

# Communitarians, Liberals, and Other Enemies of Community and Liberty

Scaling Back the Enlightenment

by Donald W. Livingston



I remember a time when the terms “community” and “virtue” had almost disappeared from philosophical discourse. Working on a doctorate in philosophy at Washington University in the mid-60’s, I took a seminar in ethics from Prof. Herbert Spiegelberg, who had written the definitive history of phenomenology. One day, he observed that philosophers no longer even spoke of virtue. He was not entirely right, because Catholic universities, where Thomism was strong, still explored the meaning of virtue. But elsewhere, in Anglo-American as well as in Continental philosophy, the language of virtue had entirely disappeared. Spiegelberg had no view on the matter—he merely mentioned it as a curiosity.

Moral virtue had vanished because Enlightenment liberalism had come to dominate the Western intellectual classes. The ethics of liberalism was either utilitarian or Kantian, explicitly rejecting the traditional moral conception of virtue. I myself (I am ashamed to say) was a Kantian at the time and had no idea what Spiegelberg meant when he spoke of virtue. It was only years later that I came to see how serious the matter was. By rejecting virtue, the liberal tradition was not merely substituting one ethic for another but—as astonishing as this might sound—rejecting morality altogether.

Morality, as traditionally conceived, supposes, first of all, a

metaphysical vision of the nature of man and the sort of life that is good for man. Virtues are cultivated dispositions of character that enable the soul to live out the life that is good for man. A virtuous soul, with much training and over a long period of time, may come to love those things that are truly good as opposed to those that merely appear to be such. Second, morality presupposes a community. A man cannot know what the good is independent of a concrete way of life, lived in community with others, in which the good is exemplified. A man becomes good through emulation and by apprenticing himself to a master craftsman in the art of human excellence. In a word, morality is *soulcraft* that touches every aspect of life: excellence in character, style of dress, manners, architecture, the form cities should take, the way gardens should be laid out, the preparation of food, what is worthy of remembrance, and so forth. Morality is an adventure, a whole way of life lived out in community with others across generations in pursuit of a common—though never fully comprehended—vision of the human good.

Communities are important because, like the family, they are the natural bearers of a valuable way of life. The 18th-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico argued that man is transformed from an animal into a human being only when he can sustain the institutions of religion, marriage, and burial. The marks of a genuine community are the temple, the graveyard, and the wedding celebration. The favorable connotations that attach to this essential structure of human life are inappropriately applied to associations that are not communities at all—for instance, the “business community,” the “entertain-

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ment community,” “gated communities,” or the “homosexual community.” IBM does not have a burial ground; homosexuals do not marry and beget children; and “gated communities” are often places where affluent strangers move to escape the aftermath of social disintegration. These associations may have value, but they are not communities.

This is how Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Christians, and Muslims traditionally understood morality. These traditions had different understandings of what the human good is, what the virtues are, and how they should be ranked; but they never questioned the metaphysical postulate that there is such a thing as the human good and that morality is the adventure of critically exploring it in a concrete way of life. Liberalism rejects this fundamental assumption, arguing that a metaphysical vision of the human good is not something human beings can agree on. Since compromise over questions of the ultimate good is not possible, liberals argue that constant and implacable conflict is inevitable. Instead, we must work to establish a universal civilization based on individual autonomy (or self-rule). Everyone should be able to do what he chooses, provided he shows equal respect for the choices of others. The problematic metaphysical question of the good is set aside in favor of a set of rules that maximizes choice. Ethics is reduced to following these rules, and government is reduced to enforcing them.

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Liberalism further argues that the rules for maximizing choice are rationally self-evident and cannot be denied by any rational person. An ethical and political order governed by these rules would naturally seek to build a global, cosmopolitan civilization in which such archaisms as community, tradition, religion, moral authorities, and ethnic and national identities either disappear or become as trivial as the latest fashions. Abandoning the notion of the human good, liberalism, from the French Revolution on, stressed individual autonomy and became, thereby, the enemy of virtue, community, tradition, and religion. The most important American liberal philosopher of our time, John Rawls, had this to say about the moral life structured around a vision of the good: “Although to subordinate all our aims to one end, does not strictly speaking violate the principles of rational choice . . . it still strikes us as irrational or more likely as mad.” What Rawls judged to be a form of madness is the fundamental postulate of the Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Christian conception of the moral life. In rejecting the human good, man would also have to reject religion, for in the Western tradition—whether biblical or pagan—religion and the good are intimately connected. Richard Rorty, the

voice of postmodern American liberalism, has observed that an “enlightened” and truly “liberal society . . . would be one in which no trace of divinity remained.” Ronald Dworkin, whose philosophy of law has had a great influence in law schools, argues that, in conflicts between the rights of the autonomous individual and the community, the rights of the individual are “trumps.”

Liberalism gradually began to shape American public policy after the Civil War and kicked into high gear after World War II. The Bill of Rights, designed primarily to protect the states—distinct political societies capable of pursuing radically different forms of social life—from the central government, was turned upside down to protect the autonomy of the *individual* from the states. The regulation of morals, law enforcement, and religion, which gave legal protection to distinct ways of life, was transferred by judicial social engineers to the central government. The education of children, which had been the province of local schools financed by real-estate taxes, was now regulated by the federal courts. The Commerce Clause of the Constitution was interpreted in such a way as to subvert local economies that sustain communities. The rules were rigged to favor large-scale agribusiness and the merger of large corporations, further weakening the small businesses that sustain local communities.

By the 1980’s, the earlier philosophical rejection of the Western conception of morality was cashed out in the collapse of many of the institutions necessary to sustain it. The United States was becoming a spiritual desert, and the signs of moral decay were ubiquitous: a spectacular increase in crime, divorce, falling educational standards, promiscuous abortion, illegitimacy, anomie, and a society with little desire to reproduce itself. But then an unexpected and devastating critique of liberalism appeared. Such writers as Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Amitai Etzioni demonstrated that, in its obsession with individual autonomy, liberalism had ignored the importance of community and tradition. The liberal self, they argued, is not necessarily the human self. For most of mankind, the self is radically situated in a substantial moral community (or overlapping communities) and is the bearer of both an inherited identity and the obligations that go with it.

This “communitarian” critique exposed another flaw of liberalism. Liberalism had occupied a privileged position only because of its claim to have discovered a set of neutral principles that no rational person could deny and on the basis of which a universal civilization could be built. The communitarians demonstrated that there are no such neutral rights. All of the conflicts that arise from different conceptions of the human good reappear in attempts to define fundamental rights. Utilitarianism and Kantianism—the two most popular attempts to define neutral liberal rights—are themselves incommensurable doctrines, the former holding that rights are grounded in the good consequences of action, the latter holding that their ground is independent of all consequences. And incommensurability breaks out even within utilitarianism and Kantianism. And so, after two centuries of attempts at liberal self-making, we have painfully rediscovered what the Western tradition always taught—that the human good is primary.

The intellectual death of Marxism long preceded the physical collapse of its institutions. The collapse of liberalism from a privileged neutral position to just another tradition with its own particular notion of the human good may well prove to be an

epoch-making event. Certain habits and practices will survive, at least initially, but how can liberalism learn to speak of the human good when, for two centuries, it has carefully developed a language that pointedly excludes such speech? If rights cannot stand on their own, independent of an account of the human good, and if men cannot agree on what the human good is, how can we continue to talk of universal human rights? Moreover, the concept of the human good gives rise first to duties and then to rights. Can we expect a Universal Declaration of Human Duties that supercedes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? And if the former is a practical absurdity, is not the latter also? Still, the philosophic cadaver of neutral liberalism continues to preside over the civil religion of the United States. Our cultural elites proudly proclaim the United States to be the first “universalist nation” and, in the name of human rights, to have the duty to remake the world, as much as possible, in its provincial image.

The communitarian critique of liberalism looked promising. Certainly, its negative critique is unanswerable, but as I read articles and listened to papers at the American Philosophical Association on what came to be called the “liberal-communitarian debate,” I realized that the positive part of the critique was weak. Substantial human communities are typically not liberal. They stress virtue and duties over rights; they respect authority over autonomy; they are exclusive more than inclusive. I realized that most communitarians are not emancipated from liberalism and, consequently, are allergic to actual human communities. “Communitarianism” is just another philosophical abstraction, as vacuous, in its own way, as the liberal “individualism” it has rightly criticized. What communitarians want is the warm feeling of solidarity and depth of character that is missing in liberal theory and practice, but without the hard and intrusive restraints of virtue. Communitarians are like those romantic Nietzscheans who admire the master morality of Greek and Roman aristocrats but cannot bear the disciplined way of life that made such characters possible.

If we wish to make the world safe for substantial moral communities, we must consider serious political alternatives to that master creation of liberalism, namely, the large-scale centralized state. The restoration of genuine federalism, radical decentralization, and even secession would enable communities of human scale to have sovereignty over their affairs. But this is not what most communitarians have in mind. Instead, the restoration of community is somehow to occur within the structure of the centralized liberal state—perhaps through the creation of a federal Department for the Restoration of Community, just as the need for reforms in education prompted creation of the Department of Education and the weakening of religion in public life (caused by the federal government) has led to federally subsidized “faith-based” programs.

The massive centralization of power built up over a century by liberal states exploded in World War I, leaving the social structure of Europe in shambles. This condition called forth searing criticisms of liberalism from fascists, national socialists, and communists. Though wildly different in other respects, they all claimed the project of restoring the social and communal life destroyed by liberalism. The most thoughtful of these critiques of liberalism were put forth by such Italian fascist writers as Giovanni Gentile, Mario Palmieri, and Afredo Rocco. But the attempt to map the idea of community—which, like the family, can function only on a human scale—onto a state

made up of millions was a cruel, absurd, and destructive hoax. Liberals never tire of exposing the atavistic collectivism and tribalism of these movements, and their criticism is sound. What they fail to see, however, is that the centralized liberal state creates a political market for these ideologies. The very names “fascism,” “socialism,” and “communism” are reminders of the social nature of man that liberalism, in its obsession with autonomy, has not only forgotten but undermined. Millions of rootless people—however misguided—have responded to these ideologies for reasons that liberals ignore at their peril.

The sort of liberalism I have described is a creature of the mid-19th century. But there is an older liberalism, sometimes called “classical liberalism,” that is quite different—the liberalism of the Founding Fathers, Hume, Tocqueville, and Lord Acton. It, too, valued individual liberty, but it also valued community and acknowledged the right of both in a highly decentralized federalism. Contrary to latter-day liberal ideology, America was not founded on a conception of radical individualism that, in Dworkin’s words, could “trump” the claims of community but by small Protestant communities for whom self-government was second nature. By acknowledging (in the Bill of Rights) the sovereignty of the states and local jurisdictions over all powers not delegated to the central government, the U.S. Constitution afforded legal protection to communities to live out, across generations, their way of life. And just as a free society must be tolerant of the many heterogeneous—and even disagreeable—goods that people might pursue, so it must be tolerant of the heterogeneous ways of life that people *in community* might pursue. But no ideology that has gained control of the modern centralized state from the late 19th century on has exhibited much tolerance for substantial moral communities of human scale.

Such a decentralized federal order flourished in America, however, until challenged by the centralization initiated by the Civil War. Even so, it lingered on into the 20th century, generating strong regional cultures, economies, and substantial characters. And its memory can still guide political conduct. Running for mayor of New York City, Norman Mailer proposed that the city secede from the state and become the 51st state of the Union. This new state would allow substantial neighborhood sovereignty. Some neighborhoods, he suggested, might be theocratic and require religious attendance; others might be atheistic and prohibit the building of churches in their jurisdictions. Individuals, however, would be able to move and trade freely among jurisdictions.

Mailer is thought of as a man of the left, but his vision was not leftist, nor was it utopian. It was rooted in the actual practice of an older America. The division between left and right is a creature of the French Revolution and presupposes a centralized state of vast scale. It is essentially a quarrel over who will control that state. In the older America, the division was between Hamiltonian centralists and Jeffersonian decentralists. Mailer rightly understood the wisdom of Aristotle, who wrote that morally intrusive communities must be of human scale. A properly decentralized polity can and must be able to tolerate a great variety of what might be called “leftist” or “rightist” policies. Where they have no place is at the level of the leviathan state, because the scale is inappropriate. When liberals and conservatives who worship the centralized state start worrying about community, you should guard your wallet, and mothers should gather their children behind their skirts.



# Reactionary Radicals

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## RADICAL REACTIONARIES



### Wheeler's Progress

Shutting Down "The Company"

by Justin Raimondo

On October 15, 1905, Burton K. Wheeler stepped off a train at the Northern Pacific depot in Butte, Montana, thinking that he had seen more of the West than Lewis and Clark but wondering if his luck had run out. After looking up every lawyer in town (Wheeler had graduated from the University of Michigan Law School) and receiving only one offer, he decided to go up to Spokane, Washington, on the grounds that he had never been there. On his way to the train station, he passed a saloon. Standing outside were two men dressed like respectable citizens and, as Wheeler described them, "oozing with geniality." Before he knew it, he was inside and deep in a poker game. A friendly game of cards turned out to be a complete loss for young Wheeler: Inside of a few hours, both the train and his savings were long gone. He had no choice but to stay in Butte—a quirk of fate that would have a major impact not only on the course of his own career but on the developing politics of the state of Montana.

Butte was a boomtown in the middle of mountains, the countryside denuded for 50 miles around; it was a jumble of soot-stained buildings, crisscrossed wires, and mountains of slag. "The Company," as Butte's citizens called the Anaconda Copper Company, dominated not only the town but the state: A gigantic smokestack, said to be the largest on earth, commanded the skyline, belching smoke and hellfire. In its shadow, the workers rose each morning and descended into the mines, more than 2,000 miles tunneled through the Butte mountains.

On average, one miner was killed or seriously injured each day; survivors were prone to "miner's con," a disease of the lungs that struck down many more in the long term. The politics of the state revolved around the feuds of the copper kings, who used the state and local governments (just as their employees used crowbars and dynamite) as weapons in the struggle over disputed mines.

By the time Burt Wheeler was first elected to the state legislature, these battles had been largely resolved in favor of The Company. Anaconda owned not only most of the state of Montana but both major political parties, the state legislature, the governor, and local officials down to the county level. The Company's leaders were used to getting their way, and they were not shy about paying off their friends and potential ene-

mies. However, to their great consternation, Wheeler could not be bribed. Wheeler became a champion of miners and successfully proposed legislation protecting "workers' rights" and giving them the benefit of the doubt in personal-injury cases—but not without furious opposition from The Company.

Wheeler's political fortunes rose on a wave of left-populist sentiment symbolized by the Socialist Party's victory in Butte's 1911 city elections, when they elected their candidate for mayor or along with a majority on the city council. The new mayor was inaugurated on a platform that he would close all dance halls in the red-light district, ban the sale of alcohol in "any place where there is traffic between the sexes," and regulate the prostitution business by requiring the girls to get regular check-ups. The ten-dollar license fee collected by the city from practitioners of the world's oldest profession was promptly abolished.

This was hardly the socialism of Marx and Lenin but more the moralism of Carrie Nation mixed with the suffragette radicalism of Jeanette Rankin. Rankin, a Montana Republican and the first woman ever elected to Congress, was a staunch opponent of World War I, one of only 49 members of Congress to vote against entering the European maelstrom. The war had some pretty fearsome consequences in Montana. Stories of German spies in the state were common, and there was a great fuss raised about a possible attack from the Luftwaffe. There were numerous sightings of the airborne Hun, who was said to be dropping to earth in balloons; and if the newspapers of the time are to be believed, the hills of Montana were crawling with the Kaiser's legions. The immigrant miners, of course, were caught up in this hysteria, much of it based on ethnicity, and the Germans and Irish came under particular scrutiny. Union leaders were accused of sabotaging the war effort. The Montana Council of Defense, a group appointed by the Company-owned governor, assumed almost total power in the state—in the name of "winning the war," of course.

By this time, The Company had marginalized Wheeler in state politics. Still, he managed to get himself appointed state district attorney upon the resignation of the incumbent. As D.A., he felt called to defend the Non-Partisan League organizer who was beaten and driven out of town by a pro-war mob: Wheeler searched (in vain) for the murderers who dragged Frank Little—an IWW organizer who spoke out against the war—from his bed and hanged him from a railroad trestle in Butte. More than 2,500 mourners turned his funeral procession into an antiwar protest. When the editor of the *Butte Bul-*

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