

Two Views of “Taking Community Seriously”

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The concept of autonomy understood as rational self-determination is attractive as a means of bridging the gap between individual and community because the concept admits of application to both individuals and groups, and so has the potential richness to give expression to a particular relationship between the two entities rather than simply articulating the privileges of one against the other. Edward Sankowski’s alternative approach to theorizing about moral education recommends expanding the notion of autonomy in a way which recognizes the importance of background moral education-supporting structures, including educational institutions and communities. The central question here is, can we say of his approach — with its expansive understanding of autonomy and respect for community — that it takes community more seriously than the neutralist liberals against whom Sankowski leans? I want to suggest that there are several ways we might envision “taking community seriously.”

There is at least one understanding of taking community seriously in moral education which can be attributed to neutralist liberals. Neutralist liberals can acknowledge that background institutions like family, culture, and community have a significant role in shaping individual identity, and greatly affect the success of moral education (for example, since children from broken homes are on average less likely to reap the full benefits of moral education in schools), yet still maintain that with respect to liberal moral education those structures are largely irrelevant to, or should be treated as if they were voluntary in, public educational contexts. This position is not as strange as it may appear. It is crucial that children understand that they can opt against and change features of their existing communities, that under many circumstances it is entirely acceptable for them to choose to exit the communities in which their initial identities are given, and even that they are able to “modify out” given features of their communal identities. This lesson is consistent with teaching civic education, or public responsibilities to participate in the communities they do choose to live in as adults.

The neutralist liberal approach to taking community seriously gains its support from contemporary views of liberal education as primarily concerned with what I call “getting along” virtues and values — those virtues and values necessary to leading an autonomous life. Some primary examples of getting along virtues and values are: morally critical/reflective ability, various practical and marketable skills, core liberal values like tolerance, and an awareness of the structure of social opportunities locally, regionally, and nationally. Built into this approach is a two-part explanation of why it often appears as if liberals are insensitive to community. The first part of the explanation is that liberal education is not in the business of perpetuating community identity, but rather is concerned with whatever identity comes along with the cultivation of getting along virtues and values. The second part of the explanation is that, far from being insensitive to community, liberal education

both embodies a skepticism about the relative educational value of community values and is committed to ensuring that the oppressive influences of community do not derail the full cultivation of getting along virtues and values, and that corresponding identity.

The liberal neutralist view can be contrasted with a communitarian view of taking community seriously in moral education. I do not know that any self-described communitarian asserts the view I am going to discuss, so this involves some speculation on my part. My speculation is that for a true communitarian, taking community seriously through moral education will have to centrally be about giving some kind of institutional recognition to existing community values, because those are the values of the community in which moral education is occurring, and because that is the primary means by which the value of specific *background* institutions like community are brought into the *foreground* of moral education. The logic behind this speculation is exposed upon asking how we are to take community seriously in a positive way rather than simply in the negative way neutralist liberals do. Taking community seriously in a positive way, which moves beyond teaching students of their moral commitments not to any particular community, but only to the communities they choose to live in, means moving beyond getting along virtues and values, and toward giving the values of the communities in which moral education is conducted special status in the structuring of moral education. A communitarian view of taking community seriously must be concerned with the *transmission* of community values above and beyond the conveyance of getting along virtues and values. It must also take some position on to what extent community values and getting along virtues and values will be sacrificed where the two sets of values conflict.

This exposes the potential oppressiveness of community. For we have good reasons for thinking that communities are more likely to sacrifice getting along virtues and values wherever they undermine community values. By “community values” I mean values more context and place specific than the general run-of-the-mill liberal values like mutual respect or tolerance. Community values, as I am using the term, are central to the *character* of a community, not simply indicative of a community’s structure. Note that to call a community “liberal” says very little about the character of the community. That is because calling a community “liberal” refers to its basic framework, and leaves individuals in such communities to generate a distinctive character according to their values. If this is correct, then to maintain that we should affirm community values through schools, as I have suggested the communitarian who takes community seriously must, means that we should imprint schools with a certain community character.

Not surprisingly, both the liberal and communitarian views of taking community seriously preserve the liberal-communitarian dispute. What is at stake, then, is whether Edward Sankowski’s approach to taking community seriously signals a satisfactory compromise between the liberal and communitarian views. Sankowski’s approach does fall in between the liberal and communitarian approaches. Rather than treating community as potentially oppressive or as having a special moral

educational status, Sankowski proposes that wherever possible, and where community value consensus has reached some critical mass via acceptable vehicles of public deliberation, we have reason to abandon the neutralist stance and shift to one which affirms particular values as "ours" rather than simply as neutrally defensible liberal values. So, for example, where there is a wide consensus on a particular version of autonomy, that view of autonomy should be advertised as a clear expression and affirmation of community. Broad consensus of interpretations of autonomy must exist in his view, and on this point I agree. I also agree with Sankowski that we cannot discover existing value consensus without empirical information about existing communities and the individuals in them. In gathering this information, Sankowski thinks we may find that the liberal-communitarian dichotomy has less genuine content than it first appears to. Moreover, empirical information may uncover altogether new moral orientations that are more attractive than either the liberal or communitarian ones.

We can test our intuitions about this third approach to taking community seriously by asking what fair-minded liberals and communitarians might say of it (assuming there are some). I think liberals will say that the approach does not change much, and communitarians will object to it as a very "liberal" approach to community which, hence, still does not take community seriously enough. The liberal perspective on Sankowski's approach might be as follows. Liberals get to keep their program of teaching only getting along virtues and values, with no requirements to imprint liberal education with distinctive community character. All liberals are being asked to do in this third approach is to conduct business as usual, but where communities hold values which reaffirm the liberal approach, they should publicly recognize this. Another way of putting this is that Sankowski's approach takes "liberal community" seriously, not community simply. Conversely, communitarians are likely to object to this alternative approach because, in their view, it does not take community seriously enough. Communitarians might respond that Sankowski's reliance on the idea of individual autonomy as the bridge or point of compromise between individual and community betrays a clear, if unconscious allegiance to liberalism. They might hold this view despite Sankowski's clear leanings toward communitarianism. In fact, communitarians might respond that Sankowski's view, while representing a genuine point of compromise, nonetheless excludes one of the central theses of communitarianism. That thesis holds that there are certain community goods in the way of grounding individual identity which can come off as oppressive from a liberal point of view, but which nonetheless can outweigh considerations of individual autonomy.

Put another way, the goods community can provide may sometimes require an illiberalism in moral practice which is justifiable from a community point of view, but not from a liberal point of view. I think communitarians would say that this recognition is absent from Sankowski's view, just as it is absent from the neutralist liberal view generally. So, as I said before, Sankowski's approach does represent a genuine compromise between liberals and communitarians on moral education. But it is not a compromise communitarians would be willing to accept, and liberals may or may not accept it since it does not affect their conduct much. In my view, this

reaffirms that there are genuine differences between liberals and communitarians which are significant, though thinkers like Will Kymlicka have caused the distinction to blur.¹

As a final point, we should keep in mind what I think are the “ideal type” examples of the communitarian approach to moral education. The first example is the Old Order Amish example popularized by Stephen Macedo and others.² But perhaps an even better example is moral education as it is conducted on some Native American reservations. Consider moral education as it is conducted on a Menominee Indian reservation in Northern Wisconsin. I once visited a group there which belonged to the “turtle clan.” The school itself has the shape of a turtle, with the body as the center of the school with a single circular hallway around it. The head of the turtle, though not the moral center, is the administration office. Each arm and leg is a hallway where less important school functions are conducted. What students learn in the center of the building is agriculture, including a spirituality about the land, as well as the beliefs of the turtle clan. All other subjects, including getting along virtues and values, are secondary, though the norms of the clan will certainly cover some of them.

This seems to be one paradigm of communitarian moral education, so we should ask how likely it is that we could accomplish something similar in, say, Milwaukee, Boston, Los Angeles, or New Orleans? What this tells us is that communitarian approaches to moral education work best in conditions of isolation and value homogeneity. To the extent that educational contexts are less isolated and more value diverse, communitarian approaches to moral education are increasingly problematic. This is especially true when we are dealing with communities which have unclear boundaries, with multiple racial and ethnic groups, each with less space than they need to live out their vision of community. Under these conditions, which exist in Milwaukee, Boston, Los Angeles, and New Orleans, what will be the shape of our school buildings, or the symbol of our community? What will be at the center of our moral education and what will go to the margins? It is not so clear anymore.

There can be multiple paradigms of community, however. One of the great contributions of multicultural theory is to observe that the formula for community in multicultural societies must be quite different from communal formulas in monocultural societies. This makes the liberal approach to community more attractive. For while it is not yet clear how communitarians might answer this challenge, the liberal answer is clear: add more getting along virtues and values, like cultural respect and how to take advantage of diversity in one’s life. If, on the other hand, I am wrong in thinking that the communitarian approach to taking community seriously does not require the transmission of community values, then, at least with respect to moral education, the differences between liberals and communitarians is not all that great.

1. See Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

2. See Stephen Macedo, “Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?” *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 468-96.