



## Individual, cultural, and social identity: A communitarian approach

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### Abstract

Identity is one of the most basic features of social existence and it is often summed up in a tradition, culture, and history of a particular society. In general the individual and social identity of self is based on two traditional trends of thought - liberalism and communitarian conceptions. Liberalism emphasizes personal and individual identity on the one hand whereas on the other hand communitarians present the notion of cultural identity and social identity. Classical liberalism gives individual priority at the expense of community. Liberals take atomistic view of individual. According to liberals, individuals are self-sufficient outside the society and do not require community to develop its capacity of self-determination whereas communitarians believe that individual's existence is formed and shaped by his community. Communitarian objected to neo-liberal or libertarian view of nature of self. Instead of "unencumbered self" they talk of "situated self." The present paper deals with the issue of individual and social identity from a communitarian perspective. Man's participation in society is necessary for development of his personality. Political recognition of the cultural communities is essential. The political identity of cultures is just not meant to protect the cultural rights of the person only. Its intention is collective cultural rights and collective welfare.

**Keywords:** identity, community, liberalism, communitarianism, self-determination, common good

### Introduction

Identity is derived from the Latin word "*identite*"; the word "*idem*" which means "same." It means continuity and stability of a person; it is a sameness of person at all times and circumstances. Basically, identity has two dimensions such as: 'ontological' and 'epistemological'. Ontological aspect of identity refers to the question 'Who we are' and while epistemological aspect to 'Who we think we are'. When asked who we are, most of us say three things: (i) what we do for living, (ii) what group, community or region we come from, and (iii) what commitment and relations we have with other groups <sup>[1]</sup>. In short, identity is not mainly an individual affair. It has three elements: competence (or capability), community and commitment: "the first element in identity is competence which is usually expressed in a job, role or an evocation. Competence is established when ability is matched by social recognition. The second element of identity is how people describe they are fixed in the social firmament – such as native of a particular region, believe in certain ideology or particular religion, belonging to a particular ethnic community. The third element is commitment. It means what a person's commitments are to others – whether through marriage, partnership, familial responsibility, team loyalty or other forms of mutuality. These three markers of identity are quite consistent for individuals, groups, classes, races and cultures <sup>[2]</sup>."

It can be said that, identity is one of the most basic features of social existence and it is often summed up in a tradition, culture and history of a particular society. Tradition, culture, and history help us in finding answer to the questions; "who we are, and where our root is?" while the concepts of community give a feeling of identity that belongs to us.

### Individualist versus communitarian position

Basically, liberalism support individual identity. According to the concept of individual identity, individuals are autonomous creatures who take decision rationally. John Locke's individualism raises the question of identity, not only individual identity but also *personal identity*. Personal identity deals with questions like; who am I? When did I begin? etc. Personal identity is a contested philosophical theory arising out of the lineages from theology, philosophy, psychology, linguistic, gender, political, cultural, and ethnic domains. According to Locke, personal identity is a matter of *psychological continuity, being foundationalist in method* <sup>[3]</sup>. When he first tackled personal identity, "he himself defined person as a 'forensic term'; we have to be able to re-identify persons in order to hold them responsible for their past actions and commitments. Locke further came out in support of citizenship as a cementing force which creates a uniform identity from the diversity <sup>[4]</sup>."

In this way, according to Locke's personal identity; each person has a specific unit in itself. Everyone has their own special identity, which separates him from other people and the person does not depend on any other person, community or state for this identity. Thus, Locke associates the idea of personal identity with the concept of individual identity.

Communitarians present the idea of cultural identity and social identity. According to communitarians, "social identity and group belongingness are inextricably linked in the sense that one's conception or definitions of who one is (one's identity) is largely composed of self-descriptions in terms of the defining characteristics of social groups to which one belongs <sup>[5]</sup>." In "The Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor linked identity with the notion of authenticity, the demand for

recognition, the idea of difference, and the principle of equal dignity. Taylor clarifies: “Authenticity connotes the idea that each of us should live in a way that is true to himself, not conforming to a way of life simply because it is accepted by others. Recognition is the idea that others should be sensitive to my quest for authenticity. They have a responsibility to interact with me on the basis of who (as far as they can tell) I think I really am; they have a responsibility to respect me as the authentic self I think I am and am striving to be, rather than as the person they think it convenient for to be. The idea of difference begins with the fact that the sort of being I think I am and deserve to be recognized as may not be the sort of being you think you are and deserve to be recognized as [6].” Further continues: “...accordingly different people may have different rights; we are not entitled to assume that one size fits all. Nevertheless, the principle of equal dignity implies that in some sense everyone's identity is entitled to the same respect: there should be no second-class citizens in a liberal democratic society [7].”

Communitarianism locate individual within a community and believes that individual develops his identity only as a member of corporate life. On the contrary, liberalism presents the discussion of identity at the individual level. The main objective of the individualistic concept presented by liberal political thought is to give priority to individual over a class or community. Liberals have considered the individuals as the ends. According to them all other political and social institutions are only means for this ends. The individualistic concept of liberals is called atomism because it focuses on ‘individuals’ only for any kind of social, economic, and political analysis. According to this concept, the existence of a self (individual) comes before any unit of society. They believe that any group or community is created for the benefit of a particular individual, so that they can fulfill its interests.

### **The individualist conception of the self**

The liberals, while interpreting “the individualist conception of the self” say that the individual is intelligent and rational by his own nature as well as being able in self-determination; he also knows what favors him. According to them, the individual is so intelligent that he can take decision on his life-related issues. He is totally free in the matter about how to live his life and how to make his life meaningful. Individualists say that the individual's work and goal cannot be directed by the society. The individual is completely free to do or not to do any objective or work, conferred by the society. Liberal considers that, the individual is free to raise question about his participation in existing social practices. If he feels that this social practice is not suitable and relevant to be adopted, he is free to abandon it. According to self-viewpoints of liberals, the individual cannot be defined on the basis of their membership in any particular economic, religious or sexual relationship because the individual is free to put questions and reject any relationship or role. In this manner, Rawls says that “the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it [8].” According to Rawls, we can come back from any plan and we can question to each plan whether we want to continue adopting it or not. According to liberals, any type of feasibility or goal except from individual is not free from the possibility of amendment. This is often called Kantian view of self;

Immanuel Kant was one of the strongest defenders of the view that “the self is prior to its socially given roles and relationships, and is free only if it is capable of holding these features of its social situation at a distance and judging them according to the dictates of reason [9].”

Liberals say that the individual must have the freedom to re-assess his values and beliefs without any interruption and coercion, and adopt them. He should not be afraid of being punished and have all the necessary resources through which he can get a decent life. He should get such environment through various cultural activities and circumstances in which he can develop his personality. Based on this individualist conception of the self, the liberals have accepted the state as a minimum and neutral political power. According to them, a neutral and less governing state is the best form of government and it does not obstacle in the person's freedom.

### **The communitarian critique of the individualist conception of the self**

Communitarians rejecting this viewpoint of self because it neglects the fact that self is embedded in existing social practices. On the opposite to liberals, communitarians say that we cannot always come back from these social practices with own wills or cannot go out. Our social roles and relationships are already given as the situation of individual. According to the communitarians, the biggest mistake made by the liberals is having extreme individualist approach and having disappointing views towards the communities. They believe that the liberals present a limited and confused belief in the society through the extreme interpretation of freedom and authority of the people because the important role of communities and groups for the success of the social, political, and economic life of an individual cannot be ignored. The individual gets his identity only from the community and as a member of the community he develops his personality. Communitarians believe that liberals ignore the values and beliefs in which the individual lives and makes his life good along with the community. Communitarians have criticized liberalism's ‘the individualist conception of the self’, mainly on two points:-

1. The first criticism is made on the basis that liberalism has totally rejected the importance of ‘community’ and has not given it any place in social and political analysis. Communitarians argue through this criticism that liberals forget about formation of their individualism that a person must necessarily be a member of a community and in this community he lives his life and gets his social identity. The values, beliefs, and traits of a community or class affect the life-style of a human being in which he is born and brought up. Therefore, historically every person is definitely linked to a particular community, caste, religion or class, and through this the person knows who he is and what his values. Hence, he cannot separate himself from any of the social and political positions obtained through the community. The individual gets a sense of duty and responsibility through all these social identities. Therefore, the idea of full independence of an individual cannot be accepted in any condition. In this context, Charles Taylor says that: “Complete freedom would be a void in which nothing would be worth doing, nothing

would deserve to count for anything. The self which has arrived at freedom by setting aside all external obstacles and impingements is characterless, and hence without defined purpose <sup>[10]</sup>.”

Taylor argues that the real freedom must be situated in the social atmosphere. It is said that we should have freedom for logical self-determination about all aspects of social status; it is irrational, because it is uncertain to demand the self-determination. Self-determination “cannot specify any content to our action outside of a situation which sets goals for us, which thus imparts a shape to rationality and provides an inspiration for creativity <sup>[11]</sup>.” Thus, we must accept this goal, which our social status determines for us. Liberals believe that a person can develop his own potentials and he does not need any class or community for determining his personality. But communitarians say that it is a mere imagination, which has nothing to do with the practical social world, because through values and rituals provided by the community the person put his best life into the work. No matter how wise, intelligence and self-reliant the person is, but, he cannot live alone; the community is an important requirement for him.

2. In the second criticism communitarians say that liberal’s concept of relationship between the self and its purposes which they accept as pre-recognition is wrong. According to individualism, the person is completely independent to choose and create the goal of his better life and if needed he can modify and change social or community values and beliefs. On this basis, the liberals have accepted the idea of ‘the self to be prior to its ends.’ Communitarians believe that if this assumption of self is to be relied upon then they must also acknowledge that a person has a voluntary relationship with the communities and social goals, the person can change or leave them in any manner and any time, but it is not possible to believe this because every person is bounded by social roles and relationships and is embedded in them. Michael Sandel argues that: “the self is not prior to, but rather constituted by, its ends – we cannot distinguish ‘me’ from ‘my ends’. Our selves are at least partly constituted by ends that we do not choose, but rather discover by virtue of our being embedded in some shared social context <sup>[12]</sup>.” He further explains: “Since we have these constitutive ends, our lives go better not by having the conditions needed to select and revise our projects, but by having the conditions needed to come to an awareness of these shared constitutive ends. A politics of the common good, by expressing these shared constitutive ends, enables us to ‘know a good in common that we cannot know alone’ <sup>[13]</sup>.”

Communitarians, question the ‘self’ related concept of the liberals by asking that could a person really escape from his social roles and relations? Could a person denounce the values and beliefs adopted by him and criticize them? According to communitarians a person cannot refuse social and community relations and attachments as he is essentially embedded in a particular community and society. A person can never be free from the identity of community. A person develops his best life-related perception through the social and community membership.

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, “in deciding how to lead our lives, we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. . . . Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles <sup>[14]</sup>.” Therefore, the use of self- determination is exercised within these social roles, in place of standing outside them. With this regard, the state respects our self- determination by encouraging our deep clutch and deep understanding in these roles. The politics of common good also wants to get same position. According to him, state must protect and promote social cooperative activity and encourage development of human excellence. If state will treat individuals as atomistic, it will lead to social disintegration and moral disaster which is already showing signs in west in the form of prevalent crime, violence, breakdown of family, and widespread drug abuse in society.

Communitarians accept the common good as the essential concept of the best life in society, which defines the lifestyle of community. For communitarians, common good itself does not adjust in the pattern of priorities of people. In place of it, common good provides standard to evaluate these priorities. The lifestyle of community gives a base to the public ranking of determination for the concept of good <sup>[15]</sup>. Communitarians support the ‘politics of common good’ <sup>[16]</sup> because as per their views the concept of common good defines community life. According to them the work of the person can be evaluated through the concept of common good. This concept is good for both the person and the society. Communitarians argue that an ideal just state is not what is neutral but it is the responsibility of the state to inspire its citizens to adopt the concept of public welfare. It is the duty of any government to help the citizens for the welfare of the person and the society. Communitarians argue that every person of society can achieve a better life through the politics of public welfare. Thus, an ideal, just, and lawful state can be established in this way.

### Conclusion

It is clear that the liberals give priority to freedom, authority and autonomy of people, while communitarians insist on community relations and social roles. Communitarianism proposes an understanding under which individual’s identity must be recognized on the basis of his community and the identity of community should be based on the culture. The individual is a social being and his socialism inspires him to be organized as a community. Communitarianism accepts that the identity of a person is established from his community. People should be accepted as citizens with their distinct cultural identity. It represents the special right through which the ‘rights’ and ‘identity’ of the cultural community is recognized.

Thus, it can be said that, communitarianism do make us conscious of our inherited traditions, it reminds us with the moral obligation we have towards our community. The idea of social solidarity adds to the problem of modern life which is based on atomistic notions. The communitarians declare that a good society is one where the strong relationships between the individual and the community are maintained, and the individual maintains the attachments and commitments to his community. Also a good life is one in which loyalty of the

person is maintained towards the community values and beliefs; and the person achieves his goals of life by playing social roles.

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