
On Communitarianism

An Interview Between Kenneth Grasso and Joseph E. Gorra

Communitarianism often informs much of our Western theologies and philosophies of community, society, and notions of social harmony. How might we understand it as a movement of thought? In this interview with Ken Grasso, we discuss the various nuances of ‘communitarianism,’ and how a robust anthropology might be a corrective to ‘political communitarianism,’ yet also help to advance a kind of ‘social communitarianism’ that is meaningful for a pluralist theory of society.

As you know, ‘communitarianism’ is a rather heterogeneous movement of associated thinkers that seems united around a common conviction of what they are against: a radical individualism inspired by some variety political liberalism. Is that about right, if one were to contextualize communitarianism, historically?

Communitarianism is indeed a heterogeneous phenomenon. In an immediate sense, it might be viewed as a reaction to the sort of hyper-individualistic theories of human nature and society associated with certain currents within the liberal tradition. In the contemporary United States, for example, it can be seen as a response to the ascendancy of the type of liberalism criticized by Michael Sandel and countless other thinkers.

What’s at the heart of this liberalism?

A vision of human beings as sovereign wills free to make of themselves and the world whatever they choose, unbound by moral ties antecedent to choice save perhaps for the duty to respect the autonomy of others. This vision of the person issues a thin theory of society in which human social relations are understood as artificial, external, and contractual; and in which human

communities are viewed as temporary aggregations of individuals united for reasons of mutual utility.

So, communitarianism is a ‘reactive’ movement?

Communitarianism must be understood as an effort to address the modern crisis of community, the decline of community that seems to happen as an outgrowth of those socioeconomic changes that together constitute modernization. The loss of community – and resulting sense of isolation, alienation, etc. -- is one of the defining cultural experiences of modernity. One cannot but think in this context about contemporary concerns about the erosion of our sense of civic solidarity and social connectedness, and decline of the institutions composing civil society.

What are the historical and contemporary varieties of communitarianism that you have identified in your scholarship?

Obviously, community can mean very different things and there are many types of communitarianism. I would say that the basic distinction in the modern world is between what might be called “political” and what might be called “social” communitarianism. The former has historically received expression in the thought of thinkers like Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, and in American context the thought of certain of the progressives such as Herbert Croly. It receives contemporary expression in the writings of thinkers like Robert Bellah, William Sullivan, Michael Sandel, Amitai Etzioni and Alan Wolfe.

What defines what I’m calling political communitarianism is a vision of social life which focuses single-mindedly on the individual and the state, and whose effect is to make the state the center of social life, and the political community the locus of community. Social communitarianism, in contrast, historically

finds expression in the writings of thinkers like Althusius, Tocqueville, Durkheim and Burke as well as in modern Catholic and neo-Calvinist social thought (where it finds expression in the social teachings of the modern popes as well as in the thought of such figures as Heinrich Rommen, Jacques Maritain, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd. In post-World War II America, it finds expression in the writings of thinkers like Mary Ann Glendon, Robert Nisbet, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Jean Bethke Elshtain.

What's important to social communitarians?

For social communitarians, our nature as social beings finds expression in a wide variety of diverse institutions and social groups in society, as to be seen not as an aggregation of individuals united by citizenship in the political community, but as a *community of communities*. From this perspective, the state is not the primary institution in which our nature as social beings finds expression, and the polis is not the locus of community. For it, the institutions of civil society, rather than the state, are the center, as it were, of social gravity.

Does political communitarianism represent a dead end?

Yes. It is incapable of addressing the modern world's crisis of community because both its theory and practice are destructive of the small-scale, highly personal, solidaristic institutions which are alone capable of addressing our need for community. At the same time, its celebration of state power is endangers liberty in its foundations. Only in social communitarianism can we find the resources to both revitalize community and secure liberty.

How have theological/philosophical anthropologies shaped communitarian conceptualization of 'state' and 'society'?

Obviously, our thinking about human social life is going to be decisively influenced by our understanding of the human person, and, more broadly, by the philosophical and theological presuppositions which inform it. In terms of your question, I'd make two broad points. The *first* is that one of the things that has really hampered modern communitarianism is the impoverished philosophical and theological framework within which its thinking about community has unfolded.

How so?

Generally speaking, modern theorizing about community has unfolded against the backdrop of a nominalistic metaphysic. Such a metaphysic does not provide a secure foundation for an authentically human vision of community both because it is incapable of forging an adequate understanding of relations (and thus of human society insofar as a society is a unity of order rather than substance) and antipathetic to the idea of natural wholes.

What's the consequence of this metaphysic?

It pushes our thinking inexorably toward either a romantic cultural particularism or strong organicism that absorbs the individual in society or an impoverished model of human community that understands social relations as external, accidental, and adventitious.

What is an adequate theory of community?

The adequate theory of community we seek – one that can do justice to both the depths of human sociality and our dignity as persons and hence as beings who transcend all human societies – must start from a realistic metaphysic (albeit one enriched through the assimilation of the legitimate insights of

contemporary of modern philosophies of the person with their emphasis on subjectivity, inwardness, etc.).

Is there another point you would like to make about Christian contributions to understanding community?

A second point to be made is that Christian thought provides a particularly rich resource for the articulation of a theory of community insofar as it combines an appreciation of the transcending dignity and value of the individual human person as a being made in the image and likeness of God and called to eternal communion with God, with an appreciation of the depths of human sociality, an appreciation rooted in its vision of the triune nature of the God in whose image we are made.

Can an argument be made that some variety of communitarianism is really a sort of liberalism?

I would argue, in fact, that the dominant form of American communitarianism does indeed have intellectual roots in a model of man and society that might be called Enlightenment liberalism. If the most striking feature of Enlightenment liberalism is its individualism (an individualism that has received signal expression in today's liberalism of the unencumbered self), to be understood, this individualism must be seen against the backdrop of its metaphysics, of the rationalism and nominalism that inform it as a distinctive intellectual tradition. Enlightenment liberalism, in this sense, must be distinguished from the broader phenomenon of liberalism as such.

So, this is a broader sense of 'liberalism'?

Right. In this sense, liberalism designates a tradition in political thought characterized by a commitment to the ideals of government that is limited in its

scope, subject in its operations to the rule of law, and dedicated to the protection of the rights of individuals and social groups. Enlightenment liberalism represents but one form this tradition has taken historically.

So in this broader sense, communitarianism is not much different than liberalism?

Although contemporary American communitarianism attacks what it sees as the excessive individualism of Enlightenment liberalism (and, in fact, offers a compelling critique of this individualism), when all is said and done, it doesn't break in a deep and fundamental way with what might be called the latter's "deep structure" – it continues to operate in the impoverished intellectual horizon of Enlightenment liberalism. As a result, it is simply incapable of generating the theory of community it rightly believes we need, and its efforts derail into the dead end of political communitarianism.

How might a pluralist theory of society differ from contemporary communitarianism?

It would differ in a number of important respects including its metaphysical foundations and anthropology. What I want to emphasize in the current context is how its model of society would differ. In contrast to theories of community rooted in the presuppositions of Enlightenment liberalism, it would insist that we are social beings from whose dynamic orientation towards the realization of our natural flow a whole array of social relations. It would recognize, in other words, that we are intrinsically, not contingently, social beings, that we possess a natural relational structure.

So, social communitarianism understands our sense of community *beyond* 'political community'?

In contrast to the political type of communitarianism that dominates contemporary communitarian thought, it would insist that our social nature finds expression not just in the political community but in a wide array of social, economic, and cultural groups and institutions. These institutions are absolutely essential both to the wellbeing of the polity, and, more broadly, to human flourishing. Society, it would insist, must be understood as a community of communities.

How about the role of the state?

The state must, in turn, respect both the natural structure and proper autonomy of these groups. Its role in the overall economy of human social life, furthermore, is limited by the responsibilities, the distinctive functions, of these institutions. Indeed, the state exists not to supplant them or to absorb their functions, but to assist them by providing a framework of public order safeguarding the delicate social ecology on which they depend, a public order within which these groups can prosper and thus make their distinctive contributions to human flourishing. A communitarian theory of society rooted in the pluralist tradition can offer us a vision of society that isn't state-centric – that doesn't make the political community the focus of community or absorb all of human social life in an omniscient state.

So, do we need a non-political communitarian theory as a theory of politics?

We need a communitarian theory of politics for the simple reason that we need community. Made in the image and likeness of a Triune God, we're intrinsically social beings. The problem is that the form of communitarianism that dominates our thinking today is flawed, and is, in fact, destructive of both community and freedom. What we need is a better communitarianism, one rooted in the pluralist tradition. Insofar as Christian thought represents one of

the most important sources of such a pluralist vision, I think that providing America with access to such a better theory of community is one of major responsibilities today confronting Christian social thought.

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