

Sebastian Nye  
[sn42@cam.ac.uk](mailto:sn42@cam.ac.uk)

## LECTURE 2

### Communitarianism and Universalism

#### Communitarianism: an overview

Communitarian concerns can roughly be divided into three categories:

1. The nature of the self
2. Anti-universalism
3. The value of community

#### Liberal universalism

Many liberals are, explicitly or implicitly, committed to universalism: the view that the principles of justice that they advocate hold for all societies across time and space. They may vary in their implementation, but the same *basic* principles hold.

Liberal political philosophers often adopt the following two-stage methodology:

1. Come up with principles of justice for an ideal society (e.g. for Rawls a 'well-ordered society', where the same principles are known and followed by all, and are implemented by the state). A task for political philosophers.
2. Apply principles of justice to circumstances that are not ideal (i.e. to the real world). A task for political scientists.

(See: Adam Swift and Stuart White, 'Political Theory, Social Science and Real Politics', in David Leopold and Marc Stears eds., *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*; Charles Mills, "'Ideal Theory" as Ideology', *Hypatia*, 20/3 (2005).)

#### Communitarian anti-universalism

According to communitarians, there are no universally applicable principles or values. Political thought is community dependent.

Two questions:

1. What is it about political thought that is non-universal (and community dependent)?
2. Why is political thought, so understood, not universal (and community dependent)?

#### Question one

(i) Reason and rationality: how we justify political judgements

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, rational enquiry and justification should be understood as:

‘embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide the remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the same tradition.’ (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p.7)

The key point is that ‘the concept of rational justification is historical. To justify is to narrate how the story has gone so far’ (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p.8).

This contrasts with the Enlightenment view of rationality and justification, according to which:

‘[r]ational justification was to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural peculiarities’ (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p.7)

(ii) The subject-matter of political thought

Michael Walzer argues, in *Spheres of Justice*, that claims about what is good and valuable which underscore debates about distributive justice are either so general that they are vacuous, or can only be understood with reference to socially relative meanings.

‘There is no simple set of primary or basic goods conceivable across all moral and material worlds – or, any such set would have to be conceived in terms so abstract that they would be of little use in thinking about particular distributions.’ (Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, p.8)

The appropriate criteria for distribution, Walzer thinks, is heavily dependent upon the meaning and significance of the good being distributed:

‘it is the meaning of goods that determines their movement. Distributive criteria are intrinsic not to the good-in-itself but to the social good. If we understand what it is, what it means to those for whom it is a good, we understand how and by whom and for what reasons it ought to be distributed. All distributions are just or unjust relative to the social meanings at stake.’ (Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* pp.8-9)

### Question two

Why is political thought, so understood, not universal (and community dependent)?

Three different kinds of answer:

- (i) This is the most fruitful way to approach political enquiry.
- (ii) This is the only way to conduct political enquiry (liberal universalism is an illusion).
- (iii) This is the only morally/political acceptable way to conduct political enquiry.

(i) Anti-universalism as fruitful

Why should we endorse MacIntyre’s view of rationality rather than the Enlightenment view?

(a) The Enlightenment project has failed. We have not achieved rational consensus on the appropriate principles of justice, and it doesn't seem that there is much hope of doing so:

'the thinkers of the Enlightenment and their successors proved unable to agree as to what precisely those principles were which would be found undeniable by all rational persons. One kind of answer was given by the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, a second by Rousseau, a third by Bentham, a fourth by Kant, a fifth by the Scottish philosophers of common sense and their French and American disciples. Nor has subsequent history diminished the extent of their disagreement. It has enlarged it.' (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p.6)

(b) The tradition-orientated approach, MacIntyre believes, offers a much more hopeful way to understand and engage with the political thought past and present. For instance, it might help to overcome deep-seated disagreement:

'once the diversity of traditions has been properly characterized, a better explanation of the diversity of standpoints is available than either the Enlightenment or its heirs can provide... How and under what conditions they can be resolved is something only to be understood after a prior understanding of the nature of such traditions has been achieved. From the standpoint of traditions of rational enquiry the problem of diversity is not abolished, but it is transformed in a way that renders it amenable of solution.' Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p.9-10

(ii) Anti-universalism as the only game in town

(a) Richard Rorty

- There is no such thing as a 'view from nowhere'; all views are historically situated and conditioned:

'there is no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary we are presented using from which to judge this vocabulary... This amounts to giving up on the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of "rational" that is neutral between vocabularies.' (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p.48)

- Communities have a shared standpoint within which enquiry (including political enquiry) is possible:

'there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *our* – uses in one or another area of enquiry.' (Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity' in *The Richard Rorty Reader*, p229)

(b) Moral relativism

It is possible to reconstruct an argument for the claim that political thought is relative to the values of a community as follows:

- Metaethical moral relativism is the thesis that moral claims are only true or false (or, on some definitions, only capable of justification) relative to a particular moral framework, and there is more than one moral framework. (See Wong, *Moral Relativity*; Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*; Bernard Williams, 'Relativism and Reflection' in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.)

- Moral frameworks coincide with the value systems of communities, so moral truth and justification is relative to the value system of a community.
- Political value is a kind of moral value, so political truth and justification is relative to a given community.

(iii) Anti-universalism as morally/politically acceptable

(a) Walzer and tyranny

Why does Walzer think that theories of distributive justice should only concern 'non-alien' goods (i.e. goods that are recognized and understood as such by a given community)?

- He argues that imposing a particular view of goods (in the form of a distributive principle) on a group of people to whom those goods are alien is simply a form of tyranny. Distributive principles must resonate with the people between whom they operate, otherwise their imposition is tyranny. He says:  
 'social goods have their own spheres of operation, where they work their effects freely, spontaneously and legitimately... the use of political power to gain access to other goods is a tyrannical use. Thus, an old description of tyranny is generalized: princes become tyrants, according to medieval writers, when they seize the property or invade the family of their subjects. In political life – but more widely, too – the dominance of goods makes for the domination of people.'  
 (Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, p.19)
- Communities are the best (albeit slightly rough) way to group persons who share social meanings.  
 'Political community is probably the closest we can come to a world of common meanings. Language, history, and culture come together (come more closely together here than anywhere else) to produce a collective consciousness.'  
 (Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, p.28)

(b) Taylor and legitimacy

- Taylor argues that the concept of legitimacy is importantly connected to the notion of allegiance. To say that a state is legitimate is to say (among other things) that it is at least in principle possible for it to attain the allegiance of the people it governs.
- For a state to claim legitimacy it must depend on concepts which are embedded in that community. It is cannot appeal to concepts which are alien to those it seeks to govern:  
 'we live in a society whose practices embody a notion of identity, and the human good. This must be ours or we cannot give society our allegiance; we are alienated from it' (Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p.287)
- But it follows from this that political justification of the state's legitimacy must proceed from values and concepts which are shared by those governed. This is a justificatory task that depends on local resources.
- Taylor further argues that close communities with a shared identity and view of the good could be legitimate, but that modern liberal capitalist societies are facing a 'legitimation crisis' (see Taylor, 'Legitimation Crisis?' in his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*).

### Coda: non-communitarian anti-universalism

Anti-universalism is not the preserve of communitarians. Here are two non-universalist approaches to politics and political philosophy that are not usually associated with communitarianism.

#### (i) Politics and political philosophy as a skill or craft

According to one tradition of thought, exercising good political judgement is not a matter of applying some universally valid theory. Rather, it is a matter of mastering a certain skill, which cannot be formulated and systemized into a set of concrete principles. Being a good politician or political philosopher, on this view, is a lot like being a great artist; to produce great works of art, it is not enough to apply a set of predetermined rules, or mechanically copying other great works. Given that sound exercises of political judgement are heavily context-dependent, this approach to politics and political philosophy offers an alternative to liberal universalism. (See Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp.95-101; Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss eds., *Political Judgement*; John Dunn, *Political Obligation in its Historical Context: Essays in Political Theory*).

#### (ii) Ideological criticism

Some belief, value, ideal, value system or world-view is subject to ideological criticism if two conditions hold:

1. It has a functional role: the belief or value system or world-view (or whatever) legitimises, stabilises or otherwise supports some existing social institutions or practices.
2. Uncovering the functional role that is played by the belief, value system or world-view frees people from some kind of (partly self-imposed) coercion to which they were previously subject. (See: Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*; Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*; Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*.)

This kind of political criticism focuses on the particular: the concern is with whether *actual* practices, in a given society or type of society, have a particular function, and whether that function is necessarily covert. The focus is not universal considerations of justice.

### The value of community

According to communitarians community is intrinsically valuable, not merely valuable as a means of individuals pursuing their own ends.

Many of the reasons why it is considered to have this value are implicit in what I have already said:

- Communitarians believe that people are, to a significant extent, constituted by their social or communal attachments. It follows that community is valuable because our identity, together with our capacity to flourish, is bound up with our communal attachments.
- Recall that Taylor's argument against atomism (the thesis that individuals are self-sufficient) was that any kind of autonomy is only possible given membership of a political community which fosters it. If this is right, then community is valuable because it provides a necessary context for autonomous agency.
- Communitarians believe that our political thought is bound up with the values, ideas, conceptions of rationality and so on which are embedded in our community. It follows

that community is valuable because it provides the context and materials of political thought.

- Communitarians (or, at least, some communitarians) believe that the legitimacy of a polity depends upon whether it reflects values embedded in the political community. So the possibility of legitimacy is connected to community.