Preface

The world of political theory has lately witnessed a remarkable revival of an old idea: the idea of community. This revival now takes an impressive variety of more and less radical forms—from traditional conservative to classical republican to social democratic to radical postmodernist—each somehow critical of the prevailing liberal individualism of our community. Liberalism, say its critics, is incapable of sustaining the civic virtue that is the foundation of a democratic community of free and equal citizens; it has impaired the moral lives of human beings by depriving us of certain goods that can be known only in communities (the comforts of “home,” the pleasures of common action, the nobility of sacrifice); and it has confounded moral philosophers by encouraging them to undertake an unavailing quest for detachment or neutrality. In this book, I consider the consequences for liberalism of our growing attachment to the idea of community.

Here is our predicament: we love our privacy, and yet we long for community. We are all somehow liberals, but from modern rationalism and individualism, which have liberated or corrupted us, there is no easy escape, and no return to traditional community is quite imaginable. So we must ask: in the modern world, “after virtue,” is it possible to revive moral community or republican citizenship without altogether abandoning our common sense that we are individuals, since this quality of the liberal soul is now inescapable, and even somehow admirable?

In this book, I defend a certain (classical) interpretation of liberalism against communitarian critics, and against critics who have been influenced by communitarian ideas. The liberalism that I defend is a cautious, conservative sort of liberalism, founded on the liberalisms of Locke and

Montesquieu. I argue that partisans of liberalism must now recover a prudent sense of the limits of liberalism, recognizing, with Locke and Montesquieu, its basis in a chastened disposition to take one's bearings from the great inhumanity of which human beings are somehow capable; and yet, Locke and Montesquieu reveal as well, I argue, that liberalism is an honorable doctrine, by which proud and spirited human beings vindicate their reasonable love of freedom. The liberal politics that I propose to defend is a politics of fearful accommodation among natural foes who somehow transform themselves into civil friends, by means of a sort of peace treaty that demands uncommon self-restraint or moderation ("liberal virtues") as the price we pay for public peace and private liberty: or, as Montesquieu says, it is the price we pay for "that tranquillity of spirit which comes from the opinion each one has of his security," where "one citizen cannot fear another citizen."

The communitarian critics of liberalism argue that liberalism is both morally and politically impoverishing. These arguments recall certain older "democratic" and "republican" assaults on the politics of liberty, assaults mounted in the name of equality, and of virtue. In order to defend liberalism, and even a rather sober interpretation of liberalism, against these more hopeful visions, I attempt in this book to locate the communitarian critique of liberalism in this larger context of enduring quarrels between liberals and republicans, and between liberals and democrats. And so I offer here several sustained accounts of various partisan quarrels between liberals (who love liberty), democrats (who love equality), and republicans (who love virtue). I argue that the case for liberalism against the communitarians has much in common with the case for liberalism against these earlier assaults. Beyond that, I contend that the unwillingness of contemporary communitarian critics of liberalism to embrace wholeheartedly the traditional arguments against liberalism manifests a revealing ambivalence toward liberalism. Perhaps the liberal vices that trouble communitarians are merely the natural and inescapable consequence of liberal achievements that even communitarians do not wish to repudiate.

Who are the communitarians? Perhaps one might say that communitarians, strictly speaking, are partisans of the idea of "constitutive" community: a community that wholly or substantially constitutes our identities, so that who we are is *principally* and *inescapably* constituted by our participation in the way of life of a particular community. From this point of view, Michael J. Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre are perhaps our leading communitarian theorists. But in this book I examine a

wider range of theorists, in an effort to reveal the effect of communitarian ideas on a variety of enduring ways of thinking about politics. Thus, although I discuss Sandel and MacIntyre in a few places, I focus here on three theorists who are perhaps not quite communitarians at all, or who are communitarians only with reservations: the *liberal* communitarian Richard Rorty, the *republican* communitarian Benjamin Barber, and the *democratic* communitarian Michael Walzer. Each of these theorists acknowledges that he is attracted by the idea of community, and each attempts to make use of that idea on behalf of more traditional (liberal, classical republican, and social democratic) ways of thinking about modern politics.

Walzer in particular is reluctant to be identified as a communitarian, and it is only fair to say that I have here offered a very partial portrait of his political theory, which is uncommonly rich and wide-ranging. And yet, the communitarian Walzer is a real Walzer too, and so I have chosen to confine myself to those texts that most reveal this communitarian aspect of his political thought. As for Rorty, who is a communitarian but not a critic of liberalism, I show that his postmodern bourgeois liberalism nonetheless signals the surprising encroachment of communitarian ideas within liberal theory itself. Perhaps the principal aim of the book, in fact, is to offer reasons why liberals should resist these encroachments. Finally, Barber's republican theory, which is the most formidable contemporary species of Rousseauian republicanism, reveals the influence of communitarian ideas within both politics and philosophy. As a consequence of his communitarianism, I suggest, Barber's republicanism is a greatly transformed republicanism whose aim is not virtue but moral comfort or warmth.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I introduce the main themes of the book: I describe the problem of community as it has emerged in recent years in the United States (which I shall call "America"), and I offer a first portrait of the liberalism that I propose to defend here. In Chapters 3 and 4, I defend this way of understanding liberalism against the erosions of postmodern liberalism, and thus consider the effect of communitarian ideas on liberalism directly. Chapter 3, an analysis of the liberal virtue of tolerance, includes a criticism of the understanding of tolerance advanced by Rorty and Sandel (among others). Chapter 4 is a discussion of Rorty's postmodern or communitarian liberalism, and in particular his repudiation of the liberal idea of "humanity." In Chapters 5 and 6, I defend the cautious, conservative way of understanding liberalism against two critics of liberalism, one democratic and one republican, who are also in some

measure its friends, Barber and Walzer. Chapter 5, which is an analysis of Barber's account of republican citizenship, contains a more general discussion of the problem of self-government. Chapter 6, an account of various ways of thinking about the idea of patriotism, includes discussions of MacIntyre's and Walzer's views. The question of the status of patriotism is now as always a particularly revealing measure of the distance between liberalism and (democratic) republicanism. Finally, in Chapters 7 and 8, I consider a further battleground in the quarrel between liberals and communitarians and raise the question whether liberal reason can sustain the moral life of a community. Chapter 7 is an account of liberal virtue and liberal reason. Chapter 8 discusses Walzer's communitarian way of doing moral philosophy.

It is appropriate here to acknowledge that I do not discuss, in this book, a number of important issues that any full account of liberalism must confront. In particular, I do not address any of the issues, raised by both critics and friends of liberalism in recent years, associated with race, gender, the politics of recognition, multiculturalism, and so on. And I do not consider those questions associated above all with the old Left, concerning economic democracy and equality (another reason for the partial portrait of Walzer's thought). These are important sets of questions, and I regret the omissions. But here I seek to understand the relation between individualism and community from within the framework which had until recently dominated discussion of these issues (and which remains, I want to show, still useful): that is, by recalling the enduring quarrels between liberals, democrats, and republicans. I should add as well that I do not here discuss the political communitarianism, associated with the new journal *Responsive Community*, that has recently attracted popular notice. For that communitarianism seems to me mostly compatible with liberalism, and even with the cautious and modest liberalism that I defend in this book.

Friends and teachers generously offered encouragement and counsel from the beginning, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to acknowledge their good deeds.

It has been my good fortune to have had many fine teachers, at James Madison College of Michigan State University, and at the University of Chicago, and this work owes them much. Among these, I express my gratitude to Richard Zinman and Nathan Tarcov. From Richard Zinman, I first learned to take philosophy seriously; he revealed by his example that teaching and scholarship could be the heart of a pleasant and honorable

way of life, at a time when I had other ends in mind. He remains for me the model of a dedicated teacher and scholar. Nathan Tarcov served on my dissertation committee; then and now, his friendly but skeptical criticism helped me to refine and enlarge my appreciation of the virtues of liberalism. I am among the many students who have profited from his example: his teaching and thinking are distinguished by a rare marriage of fearlessness and sobriety, the mark of a philosophic scholarship.

It is a great pleasure, though one mixed with sadness, to acknowledge my debt to the late Allan Bloom: a splendid teacher, a benevolent friend, and an indomitable champion of humane politics and freedom of thought. This book is dedicated to his memory.

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Liberalism and Community