

In Defense of Communitarianism

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Democracy is one of the four main concepts we Asians have learned from the West. The other three concepts are rationality, philosophy, and science. To inquire into Western civilization, we may hearken back to the three main cities of old: Jerusalem, Athens and Rome – which figuratively stand for faith, reason, and will respectively. We, therefore, can investigate democracy and the other three concepts from the principles of the philosophers of ancient Greece. However, whenever the word “democracy” is heard, we usually think of modern political philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Since these philosophers, especially Hobbes and Locke, believe in liberalism, it inevitably follows that democracy for them is based on liberalism. The central question to be raised here is whether it is necessary for democracy to be based on liberalism. I will try to argue that democracy is not necessarily based on liberalism.

I

Both Hobbes and Locke believe that the state or society is just a machine made by free, equal and independent individuals, on the basis of consent, in order to secure their self-interest and their lives. In his *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes wrote that life of man in the state of

“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹ Hobbes held that human beings are absolutely autonomous individuals, Locke added that these individuals are born free and equal with natural rights, namely, right to life, right to liberty, and right to property.

What is the state? Why should men obey it? Locke answered these questions in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). He wrote:

If man in the state of nature be so free, as has been said; if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to no body, why will he part with his freedom? Why will he give up this empire, and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer, that though in the state of nature he hath such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain and constantly exposed to the invasion of others. For all being kings as much as he, every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very insecure. This makes him willing to quit this condition, which, however free, is full of fears and continual dangers; and it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property.²

Hobbes and Locke offer a contrary view to that of Plato and Aristotle. While Plato and Aristotle held that the state or society is prior to individuals, Hobbes and Locke held that individuals are prior

¹ Thomas Hobbes, “The State of Nature,” in William Ebenstein (ed.), *Great Political Thinkers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 366-369.

² John Locke, “Of the Ends of Political Society and Government,” in Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Classics of Modern Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 254-256.

to the state or society. According to Aristotle, men cannot be men if they were not born in the state. This is what he means by the statement that man is a political animal. In his book *Politics*, Aristotle wrote:

...the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part... The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole.”³

In other words, while Plato and Aristotle held that the state made man, Hobbes and Locke held that men made the state. The state, for Hobbes and Locke, is just an artifice made by human will and instrumental reason. For Plato and Aristotle, the state is natural, not artificial. From this, it follows that whereas Plato's and Aristotle's ideas may lead to communitarianism and organicism, Hobbes' and Locke's liberalism will inevitably lead to individualism and mechanism. Now, on the one hand, individualism of this kind could be supported by Greek atomism. More than anything else, the individualism of modern political philosophy has been highly supported by Newtonian mechanics. According to these schools of thought, the universe, man, and the state are only machines. On the other hand, the organic view of the state was adopted and highly developed by Rousseau and Hegel. According to the organic theory, the universe, man, and the state are organisms rather than machines. The state for Hegel is actual, not artificial as he puts it in his *Philosophy of Right* (1821), “The state in and by itself is the ethical whole, the actualization of freedom; and it is an absolute end of reason that freedom should be actual.

³ Aristotle, “Nature and Origin of the State,” in William Ebenstein (ed.), *Great Political Thinkers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 75-77.

The state is mind on earth and consciously realizing itself there.”⁴ Since Hegelian philosophy was thought to support totalitarianism or authoritarianism, which contrasted with democracy, most, if not all, Western scholars have neglected or ignored it. But this is something like “throwing the baby away with the bath water.”

II

What would happen if some people believe that the state or society is just an artificial machine made by individuals? What if others think that the state or society is a natural and actual organism? These two kinds of people, I believe, will certainly have different attitudes towards the state or society. Those who believe that the state or society is a natural and actual organism would treat the state with a sense of respect, whereas those who believe in the state as an artificial machine may treat it as a tool or means only without a sense of respect at all. People who believe that the universe, the state, and human beings are actual organisms usually treat these things with respect. Xi (Nixau), the Bushman in the movie *The Gods Must be Crazy*, could remind us well of this fact. Xi apologized with deep respect to the deer he had killed because his family needed meat. Furthermore, the belief in those things as machines will provide no place for enchantment. When everything is considered as a machine, it will inevitably lead to the disenchantment of the world. Therefore, liberalism leads not only to individualism but also to the disenchantment of the world. The disenchantment is also supported by Marxism and Darwinism. Liberalism cannot make people see the state or society as a living community. As Charles Taylor puts it:

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, "Monarchical versus Popular Government," in William Ebenstein (ed.), *Great Political Thinkers*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 605-609.

A fragmented society is one whose members find it harder and harder to identify with their political society as a community. This lack of identification may reflect an atomistic outlook, in which people come to see society purely instrumentally. But it also helps to entrench atomism, because the absence of effective common action throws people back on themselves. This is perhaps why one of the most widely held social philosophies in the contemporary United States is the procedural liberalism... which combines quite smoothly with an atomist outlook.⁵

People who welcome and adopt individualism will become "*lonely people*" even though they live their lives in a society with other individuals. Their beliefs and attitudes towards things will affect their actions. Let us consider the following scenario.

Once upon a time there was a group of one hundred bulls and cows living together in a field far away. One day a mountain lion happened to pass by that way. When it saw those animals, it started to hunt. The cattle were frightened and ran away in different directions. The lion could kill and eat the animal who ran slowest. When the lion was full, it departed. The cattle got back together and continued eating grass in the field. The next day the lion felt hungry and chased the cattle in the field. It could kill and eat the one who was slower than the others. It happened like this again and again until there were only ten animals left. Then the ten cattle had a meeting and consulted with one another. "Why should we have lived our lives individualistically?" asked one animal. "We should change our attitudes and get together hand in hand to fight the lion," another animal suggested. The following day the lion came as always, but this time the cattle did not flee. They

⁵ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 117.

got together to fight the lion. The lion was wounded by their sharp horns. It departed and never came back again. The ten cattle then lived their lives together happily and peacefully.

III

If democracy is based on liberalism, then it will inevitably lead to individualism and the disenchantment of the world. Is democracy necessarily based on liberalism? I do not think so. Why? Because liberalism is based on some wrong assumptions. Even though it is true that humans are born free and equal in some sense as described by Hobbes and Locke, it is not the case that humans are absolutely independent and solitary. Surely, humans are rational in some sense, but more fundamentally, they are relational beings, or, in other words, they are interdependent beings. That is the reason why Heidegger uses the word "Dasein." All human beings are, in Peirce's and Hartshorne's words, "compound individuals," or, in Whitehead's words, "feelings of feelings." According to Whitehead, Hartshorne and other process philosophers, families and societies are also natural, not artificial. We were not born 'alone'. We are always born into a family in some particular society. To use Heidegger's phrase, we are always "thrown to be there." We are related not only to other people but also to other things in the world. We always belong in some particular place in the world. In fact, we can never be separated from the world. We can imagine that we are separated from the world only in our thought, not in fact. Thus it is not true to say that individuals are prior to the state or society. However, to say that the state or society is prior to individuals is also misleading. As a matter of fact, both individuals and societies are natural, not artificial, and they always come together as living organisms. In one sense, the state or society makes man but, in another sense, man also makes the state or society. Hence to consider them as machines does not seem correct. In other words, the mechanistic model of life, which adopts only external relations and

denies internal ones, fails in providing answers for the questions raised in biology and ecology when compared with the ecological model. As Charles Birch puts it:

The notion of internal relation as causal strikes at the heart of the strictly mechanistic and reductionistic model. The ideal of this model is to divide the world into next to nothing as possible – call those entities ‘atoms’ or what you will – and then try to build the world up again from those building blocks. When you do that, of course, you get a machine. In the mechanistic model the building blocks are substances. They have no internal relations. The definition of a substance is something that exists independently of anything else. In substance thinking, an atom of hydrogen is the same atom of hydrogen whether it be in the heart of the sun or in the molecule of my brain. It is what it is independently of its environment. That is the substance notion of a hydrogen atom. The idea of internal relations is that a human being, let us say, is not the same person independent of his or her environment. The human being is a subject and not simply an object pushed around by external relations. To be a subject is to be responsive, to constitute oneself purposefully in response to one’s environment... cells or atoms or electrons... are subjects. All have internal relations. Consequently, in biology a distinction is made between a biology that is *compositional* (substantialist) and one that is *relational* (ecological).⁶

IV

If liberalism is based on false assumptions, then we should not have it as the foundation of democracy. In other words, democracy

⁶ Charles Birch, “The Postmodern Challenge to Biology,” in Charles Jencks (ed.), *The Post-modern Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), pp. 392-398.

should not be necessarily based on liberalism. The false assumptions of liberalism will make democracy be distorted and harmful.

For liberalism is above all a doctrine of liberation. It sets individuals loose from religious and ethnic communities, from guilds, parishes, neighborhoods. It abolishes all sorts of controls and agencies of control: ecclesiastical courts, cultural censorship, sumptuary laws, restraints on mobility, group pressure, family bonds. It creates free men and women, tied together only by their contracts – and ruled, when contracts fail, by a distant and powerful state. It generates a radical individualism and then a radical competition among self-seeking individuals.”⁷

Hence democracy should be based on communitarianism instead, because communitarianism has the correct assumptions. If democracy is based on communitarianism, then it will better allow us to acquire a sense of respect and care for others and the world at large. We will see the relationships among and the interdependence of things. We will respect and see the importance of society and of other people, no matter whether those people are stronger or weaker than us.

Communitarianism is strongly supported by holism which is the opposite of reductionism. However, holism is different from totalitarianism. Whereas holism implies organicism, totalitarianism implies authoritarianism. Thus communitarianism has nothing to do with totalitarianism. In fact, communitarianism can be an appropriate foundation for democracy. Postmodern communitarians who adopt a holistic view will never try to reduce things into “the heart,” “the center,” or “the most important part.” They have no room in their hearts for the hierarchy of lower and higher levels. Nor do they agree that one kind of species is “higher” than another. For example, SARS viruses

⁷ Michael Walzer, “Liberalism in Retreat,” in Michael Rosen and Jonathan Wolff (eds), *Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 323.

can kill smart scientists as easily as smart scientists can kill them. Communitarians do not believe that people of particular occupations or positions are "higher" than others. In fact, even within a person we cannot say that a heart is more important than a liver or a brain. All organs have their own functions, and they are, in Kuhn's and Feyerabend's word, incommensurable. The story of the Lion and the Mouse in Aesop's Fables remind us well of these facts. In order to arrive at the ethics of communitarianism, the accounts given by Hobbes and Locke about the nature of man and the state of nature should not be considered as true. Our interest should be turned more on process thought which puts an emphasis on holism, psychicalism, and panentheism. If we appropriate our attitudes according to this kind of philosophy, we will be more able to be open, humble, compassionate, generous, creative and cooperative. To reach democracy based on the ethics of communitarianism, we may follow Habermas' ideal political process or ideal speech situation as follows:⁸

- 1.No constraint: every participant is fully free to express his/her opinions, ideas, feelings, needs, and so on.
- 2.Equal opportunity: every participant has an equal opportunity to contribute.
- 3.Equal power: no one is in a position to impose pressure of any kind on others.
- 4.Rational processes: every participant seeks to convince or persuade others by rational arguments rather than fallacies of any kind.

⁸ See Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 190-195. See also Werner Ulrich, *Critical Hermeneutics of Social Planning* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), pp. 120-127.

V

Democracy is desirable in the world today, but it is obviously inappropriate to have liberalism as its foundation. If democracy is based on liberalism, then individualism will follow unavoidably. If individualism is adopted, then competition is inevitable. Competition will never lead us to “civil society.” It is cooperation rather than competition that can lead us to civil society which promotes “the common good.” As George McLean puts it:

Civil society... has three elements. First there is governance: *arché*, the beginning of action or the taking of initiative toward an end; this is the free and responsible exercise of human freedom. But as this pertains to persons in their various groups and subgroups, there are two other dimensions of freedom, namely, communication or solidarity with other members of the groups, and the participation or subsidiarity of these groups or communities within the whole. The key to understanding civil society lies then in the solidarity and subsidiarity of the community as ways in which the freedom of its members is shaped into the governance of life toward the common good.⁹

If democracy is based on communitarianism rather than liberalism, cooperation rather than competition will follow. Since democracy and communitarianism are compatible, the ethics of communitarianism is suitable as a basis for a new social contract in a global society. Let me finish this paper with Aesop’s Fable of *The Hare and the Tortoise* – and some comments on it.

⁹ George F. McLean, “Freedom and Cultural Traditions: The Basis of Values in a Time of Change,” in Kirti Bunchua, et al. (eds), *The Bases of Values in a Time of Change: Chinese and Western* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1999), pp. 63-85.

Once upon a time a tortoise and a hare had an argument about who was faster. They decided to settle the argument with a race. They agreed on a route and started off the race. The hare shot ahead and ran briskly for some time. Then seeing that he was far ahead of the tortoise, he thought he would sit under a tree for some time and relax before continuing the race. He sat under the tree and soon fell asleep. The tortoise plodding on overtook him and finished the race, emerging as the undisputed champ. The hare woke up and realized that he had lost the race.

This is the version of the story that we have all grown up with. But then recently, someone told us a more interesting version of this story. It continues as follows:

The hare was disappointed at losing the race and he did some soul-searching. He realized that he had lost the race only because he had been overconfident, careless and lax. If he had not taken things for granted, there was no way the tortoise could have beaten him. So he challenged the tortoise to another race. The tortoise agreed. This time, the hare went all out and ran without stopping from start to finish. He won by several miles.

The tortoise did some thinking this time, and realized that there is no way he can beat the hare in a race the way it was currently formatted. He thought for a while, and then challenged the hare to another race, but on a slightly different route. The hare agreed. They started off. In keeping with his self-made commitment to be consistently fast, the hare took off and ran at top speed until he came to a broad river. The finishing line was a couple of miles on the other side of the river. The hare sat there wondering what to do. In the meantime the tortoise trundled along, got into the river, swam to the opposite bank, continued walking and finished the race.

The hare and the tortoise, by this time, had become pretty good friends and they did something together. Both realized that the last

race could have been run much better. So they decided to do the last race again, but to run as a team this time. They started off, and this time the hare carried the tortoise to the river bank. There, the tortoise took over and swam across with the hare on his back. On the opposite bank, the hare again carried the tortoise and they reached the finishing line together. They both felt a greater sense of satisfaction than they had felt earlier.

I believe that the new version of *The Hare and the Tortoise* may tell us something for reflection.