AMY GUTMANN:

THE CONSTRUCTIVE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITARIAN VALUES

DOES GUTMANN SUCCEED IN SHOWING THE ‘CONSTRUCTIVE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITARIAN VALUES’?
The view of Amy Gutmann is that communitarians have been unsuccessful in undermining liberalism. However, she thinks that their work presents a welcome challenge to it. In her opinion, the communitarian criticism, rather than giving good reason to abandon liberalism, is of use in an attempt to discover a liberalism that successfully combines communitarian with liberal values. Gutmann’s aim is to demonstrate how communitarian values can supplement liberalism in order to substantiate her claim that those values have constructive potential. This essay examines the extent to which Gutmann successfully shows that communitarian values, like kinship, affection, or a sense of common purpose, have the latent but unrealized capacity to serve to improve liberalism.

The first part of the essay outlines my understanding of Gutmann’s account of the constructive potential of communitarian values. This part is divided into three sections, each of which is introduce by a preliminary question and then discusses a condition necessary for showing the ‘constructive potential of communitarian values’. Subsequently, the possibility that communitarian values do not have a constructive potential is elaborated upon. In the latter part it is referred to the work of the political theorists Joseph Raz and Adam Swift.

**Does Gutmann succeed in showing that communitarian values can actually have a constructive potential within liberalism?**

Gutmann agrees with Sandel in that when a society’s social institutions are well organised, its citizens can recognise a common good worth striving for which they would be unable to recognise alone. In contrast to Sandel, however, Gutmann believes that the common good mentioned is liberal justice. Moreover, Gutmann points out that liberal justice is not necessarily the only virtue of social institutions.

It can be argued that a perfectly liberal society is not the best conceivable society, and this suggests that is possible for communitarian values to supplement liberalism. The best conceivable society essentially relies on communitarian values. Liberals strive for a society in which everyone’s liberal rights are guaranteed, but do not account for the importance of the phenomena that constitute community. But a society within which there is no particular role for such phenomena can hardly be conceived of as ideal.
For example, in a perfectly liberal society, the existence of, for example, ties of love and friendship, or affiliation to social groups are not required.

Communitarianism has the potential to make a substantial contribution to liberalism as it forces liberals to acknowledge that communitarian values should be integrated into their political conception. Gutmann thinks that it is possible to bring about such integration without violating individual liberal rights. She illustrates how communitarian commitments can successfully be combined with liberal commitments: for example, a local community has a profound aversion to a pornographic bookstore in their neighbourhood. Commitment to liberal values would imply that the right of free speech should be respected. This means that the community’s efforts to ban the bookstore would be illegitimate. However, a commitment to communitarian values implies that the neighbourhood’s values should be protected. According to Gutmann, there remains an acceptable course of action, which is to control the manner in which the pornographic books are displayed.

It can be concluded that communitarian values can be utilized either to improve the liberal’s conception of justice, or to supplement liberal justice with virtues deriving from communitarianism.

**Does Gutmann succeed in showing why constructive potential is commensurate with communitarian values and in showing that the liberal state should actively foster communitarian values?**

Gutmann assumes that people’s present moral understandings should be the guidelines in any attempt to outline a vision for the future. At the same time she claims that our moral visions essentially rely upon communitarian values. However, liberalism does not take communitarian values adequately into account. Hence, communitarian values have a constructive potential in this regard.

Communitarian values potentially help to develop liberalism as they inform liberals about the fundamental role of social unions in society. If liberals listen attentively to their communitarian opponents, they can become attuned to their criticism that it is insufficient for a liberal state to simply allow for social unions, but that social unions are something to be deliberately fostered. For example, in a liberal state people are
free to pursue policies which prevent the disruption of communities, but it is the communitarian and not the liberal who, explicitly, emphasises the necessity of such policies.

**Does Gutmann succeed in showing that the potential of communitarian values is really constructive?**

Gutmann uses several examples to show that the constructive potential of communitarian values is by no means conservative. She uses these examples to illustrate how reflection on communitarian values can be effective in helping to supplement liberal policies. Gutmann thinks then that these policies not only succeed in realising justice, but also community through social unions. It is worth mentioning that Gutmann even holds that the liberal state itself is a ‘super’ social union, or, similarly, a community of communities.

For instance, she observes that both communitarians and liberals feel uneasy about the massive accumulation of political power in the hands of state bureaucracy and large business corporations. The danger is that managers and bureaucrats tend to use their power to impose their own values on society. Thus, political and economic institutions are needed which successfully prevent this from happening. Interestingly, the kinds of values that would lie at the heart of such institutions are likely to be communitarian. The communitarians, in trying to foster communitarian values, can probably find appropriate ways to do something about such concerns. For example, they would probably recommend the creation of new institutions rather than the strengthening of existing ones as a means to control the influence of bureaucracies and businesses.

Another example in this context is provided by Sandel. He warns liberals that in a predominantly liberal world, politics would be dominated by comprehensive forms of association rather than smaller ones. If liberals take this warning serious, this could lead to the development of highly constructive joint programmes between liberals and communitarians which would then, for example, enhance the role of local politics.
The two examples mentioned demonstrate that there are many ways in which communitarians can provide liberals with valuable insights as to how even a perfectly liberal state can still be changed for the better.

Joseph Raz, however, would not agree with Gutmann’s account of the constructive potential of communitarian values. In claiming that individual goods are communal in content he transcends the kind of debate that takes place between liberals and communitarians in Gutmann’s work. Raz thinks that the individual’s aims and purposes coincide with those of the community because they are derived from the social matrix prevailing in the community:

‘...individuals inevitably derive the goals by which they constitute their lives from the stock of social forms available to them [...]. If those social forms are morally valid, if they enshrine sound moral conceptions, then it is easy for people generally to find themselves with, and to choose for themselves, goals which lead to a rough coincidence in their own lives of moral and personal concerns. In their careers, personal relations and other interests they will be engaged on activities which serve themselves and others at the same time. By being teachers, production workers, drivers, public servants, loyal friends and family people, loyal to their communities, nature loving, and so on, they will be pursuing their own goals, enhancing their own well-being, and also serving their communities, and generally living in a morally worthy way.’ (Raz, 1986, p.319)

Raz’s liberalism seems to adequately account for communitarian values because it points to the extent to which social institutions should actively support the well-being of the community. For someone adopting Raz’s conception of liberalism, communitarian values cannot be said to have a constructive potential. In Raz’s conception of liberalism the importance of goods that are communal in content is recognised. His liberalism incorporates the idea that community is prior to the individual for the reason that it is the community which provides the individual with the social matrix within which the individual acquires his or her identity and goals. Thus, to the extent to which they do not conflict with his commitments to pluralism and autonomy, communitarian values are already embedded in Raz’s liberalism. (Information on Raz (e.g.) from: Mulhall, 1992, pp.282-286)
If it is true that liberalism does by no means foster communitarian values, then it is probable that liberals can learn a lesson from their communitarian critics. However, the extent to which the premise in this argument is true can be challenged.

Adam Swift observes that the idea of the liberal state is to provide a framework within which each citizen, at least ideally, can live his favoured way of life. As it is perfectly legitimate for this way of life to be based on communitarian values, liberalism can, in many cases, accommodate such values.

However, it can be argued that the liberal state not only allows people to strive for communal goods, but fosters at least one of them, namely liberal justice. Swift argues that liberal justice is a common good as it is shared and pursued by everyone in society.

Liberals want to shape social institutions in order that they meet the criteria of liberal justice. Hence, if such social institutions can be regarded as representing a valid understanding of community, and if liberal justice can legitimately be seen as a communal good, then the charge that liberals neglect communitarian values is unjustified.

Swift goes even further and suggests that the liberal state can be seen as a genuinely communal project. Swift argues that as well as justice, other liberal values such as autonomy, equality and freedom are communal values. Moreover, he argues that these liberal values are the only truly communal values as no others can reasonably be said to be shared by all individuals and, therefore, cannot be advocated on the basis of common ground reasoning. (Swift, 2001, pp.152-154)

At first sight, it seems as if Gutmann succeeds in showing ‘the constructive potential of communitarian values’. She shows that communitarian values actually can have constructive potential within liberalism; she demonstrates that the constructive potential is commensurate with communitarian values and that the liberal state should actively foster such values; and she illustrates in what ways the potential of communitarian values is constructive. However, Raz describes a liberalism within which the communitarian values are embedded; and Swift, among other things,
claims that liberalism actually fosters communitarian values. The reasoning adopted by Raz and Swift certainly poses a considerable threat to Gutmann’s alleged success.

**Bibliography:**


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