Are Particularistic Obligations Justified? A Communitarian Examination

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Are we justified when we care more about “our own kind” than about all others? Some scholars have tried to provide an answer based on what they consider human nature. Others—on self-interest. The author examines the implications of the constitutive roles community has in our life for this question, as well as the differences it makes when considering what kind of human flourishing we deem of value.

If three children go hungry in a community, the members of this community are more distressed than if thousands starve in some far away country. Moreover, people not only care more about members of their own communities, but maintain that they are justified in doing so, that one has a higher level of obligation to one’s “own kind” than to all others. Are such particularistic obligations justified, and on what grounds?

This question has been the subject of an immense amount of deliberation, which is not reviewed here. This exploration is limited to an examination of communitarian justifications for particularistic obligations, and only to those in a societal rather than political context. That is, it concerns the obligations of members of communities, not those of citizens of states.

Introduction

A. SPECIAL IMPORT TO COMMUNITARIANS

Addressing this question is of particular importance to communitarians. Those who center their social philosophy on the

I am indebted to Andrew Volmert for extensive research assistance and discussion of this essay; to William Galston for suggestions of important resources; to David Lefkowitz, and to Philip Selznik, David Archard, and Lawrence Blum for comments on a previous draft; and to Mark E. Gammon for editorial suggestions.

1. A similar point was made by Adam Smith in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, although Smith refers to the difference between a man’s reaction to his own problems and a disaster far away (Smith, The Essential Adam Smith, ed. Robert L. Heilbroner [New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986], p. 106).

2. I would have preferred the term “moral claims” to obligations because obligations, like duties, imply imposition from the outside, while using “moral claims” may help to remind that reference is made to claims whose innate merit we recognize. They are, at least in part, internally motivated.
concept of individual rights need not recognize that collectivities (social groups, communities) have any rights or can elicit any special obligations. Indeed, Bentham argues that the very notion of the existence of a society, as distinct from an aggregate of individuals, is a fiction.3

In contrast, because communitarians consider shared formulations of the good essential, these formulations ipso facto entail particularistic moral obligations to and for the members of the communities involved. For instance, to hold that one ought to cherish one's ethnic heritage entails "do's" and "don'ts" to and for members, but not for others.

The argument could be made that given that liberals are concerned with universal rights, which the state is obligated to honor, and that communitarians deal with particularistic obligations within society, there is not necessarily a conflict between these two philosophies. Indeed, one might suggest that there is no reason for liberals to object if members of communities abide by some particularistic commitments in the private realm. Such a liberal, however, may still be concerned that private commitments, if widely endorsed, will lead to state enforcement. For instance, if most members of a community agree that abortion is immoral, they might well seek to use the state to ban it. The particularistic position of a community thus would become a law that might well violate one or more universal rights.

Also, many liberals fear that social pressure by communities on their members to abide by particularistic obligations amounts to coercion.4 For instance, they not only oppose laws that mandate HIV testing and disclosure of the results to one's sexual partners—but also social pressure to do so on the ground that it is coercive. Given that communities are the source of coercive so-


4. John Stuart Mill writes, "But neither one person, nor any number of persons, is warranted in saying to another human creature...that he shall not do with his life for his benefit what he chooses to do with it" (Mill, On Liberty, ed. David Spitz [New York: W. W. Norton, 1975], p. 71). In developing a principle for dealing with "compulsion and control," Mill explicitly says this applies "whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion" (ibid.). For Mill, neither community nor state ought to tell people how to live their lives. For a discussion of the difference between social pressure and censorship, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, "On Moral Outrage, Boycotts, and Real Censorship," The Responsive Community 2 (1992): 9-13.
cial pressure, some deride them as "Salem's," as places they would rather do without—one more reason they do not brook particularistic obligations.

Indeed, the basic vocabulary and paradigm of those political theories that are centered around rights, as well as those moral philosophies that are centered around universal principles and individual autonomy, do not include the concept of particularistic obligations. ("Basic" is used to remind that there are numerous different liberal positions and that the preceding point may not fully apply to some liberals.) Even when liberals do not explicitly object to particularistic obligations, they do not examine the grounds on which these obligations may be justified. In contrast, communitarians, whose paradigm is centered around the common good as conceived by particular social entities such as communities and societies, must deal with the question of whether special commitments to these entities by their members are morally appropriate.

B. COMMUNITIES, NEITHER STATE NOR FAMILIES

The following exploration of the issue concerns only the particularistic obligations members of communities have to one another and to the common good of their communities—not obligations to the state or members of one's family. The concepts of state and society are often conflated, but the state commands special duties and can coerce compliance, raising a host of moral issues that communities do not face. These issues are explored often enough. Families, though in some sense small, intense, immediate communities, lay moral claims on their members that are readily apparent and do not apply to more extensive communities. Here, the focus is on the distinct particularistic obligations of members to their communities and to one another.

C. UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULARISTIC

In many discussions comparing the liberal and communitarian positions, it is stated, or at least implied, that one has either particularistic obligations or universal ones. The two approaches seem, on the face of it, oppositional: One either respects all persons equally or holds some individuals as

commanding higher regard than others. For instance, one holds that all individuals are entitled to the same basic rights, say to purchase a house for sale, or one discriminates between members and nonmembers of a community, according members the right of first refusal.

The same assumption is implied in many of the discussions comparing partiality to impartiality. Although these concepts do not precisely parallel those of particularistic versus universal obligations, there are strong similarities. In both cases, it is often assumed that it is impossible both to approach all people as deserving equal regard and sometimes to hold particular people as commanding special privileges. Lawrence Blum articulates this assumption when he writes of the "unexamined presumption of traditional moral theories, especially of a Kantian or utilitarian stripe, that the impersonal demands of morality ought always and automatically to take precedence over personal pursuits." Marcia Baron argues that the charge that impartialists do not allow room for partiality is incorrect, since many are not so extreme in their views. This may be true for moral philosophers, but it is not the case in political theory. Indeed, one of the "hottest" current positions is that immigrants and citizens should be treated alike, or, ideally, all people of the world should be. This claim includes not only basic rights such as healthcare and employment, but all rights, for example voting.


As I see it, the dichotomous opposition between partiality and impartiality, or between particularistic and universal obligations, holds only if we assume that one's position on this matter must be all-encompassing. There is no logical requirement to assume such comprehensiveness, and in social reality people often combine the two orientations.

One may argue that such a combination may hold only as long as one limits universal rights to negative liberty rights that impose only duties of noninterference. According to this objection, if positive liberty rights are included (e.g., a right to an education), these impose a duty to provide whatever is needed to satisfy this right for all. My point, however, is that even if we owe certain obligations to provide a minimum level of well-being to all, we still may be obligated to give more to members of our own community. But this is not permissible if one's impartial morality is not rights-based but, say, some form of maximizing utilitarianism. In this case, one must ensure that the good of all, impartially considered, is an aim.10

This may indeed be the case, but this argument merely serves to highlight my point that one can define the opposition between the two moral orientations such that they will become mutually exclusive. However, there is no necessary reason to embrace this particular form of utilitarianism when dealing with partiality and impartiality. For the sake of the discussion that follows, I assume that there is no principled reason that a person cannot fully respect some universal rights (e.g., to free speech, to a given level of education) as well as some particularistic obligations to members of his or her community (e.g., to help a particular school). The issue explored here is not whether one ought to respect particularistic obligations instead of universal ones, but whether one is on justifiable moral grounds when one assumes any obligations to members of one's community that are not extended to everyone.

The observation that one can combine particularistic and universalistic obligations, partial and impartial considerations, is not to suggest that these orientations never come into conflict. However, this is not a reason to abandon either, and there are procedures to work out these differences and find a point of balance between the two. Here, the focus of attention is on what justifies particularistic obligations in the first place.

10. I am indebted to David Archard for this point.
D. OUTLINE OF THE DISCUSSION

The following discussion first illustrates the issue at hand with a brief report about a case in which a ruling was made against parents who sought to provide special support for the particular public school their children were attending, above and beyond what they provided to all children in the citywide school system. The discussion then examines reasons provided by those who favor particularistic obligations on empirical grounds. Next, the concepts of reciprocity and mutuality are examined to determine whether they can be drawn upon to justify particularistic obligations. The article proceeds by providing communitarian arguments that derive particularistic obligations from the roles communities have in constituting individuals, allowing them to function as full human beings, and in enabling human betterment. These arguments share elements of phenomenological, existentialist, and Aristotelian essentialist thought; however, because these designations imply many complex meanings to different people, the argument at hand follows a line of thought we will deem "constitutive communitarian arguments." It holds that membership and participation in community are at once fundamental to human functioning and essential for the development of identity and character and human flourishing, from which emanates a moral obligation to nurture and sustain community and the particularistic obligations without which community cannot exist.

Our Schools vs. Schools: An Illustrative Case

In 1997, Public School 41 in Greenwich Village, a part of New York City, decided to let go of a teacher for budgetary reasons. The parents reported to the school that they would raise the $46,000 needed to keep the teacher. However, Rudy Crew, New York’s Schools Chancellor, ruled that such donations were unacceptable, and he preferred to delve into his limited uncommitted funds to pay for the teacher rather than allow the parents to make the voluntary contributions they offered to make. Crew’s decision reportedly avoided “opening the door to widespread efforts by parents to raise money” for their children’s schools. (Indeed, there were indications that parents at other New York schools were about to follow the example of those in
Crew reasoned that such donations would create inequities between schools in poor and in rich districts. Another reason was that such donations would undermine the willingness to support taxes (either at the current level or future increases) used to pay for the total school system, and that if parents wanted to make donations, they should make them to the total school system and not to "their" schools.

Note that the issue is not whether Village residents should have neglected their universal duties and been allowed merely to attend to their particular ones. The parents paid taxes dedicated to the total school system. The opposite question is raised, whether they should have been allowed to respond to moral claims made by their community to contribute additional funds to their particular school. Those objecting to the contributions were challenging the moral legitimacy of the claim of obligation placed on parents by the community to help their particular community's school, above and beyond what they were required to do for the whole school system.

It should be noted in passing that in this, as in many other cases, the demand was not actually to make donations only to a truly universal category, say to schools in general, but merely to a larger community, in this case New York City. But the claims are made in universalistic terms: the parents seek to favor their children over "children," their affluent neighborhood over poor ones.

Whether one takes the side of the parents or the Chancellor in the case at hand, it provides a vivid introduction to the question explored here in a realistic rather than hypothetical context.


12. Hartocollis, "Chancellor to Keep Teacher in Her Job in Parents' Victory."

13. For example: "The practice of PTAs and other parent groups hiring supplemental teaching staff has been banned in Washington's suburbs and other parts of the country because of concerns that it could lead to inequalities among schools and create a have/have not educational environment. Opponents say allowing PTAs to pay for extra teachers challenges the concept that a strong public education should be available to all students—not just those who live in affluent communities" (Justin Blum, "PTAs Give Some D.C. Schools an Edge; Affluent Parents Providing Extras that Poorer Neighbors Can't," Washington Post, 17 April 2000, B1).
Empirical "Human Nature" Justifications

An often repeated argument against denying the moral appropriateness of particularistic obligations (in order to ensure commitment to universalistic ones) is that to do so flies in the face of human nature. I realize that many social scientists object to the use of the term "human nature" on the grounds that we have no way of studying it because all we encounter are people who are socially and culturally constructed. However, most social scientists do not raise similar objections if one points to behavioral attributes that are found widely among the members of most if not all societies, such as the quest (or "need") for profound affective attachments. I use human nature here in this sense.

The specific ways the argument from human nature is presented differ, but the conclusion is the same: people are unable to abide by sheer universal dictates. For instance, J.L. Mackie writes, "To put forward as a morality in the broad sense something which, even if it were admirable, would be an utterly impossible ideal is likely to do ... more harm than good .... But why, it may be asked, are such moralities of universal concern impracticable? Primarily because a large element of selfishness ... is a quite ineradicable part of human nature." A seemingly obvious example, although, like all such, not an uncontested one, is that if a person were forced to choose be-

16. The most often discussed example of this is William Godwin's suggestion that a person should not save a loved one before a person of greater societal worth (Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, ed. Raymond A. Preston [New York: Knopf, 1926]). Godwin is discussed in, among other works, Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Baron, "Impartiality and Friendship"; Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Magic in the Pronoun 'My'" (review of Williams' Moral Luck), Ethics 94 (1983): 113-25; Friedman, "The Practice of Partiality." For a criticism of Williams' analysis of the example (and the suggestion that the man in the example has "one thought too many"), see Marcia W. Baron, Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
between saving the life of a loved one and a stranger, one "naturally" would choose the loved one. Thus it is imprudent to ask people to treat those to whom they have a particularistic bond as if they were the same as others.  

This argument takes two major forms. One is basically didactic. If you train children to jump, you should not ask them to clear a bar a yard higher than the one they currently clear, because they will soon find themselves unable to live up to your urgings and will ignore your exhortations altogether. Such excessive demands may backfire, causing resentment and detachment. Instead, you should ask children merely to jump, say, an inch higher. The assumption here is that certain demands should not be made because of the way people are. (Theoretically, children simply could do their best whether you asked for an inch or a yard.)

The same is said for the moral equivalent of stretching people too far. An ethic that laid excessive requirements would lose whatever guiding power such normative rules might provide to make human life more moral. Sometimes the term "heroic" is used to suggest that one should not demand that ordinary people act in ways only heroes or saints might.

A different version of the same argument is implied by the body of literature dealing with supererogation. It focuses on the distinction between moral duties and acts that are praiseworthy—but not mandatory—because they are above and beyond what one can reasonably expect from human beings. The classic ex-

17. Many of the authors who address this oft-discussed case analyze it from a different perspective, suggesting that the person in the case should not think of his wife in the same way he thinks of the stranger (this is Bernard Williams' point in raising the case in his essay "Persons, Character and Morality," p. 18). Here, the case is used to illustrate a different point, that the person in the case will not treat his wife in the same way as the stranger (or think of her in the same way) because it is not human nature to do so.

18. J. O. Urmson, in his classic essay "Saints and Heroes," writes, "There is, indeed, a place for ideals that are practically unworkable in human affairs, as there is a place for the blueprint of a machine that will never go into production; .... there are ample grounds why our code should distinguish between basic rules, summarily set forth in simple rules and binding on all, and the higher flights of morality of which saintliness and heroism are outstanding examples" ("Saints and Heroes," in Essays in Moral Philosophy, ed. A.I. Melden [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958], p. 211).
ample is the soldier who throws himself on a grenade in order to save the lives of those around him. 19 This action is commendable, but, so the argument goes, beyond what we can reasonably expect a person to do. Though there is a universal moral obligation to save lives, normal human instincts for self-preservation are perfectly understandable—and in some sense expected—given the situation. The sacrificial act is extraordinary, and one cannot be faulted for not performing it. 20

Though not all, or even most, supererogation arguments deal with particularistic obligations or human nature, their application to the issue seems clear. Abiding by comprehensive universalistic obligations is beyond human nature. In contrast, one might add, abiding by particularistic obligations comes quite naturally. Indeed, often what must be ensured is that powerful particularistic obligations do not pervert justice, fairness, the law, and much else, that obligations to one’s friends, family, and community do not turn into cronyism, nepotism, and favoritism at the workplace and in public office. One may argue that while such obligations must be tolerated, they are not necessarily morally appropriate. However, if one takes into account the human suffering that results when one strongly promotes an ethic people cannot adhere to, one may find some moral justification for limiting the reach of universalistic obligations and hence leaving the door open to particularistic obligations.

Although there is considerable didactic and psychological validity to this line of argumentation, it is a weak one. First, it is based on what is considered a human weakness that presumably cannot be corrected. Many social scientists will here point out that human qualities are deeply constructed, profoundly affected by culture and society, although there are some “givens.” A kibbutz member may well find it in her “nature” to do much more for other members than, say, a city-dweller in a high-rise building with few bonds of attachment to other residents and with few shared values or mores. This is not to suggest that people could be reformulated at will, given the proper social


and cultural environment. But what their nature tolerates is a very difficult and murky subject, and it at best provides a very unreliable basis for drawing a line between any two kinds of moral claims, universalistic and particularistic obligations included.21

Second, arguments that base themselves on human nature have been used to justify much evil, from racism to violence, and hence must be approached at least with special caution.22

Third, there are two parts to ethics. While one is didactic, the other sorts out what moral philosophers consider virtuous, without regard to practicality. An obvious example is the veil of ignorance. One may argue about whether or not such a standpoint provides a defensible foundation for ethical judgments, but it is difficult to expect that faced with actual choices—as distinct from a mental experiment or philosophical exercise—people would actually disregard their social attributes, part of the inner self, in making these choices. Still, it is considered a very strong foundation for moral judgments by many ethicists and philosophers. Numerous other ethical deliberations, from what makes a proper moral discourse to what constitutes equality,23 pay little mind to how utopian they are, how remote from human nature as we now know it or believe it to be.

In short, the empirical and prudential considerations presented so far may lead one to tolerate particularistic obligations, but they hardly provide a strong moral justification.

Reciprocity and Mutuality

Another line of argument in favor of particularistic obligations is that particularistic bonds (with friends, neighbors, co-workers) cannot be sustained without particularistic obligations. The bonds are particularistic because they entail special, favorable treatment of those encompassed compared to all those

21. For an important discussion of other grounds to determine what is reasonable to expect of people, specifically their culture, see Blum “Vocation, Friendship, and Community.”
22. I am indebted to Andrew Volmert for this point.
excluded. *Ergo*, as long as one considers the bonds at issue morally worthy, they bestow some moral justification on those obligations, without which these bonds cannot be sustained.24

A whole school of thought, sometimes referred to as rational choice, at the heart of neoclassical economics, law-and-economics, and exchange sociology, treats particularistic bonds as based on reciprocity, which in turn is said to be based on self-interest rather than on moral obligations.25 Their essence entails that *ego* does for *alter* what *alter* does for *ego* because both benefit. A shopkeeper pays for the delivery of goods because he needs future shipments, and the producer ships the goods because he needs a market to sell them. Initially, both sides may seek some assurances, say in the form of a deposit or a legally binding contract, but if the trade continues they will rely on the self-interest of both parties—rational choice advocates argue—to sustain the relationship.

Reciprocity, though, is a thin reed on which to rest particularistic bonds. Sociologists and anthropologists have often pointed out that even in strictly economic relations, self-interest cannot be relied upon fully, and relationships must be backed up at least by some measure of moral obligation. Reciprocity is more solidly based if it is given a moral overcoat, because reciprocal acts are never completely symmetrical, and there is typically some time gap between an act and reciprocation. There is at least a measure of implied promise which, if not honored, undermines the relationship, but which cannot be "retaliated for" and hence must rest on other foundations. Moreover, the transaction costs of fully laying out all the terms of transactions and verifying that they have been abided by are prohibitive.26 Indeed, if one of the sides finds that its self-interest is no longer served, it can often wiggle out of a contract, and the costs of enforcement may be ruinous. In short, commerce flows much more smoothly when the sides can trust each other, because there is a sense that they will abide by their mutual commitments due to their sense

24. There is a considerable literature that is critical of functional explanations that cannot be reviewed here.


that obligations must be respected. As Emile Dürkheim put it, contracts require some pre-contractual obligations. (This does not mean that the parties will necessarily absorb a very large loss in order to be true to their moral obligations, but the fact that under some circumstances they might well seek to violate their moral obligations does not show that they do not have any.)

If particularistic bonds that commerce draws on heavily cannot fully rely on reciprocal self-interest and require some moral undergirding, the same holds many times over for social relationships such as those among friends, neighbors, or people in love. Here, in effect, the relationship between self-interest and moral obligation is reversed: obligation plays a key role and self-interest a relatively smaller one. I refer to such a relation as one of "mutuality." If A has a generalized (or "diffuse") relationship with B rather than a relationship involving one or more specific exchanges. Friendship, for instance, is based on open-ended commitments. A nurtures B when B is sick without keeping a registry of time spent or thinking that if A becomes ill, he will "cash in" what he has given, getting an equivalent number of cups of soup or bedside visits from B. This holds if a friend loses a loved one, needs a loan, and so on. People care for one another because of the value they attach to the other person and to the relationship, not primarily because they expect to be paid back. Marriage is another relationship that is based on mutuality and not on reciprocity. It is a common mistake to speak of marriage as a contract rather than a covenant. The commitment is "in sickness and in health," and so on, and not like prenuptial agreements that seek to spell out obligations between the partners.

27. One may argue that reciprocity is, actually, a universalistic principle: Whoever does X for me I will do X for them, regardless of who or where they are (as long as they have basically the same attributes). Without going here into ways of challenging this interpretation, it suffices to note that even if it is fully endorsed, it amounts to a universal dictate to honor particularistic obligations. Even if one holds that I owe a ride to anyone who gives me a ride (although people outside my social range hardly can do so), the obligation is always to specific people who accorded me a ride in the past.


True, just as reciprocity contains a moral overcoat that helps sustain it, so mutuality contains an element of reciprocal self-interest that does the same. A friendship or marriage in which the giving flows largely one way might well gradually be undermined. However, within very broad confines, the essence of the relationship is based on a commitment to its value and to the other person, not to trades and payoffs. Here, particularistic obligations play a much greater role in mutual than in reciprocal relationships. They are an integral part of the relationship, part of its essence, even definition. Neither, though, is sustainable without a measure of moral obligations.

One may ask whether such relationships are not sustained by affection, sympathy, and compassion rather than by either self-interest or obligation. Indeed, there are numerous situations in which one’s affective relationships do come into conflict with self-regard. It is then that they are sustained—to the extent that they are—by obligation. Say, for example, I have already visited my friend in the hospital many times; tonight, I would rather go to a movie, but my sense of obligation prevails.

Communal bonds and relationships and the particularistic obligations they entail differ from those of commerce, friendship, and even neighborliness, in two important ways. First, they contain a moral commitment not merely to the other person or persons encompassed in a close relationship, but to all members of the community (including those with whom one has no personal relationship) and even future members (both children to be born to members and newcomers to join the community). Second, importantly, they contain commitment to what that particular community considers the common good, such as the environment. Here, often the element of reciprocity is especially meager and the role of obligations high.

Hence, to the extent that one accepts the value of friendship, neighborliness, and communal relations and recognizes that these entail particularistic obligations, these obligations gain a considerable measure of moral endorsement. This argument should be viewed as a sort of a down payment. I try to show next that there are even more powerful arguments. However, note that they are what I called constitutive communitarian arguments. They hold.

30. On gift relations, see International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, s.v. “interaction: social exchange“ and “exchange and display.”
that if these valued relationships cannot exist without particularistic obligations, then one should uphold those obligations. It is like saying that if you value water, you cannot deny the merit of oxygen and the value of bonding with hydrogen. These two elements in combination constitute water. So do family, friendship, and community go hand-in-hand with particularistic obligations. To deny one is to deny the other. I try next to do even better.

**Constitutive Arguments: Obligations We Owe Our Makers**

Arguably the strongest communitarian argument in support of particularistic obligations is that they are an essential part of that which constitutes us. On closer examination, one notes that there are a couple of arguments that shade into one another but are distinct.

**A. Community Is Essential for Our Composition**

For the purpose of this article, I take for granted that particularistic relationships such as friendship, neighborliness, and love are good in themselves. (Note that I do not assume that these values trump all others, including universal obligations.) As already suggested, these valued relationships bestow a measure of moral legitimation on the obligations that these relationships entail. However, before arguing that communities also accord such legitimation to particularistic obligations, one cannot take it for granted that communities per se are good. Indeed, many liberals view them rather critically as being ascribed (membership being predetermined at birth and hence at least initially involuntary), authoritarian, and oppressive. Hence, the value of communities—and which kinds of communities are valuable—and the normative obligations that follow need to be carefully scrutinized. To proceed, one must first define community.31 The definition of community here followed has two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and

reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, to a particular culture.

One should note that there is a strong tendency to think about communities as if they were what social scientists call a dichotomous variable rather than a continuous one, one which can vary greatly in its thickness rather than merely being present or absent. Mountains of data, recently reviewed and augmented by Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama, and long before them by Robert Bellah and his associates, and scores upon scores of other sociologists from Ferdinand Tönnies, Emile Durkheim, and Martin Buber on, show that when there is little or no community, people suffer physically (e.g., are more prone to have a great variety of major illnesses including heart attacks, ulcers, and high blood pressure, as well as recover from illness more slowly) and psychologically (e.g., are more prone to be depressed, have low self-esteem, or be disoriented). The absence of sufficient communal bonds is also a major reason people feel detached, alienated, and powerless and either withdraw or act out in antisocial ways including joining gangs and militias (to find community) or abusing drugs and alcohol or each other.

One may object: Are there not fully functional individuals who are members of no communities? The well-documented social science response is that when people are truly isolated, cut off from a fabric of bonds of affection and shared values, they are deeply diminished. Indeed, it is the mark of the modern self that its development is stunted and truncated, that it shows the ill effects of deficient connectedness as well as moral anomie. Others have noted that modern loneliness makes people neurotic, selfish, or narcissistic.

34. Ibid., pp. 331-33; see also Srole et al. 1962.
In short, communities are essential for our full constitution. We can *survive* without them, but we can neither achieve nor sustain a full measure of what is considered a "fully functioning" human being without some measure of community. And thicker communities bode well for our constitution, although excessive community causes ills of its own.

**B. Identity Is Particularistic**

Identity is profoundly tied to communities, and thus to particularistic obligations. As Joseph de Maistre put it, “There is no such thing as *man* in the world. In the course of my life I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians etc.; I know, too, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian. But as for *man*, I declare that I have never met him in my life; if he exists, he is unknown to me.”\(^{36}\) We do not know who we are, which culture is ours, which heroes we ought to emulate, which demons we must avoid, what our origins are and much of our fate, unless we are linked up with one community or another (or with several).\(^{37}\)

Michael Sandel puts it well when he writes that we cannot understand ourselves but "as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic."\(^{38}\) Charles Taylor observes:

> People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic, or an anarchist. Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to, as an Armenian, say, or a Québécois. What they are saying by this ... is that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. Put counterfactually, they are saying that were they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn't know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.\(^{39}\)


\(^{37}\) The mirror opposite of this argument is to point to the loss of identity in the mass society, the ill effects of atomization, the resulting alienation (William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* [Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959]).


There is a tendency to collapse the contributions that community (and the particularistic obligations it entails) makes to our composition as humans with those it makes to our individual identities. The difference is that the first kind of contributions are to our existence as full-fledged human beings; the second concerns our sorting out what kind of human beings we are. The distinction is akin to the difference between learning to walk and determining which direction we shall walk. The first concerns our physical and psychological health, our general capacity to function. The second concerns which particular relationships (out of a large universe of possible ones) we will become more deeply invested in (say our ethnic group or our class, our country of origin or the one in which we currently live). It concerns how we our going to define ourselves (say, as conformist or rebellious), and which of the values that we find around us we shall particularly embrace to the point that they are going to become an integral part of our self. True, these two are connected: if our capacity to function is diminished this will affect our ability to form and sustain our identity as well as which identity we shall be inclined to develop—and a strong identity will help nurture our ability to function. However, the fact that these two are mutually supportive does not render them a distinction without a difference.

Insofar as one’s identity as a member of a community is constitutive of one’s basic being as a moral agent, one has a responsibility to nurture the identity of the community itself through participation in its practices, concern for its past, present, and future members, and protection of its resources. Such responsibility may engender particularistic concern for the community above and beyond more universal obligations, and, in fact, one’s understanding of universal moral obligations is itself a product of the community’s role in identity formation.

To put it differently, particularistic obligations reflect a moral obligation to nurture the social environment in which people can develop, what might be called a “moral ecology.” They compel us to apply to the social realm the environmental idea of stewardship toward nature, the notion that we are obligated at least not to leave the social ecology in a worse condition for future generations than it was when bequeathed to us. This argument is a specific application of a general moral position that endorses symmetry: one could not reasonably
claim that we are generally entitled (as distinct from occasionally or under special conditions, *e.g.*, when on one’s deathbed) to take and not to give, to diminish the total good and not to participate in refurbishing it, within the limits of our relative ability to do so.

*I cannot stress enough that the obligation of stewardship toward the moral ecology does not arise because I will be harmed if I do not nurture it.* There may be sufficient stock of moral and social fortitude provided by others that the societal fabric may be sustained for a while even if I draw it down without then shoring it up (just as if I pollute a river, I may not be short of drinking water). Stewardship toward the social ecology arises because it is immoral to take and not to give, to diminish and not to restore (although how much I take and give depends on numerous conditions).

Although (partial) loss of community is one of the defining characteristics of modernity, there is no reason to overlook the fact that just as we can experience diminished community, we can face excessive communality. This is the case in Japan, where individuality is suppressed, rights are neglected, autonomy is severely curbed. Community is to be considered as a good only when its social order is balanced with carefully laid protections of autonomy, when particularistic obligations are balanced with universal ones, especially to protect basic individual rights. In short, although communities and the particularistic obligations they entail are essential to our full functionality, both can be excessive.

Lawrence Blum, in commenting on this essay, posed a pivotal question. He asked whether these arguments apply to all communities, or only to good ones. Do people have obligations to bad communities, or only to those that “realize important human goods”? One possible response, Blum suggested, is to hold that “some communities will be sustaining for each individual, and particularistic obligations are being defended only in the sense that each individual will have some such obligations, not that any specific forms of such obligations (neighborhood, ethnic, etc.) are being defended in general.”

Numerous social scientists and some communitarian philosophers would part ways here (this author included). Social scientists tend to argue that antisocial communities (say gangs) may be as sustaining as pro-social ones. Some communitarians,

Michael Walzer for instance, have argued that communities are the final arbiters of what is good. This communitarian holds that communities do not have the final word about what is good, and that obligations they articulate are valid only if they do not violate what is otherwise justified as good (best deontologically). Further elaboration of this point requires a whole separate examination of how one separates true from false articulations of obligations (or good from bad ones) and whether they are universal or particularistic, an examination that cannot be undertaken here.

**Human Betterment**

So far, I have made the argument that communities (and the particularistic obligations they entail) are essential for our constitution, for our ability to function as full human beings and as persons oriented by a particular identity. Next, I advance the argument that communities help make us into better people than we would be otherwise.

A. **PARTICULARISM NURTURES FREE AGENCY AND UNIVERSALISM**

Communities (when thick but not excessive) help make us relatively free agents and rational beings and can help us to live up to universal obligations. As Erich Fromm put it in his *Escape from Freedom*, and as numerous studies of behavior in crowds have shown, isolated people tend to be irrational, impulsive, and open to demagogical appeals and totalitarian movements. One could argue that these movements have risen only in societies and periods in which social integration has been greatly weakened. In contrast, as Tocqueville and the enormous literature on civil society holds, people well woven into communities (including families and voluntary associations) are able to resist pressures from governments and


44. See, for instance, the vast body of literature examining the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism, especially Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 43, no. 3 (1997): 401-429.
the seductive appeal of demagogues. Moreover, community members are much more likely to have the psychological integrity and fortitude required for people to be able to engage in reasoned deliberations, make rational choices, act on judgment rather than on impulse, and act as relatively free agents. (I write "relatively" because even under ideal social conditions people can only approximate the liberal ideal, and not very closely, but they certainly cannot do so absent particularistic relations.)

Liberals fear that communities inherently oppress individuality, as they often did in earlier periods and still do in some parts of the world. This fear is justified in reference to excessively thick and authoritarian communities, which existed mainly in earlier periods or in nonliberal societies, although even relatively thin communities tend to restrict the individuality of their members to some extent. Nonetheless, liberalism itself is dependent on the kind of persons found in communities.

David B. Wong adds that to learn to be duty-bound and to act universalistically, we first must have relationships of trust with others (i.e., particularistic relations). We are not born with universalistic obligations; they must be taught. We acquire respect for them from parents, educators, religious figures, spiritual leaders, or heads of social movements—all people with whom we have an intense particularistic involvement.

All this is especially evident when we consider our condition as children. Without those who cared for us, we would not have developed into "individuals," but would crawl on all fours and bark, inarticulate and aggressive, snarling at each other. (This is not some Hobbesian heuristic but a statement based on empirical studies.) Even as mature adults we re-


quire continued bonding with others to sustain our values in general, our universalistic commitments included.47

B. Communities Help Minimize the State (Especially Its Application of Coercion)

Communities' introduction and reinforcement of our moral commitments help make for a strong measure of a voluntary social order. There is a tendency to assume that once people are brought up properly, by strong families and good schools, possibly backed up by churches or other places of worship, they will be men and women of virtue. Actually, social science data leave little room for doubt that unless people's moral commitments are continually reinforced, they will deteriorate. The most effective way to reinforce them builds on the fact that people have a very powerful need for continuous approval by others—especially those to whom they have thick bonds of attachment. These bonds, in turn, are found most readily in communities (families and voluntary associations included).48 Communities, then, can strengthen adherence to social norms, especially when communities endorse pro-social values.49 Thus, the role of the police and the courts can be minimized, and the state and its coercive means are less needed to maintain social order. Law and order can be largely replaced by the informal controls of communities.

C. Particularistic Bonds Humanize Us

Particularistic bonds, and hence obligations, protect us from the inhumanity that has often arisen in the past from strong commitments to abstract and general ideas, leading those who believed in these ideas to fight for the betterment of humanity but to care little about their fellow human beings. Particularistic obligations stopped many children during the Nazi era from spying on their parents and some Germans from turning in their Jewish friends, thus showing that even in a severely fragmented civic environment, particularistic bonds maintain considerable

47. I am not arguing that universal commitments' moral standing is based on their introduction and reinforcement by particularistic relations, but that without these relations people will not acquire or sustain them, whatever their intrinsic merit.
moral power.\textsuperscript{50} The history of the twentieth century, memories of the unfathomable suffering that totalitarian governments and movements inflicted on millions of people in the name of one universal cause or another (e.g., Stalinist socialism and some radical religious movements) reminds us how crucial such particularistic tempering is.

A related but not identical point is that justice is best served when we judge people and deal with them as whole people, whose particular circumstances we are bound to take into account, rather than merely as members of one or more categories. We should treat individuals as unique, concrete individuals, rather than incidents or members of abstract categories. Selznick puts this point eloquently as follows: "[The] personal standpoint is not and cannot be embraced wholeheartedly. Judgment in the light of rule and principle has serious limitations from a moral point of view. That is so, fundamentally, because rule-centered [universalistic] judgment does not adequately appreciate the place of concreteness and particularity in moral experience."\textsuperscript{51} He adds the following telling quote: "'There is no general doctrine,,' wrote George Eliot in \textit{Middlemarch}, 'which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.'"\textsuperscript{52} And he concludes that "the lesson is that impersonal precepts must be tempered and assessed in the light of very specific human outcomes."\textsuperscript{53}

The merit of the obligation to take particularistic conditions into account is evident when mandatory sentences prevent judges from taking into account special circumstances, when admissions officers of colleges are expected to adhere strictly to standard guidelines, and in comparison of the Napoleonic legal and the common law traditions.

One may argue that particularistic considerations are not the same as particularistic obligations; the first deal with localized conditions, the second with moral commitments. However, note


\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 197, quoting Eliot.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}
that the commitment to take into account context is, in part, a moral judgment reflecting particularism.

D. HUMAN FLOURISHING

There is an immense literature on what constitutes a good life, human flourishing. Thus, for instance, John Cottingham finds in it a ground for justifying some partiality, drawing on Aristotle. Cottingham writes, “If I am to count as making a moral judgment I must be prepared, at least in principle, to show how my prescription contributes to the overall blueprint for the good life—how it forms part of, or connects with, my vision of how life should be lived if it is to be worthwhile... [contributing to a] fulfilled or ‘flourishing’ life.”

In a very elementary sense, the connection between human flourishing and particularistic obligations is supported by the reasons already discussed: without stable and meaningful social attachments it is impossible to form and nurture fully functional human beings, individuals whose sense of self (or identity) is established, and who are able to act as reasonable, free agents. However, if one takes the term flourishing to mean a higher level of achievement, a greater realization of human potential, a life that is more virtuous than just fully functional—one finds that the relationship to particularistic obligations is a complex one, although clearly there is a connection.

A preliminary examination suggests that particularistic obligations may be compatible with, indeed highly supportive of, some forms of flourishing, but not nearly as essential, possibly even a hindrance to some extent, to some others. Cottingham writes:

If I give no extra weight to the fact that this is my lover, my friend, my spouse, my child, if I assess these people’s needs purely on their merits (in such a way as an impartial observer might do), then that special concern which constitutes the essence of love and friendship will be eliminated. Partiality to loved ones is justified because it is an essential ingredient in one of the highest human goods.

But this assumes that one recognizes these particular virtues as part of the good life.

If the center of human virtue is a life of contemplation or nirvana, or other forms of self-perfection, especially if those are

55. Ibid., p. 369 (emphasis in original).
viewed as virtues one practices individually rather than as a member of a community, particularistic obligations will play a relatively small role. The same might hold if the good life is one that seeks to promote justice, or a world order based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or on some other such universal principle.

Particularistic obligations become pivotal if one considers any of the following lives (or combinations thereof) as good: one dedicated to love and caring; tending to particular ill or poor persons (rather than to health care or distributive justice generally); nurturing communal bonds and bonds among communities, including conflict resolution and mediation; parenting and attending to our parents; and, more generally, dedication to the betterment of family life and that of particular communities.

All this is not to suggest that particularistic obligations play no role in societies centered around self-perfection. Human flourishing of any kind takes place within a societal context. People cannot work much to improve their self unless they build or help nurture a context in which such labor is considered part of the good life. Thus, a life of learning can thrive in a Jewish shtetl or a Chinese literati society that celebrates such a life, but not in one that sees serving the poor and the ill as the main virtue. That is, whatever is considered the good society, whatever form human flourishing takes, it does not take place within a social vacuum. It thrives when it becomes the good around which a society—and the particularistic obligations it entails—is centered. Members must be committed not merely to the particular community (or society), but also to its particular vision of the good—and must be willing to absorb the costs and often the sacrifices that such visions entail. Thus for a group of literati to dedicate their life to philosophy, poetry, and brush painting—the other members of the far from affluent society must be willing to curtail their already meager consumption. Therefore, although some forms of human flourishing are more intimately associated with particularistic obligations than others, all draw on them and all add to their moral justification.

**Conclusion**

To be full-fledged human beings we require a certain environment, one rich in solid but not overbearing communities. These, in turn, are composed of bonds of affection, which cannot
be universalized, and moral obligations to members. A measure of moral obligation to nurture the social environment in which people can develop well arises out of this understanding. That obligation is neither self-serving nor utilitarian nor consequentialist. The moral ecology particularist obligations help sustain may well be sustained for the duration of our lifetime, or even that of our children, even if we do not abide by these obligations and draw on the existing stock of trust and affection and moral commitments—as we draw them down. However, just as we are obligated to sustain the natural environment as a common good, so are we obligated to sustain the moral ecology. I call this a constitutive communitarian argument.

The same communal environment justifies our moral commitment not only because it enables people to fully function, but also because it makes us and others better than we would otherwise. Communities provide the conditions under which people can act autonomously and curb the need for state coercion, provide for empathy that benefits not merely particularistic but also universal obligations, and contribute to human flourishing. None of these attributes—as significant and compelling as they may be—justify ignoring our universal obligations, but they provide a strong communitarian justification for those of us who honor additional commitments to our own communities.