

Individualism and the Vitality of Community Life

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Individual versus Society

Who among you hasn't confronted the notion that individual rights conflict with legitimate community interests? In Fullerton a famous theater is about to be sold by its owner who is scolded for sacrificing community interest and the government bans the sale; in the city of Orange a resident in a historic district wants to build some apartments on property he owns but fellow residents urge the government to prohibit this because the community would be ruined if the plans goes through; in a Michigan neighborhood some citizens want to institute random car searches to stem drug traffic, claiming that the application of unreasonable search considerations to the case pits private against community interests.

More generally, political elections throughout the country, indeed, the globe, are replete with references to the conflict between private and public interest, the right to individual freedom versus the community's rights to safety and security.

Clearly, in modern times there are few more prominent disputes than that between the individual and community. Pitting these two forces – otherwise known as the private against the public interest or individual rights against the common good – seems to be the central theme of modern political life. Such essay titles as “The Challenge of Privatization in the former East Germany: Reconciling the Conflict between Individual Rights and Social Needs” (Thomas Raiser, in G. S. Alexander & G. Skapska, eds., *A Forth Way?: Privatization, Property, and the Emergence of New Market Economics* [Routledge, 1997]) indicate how easily we fall into the trap of juxtaposing individual rights with community benefits.

As with most cryptic statements, though, this one must also be amended and made more complicated – we cannot leave it at the all too simple truth of the matter. For we need, also, to grasp how it came to be that these two became a kind of polar opposite of political life.

First of all, no individual has ever survived alone, solely as an individual apart from others. These others might have been fellow animals, most often, fellow humans. Family, neighbors, tribe, village or city, and by now country and world, all form a vital feature of the life of every individual human being. So any opposition between the individual person and various communities of which he or she is a member makes little sense.

But there is no justification for such a dichotomy. We are, as some would put the point, nothing apart from the group or groups of which we are members. Yet, we are not much either if our individuality is stifled, suppressed and banned. So then why ever did this conflict become so commonplace?

History and Independence

In the history of humankind, it has always been natural, normal, for one to be connected with or in close relationship to others. As a babe one begins with mother and other family members and even in the sad circumstances of being orphaned, others tend to take their places. And in early times, especially before there was much reflective thought, let alone writing, there could only be quiet challenges to this normalcy, usually when certain problems arose and wills clashed. Survival, let alone flourishing, certainly couldn't succeed without the ties to others, so when such ties were challenged, the prominent idea prevailed that the challenge had to be rejected. And since there need really be no serious reason for challenge anyway – folks would not regularly stifle the individuality of their fellows, at least the degree of it needed for keeping community projects on course – the problem of the individual versus the community could not arise with much force.

In the age of the birth of political thought, in ancient Greece, there was still much more focus on how communities should be administered, what civic virtues need to be honed, cultivated, than on how to resolve conflicts between individuals and the community. In Socrates' life, of course, some serious conflicts arose that Plato then developed into major themes of his political explorations. Socrates was opposed to the mob of Athens, thinking it was unruly and needed to be set on a right course. And while this set him against the group, his thinking did not actually challenge the group's supremacy but aimed to steer it on a right, fruitful course.

Indeed, Plato's philosophy of community life rested on some ideas that made communities clearly supreme. He treated the universal idea of humanity or Man as having transcendent significance, while its particular rendition – namely, you and me – as perishable, imperfect, even base and low. It is humankind that is the perfection, as it is the idea of the circle or square in geometry that is perfect, not any given circular or square being.

So the first major political reflection, at least in Western history, underscored the theme that individuals are lowly parts of a greater whole, the community or humankind itself. Of course, in the hustle bustle of life, Socrates, even as depicted by Plato, encounters serious problems with the community to which he supposedly belongs. The issue from the drama of

Socrates' life is very close to what the modern question raises: to what extent has Socrates the right to dissent from the group and to what extent does the group have the authority to subdue Socrates?

As the Problem Evolves

We do not need to traverse the entire history of Western political thought to appreciate that as creativity became more unleashed among people and as the community expanded way beyond the intimates of family and neighborhood, the issue that arose in Socrates' life began to be the prominent political problem. In some regions of the globe it has already made its official appearance – for example, in ancient Chinese political thought. Lao Tsu, for example, voiced skepticism about the community's wisdom much earlier than Socrates did.

Still, in the West even Aristotle's focus upon the status of the individual citizen is less stark than his focus upon the need to administer the community properly. Individual rights do make a vital appearance in Aristotle but not so starkly as they do later, in the 13th Century and thereafter, especially in the writings of John Locke and later libertarians.

Why? And is it really a question about the individual versus the community?

Individual Rights versus Claims Made in Behalf of Communities

This really is the crux of the issue I wish to focus upon. In fact, the individual has rarely been opposed to community as such – although some have, no doubt, yet even they could be seen as opposed to themselves, at the same time. The individual's wants or objectives are often at odds with his own best interest, and it is more that than some bifurcation of individual and community that has always been at issue in this debate.

To put it plainly, individual human beings cannot be opposed to community. It is their vital support system. The way a human being is – fundamentally, something true about everyone, as a human being – involves thinking and learning from considering ideas, ideas one does not always think up oneself but learns from others, from traditions, books, practices, institutions, culture. For human beings such learning and communicating – immersed in community life – is central not only to flourishing but to simple survival. Rationality is basic to human living and rationality is dormant without being immersed in community life. In conjunction with this there is also the breadth and depth of possibilities regarding love, family, entertainment, art, science – the entire range of experiences and those yet to come.

So community is vital to human living. The problem is, however, that it also has its serious hazards. We aren't guaranteed hospitable communities. We, unlike other animals, need to watch over our communities, make sure they are suitable and not corrupt. And this watchfulness, just to start with, involves individual responsibility. To abandon a corrupt tribe is something an individual does as an individual, not as a member of some other tribe.

To put the matter plainly again, individuality is equally vital to human life. We are by nature individuals as well as members of communities. Indeed, our communities have what merit they do have in part because they suit us as individuals. The community that stifles individuality is a corrupt, stagnant one and needs either to be repaired or abandoned.

What makes a community suitable to individuality is its embrace of principles that make individuality possible within the community of others. And those principles are individual rights.

Why Some Communities Oppose Individuality

The real conflict isn't ever between the individual human being and the community but between various conceptions of community life. And if the thesis of this paper is sound and no bona fide conflict exists between individuals and communities, the conflict at issue is actually between some individuals and other individuals or the various purposes of different individuals who comprise the membership of communities.

Some conceptions of community life -- which some then wish to implement and to which others are resistant -- do violence to individuality and thereby undermine their merits as suitable communities. Yet, some folks prefer them, fight for them, want to establish and maintain them. It is the will of these people as to what kind of community should prevail and runs into conflict with the will of others.

Some communities would have some individuals barred from membership, for perverse reasons. Some would require sacrifice of individuality, some would impose conditions not suitable for the pursuit of some people happiness who have done no one any injury or violence.

Such communities are bad ones and when folks say human beings need to give up individuality or abandon protection of their basic rights in support of the community, they are distorting the actual conflict that is afoot.

Communities governed Properly

Libertarians, in particular, champion communities that respect individual initiative and choice, not ones in which these are squashed. But they do not oppose community at all, only certain kinds of community. Why they champion the type of community wherein the basic right to life, liberty

and property is protected in law is not here at issue, although that, of course, is crucial for purposes of appreciating the merits of libertarianism. If the conception of the human being that underpins libertarianism is not sound? if adult human beings are not, first and foremost, creative, self-determined and morally responsible agents? then, of course, the way communities ought to be constituted will not be as libertarianism proposes.

It is not the task here to reconsider the case for the libertarian idea of human nature. Suffice it to recall, however, that what makes people the kind of beings they are is primarily their capacity to guide their lives (to the level of flourishing possible to one) on their own initiative. This implicitly commits them to live by their reason, to act virtuously? honestly, courageously, prudently, generously, and so forth? *by choice*.

This is the reason that by the tenets of libertarianism it is central that human community life be governed by the principles of the individual right to life, liberty and property. The protection of these principles is what secures for individuals the best chance to achieve the kind of life they ought to live while at the same time partake of community, which is also vital to their flourishing.

Even Libertarianism May not be Imperial

The community of human beings so understood, however, must not be forced upon people. Why? Because that would violate their basic nature, who they are essentially. When persons are dealt with in ways that negate their sovereignty, this thwarts their humanity, diminishes it and thus demeans them. So would they demean their lives by way of their own neglect of community affairs, their failure to cultivate community lives that are of high quality but in the great variety of ways that can be cultivated by the great variety of human beings there are. Yet that is something for them to contend with, it is the challenge every person faces in his or her own life and to deprive them of that challenge – to force them into or out of communities against their own will – is to violate principles of community life itself.

This means only that forcibly establishing a community that respects individual rights is itself morally and politically objectionable. This is not the same as resisting tyrannical regimes but, rather, the acceptance, so to speak, of unorganized, anarchical communities. If people refuse to unite behind a constitution of individual rights, so long as they do not establish one that violates such rights, there is nothing that can be done. (This has some very serious foreign policy implications, by the way!)

In any case, specifically human community life, while open to innumerable variations, must adhere to the requirements implicit in being a human individual, including personal sovereignty. That is, put plainly, the meaning of the well known idea of “the consent of the governed” and the economists more technical term, “the exit option.” The details of the kind of community required for human beings is not something that can be laid out like some kind of blueprint. It must be discovered, handed down peacefully from generation to generation, rekindled when lost sight of, revitalized, attended to, heeded, honed. But whatever shape such community life must take, it is indispensable.

As we assess past and neighboring civilizations, it is important to keep in mind the overriding social moral principle that applies in human communities. This concerns the fact that human individuals need to have room to make their own moral choices, regarding the best career to pursue, people to befriend, recreation to embark upon, whom and what to revere or worship, etc. This is what the theory of individual rights is all about.

What of the Conflict between Public and Private Interest?

The supposed inherent conflict between the interest of the community and that of the individual members who comprise it is just that, supposed, alleged, even imaginary. Of course, sometimes what we wish for or desire can conflict with what is best for us, what we ought to do. But this does not just have to do with issues pertaining to our relationship to the community but also to our own, private concerns. But real, unresolvable, entrenched conflict does not exist between individual rights and community requirements since every community worth its name, every genuine, full blown civilized human community, must embrace the proper conditions under which human beings can flourish, which is the right to freedom of choice.

Let us put some of this in concrete terms now. Consider the common allegation that the needs of communities in environmental matters conflict with individual rights. Wrong. If wild life preservation is at issue, involving wet lands, for example, it seems that here clearly community interest and private interest are at odds. But why should this be so? It turns out, actually, that within the bounds of private property rights chances are best for conserving the resources that human beings require in the long run. The tragedy of the commons or collective ownership is the main threat to environmentally sound public policy, while private property rights secure long term care for resources.

Take, again, pornography or prostitution, both of which are often mentioned as problems where the community’s best interest conflicts with

individual rights. But does it? In fact, in both cases a kind of tragedy of the commons looms as the most important threat to the proliferation of smut or sexual degradation. If private property rights are not strictly protected and thus those trading in pornography and sexual services are forced to desist while the majority or their representatives disapprove of the trade, the road is opened for just the opposite, namely, the proliferation when the attitudes change.

The right approach is to protect private property rights and thus not ban private trade, even while it is properly condemned but to confine it to where it is wanted. In time, of course, pockets of smut trade or prostitution may develop, but only if these are not permitted to invade the areas where people refrain from trading in such goods and services. The integrity of such pockets and areas cannot be maintained if communities are ruled not in terms of individual rights but majority will or dictatorship.

What is the greatest threat to government in such terms? It is the haste and panic with which some folks deal with practices they find objectionable, leading them to abandon principle for expedience. This is no different from how people resort to violence and other abusive behavior when they become impatient and too eager to solve a problem, with no attention to the problems they thereby create. It is especially important to adhere to principled problem solving within a community where the legal system pays close attention to precedence. If principle has been compromised in the past, a wide gap is created through which all kinds of breaches can be promoted and established. They did it with pornography, so why not do it with, say, socialism or libertarianism? They did it with prostitution so why not do it with jazz? If we don't want it in our midst, we have the precedence to give us legal support for our next act of tyranny.

Let me end on a classical note. Ancient Greek thinkers were most aware of the fact that human beings are at once private and public entities. They counseled in support of personal excellence, development of moral character, the ethical life of every individual, yet they did this knowing that such excellence, development and ethical life will require community engagement. Hermits are rare birds and their flourishing is possible only in comparison with members of a tyrannized community! Otherwise they live impoverished lives.

There was no necessary, inherent conflict between the individual and the community for the Greeks, unless the law becomes corrupt or the individual is irrational. They were right. It is only when we take individual aspirations to be necessarily whimsical, irrational and community goals as

mere some kind of collective will that such a conflict appears unavailable and unavoidable.

So What about those Local Cases?

So let's return now to the Fullerton, California, case of the famous theater which its owner wanted to sell but was opposed on grounds of the community's interest?

Simply put, given the nature of the citizens of Fullerton, to abandon a commitment to individual property rights would be a very serious breach of principle and, ultimately, against the public interest. To build nice theaters, individuals need to know that they will be able to sell them when that is deemed to be to their best advantage. Without this freedom, the creation of valued things is seriously hampered. Sure, nice things are built in tyrannical societies but most at the expense of large segments of society who receive nothing in return for their sacrifice. Only in free societies can there be a serious balance between individual rights and community values.

In the city of Orange, where a resident in a historic district wanted to build apartments on his property, there would have been ways of dealing with the problem of contaminating the historic value of the area without violating the owners' rights: pay the man for his losses, if the land is so valuable to the community, induce him to relocate, make it to his best interest to cooperate, do not force him to sacrifice his rights. Certainly, restrictive covenants could have prevented the situation, as well, with the sale of the property stating terms that made clear that no alteration of the architecture is permitted. The Michigan neighborhood simply has to accept that prior restraint against innocent citizens is a serious breach of community standards for free people. Local groups could obtain consent, though, via a campaign – stickers could be hung on the cars of those who go along and the others could experience ostracism and other pressure, barring the violation of their rights. Allowing unreasonable searches isn't the way to handle community drug problems.

And when it comes to the more general tendency to inject the theme of individual rights versus community interest into political elections, this needs to be resisted with some serious education, the reiteration of the plain fact that a community that does not protect the rights of its members is not worth admiration and loyalty, whereas one where such protection is given, citizens can be proud that they solve their problems in line with standards of civility and humanity.