BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM?: A RESPONSE TO ROBERT BELLAH

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RADICAL INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICA IS CERTAINLY isomorphic with Protestantism, not least in the relationship between evangelical pietism and therapeutic subjectivism. Philip Rieff is an important guide to how this came to be. In an essay entitled "The American Transference from Calvin to Freud," he wrote:

> to the therapeutic of the mid- (one could also say late-) twentieth century, early twenty-first century, as to the ascetic of the Reformation movements, all destinies have become entirely personal, not at all communal. The way to this self-knowledge is to trace back a person's conduct from symptom to the inner conditions responsible for that symptom. In the religious period the symptom was called sin, and the neurotic a sinner, self-convicted. The task of the clergy was to make the sinner hopefully aware of his sin. The task of the analyst is to make the neurotic therapeutically aware of his neurosis. Residues of the old attribution cling to the modern and popular usage of the term neurotic. Like his predecessor, the sinner, the neurotic is most

> reluctant to admit his weakness. In fact, his failure to admit a fundamental weakness is the most obvious characteristic of the inner wrong which the sinner/neurotic commits against himself. Such failure was once called pride. The thankless task of old ministers and new psychoanalysts consists first in educating for that state of awareness from which a person can cope with his weakness.[1]

There is, it would seem, a fine line existentially between the quest for spiritual purity before God and therapeutic introspection oriented toward achieving well-being and a healthy lifestyle. This line was crossed many, many years ago in most Protestant denominations, and even in the more ascetic, evangelical denominations today, the transference Rieff speaks of is a pervasive reality in theology, ministry, popular literature, and so on. Though present in Catholic experience, it does not seem to be as big of a problem there, and even Rieff in this essay writes: "psychoanalytic therapy never found as ready and receptive a public in those areas of Western culture that remained Catholic or non-ascetic."[2]

The cultural codes of radical individualism do indeed run deep in American history and identity. It is particularly radical in our day both in its moral constitution and in the reinforcing social practices of consumerism. The questions that dog us are: In what ways can an alternative be found to the radical individualism we have today? How might an alternative resist the disintegrating tendencies of that individualism through communally enacted ideas of a common good? In what ways might the hold of this monoculture be broken?

My entré into this question is the matter of "difference" and how difference is framed and articulated in our day. For all of its noble aspira-

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1 Philip Rieff, "The American Transference from Calvin to Freud," *The Feeling Intellect: Selected Writings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 12–13.

2 Rieff 13.

tions, multiculturalism has a basic design flaw that results in undermining precisely what it advocates. The central problem is conceptual, namely, how "culture" in multiculturalism is defined in the first place. Within the mainstream multiculturalism literature, culture is essentially reduced to lifestyle, or, at best, customs, or, perhaps, collective experiences. Implicit in this is a reduction of culture to the ethic of individual choice; taste in food, clothing, art, music, and the like, are just the obvious ways in which an individual can express this choice.

Multiculturalism extends this logic to all aspects of culture. Even religious faith and ethnicity are presented implicitly and sometimes explicitly in these terms. Indeed, multicultural education universally encourages children to participate in, identify with, and adopt the practices of other groups as though culture were a wardrobe one could put on and take off as one chooses. As one multicultural educator put it: "rather than forcing all students into the majority culture mold, the educator, with great care and sensitivity, can help children live in more than one culture."[3] The problem, of course, is that it assumes a historically specific understanding of the self, one free and independent from culture, unencumbered by moral commitments defined by virtue of one's membership in a community.

But culture is much more pervasive and powerful and compelling than is allowed for in multiculturalism. By virtue of one's birth into a community and culture, people are bound by moral ties and obligations that are, as Michael Sandel puts it, "antecedent to choice."[4] People, then, are rarely freed from the sanctions of custom and tradition and inherited status. By reducing culture to a product about which individuals may choose, multiculturalism further renders culture a rather trifling matter. By centering on the autonomous individual whose cultural identity is a matter of relatively unconstrained choice, multiculturalism

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3 Donna M. Gollnick, Frank Klassen, and Joost Yff, "Multicultural Education and Ethnic Studies in the United States" (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1976) 13.

4 See Michael Sandel, "The Politics of Public Identity," *The Hedgehog Review* 2.1 (Spring 2000).

locates difference within the dominant symbolic order. So, you have in multiculturalism an attempt to provide a framework for understanding difference, but it only acknowledges differences among individuals in the choices they make. Rather than challenging radical individualism, it only reinforces it.

This problem reaches to the communitarian movement as well. The communitarian movement's very *raison d'être* is to offer an alternative to this encoded propensity toward individualism. But how is community conceptualized? In principle, of course, any adequate theory of community will have to take into account the concrete social and normative composition of real communities. In actual practice, these constitutive elements tend to be downplayed. The reason for this might be that the dominant and most influential school of communitarianism tends to equate its ideal of community with the welfare state. In its political structure, one finds the articulation of the common good, and in its polity of equality, one finds the ideal of civic life. In this, one has the manifestation of social and political consensus that offers the feeling of solidarity, but avoids the most unpleasant realities that accompany their thick associations. In their particularity, of course, communities are often provincial and exclusive and messy and almost always constricting in some ways to individual freedom. Communities of this nature are almost always laced with a certain degree of oppressiveness. The kinds of binding obligations rooted in the communal purposes of creedal communities, for example, make many Americans, and certainly most communitarians, nervous, so they are derided as puritanical and authoritarian. Thus, reluctant to affirm the underside of lived communities that often challenge received notions of individual autonomy, communitarians find it easier to embrace a political ideal of community that does not. In this way, community is championed more as an ideal of liberal universalism than as the diverse relational structures and creedal obligations that impose themselves on us in everyday life.

Consider, for example, how communitarians ground social consensus, that is, notions of the common good, in moral education. Nervous about sanctioning any binding authority external to the self, the validity of moral obligations and aspirations are established in an appeal to individual subjectivity. One brief illustration: In 1997, Nancy Van

Gulick of the Character Counts Coalition gave testimony before the National Commission on Civic Renewal. She unequivocally affirmed such consensual values as the Golden Rule, yet, almost in the same breath, she insisted that teaching children to do the right thing, that is, to embrace or to enact the Golden Rule, means teaching them that it feels good to do right. As she explained, when you help the little old lady across the street, that feels good. When you do the right thing, it feels good. When you do the wrong thing, it feels bad. The appeal to consensus as the ground for these notions of the common good depends upon individual affirmation. The consensus has no authority except to the degree to which the individual chooses to participate in that consensus and affirms that consensus as right for him or her.

This point is made explicit in Amitai Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community*. Writing of the pressures that moral communities can impose upon people, he says,

> but as long as these preferred moral expressions do not lead to discrimination against those who abide by them, they do not amount to Puritanism. Those who wish to follow other courses may join other communities or put up with the fact that many people in a given community will avoid social contact with them. This may sound somewhat intimidating unless one realizes that one may change one's community without changing one's residence, by joining a different social club, place of worship, and so on.[5]

Again, collective notions of the common good tend to be self-referencing. In the end, people do not need to accept those notions of the common good; it is their choice as individuals. Even when they do, they may interpret the meaning of that common good in ways that are at odds with the consensus makers.

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[5] Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown, 1993) 43–4.

In the end, what many advocates of communitarianism want is the moral integration of traditional community and the compact that makes that possible without the complex and often suffocating communal responsibilities and dependencies built into lived communities. A notion of community conceptualized without basic links to specific beliefs and their obligations means that the moral goods they espouse and aspire to entail few, if any, psychic costs. Moral authority, finally, resides with the individual. Yes, communitarians do advocate an alternative to radical individualism, but the alternative is more powerful as political rhetoric than as social strategy.

Individualism is paradigmatic in America—in ways similar to Thomas Kuhn's usage in his theory of science and scientific change. The assumptions, rules, and social practices of individualism are so powerful that they can suppress innovation when innovation is subversive to the basic commitments of the paradigm. This is what you have in multiculturalism and communitarianism, at least in their dominant articulations. Alternatives are offered but only in ways that are consistent with the assumptions, rules, and social practices of individualism.

In what way might the hold of a monoculture of radical individualism be broken? We are faced with profound and reinforcing movements of culture and social structure that defy a simple solution rooted in individual will. This, in fact, is the problem with Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*. He presents data about the decline of our civic culture with causes that are primarily structural in nature, and yet he ends the book by arguing that the solution can be found in an exertion of the individual will. We have a task we simply don't know how to perform, a set of problems that individual will alone cannot address.

Historically speaking every genuine community has been creedal in character, and the moral goods that define its collective identity are sacred. These goods, therefore, exist in time and authority prior to the will of individual actors. The structures such communities impose on everyday life are always imperfect reflections of the sacred ideals they embrace. In this light, individual will is always understood by its members as assent to or denial of these collective normative claims. My hunch is that creedal communities alone provide the social and cultur-

al conditions capable of resisting the excesses of radical individualism. And yet, these communities are rare in contemporary America and typically exist at a distance from the centers of cultural formation. These facts are not likely to change any time soon, nor would most Americans want them to.