism’, p. 274, note 3, for further references.

¹¹ See, e.g., C. Taylor, ‘Atomism’, in his *Philosophical Papers*: vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 190–1.

¹² See, e.g., M. Walzer, ‘Justice Here and Now’, in F. Lucash (ed.), *Justice and Equality Here and Now* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 137, 148.

¹³ See A. Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York, 1993); D. Selbourne, *The Principle of Duty* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

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shared traditions of thought and practice, or our shared understandings, and cannot transcend them.¹⁴

Much of the debate between liberals and communitarians now seems misconceived.¹⁵ It is not obvious what is meant by the idea that the self is constituted by some of its ends and attachments. Communitarians often seem to hold back from claiming that the self is *wholly* constituted by some or all of its commitments.¹⁶ But if they make the weaker claim that the self is only partially constituted by those commitments, then this leaves space for the idea that there is some aspect of the self which is not socially constituted, and makes it unclear how the communitarian conception of the self differs from that which many liberals seem to have advocated or presupposed.¹⁷

Perhaps the communitarian idea is that the liberal conception of the self fails to appreciate that people are unable to hold up their deepest commitments to critical scrutiny: a deeply religious person, for example, is unable to subject his core religious beliefs to rational assessment. But this is questionable in a number of ways. It is not clear that most people are in general engulfed by their particular ends and attachments in the way that this thesis would require. As Will Kymlicka suggests, for many it is part of their self-understanding that they can hold up their particular ends and attachments to critical scrutiny – one at a time, at least – and imagine themselves with different ones.¹⁸ We can be gripped by particular commitments, and possess a deep attachment to particular individuals, groups or ends, manifested in an unwillingness to question those attachments, but we nevertheless generally retain the freedom to subject these commitments to critical scrutiny if we so choose. (This is not to deny that as the inheritors of particular cultural outlooks, some social forms may not represent meaningful choices for us, and that we may lack the re-

¹⁴ See Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, e.g., pp. 8–10; A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), esp. chs. 1, 18, 20; R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. ch. 3.

¹⁵ For a sustained argument for this conclusion, see Caney, 'Liberalism and Communitarianism'. For other arguments for much the same conclusion, see also J. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, vol. 4, *Harmless Wrongdoing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), ch. 29A; A. Buchanan, 'Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism', *Ethics*, vol. 99, 1989, pp. 852–82; W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), chs. 4–5; S. Benn, *A Theory of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); A. Ryan, 'The Liberal Community', in J. W. Chapman and I. Shapiro (eds.), *NOMOS*, vol. 35, *Democratic Community* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 91–114.

¹⁶ See Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 150; 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self', p. 23; C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 27.

¹⁷ Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, pp. 55–6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–8.