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No longer “neutral among ends” – liberal versus communitarian ethics in library and information science

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Abstract. This short paper explores the philosophical debate between liberalism and communitarianism in political philosophy, and how concepts like neutrality figure in that debate. It presents the philosophies of both liberalism and communitarianism to encourage debate among the LIS community as to the potential for a communitarian ethic to develop in LIS. In doing so it specifically considers what a communitarian ethic might look like for library and information science, and considers that ethical approach in contrast with both individual rights, and group-rights based philosophies. As the concept of neutrality is under significant challenge as an ethic in LIS in the past decade, the paper argues that in such a polarized world, we must seek to consider other ethical approaches that do not divide us but instead have the capacity to bring people together around a common good, while respecting individual group identity.

Keywords: Liberalism, Neutrality, Social Justice, Ethics, Communitarianism

1 A Contemporary Concern in LIS

This short paper attempts to add to the debate around neutrality in library and information science (LIS) by considering the efficacy of liberalism through the lens of the communitarian critics. Neutrality is a core facet of liberalism, and it is also a “core – yet controversial – value” in library and information ethics [1]. As can be seen in the table below, a search of Library and Information Science Abstracts indicates that in only the first 9 months of 2020 alone, there are almost three times as many references in the LIS literature to neutrality as there was in the entire 1980s. Clearly the topic has been exercising the discourse of the profession more in the modern era, and this paper seeks to add to that debate by unpacking neutrality from its first principles as a core tenet of liberalism, and consider how a communitarian approach might counter some of the legitimate criticism that liberal neutrality attracts.

Table 1. Frequency of term “neutral” in Library and Information Science Abstracts – 1980s-2020s (“net neutrality” removed) – September 2020

Decade	Number of references
1980s	14
1990s	127
2000s	487
2010s	755
2020s	36

This growing focus on the concept of neutrality within LIS reflects wider societal concerns related to social justice that consider neutrality as a value that, rather than guaranteeing detached subjectivity and equity, actually reflects the worldview of one particular group in society over, and to the detriment of, others:

Universalistic moral theories in the Western tradition from Hobbes to Rawls are substitutionalist, in the sense that the universalism they defend is defined surreptitiously by identifying the experiences of a specific group of subjects as the paradigmatic case of the human as such. These subjects are invariably white, male adults who are propertied or at least professional” [2, p.181].

This debate reflects the wider one that is happening in Western societies related to social justice. Pejoratively dubbed, “culture wars” by some commentators, there has been an emerging emphasis on group rights where previously disenfranchised sections of society seek to assert their positions from the point of view of equity, and ask other groups that are deemed to be more powerful and are argued to be hegemonic in society to consider their own status [3].

1 The tenets of liberalism

Since neutrality has become such a controversial issue in LIS ethics, it is important to understand the concept from first principles. To effectively critique an idea, we must understand it. In this part of the paper, then, we explore the key tenets of liberalism, and consider neutrality as a fundamental cornerstone of the liberal ethic.

1.1 The triumph of autonomy

The emphasis of liberalism on the autonomy of the person has important strands that are of concern for the debate with communitarianism. Primarily in this context liberalism can be defined as an “approach to political power and social justice that determines principles of right (justice) prior to, and largely independent of, determination of conceptions of the good” [4]. This autonomous individual has no theoretical connection with others or the community, it is her own rational processes of decision making that determine her own good. Stemming in large part from the theories of

Kant, who placed the emphasis on his rational autonomous agent as they key arbiter of moral duty, the main proponent of liberalism in this vein in the modern era was John Rawls. For Rawls the Kantian inspiration on his notion of justice as fairness was profound; he devotes an entire section (s40) of his *A Theory of Justice* to the Kantian influence [5]. As much as the concept of autonomy is important to Rawls, a crucial component of the Kantian influence on Rawls is an expansion of the notion of the rational choice of the individual. For Rawls, the justice is in the right to be the autonomous rational agent. In other words the right comes before the good and “no particular conception of the good may define or take priority over the principles of justice” [6]. The self is defined as a “chooser of ends”, separated from the conception of the good, and exists as a moral being regardless of the good [6].

1.2 Societal neutrality – the right before the good

This autonomous individual that is the cornerstone of modern liberalism is ideally free to choose her own path in life, and the state should not attempt to impose on her any for of the good life. She must be free to select her own path, and as long as that path does not negatively impact on the rights of other autonomous selves, then no interference is to be supported from the state. This is core of the neutrality that liberalism supports; no one idea of the good is to be considered above any other that is preferred by an autonomous person. Applied to LIS practice then, in theory, this means no one users’ preference is to be preferred over any others’.

While we could undoubtedly argue a case that the 20th century was the century of liberalism and the individual, Griffin identifies three distinct periods of human rights that brought us to where we are today:

The first generation consists of the classic liberty rights of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—freedom of expression, of assembly, of worship, and the like. The second generation is made up of the welfare rights widely supposed to be of the mid-twentieth century though actually first asserted in the late Middle Ages—positive rights to aid, in contrast, it is thought, to the purely negative rights of the first generation. The third generation, the rights of our time, of the last twenty-five years or so, consists of ‘solidarity’ rights, including, most prominently, group rights [7, p.256].

The current controversies dubbed “culture wars” seem largely to be a clash between those on the right-wing of politics who espouse the first generation classic liberty rights versus those more left of center who espouse the third generation solidarity or group rights. Like many battles within liberalism, the issue is with competing rights and how society resolves them. First generation liberals may believe their traditional rights like freedom of speech trump the rights of groups not to be offended. Yet supporters of group rights might counter that social cohesion and equity rely on autonomous individuals within previously under-served or ill-served groups being able to have that group identity respected and even lauded. Griffin clarifies this viewpoint:

Membership of certain groups, especially cultural groups, is of great importance to their members. A good life depends importantly upon the successful pursuit of worthwhile goals and relationships, and they, in turn, are culturally determined. So the ‘pragmatic’ and ‘instrumental’ case, as Raz describes it, for the existence of a group’s right to self-determination would go along these lines [7, p.262].

Within this clarification of Raz’s argument for the group right we can delineate the beginnings of the concept of what has come to be known as *identity politics*.

The question for us is whether liberal neutrality, *or* a more group-rights focus are the best fit for a library and information science ethic. More broadly, Griffin argues that the “fairly recent appearance of group rights is part of a widespread modern movement to make the discourse of rights do most of the important work in ethics, which it neither was designed to do nor, to my mind, should now be made to do” [7, p.256]. Put simply, if society becomes merely a collection of groups fighting for their own group rights, can this be done so in a way that preserves respectful civic discourse and promotes a just society? Even more simply, how can the LIS profession respond to such potential civic dysfunction?

2 The Communitarian Critique

The most influential critique of liberalism in modern times has come from the communitarian critics. In this section we explore some of the key critics of liberalism in the modern era from the point of view of communitarian philosophy.

2.1 The communitarian critique of liberalism

It is rather difficult to summarize the communitarian critics in one sentence, as they espouse differing aspects of critiques on liberalism, however Parvin and Chambers neatly do so by defining communitarianism as, “the view that, by emphasizing individual freedom, liberalism and libertarianism [liberals] undermine the shared sense of identity which people need in order to function as a society” [6, p.205]. As Voice has observed, “for some communitarians, the ideal of autonomy is not only a philosophical error but it is also a practical evil” [8, Kindle Location 1893]. As we will see in our discussion of some of the communitarian critiques that will follow, the philosophical error in question is that the individual autonomy espoused by Rawls and other liberals is a flawed concept of personhood; a metaphysical error. The practical evil in question is that a system of justice based around concepts of autonomy and individualism is argued to be detrimental to society. An individualistic society puts each and every person out on their own, with no good specified but that each individual sets themselves. This mitigates against a common good, of any kind, be it one based on a historical concept of the good, or a religious one. Communitarians believe that such a society can lead to “selfishness and anti-social behavior” [9, p.12].

One of the most important and influential communitarian critiques of liberalism is Michael Sandel, who in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (LLJ) provides a critique

of Rawls' notion of the "unencumbered self". Sandel challenged Rawls' *Theory of Justice* in important areas. He argued that the idea of the freely choosing autonomous individual, rationally choosing the distribution of social goods behind a veil of ignorance, was extremely flawed:

At issue is not whether individual or communal claims should carry greater weight but whether the principles of justice that govern the basic structure of society can be neutral with respect to the competing moral and religious convictions its citizens espouse. The fundamental question, in other words, is whether the right is prior to the good [10, Kindle location 92].

As well as the state neutrality implied in Sandel's critique above, he also considered the subsequent influence of moral and religious encumbrances on individuals as equally important. He captures this critique that relates to the influence of community/culture on the individual well in the following passage from LLJ: "Construing all religious convictions as products of choice may miss the role that religion plays in the lives of those for whom the observance of religious duties is a constitutive end, essential to their good and indispensable to their identity" [10, Kindle location 134]. In other words, to many the right does not come before the good, the right is an intrinsic aspect of the self. If Sandel's point is proven, we can easily move from here to an argument that suggests any attacks on that religion, or other cultural identities, should potentially be considered attacks on the self. In this idea we can see the core of some of the attacks on free speech espoused by group rights advocates, where the argument is that speech that targets someone based on group characteristics is a harm in that it attacks a fundamental aspect of a person's sense of self, and thus their autonomy.

Another key text in the communitarian critique is Alasdair MacIntyre's, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's critique goes beyond the notion of Rawls' version of liberalism and attacks the very foundations of liberalism that emerged from the Enlightenment. For MacIntyre, since all liberal ideas are essentially based on the rational voice that emerged during the Enlightenment with its focus on the universality of persons rather than community, history and culture, he believed liberalism as an entire concept was fundamentally flawed. A much quoted passage from *After Virtue* summarises his thesis:

I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations, and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity [11, p.220].

Fawcett neatly summarises MacIntyre's thesis as follows:

Liberals assumed that what people happened to want fixed their values and ideals, whereas in truth, values and ideals fixed what people ought to want. Values and ideals, in addition, grew out of shared practices in society, which

alone gave people a purpose in life. Liberal modernity had dislocated society and shattered its practices [12, pp. 351-352].

For MacIntyre, humans are story-telling beings; we exist as products of the legacies we are a part of, and we inherit from this legacy our cultures, mores and values, and these are fundamental parts of our identity. For him, then, the notion of the rational agent, atomised within society is a philosophical error. Again, we can suggest that it is not a large step from MacIntyre's thesis, to consideration of how integral our culture, religion and identity is to our sense of being.

Bell sets out the 3 main communitarian critiques of liberalism as follows:

- The Liberal Self – the liberal, autonomous individual is defined as overly-individualistic. An unencumbered self.
- Liberal Universalism – the liberal, autonomous individual is insufficiently rooted in community and its influences.
- Liberal Atomism – the liberal, autonomous individual is a lonely, isolated figure who is unaware of society and the people in it [13, pp.4-6].

The key theme, then, is that liberalism fails to consider communities and their needs and influences, and the impact such links and ties have on us as individuals. It fails to consider how important notions of community, culture, group identity, and religion are to the identities of people.

How does then manifest in the professional concerns of library and information science? From the point of view of free speech, for example, we can identify some fundamental issues here. We can see here the core of the argument that if the situated self is a product of their culture or religion, then such attachments form a crucial part of their identity. It is no great leap from there, then, to argue that any attacks on those elements of identity would constitute a potential harm to the person and should therefore be considered for remedy. Attacks on these elements from the point of view of freedom of speech become a potential harm. Sandel further revisits this concept as it relates to state neutrality later in the LLJ when he summarizes the approach a liberal state would normally take towards offensive speech: "To ban offensive or unpopular speech imposes on some the values of others and so fails to respect each citizen's capacity to choose and express his or her own opinions" [10, Kindle location 169]. The state, then, cannot impose any version of the good life on its citizens in a liberal democracy, it must respect the ability of citizens to rationally and autonomously choose their own way. It is clear that such an approach can cause societal tension.

3 What can replace the ethic of neutrality?

Sandel has written extensively about what he calls the hollowing out of the public sphere, suggesting that it, "makes it difficult to cultivate the solidarity and sense of community on which democratic citizenship depends" [14, p.267]. Like other communitarians, he has "argued not only for stronger notions of community and solidarity but also for a more robust public engagement with moral and religious questions" [14,

p.247]. The current times seems to many to feel bleak with polarization of society along political, racial, and religious grounds. To arrive at solutions, different groups in society need to engage, but when peoples are poles apart, the challenge is what can bring us together.

Identifying with one group over a wider societal ethic poses problems for a cohesive society unless we are able to embrace respectful civic discourse. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt sums up the key dilemma for us quite well:

We're not always selfish hypocrites. We also have the ability, under special circumstances, to shut down our petty selves and become like cells in a larger body, or like bees in a hive, working for the good of the group. These experiences are often among the most cherished of our lives, although our hivishness can blind us to other moral concerns. Our bee-like nature facilitates altruism, heroism, war, and genocide [15].

Professions need to support the good things in society, and we should never seek to be contributing to polarization or conflict. Part of the mission of the LIS profession is encouraging discourse, indeed it is one of the themes of this conference. A debate around what could constitute a new LIS ethic that is inclusive, but that protects ideas and knowledge from censorship, is not an easy one to have. However, by utilizing a communitarian ethic, one that favors respectful discourse, one that celebrates diversity of groups and peoples, while recognizing our own situation within our own groups, we stand the chance of a progressive future for our profession that supports a cohesive and respectful society.

4 Conclusion

This short paper has sought to contribute to the important conversation that is being undertaken within the profession around library and information ethics, and the place of neutrality within the debate. It has explored neutrality as part of a wider liberal ethic related to individualism and autonomy, and presented the communitarian critique that seeks to take on the atomization the critics perceive to be damaging to society. It has also considered how a communitarian approach to social justice might offer a potentially inclusive ethic that respects diversity within the public discourse. This is an important debate, and one that is arguably long overdue. It is hoped that in unpacking neutrality and perhaps rethinking its place as a core LIS ethic, we can continue to emphasize the health of civic discourse and our place in cementing it.

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