How not to Understand Community:

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How Not to Understand Community: A Critical Engagement with R. Bellah

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Abstract

Robert Bellah's article "Community Properly Understood…" is critical of the conventional conception of community as a product of consensus established by shared values and goals among people of common social reality. The need for such a critical approach is arguably encouraged by the rather imprecise deployment of the notion of community in the vast communitarian literature, a deployment which truly raises issues of concern over what the term 'community' really means. Bellah's article is one of the numerous responses to this quest. This paper challenges Bellah's view on community and offers some arguments to demonstrate why his conception of community may not be adequate. While the uniqueness of his argument is not in doubt, the paper argues that Bellah commits a straw man fallacy by conflating a normative question, "what ought we to do to achieve a working and progressive community?" with the descriptive question, "what is community?" The paper argues that an adequate conception of community must be such that its conception is acceptable to both the liberals and the communitarians. To achieve this, the paper introduces the notion of shared spaces to the conceptualization of the concept of community, and thereby arrives at the definition of community in terms with which both sides of the debate can relate. The paper concludes that with an appropriate concept of community, it would be obvious, contrary to the popular opinion, that liberals and communitarians are both committed to the survival of the community, and that they only differ in their respective approaches to achieving this common goal.

Keywords: *community; Robert Bellah; communitarianism; liberalism; shared space*

I. Introduction: Some background acknowledgements

The publication of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 triggered a variety of advancements within political philosophy among which the need to review the notion of right to freedom by liberals and a search for an alternative political theory in which this is appropriately addressed are most central. In some scholars' opinion, Rawls showcases liberal ideology in an intolerable proportion.[1] The over-glorification of the individual's liberty in the liberal tradition led to the suspicion that liberalism has a tendency of destroying the moral cord that binds us together as human beings. Specifically, there were worries about the welfare of community in an atmosphere characterized by "inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override."[2] According to Brian Orend,

> These criticisms focus on the conviction that there is a dark side to respecting individual human rights. The dark side deals with the glorification of the self at the expense of the social connections to families and churches, neighborhoods and nations. This detachment, communitarians say, has led to isolated and alienated individuals; increased greed; drug, alcohol, and gambling addictions; the growth of secularism and even nihilism, historically high divorced rates; historically low voter turn-outs; and the shriveling up of civil society, and indeed, of even basic aspects of etiquette.[3]

The above results in a growing concern for the establishment of a non-liberal tradition which does not *necessarily* take away the liberty of the individual, but which, unlike liberalism, has as the centerpiece of its social thinking the protection of the community, the only *thing* we truly share in common. The ensuing theory is what is known as 'Communitarianism,' deriving its name chiefly from its opposition to liberalism. One of the positive roots of contemporary communitarianism, therefore, concerns

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[1] Some of the scholars that hold this position include Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Alasdair Macintyre, *Is Patriotism a Virtue?* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1984); Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Walzer, *Sphere of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); and others.

[2] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 3.

[3] Brian Orend, "Communitarianism and Community," in *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, ed. David P. Forsythe, 377-386 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 377.

the substantial and sustaining role that communities play in human development and human lives generally.[4]

According to Daniel Bell, "in retrospect, it seems obvious that communitarian critics of liberalism may have been motivated not so much by philosophical concerns as by certain pressing political concerns, namely, the negative social and psychological effects related to the atomistic tendencies of modern liberal societies."[5] A great deal of communitarian critique against liberal/libertarian political ideology focuses on its failure to acknowledge the sanctity of human community to the individuals, a failure which ultimately leads to a wrong positioning of the individual, rather than the community, at the center of political life of the state. If community is prior or morally superior to the individual, communitarians think, it will be morally obligatory to safeguard the interests of the community against the personal interests of socially unhindered individual populating the state. "Communitarians maintain that there is a common good or community interest which is greater than individual goods or interests, and that the state should uphold this common good rather than remain neutral."[6]

For the communitarian argument to be worth its salt, there is a need for the notion of community to be clarified. "What is community?" is an interesting question because, essentially, the substance of the disagreement between liberals and communitarians consists in determining the primary locus of political allegiance. Liberals opt for individual liberty and rights over and above community common good, while communitarians opt for community over and above individual liberty and rights. It cannot therefore be the case that the liberals do not have the notion of community nor do the communitarians lack the concepts of liberty and rights. That is, given that the crux of the liberal-communitarian debate is either accepting community and otherwise rejecting liberty and rights as the primary locus of political allegiance, or vice-versa, then there must be some agreement between liberals and communitarians on what these terms (i.e., community, liberty and rights) really mean. In other words, whatever meaning one gives to these terms must be one that both sides of the debate accept, for there to be a genuine disagreement between them.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Daniel Bell, "Communitarianism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta, and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/communitarianism/.

[6] David Morrice, "The Liberal – Communitarian Debate in Contemporary Political Philosophy and Its Significance for International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 237.

More specifically, an adequate response to the question "what is a community?" helps to properly understand the communitarian political theory and moral obligations on the one hand, and, on the other, the limits of the individual's liberty in relation to the community. Arriving at this plausible notion of community has, however, become elusive for the communitarians. Communitarians simply do not seem to agree on what exactly constitutes a community. Perhaps, one reason for this could be the fact that there are different kinds of community,[7] such as political community, cultural community, national community, even international community, etc.; and communitarians don't seem to agree on which is most essential to their theory.[8] Robert Bellah's "Community Properly Understood…" is one of the communitarian attempts at filling this conceptual gap.

The present paper is a critique of Bellah's notion of community. It argues that Bellah's explication is a response to a normative question, "How ought we to live to realize a functional or an ideal community?" rather than the conceptual question, "What is a community?" The paper argues that in responding to the latter question one is required to state some essential properties that all actual human communities have in common and by virtue of which they are called communities. This does not include specification of certain attitudes elicited by members of a community in order to realize a morally desirable end for the community. In other words, all that is needed is the description of some empirical features present anywhere there is a community, rather than a prescription of attitudes leading to the realization of 'a good community.' One problem with Bellah's normative approach to defining community lies in the fact that not only are there good communities that do not conform to Bellah's standard (which Bellah would readily dismiss as not good communities), there are communities whose essence cannot be realized within the normative framework provided by Bellah. The paper concludes that, given its normative intent, Bellah's article is guilty of a straw man fallacy.

Issues discussed in this paper are divided in four sections. Following the first section, the ongoing introduction to the background to Bellah's paper, the second section seeks to respond to the probe whether community is an ideal or a physical entity. In doing this, the paper employs the philosophical methodology of ordinary language philosophy and finds out that the question, "what is a community?" requires a descriptive analysis rather than

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[7] See Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1993), 32.

[8] See Sandel, "Liberalism;" Macintyre, "Patriotism;" Walzer, *Sphere of Justice*; Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

normative analysis. The third section *reveals* the normative implication of Bellah's notion of the community, thereby showing his commitment to prescriptivist enquiry rather than the descriptive question that sets his inquiry on course. The paper attempts to correct this error by conceptualizing community in terms of the concept of shared spaces. It is argued that the term community belongs to a family of concepts such as state, nation, neighborhood, etc., and that what unifies them is the concept of shared spaces. It is concluded that Bellah's paper leaves unanswered the question that necessitates its probe into the meaning of "community."

II. Is community an ideal?

The question of whether or not community is an ideal is an offshoot of the debate on the appropriate methodological approach to issues in contemporary political philosophy. Two sides of the debate have been identified as ideal method and non-ideal method in the works of Merceta,[9] Valentini,[10] Stemplowska,[11] among others. Using Rawls as a paradigm example of the ideal method, Lagerlof characterizes ideal method as one in which the goal of the enquiry is to construct a model of social life and relations, where each component of the society is well appropriated and attuned to one another in bringing about a desirable social state of affairs.[12] The ideal method is characterized by its specification of certain principles, which, if fully compliant with, guarantee the reality of the desired society. Societies are desirable because they are just, fair, good, etc.[13] Non-ideal method is the exact opposite of ideal theory. It favors the study of actual social state of affairs with all its historical challenges. The non-ideal method does not aim at construction of how a society ought to be, but is a descriptive analysis of what actually obtains within the social milieu.

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[9] Jesper A. Merceta, "Ideal and Non-ideal Theory in Political Philosophy," January 16, 2019, https://jahlinmarceta.com/2019/01/16/ideal-and-non-ideal-theory-in-political-philosophy/.

[10] Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654-664.

[11] Zofia Stemplowska, "What's Ideal About Ideal Theory?" *Social Theory and Practice* 34, no. 3 (2008): 319-340.

[12] Julius Lagerlof, *Ideal or Non-ideal Theory: The Challenge of Charles W. Mills* (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2021).

[13] Plato's *The Republic* and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* present two of the most influential ideal theories in which attempts are made to envision a just society. Plato thinks that a just society is achieved when the three components of the society do what they are naturally made for, while Rawls' theory of justice is founded on the supposition of fairness based on the liberty of the moral agent.

The question, "what is a community?" can be situated within the above theoretical distinction between ideal and non-ideal theories. One crucial confusion to clear is whether 'community' is an ideal or a non-ideal concept. To say that community is either of these is to acquiesce to answering the question in a particular way. For instance, to conceive community as an ideal is to conceive community in terms of its realizability, since ideals are often set as standards to which things are expected to conform. In *Community and the Economy: the Theory of Public Cooperation*, Jonathan Boswell sets out to "investigate community as an ideal, a phenomenon which struggles to express itself in the most unlikely places, and as an object of action in modern times."[14] There are ample evidences that Bellah is greatly influenced by this idealistic conception of community by Boswell, as he himself writes that his conception of "democratic communitarianism," a product of his "properly understood community," is a borrowing from Boswell.[15]

The question about the meaning of community may be explored by examining the nature of ideals in general. Charles Mills has distinguished four senses of the term "ideal," viz., ideal-as-normative, ideal-as-model, ideal-as-descriptive-model, and ideal-as-idealized-model.[16] The sense of ideal directly relevant to our discussion is the sense in which it means ideal-as-normative. Thinking about ideal-as-normative, Mills writes:

> Since ethics deals by definition with normative/prescriptive/evaluative issues, as against factual/descriptive issues, and so involves the appeal to values and ideals, it is obviously ideal theory in that generic sense, regardless of any divergence in approaches taken.[17]

The sense of ideal here contrasts with factualness, or descriptiveness. To relate it to the ongoing discourse, it is the sense in which community is revealed as it ought to be, rather than as it is. Conceived this way, community could be seen an abstract model to which actual human social associations are expected to conform. Hence, considering

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[14] Jonathan Boswell, *Community and the Economy: The Theory of Public Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

[15] Robert N. Bellah, "Community Properly Understood: A Defense of 'Democratic Communitarianism,'" in *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, ed. Amitai Etzioni, 15-19 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 18.

[16] Charles W. Mills, "Ideal Theory as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165-183.

[17] Ibid., 166.

community as an ideal entails that one specifies particular standards to be met before a concrete human society can be properly so referred. The implication of this is that, depending on whether or not an actual human society meets up to these standards, there can either be a community or a non-community. Bellah's conception of community aligns with this theoretical framework. For example, Bellah writes:

> A good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community is not about silent consensus; it is a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consensus, but where the consensus can be challenged and changed – often gradually, sometimes radically – over time.[18]

Obviously, the above, that is the argument/conflict about the meaning and how the shared values and goals are to be actualized, cannot constitute the essential property of a community because it would mean that all communities have it as a matter of fact. But this is not the case, since, as it will be shortly shown, not all communities have their essence realized in that way (i.e., through disagreement about their shared values and goals). This is not a denial of the fact that arguments or conflict may feature as part of a community, but as far as it does not constitute the essence of all communities, it fails as a core defining property for properly conceiving communities.

Besides the so-called "silent consensus," Bellah argues that it is an inherent part of the concept of community to often get involved in arguments and conflicts about what the shared values are, and the best way to realize them. We may take Bellah as saying that arguments and conflicts about shared values and goals characterize the essence of community. It may further be taken that this property must be present in every human association that aspires to be a community. Rawls has anticipated this kind of definition of human society where he argues that justice is the first virtue of human society as truth is to the system of thoughts.[19] Rawls concludes that "laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well-arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust."[20] We may, thus, take justice as the essence of the Rawlsian

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[18] Bellah, 16.

[19] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 3.

[20] Ibid.

human society. However, much as one is tempted to argue that Rawls' position equates all human societies with justice, this does not seem to represent Rawls' point. Rawls concedes to the possibility of unjust societies; else the imperative to reform, or, should reformation fail, to abolish. Thus, Rawls is interested specifically in an ideal state, not the actual ones.

In like manner, Bellah specifies arguments/conflicts on shared value and goals as the essential feature of community. Bellah may, in response to charges against the normativity of his conception of community, therefore insist that his interest does not lie in all human groups. Of course, there are human groups in which this essential feature of community is missing, but such groups will not qualify for a community, properly understood, so long as they lack what guarantees their being good human groups. Hence, it may be argued that it does not really make much sense to criticize Bellah's normative argument because it falls short of embracing all descriptive cases; a normative account sorts out only descriptive cases that meet normative criteria.[21] Bellah's criterion of a good human group (i.e. a community) is that, beside the consensus on values and goals of the group, there must be occasional debates, arguments or conflicts on what these values are, as well as the best way to bring them about.

However, while this is true of some communities, it is not true of all communities. There are human groups whose essences are realized only through unwavering consensus on shared values and goals. Consider a community of road users. They share the value of road safety in common (although there are cases where this is not realized) while their goal is the safe arrival at their respective destinations. Besides the fact that no arguments/conflicts arise from defining what this value is, there are really no alternatives to observing road safety rules in the realization of the goal. This point is further reinforced because even when a member leaves his/her local community for another, say a community where road users observe different traffic rules, s/he will have to learn afresh the rules in the new community to forestall dangers that his/her presence on the road may pose to other members of the community. This ritual is not optional to a new member, with no possibility of review in view, even if s/he thinks that his/her local community has a better set of traffic rules. Hence, contrary to Bellah, this kind of community does not need argument and conflict to realize its ideal self within its own system.

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[21] This line of argument was suggested to me by one of the anonymous reviewers of the first draft of this paper, to whom I am very grateful.

Also, Bellah's argument-oriented standard of community does not apply to religious communities, which thrive chiefly on perfect and unquestioned obedience to religious injunctions as laid down by the founder of each religion. Contrary to Bellah's position, progress is achieved in religious communities through non-argumentative, silent consensus. For instance, members of the Christian religious community are forbidden to question the authority of the holy bible either on the values of Christian conception of good life on earth or the goal of making heaven. The periodic review from citizens that Bellah believes characterizes the ideal community does not obtain within the religious community.[22] In fact, religions such as Christianity and Islam will explain the social ills currently experienced in the world as a result of the deviation of members of their communities from the standards laid down by God. Hence, in religious communities, conflicts brew polarization rather than the cooperation and growth Bellah's criterion anticipates. Even Jesus says, "if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand."[23]

However, the fact that there is no reason for arguments in the cases cited above does not mean that there cannot be divergent opinions on the justification for obligation to obey or otherwise. In a community of road users, for instance, some may have a consequentialist justification for observing traffic rules, namely that it leads to the avoidance of an accident that may have taken place had the rules not been strictly adhered to. A thorough consequentialist may see no reason to obey the rule when the expected goal, namely safety, is already realized. This may be without considerations for personal safety. Sometimes, as a driver, one wonders what use is one's obeying traffic rules if by violating them one poses no danger to another person, including oneself. That reminds one of Mill's Harm Principle which says, "people should be free to act however they wish unless their actions cause harm to somebody else."[24] In other words, an agent's moral commitment to obeying traffic rules may not necessarily bind one from sometimes violating them when safety, the *telos*, is already realized.

On the other hand, one may justify unconditional observance of all moral codes (traffic rules are moral codes) by appealing to the

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[22] Under no circumstance should this be taken to mean that some members of the religious communities are not desirous of change, either radical or gradual, through disagreements among their members. There are ancient landmarks across religions that must not be crossed. Disagreements on these fundamentals do not strengthen religious communities; they weaken and divide them.

[23] Mark 3: 25.

[24] The Ethics Centre, "What Is the Harm Principle? Ethics Explainer by the Ethics Centre," accessed December 22, 2021, https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-the-harm-principle/.

strictness, necessity and universality that living morally requires from rational agents. Such attitude demands an 'at all times-ness' that is not tied to the situations under which the act is performed. In respect to our example above, a person may argue that the unconditional observance of traffic rules is not justified by the realization of safety on the road, but rather by the fact that obedience to all moral rules is good in itself. This is a deontologist position which states that "the basic criterion of right and wrong conduct cannot be the consequence of such conduct, but rather an *a priori* imperative which flows from the agent's exercise of his practical reason."[25] Here, rules are obeyed as a matter of duty, regardless of their consequence. However, the presence of divergent opinions on the justification to obey rules does not constitute conflicts or disagreements over the shared value of safety or the goal of arriving to destinations unscathed. It only shows that members of the community have compelling reasons not to disagree with one another on the quality of their shared value and goals.

The discussion so far has shown the error involved in contemplating community as an ideal. The other option left is to conceive community not as something achievable as a result of its members possessing certain moral properties, a strategy which surely fences off some actual human associations as non-communities. The question "what is a community?" is a simple question that does not require specifications for some social standards that must be upheld for an actual human association to exist. On the contrary, community should be properly understood as a factual entity, whose meaning can be specified purely on a descriptive conceptual framework.

III. What, then, is a community?

As a social and political concept, community belongs to the class of concepts such as state, country, nation, neighbourhood, even city, town, village and family.[26] Like these concepts, community cannot be completely understood without the concept of shared space. Shared space, as it will be used in this paper, refers to an umbrella under which each individual in the society is able to fulfill his or her sociality, and, ultimately, humanity. Shared space is characterized by its interactiveness, dynamism and populated by individuals with different

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[25] Moses Oke, and Idoreyin F. Esikot, *Elementary Ethics* (Lagos, Uyo, Eket: Minder International Publishers, 1999), 111.

[26] These should be distinguished from other similar concepts such as tribe, race, or people in that, while state, country, etc., are physical concepts because of their space-relatedness, tribe, race, etc., are attitude-related concepts, and they are not space-bound.

dreams and aspirations. As a concept, 'shared space' is not limited to physical space alone, as this will restrict the meaning of community to its traditional sense in which the concept only applies to common locations and areas. For example, Sutton and Kolaja define community traditionally, as "a number of families residing in a *relatively small area* within which they have developed a more or less complete socio-cultural definitions imbued with collective identifications and by means of which they resolve problems arising from *the sharing of an area*"[27] (emphasis mine). A similar sense of community can be found in Robert Stebbins' definition of community as "a social group with *a common territorial base*; those in the group share interests and have a sense of belonging to the group"[28] (emphasis mine).

However, the complexities of the contemporary world, especially those inspired by technology, have introduced variety of dimensions to the concept of community that makes common location or areas, as gleaned in the above definitions, less fashionable than they used to be. Shared space has now assumed a more robust conceptual signification than geographical or territorial delineations. It now makes sense within the new conceptual framework to talk about non-physical shared spaces such as virtual, academic, cultural, religious, etc. spaces, corresponding to various kinds of community. To have a Yoruba community in the United Kingdom, for example, it is not required that all Yoruba people in the country should be packed together in a specific location in Great Britain. Members of the community may not share the same physical space, yet, they share a cultural space, which distinguishes them as members of a community. A similar remark can be made for academic community or virtual community, among others. Either physical or not, however, the shared spaces relevant to the concept of community create an interactive platform for members to fulfil their sociality and humanity.

Notwithstanding the conceptual boundaries shared by members of the category of concepts highlighted above i.e. state, country, etc., a closer look suggests that the concept 'community' is more complex than others in that category. Bellah's view that "community leads a double life"[29] is only correct to the extent that community is taken out of its ordinary use. Bellah takes 'community' out of its ordinary use by

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[27] Willis A. Sutton, and Jiri Kolaja as quoted in Colin Bell, and Howard Newby, *Community Studies: An Introduction to the Sociology of the Local Community* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 31.

[28] Robert Stebbins, *Sociology: The Study of Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 534.

[29] Bellah, 15.

thinking that "if the term 'community' is to be useful," it must mean *more* than "small-scale, face-to-face groups like the family, the congregation and the small town – what the Germans call *Gemeinshaft*."[30] This is because, according to Bellah, it raises the suspicion that community implies the abandonment of ethical universalism and the withdrawal into particularistic loyalty, and sometimes leads to ethnic cleansing.[31] Elsewhere, he says, "but when that is all community means, it is basically sentimental, and in the strict sense of the word, nostalgic," 'nostalgia' being, quoting Christopher Latch, "merely a psychological placebo that allows one to accept regretfully but uncritically whatever is currently being served up in the name of progress."[32]

The foregoing may suggest that Bellah's rejection of standard conception of community is built around his discontent with defining community in terms of shared values and goals. Bellah rejects defining community in terms of shared values and goals especially because it does not allow for social criticisms, and eventually stagnates the society. The liberals have objected to this idea of shared values and goals from a different perspective. According to liberals, societies are supposed to be a contractual association of communally unencumbered, right-carrying individuals, with the principle of fairness underlying their pursuit of individual interests. Rawls, for instance, holds that society, being as it were, distributive, competitive and populated by self-interested human beings, is a co-operative venture for mutual advantage.[33] This suggests a denial of community because if the idea of community is woven around shared values and goals, then it can only exist in small groups, which is neither possible nor desirable in large-scale societies or institutions.

According to Bellah, community consists either in silent consensus about shared values and goals or in contractual relation among free and disjointed fellows only interested in pursuing largely incompatible goals. This implies that while none of these represents community in its own right, it is impossible to define community without having recourse to either of them. Hence, Bellah seeks to reconcile the two seemingly disparate accounts by conceiving them as a "continuum, or even as a complementarity, rather than as an either/or proposition."[34]

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4.

[34] Bellah, 16.

To construe community as an amalgamation of these two accounts, however, seems to involve an error. This error comes to fore when you conflate community with the spirit of community, two clearly different phenomena. Such error is common both to supporters of community and to their philosophical liberal critics.

In order to remove the above error, a distinction must be made between community and the spirit of community. This distinction is clearly suggested in Amitai Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community*, where what could be referred to as the communitarian manifestoes of the ideal community are well spelt out. These cut across different spheres of the community including family, school, and other political institutions. It is discovered that Etzioni's discussion of these different organs of community, beside its critical attitude towards liberal/libertarian social systems, provokes the need for a return to the good old days when the community was being run not by the greed introduced by a dangerous over-stretching of individual rights, but by a healthy communal concern for one another. The spirit of community may be thought of as community values and goals which define the essence of community's existence. Community must, therefore, be distinguishable from community spirit because the thought of one does not include the other, necessarily. Whereas a community is an entity defined essentially by *shared space* within which interactive activities among its inhabitants (persons and nonpersons) occur under the umbrella of common ownership of the space, the spirit of community helps to specify the *kind* of people occupying an actual human community, and this forms part of the basis for their identity.

Perhaps Bellah's failure to recognize the above distinction, leads to the illusion that all communities strive towards the same ideal. Difficulties attend attempts to provide an acceptable proposal for what this ideal really is. Thus, the proponents of the normative conception of community have the responsibility of specifying what the end is to which all communities strive. A typical communitarian response may be one that specifies 'common good' as the end of all communities. As Hussain notes, "the 'common good' refers to those facilities – whether material, cultural or institutional – that the members of a community provide to all members in order to fulfil a relational obligation they all have to care for certain interests that they have in common."[35] Setting aside the ambiguity of the definition, it suggests that diverse

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[35] Waheed Hussain, "The Common Good," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/common-good/.

things may constitute the common good for different communities. For example, what constitutes the common good for a community sited along a coastal line may be different from that of another community located close to the desert. They are geographically constrained to have different interests, which form the basis of their values and goals.

The community spirit can be progressive, stagnant, retrogressive, corrupt, hard-working, war-like, hospitable, sociable, lazy, violent, and religious, to mention a few, but only community can be developed as secure, vulnerable, poor, dirty, beautiful, small, far, desolate, populous, etc. The spirit of community may be strong, low, high, elated, but it is community itself whose soil is fertile, whose girls are sexually profligate, whose light is stable, whose husbands are unfaithful, whose youths are uncritical, etc. It is in the community where children are born, where children are raised, where the dead are buried, where accidents happen. It is the community that people leave behind when they travel, and to which they return. Community is where all sorts of things happen without any known pattern of happening, leading ultimately to the suspicion that community is an elusive phenomenon. Following from this argument, one may object to Bellah's submission:

> Thus we are led to the question of what makes any kind of group a community and not just a contractual association, the answer lies in a shared concern with the following question: "What will make this group a good group?" Any institution, such as a university, a city, a society, insofar as it is or seeks to be a community, needs to ask what is a good university, city, society, and so forth. So far as it reaches agreement about the good it is supposed to realize [...] it becomes a community with some common values and common goals.[36]

A problem with the above characterization of community derives from the worry over whether a community has the ability to disintegrate into a non-community. Suppose, for instance, there is a human group that exhibits Bellah's specifications for ideal community. Such human group, to follow Bellah, would qualify for a community because it would manifest qualities that would have made it 'a good human group.' Suppose further that at a later time of the group's existence, it loses sight on its desire to be a good human group. This, still following Bellah, would imply that

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[36] Bellah, 16.

the group has degenerated into being an ordinary 'contractual association' rather than a community. The question, then, is this: is it an essential characteristic of community to be this fluid, dangling between community and non-community? This fluidity, it appears, raises some issues in logic that Bellah may not be comfortable with.

Hence, to say that a community disagrees on its values and goals is to say that there is the possibility of a shift occurring in the community spirit. The dominant attitude within a community per time determines its spirit of the time. A community does not disintegrate or cease to exist because it fails to demonstrate Bellah's ideal property. It may raise genuine concern for the community spirit to be re-evaluated in the light of its current, perhaps undesirable, state, and the goals the members of the community have set for themselves. For instance, the university is a community because it attracts certain category of persons (such as scholars, researchers, students, administrators, emissaries, food vendors, etc.), accommodates certain buildings (such as lecture theatres, senate building, faculty offices, departmental offices, etc.) and encourages certain sort of activities (such as teaching and learning, research, scholarship, student unionism, etc.) among others. Both human (e.g., scholars, researchers, students, etc.) and non-human (buildings, learning, research, scholarship, etc.) occupants of a university constitute the shared space called the university community. A good or bad university is a product of the activities of members within the shared space. Put differently, a university is good or bad to the extent to which members sharing its space make it. Hence, it cannot be the case, as Bellah proposes, that agreement on what constitutes a good university makes a community; rather, it is out of the community that a good university is made.

The normativity of Bellah's view is further reinforced by the definition of community in *Habits of the Heart*. Here, Bellah, along with co-authors, defines community as "a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it."[37] This definition presupposes that there are social conditions to be met before there can be talks about community. The problem with this definition is that it puts the cart before the horse; it assumes that the conditions predate

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[37] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William N. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Stephen M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 333.

community. On the contrary, according to the shared space view, community is temporally prior to what its members do or fail to do. The conditions outlined in the definition, namely social interdependence, joint discussions of issues and decision making, etc., are all products of community; their presence does not constitute the community.

The point against the normative notion of community, either as the communitarian shared value or the liberal contractual agreement, is that for both, there really should be no disagreement on what a community is. This is because attitudes towards terms such as 'community,' 'individual liberty,' and 'human rights,' etc., provide theoretical framework for distinguishing communitarianism from liberalism. For example, whereas liberals opine that the primary locus of political allegiance is the preservation of individual liberty and rights, communitarians believe preservation of community ought to be the primary locus of political allegiance. It is not the case that liberals lack the conception of community nor do communitarians lack the conceptions of liberty and rights. Thus, there can be a genuine ground for disagreement between liberals and communitarians only if they both share the same conceptions of these terms; otherwise, the acclaimed disagreement between them would be spurious, or, at best, merely verbal. I propose that the appropriate conception of community should be something that both liberals and communitarians accept, even if they disagree on whether or not it constitutes the primary locus of political allegiance.

Rethinking community in terms of shared space helps to reinforce the need for both communitarians and liberals to be committed to the survival of community. The debate between communitarians and liberal has often been framed as an ideological impasse between the communitarians' commitment to the shared value of common good and the liberals' commitment to the shared value of individual liberty and rights. This way, communitarianism seems to be antithetical to liberalism, the former being a collectivist theory while the latter an individualist theory. However, with the shared space conception of community, the dispute between communitarians and liberals, traditionally framed, becomes merely methodological in the sense that they are both methods of ensuring the shared space, that is, community, is kept at its best state for human survival.

Both communitarians and liberals are committed to keeping the community, conceived as shared space, alive, albeit with different

methods. Communitarians, on the one hand, flaunt their commitment to the well-being of the community by being more concerned about the protection of things that members of community share in common. To communitarians, community is a moral voice that shapes members' character in relation to the community itself and to the other occupants of the same community. Etzioni recounts his experience as a new tenant in a community in Washington, D. C. thus:

> When I first moved to a suburb of Washington, D.C., I neglected to mow my lawn. One neighbor asked politely if I needed "a reference to a good gardener." Another pointed out that unless we all kept up the standards of the neighborhood, we would end up with an unsightly place and declining property values.[38]

The two community co-members of whom Etzioni writes are devoted to the value, that is the 'community spirit' of keeping the community as beautiful as Etzioni met it. Suffice to say that they are both committed to the well-being of the community, to which Etzioni's act of negligence poses a significant threat.

On the other hand, liberals seek to achieve the same feat by talking about rights. It is good to note that talks about rights help to ensure the continuous existence and sustenance of community. Among other things, rights help to create a level playground for individual members of community to realize, develop, and be who they want to be within the context of community, without anticipating harm from fellow community members. Other non-human occupants of community are imbued with rights to bar members of community from their indiscriminate exploitations, which may be injurious to the community. Etzioni articulates how the concept of rights has become so trivialized that it now applies to sand! He writes:

> […] have pointed out that many builders use sand from beaches, that cities cut into them to create new harbors, and that utilities use them for their power plants – all of them benefiting from beaches and contributing to their erosion. But instead of turning to the language of responsibility to protect beaches, legal scholars, among

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[38] Etzioni, 33.

them a Los Angeles lawyer- who specializes in the environment, have advanced the notion that sand has rights! It is difficult to imagine a way to trivialize rights more than to claim that they are as common as sand.[39]

As trivialized as the above may appear, it is arguable that the so-called notion of the right of sand being advanced by the likes of the Los Angeles lawyer is an attempt to protect beaches and their environing community from the hazards that may result from their unguided exploitations. Protection of rights and liberty from abuse seems to be a liberal approach to forestalling community collapse. It is a way of saying that the community is protected if the rights and liberty of individual members are protected.

One merit of the concept of community as shared space is that it reveals community as the primary element of social life. Hence, not only is it that no individual can flourish without community, but also life itself is not possible without the community. It is within the shared space called community that we live and have our being. Community is an amphitheater where all activities that characterize the spirit of community are showcased. Disagreements over shared values and goals are only some of the interactive activities that occur within community, and, thus, do not essentiate it. In other words, one of the activities that community as a shared space allows for is the possibility of conflicts among members. The shared space is the *absolute* common good for both communitarians and liberals. Hence, as common good, the shared space receives maximum care and attention from both communitarians and liberals. Famakinwa has brilliantly argued for correcting the long-standing error that the notion of common good is primarily communitarian.[40] Although he posits liberty as the liberal common good, the value of liberty is not sought for its own sake. As the liberal common good, the value of liberty is an instrumental one, aiming ultimately at the protection of the shared space. In fact, the threat of insecurity and lack of safety to this shared space provides a moral justification for liberals to engage in a just war, in spite of the alleged liberal commitment to individual rights and liberty. Rawls writes that liberals "go to war only when they *sincerely* and *reasonably* believe that their safety and security are seriously endangered by the expansionist policies

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[39] Ibid., 9.

[40] Jimoh O. Famakinwa, "The Liberal Common Good," *Diametros* 12 (2007): 25-43.

of outlaw states."[41] This represents an attempt to safeguard the existence of the community by a liberal regime.

IV. Conclusion

Our conception of community can be roughly summarized in the following words by David A. Hardcastle:

> [...] the word *community* conjures up memories of places where we grew up, where we now live and work, physical structures and spaces – cities, towns, neighborhoods, buildings, stores, roads, streets. It calls up memories of people and relationships – families, friends and neighbors, organizations, associations of all kinds: congregations, PTAs, clubs, congregations, teams, neighborhood groups, town meetings, and even virtual communities experienced through chat rooms. It evokes special events and rituals – Fourth of July fireworks, weddings, funerals, parades, and the first day of school. It stirs up sounds and smells and feelings – warmth, companionship, nostalgia, and sometimes fear, anxiety, and conflict as well.[42]

The above shows that community is, first and foremost, a place, a shared space where all that are listed above take place. It is a point of social interaction. The idea of a shared space, which community traditionally conjures, has been redefined in the face of contemporary reality in the world of science and technology. Such advancement has revealed the whole world as a community, whose members are united by the common cause of ensuring the continuity of the shared space called earth. This global community is faced with common challenges, such as global poverty, global warming, climate change, global terrorism, among others. Establishment of such world bodies as International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations Organization (UNO), World Health Organization (WHO), to mention but a few, are some of the efforts aimed at fighting these common global enemies, thereby ensuring that the global community not only continues to exist, but is kept in peace, for it is only in this that individual members therein can flourish.

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[41] John Rawls, *The Law of the Peoples: With the Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 90-91.

[42] David A. Hardcastle, "The Concept of Community in Social Work Practice," in *Community Practice: Theories and Skills for Social Workers*, eds. David Hardcastle, Patricia R. Powers, and Stanley Wenocur, 94-129 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94.

This paper does not aim to determine which of the communitarian and liberal approaches is more plausible. Rather, it attempts a response to the probe "what is a community?" Given the discussion so far, one is amply warranted to submit that an adequate response to the probe cannot be in terms of the attitude of members of community. This, at best, may be required to answer another probe, namely, "how ought we to live to realize a progressive community?" What constitutes an appropriate answer to this question depends largely on what kind of community is in question. It may be true that some communities realize their essence through manifesting properties identified by Bellah. The paper has also shown awareness of some communities that realize their essence by the so-called silent consensus. Community is a natural organism whose existence is conceptually detachable from whatever happens in it. Hence, neither silent consensus on basic shared values nor argument about what the shared goals are – what is here referred to as the spirit of community – in themselves, makes up a community. They may only help to keep community alive and properly oiled.

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