

## 6 Communitarianism

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### **Introduction**

Can communitarianism meet the ecological challenge? In keeping with the purposes of this volume, I interpret this challenge to mean, 'Does communitarianism provide the appropriate insights, conceptual resources and norms to guide political communities along ecologically sustainable paths?'<sup>1</sup>

This question admits of no straightforward answer because communitarians are an unruly bunch who defy simple political classification. Communitarians can be more easily identified in terms of what they are *against* rather than what they are *for*. We all know that communitarians are critical of cosmopolitanism (see Linklater, chapter 7 in this volume) and the Enlightenment idea of Universal Reason, but it is not always easy to find a common thread in their positive political prescriptions. Some are conservative or traditional while others are civic republicans. Some draw on Aristotle, others on Hegel. Some communitarians have a theoretical affinity with postmodernism while others find common cause with realism. There are also some interesting hybrids, such as liberal communitarians, liberal nationalists and Third Way 'new communitarians', who are keen on rebuilding social capital so we no longer go 'bowling alone'.

Despite this political diversity, it is possible to single out one preoccupation that does unite communitarians, and that is a special preoccupation with questions of identity and the significance of social bonds. It is this preoccupation that partly explains their critique of cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and the diversity of their political prescriptions, on the other (after all, there are many different ties that bind people together). Communitarians are concerned with the nature of recognition or misrecognition, with how we are situated in the world,

<sup>1</sup> Note also that I use the plural 'communities' and 'paths' to acknowledge that there is not only one kind of community nor one true path. There are many types of community and many paths to sustainability.

and how this shapes and constrains the boundaries of our particular moral universes. Understanding 'who are we/who am I?' is logically prior to asking 'what ought we/I to do?' These questions can only be answered by locating people in particular communities, a move that fixes their place in the world and assigns meaning, roles and relationships (Taylor 1992). These questions are also considered basic to understanding how we ought to set our moral horizons and fashion our political institutions. In this respect, we might say that communitarians like to put the ontological horse before the ethical cart.

Now this preliminary account of communitarianism hardly amounts to a clarion call for the green society, especially if it is accepted that most environmentalists tend to be cosmopolitans. Indeed, communitarianism offers some mixed messages for those who are keen to see the flourishing of ecologically sustainable communities across the globe, rather than in isolated, intentional green communities. Nonetheless, in this essay I show that communitarians offer a range of salutary insights about the nature of social bonds and human loyalties that greens ignore at their peril. These insights are important when it comes to understanding the basis of successful citizenship and democracy, along with the more general question of human motivation for environmental reform. The sobering lesson for greens is that there is no point developing political prescriptions or fashioning political institutions that have no grasp on the nature of human identity and motivation. However, there is also a more positive side to this story: focusing on the way human identities are constructed can provide clues as to how greener identities might be created. More generally, I shall seek to show that it is not too difficult to develop an ecologically informed communitarianism by adapting the structure of communitarian arguments to green ends.

### **The boundedness of human identity and community**

Communitarians have been particularly critical of the liberal understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community or society. This critique is waged at both the ontological and the normative levels. That is, the traditional liberal ontology of the self as asocial, detached and radically autonomous is seen as *incoherent*. Moreover, many of the normative prescriptions that flow from this framing of the self are seen as *undesirable* insofar as they neglect or undermine the importance of community belonging and communal responsibilities by emphasising 'arms-length', impersonal contractual obligations over familial and communal ones (e.g. Sandel 1982). Communitarians are typically critical of market relations because they are believed to have a

corrosive effect on community life. (Greens need only add here that this applies to both social *and* ecological communities. Since this point is admirably dealt with by Mellor in chapter 3 of this volume, I shall not explore it here.)

In contrast, cosmopolitans typically begin from a normative rather than an ontological starting point: the idea of the equal dignity of each and every human being. Their concern is to develop moral principles and political and legal institutions that might see to the practical realisation of this basic moral precept. However, they are prone to skip over questions of identity or ontology or else assume that human identity can be easily reshaped by new cosmopolitan moral principles and institutions based on Universal Reason rather than loyalty or sentiment. Their concern is to develop universal moral and, in some cases, legal obligations based on our common humanity, which transcend the limitations of particularistic identities and communities. Like communitarians, not all cosmopolitans share the same political analysis or prescription (we need only compare, for example, Marx and Kant!). In this respect, we may describe communitarianism and cosmopolitanism as 'meta-ideologies' or 'meta-theories', since the tensions and debates between these positions cut across many modern political divides. These meta-theoretical differences revolve around disagreement about the proper starting point of political enquiry, the relationship between the self and others, and degree of malleability of human identity.

From a communitarian perspective, human identity is always *bounded* in space and time. This boundedness shapes and constrains the field of ethical and political possibilities; our ethics are correlative with the various particularistic, bounded communities to which we belong. Communitarians disagree among themselves or else are agnostic about the source and scope of this boundedness, that is, whether it is derived from cultural, linguistic and/or place-based ties, and how far it might be enlarged beyond existing horizons. Moreover, the different answers that communitarians give to these questions also provide clues to the kinds of political order they may support (whether traditional or modern, hierarchical or democratic). However, they all agree that there is something about the way humans are socialised that creates primary loyalties and makes it impossible for us to become fully fledged citizens of the world. While communitarians may welcome a cosmopolitan education, they maintain that, however far we manage to extend our circle of compassion for others, our most fundamental allegiances will always be particularistic (i.e. the family, the clan, the nation) rather than universalistic, and especially so when the going gets tough. As Walzer (1994) puts it, we are fundamentally 'tribal'.

Now it necessarily follows that if all humans belong to tribes (loosely understood to include linguistic, national, ethnic and religious communities), then attempts to develop a supra-tribal morality, such as new norms of global environmental justice, will always be fraught. Traditionalists, such as Alastair MacIntyre (1981), maintain that there is no universal morality, only particular moralities that derive from particular traditions. The Enlightenment thinkers had sought to break free from all-embracing traditions, claiming that reason would replace authority and tradition (notably the Church) as the arbiter of what was just or unjust. However, the Enlightenment standards of rational enquiry could not be met; people disagreed as to what principles all rational people might accept. So while we in the West may have broken from an all-embracing tradition, we are left with the problem of choosing among a range of competing and incommensurable traditions. In this context, liberal cosmopolitanism (along with other expressions of cosmopolitanism) must be understood as simply one more tradition. These insights challenge liberal claims of universality, anti-perfectionism and neutrality towards competing ideas of the good. The only place to look for moral guidance is the shared views of the good life, embodied in the social, cultural and religious practices of particular communities.

Those communitarians who have tackled the task of developing a supra-tribal morality have proceeded with great caution, offering only 'thin' rather than 'thick' prescriptions for the global order. For Michael Walzer, if we are to develop a minimal, normative code that is external rather than internal to particular cultures, then it needs to be based on the principle of 'respect for particularity'. As Walzer puts it, such moral minimalism '*leaves room* for the tribes' and for their particularistic versions of justice and criticism (Walzer 1994: 64). Indeed, the principle of self-determination is, according to Walzer, an expression of moral minimalism in international politics. While self-determination is typically thought of in democratic terms, it need not be. It merely means that the members of a tribe *ought to be allowed to govern themselves*, in accordance with their own traditions.

Insights such as these provide the basis of the claim that while thicker principles and prescriptions for global environmental justice may well be *desirable*, they typically won't work because of cultural incommensurability. This is not to say that human identity, particularistic communities and their associated moralities must be understood as fixed and immutable. Quite the contrary, communitarians are constructivists by inclination. Nor does it mean that communitarianism must always be conservative and uncritical. I, for one, consider that communitarianism ought to be both constructivist and critical. However, attempts to

expand human moral horizons must be sensitive to local cultures and therefore draw creatively on local resources rather than 'foreign imports' in any refashioning of ideas and practices – environmental or otherwise. This follows from the communitarian insight that ideas of justice (including environmental justice) are embodied within particular traditions; they do not stand outside or above tradition, as the Enlightenment thinkers believed, and as modern liberal cosmopolitans believe. Traditions, along with conceptions of justice, contain their own (revisable) standards of rationality, which have emerged out of a history of engagement (Walzer 1987). Here, communitarians join with post-modernists in seeking to get rid of the rhetoric of Universal Reason. For Richard Rorty, this 'would permit the West to approach the non-West in the role of someone with an instructive story to tell, rather than in the role of someone purporting to be making better use of a universal human capacity' (Rorty 1998: 57). Appeals to Universal Reason are not especially helpful to the process of consensus building in a multicultural world. Efforts to persuade others to interact with their environment on a more sustainable basis must speak across, and appeal to, a wide variety of human cultures (and languages). Wilderness advocates in New World regions have discovered this in their dealings with indigenous peoples. And those cosmopolitan environmental NGOs who have sought to negotiate 'debt-for-nature swaps' or local environmental initiatives in developing countries have likewise been sobered by accusations of 'green imperialism'. Clearly, we must learn to think of sustainability in multicultural terms, in ways that are sensitive to cultural difference.

### **Communitarianism in a positive green light**

So far, I have merely offered a few sobering insights for environmentalists. However, communitarianism also provides scope for a more positive commitment to environmentalism; that is, it is possible to work with the *structure* of communitarian arguments to develop insights that might ground ecological selves, and ecologically sustainable societies. As we have seen, the starting point of communitarian enquiry is the nature of human identity and selfhood. Communitarian ethics and politics flow from a relational rather than atomistic ontology whereby selfhood can only be understood in the context of the network of linguistic and social relationships in which individuals are always embedded. Community is thus a structural precondition of human agency, including moral agency, and the ideal of self-determination is necessarily a collective one, based on the idea of mutual enablement or mutual self-realisation of selves in particular communities. It seems to me a short step to

include ecological embeddedness in this ontological understanding of selfhood (e.g. Matthews 1991), to include ecosystem integrity as a structural precondition of human agency and to include non-human species as part of the community to be realised. To be sure, not all communitarians (and certainly not all communities!) have taken this step. However, those who have – many local environmental activists, bioregionalists, ecoanarchists and ecofeminists, to name some of the more prominent examples from within the ecocentric canon – have found it relatively easy to add the ‘eco’ to communitarianism.

Understanding human *motivation* in terms of bounded and particular loyalties is arguably communitarianism’s trump card.<sup>2</sup> So allow me to play this card for what it is worth before exploring how communitarianism’s apparent inability to deal with transboundary and global social and ecological problems might be addressed. Let me single out three bounded communities where this kind of ecocommunitarianism has, or might, be played out: the local community, the bioregional community and the national community.

### *The local community*

Local environmental battles, such as campaigns to protest against freeway extensions, high-rise developments, toxic waste dumps and the like, have played a prominent role in the history of modern environmentalism. One of the driving forces of such local activism is a strong ‘sense of place’ – a deep psychological attachment to a particular place or locale, which encompasses all that dwells within it. It is the deep and intimate knowledge of, and attachment to, particular places (rather than abstract knowledge of abstract spaces) that provides one of the strongest motivations to act to defend threatened historical buildings, neighbourhoods, parks, waterways and other local ‘heritage’ buildings or ecosystems. Threats to transform the locality are tantamount to an invasion of self and community. At the other extreme, a lack of attachment to particular places can provide the basis for alienation and vandalism or corporate profiteering.

For all the limitations of particularism (and there are many), cosmopolitans have never been able to answer communitarians on this front of the debate with a viable account of why humans might rally in defence of all humans, or all ecosystems, with the same degree of fervour as they would rally in defence of particular communities and

<sup>2</sup> Green (post-)cosmopolitans, such as Andy Dobson (2004), have noticed this motivational vacuum within cosmopolitanism.

ecosystems. The flip side of this fervour is, of course, the problem of NIMBY ('not in my backyard') environmentalism, which is also enacted on a grander scale by so many nation states. Yet we should not be so quick to disparage NIMBY environmentalism. Place-based activism enables the ongoing social and ecological learning that is required for communities to reorient their practices on a more sustainable basis. It also provides a fertile opportunity for active political engagement and deeper questioning. NIMBY environmentalism, according to Paul Kingsnorth (2004: 24),

*is becoming the struggle of the rooted against the rootless; a battle between those who believe that places matter, and those on the left as well as the right – who see local and national geography as an embarrassing obstacle to a truly global future. This is the struggle of the Mexican Zapatistas and the Welsh road protesters, the Landless Peoples' Movement in Latin America and the family farmers of England, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the No Airport at Cliffe campaign. Each time, the rallying cry is simple, ancient and deeply democratic: Place matters. This is ours. We decide.*

### *The bioregional community*

Psychological attachment to people and places need not be confined to the local. It may be regional or national. Bioregionalism provides perhaps the fullest ecological expression of ecocommunitarianism. A bioregion is literally a 'life place' and bioregionalists seek to 'reinhabit' life places in ways that avoid ecological damage and allow local nature to flourish (e.g. Dodge 1981). In this sense, bioregionalists take to heart the ecological insight that human animals – like all animals – are unavoidably biologically embodied and ecologically embedded beings. This acknowledgement demands the development of an intimate knowledge of the species and ecological relationships in one's own bioregion. Such an intimate knowledge provides the basis for both empathy and prudence towards the local life place, treading lightly, restoring damaged ecosystems and, as far as practicable, living sustainably within the particular bioregion. Bioregionalists believe that strong attachments to, and local reinhabitation within, the bioregion grow out of knowledge of, and dependence on, the bioregion. Whereas privileged social classes and nations have managed to remain relatively remote (spatially, temporarily, epistemologically and technologically) from many of the ecological consequences of their lifestyles, bioregionalists remain on much more intimate terms with the ecological consequences of their actions. One of the reasons bioregionalists have had so little to say about co-ordination

between bioregions is that, in the ideal bioregional world, all communities would look after their own bioregion, there would be no 'spillover effects' and therefore no pressing need for co-ordination.

One of the many problems facing bioregionalists, however, is that most human communities are tied together by social rather than ecological bonds, and these social bonds have no necessary relationship to the soft and overlapping contours of ecosystems (although many indigenous tribes in Australia tended to live and move within watershed boundaries). Moreover, we now live in a rapidly globalising world where the scale and rate of movement across borders (goods, money, diseases, people, pollution, weapons, seeds, television, music) has intensified. Cosmopolitans would ask: if trade and other 'metabolic' exchanges between bioregions are to be limited, what of the hapless inhabitants of poorly endowed regions? How to address inequalities of wealth and income? Of course, these same arguments can also be directed to defenders of the nation state. I shall return to these questions shortly.

### *The national community*

Attachment to the national community can provide another potential source of mobilisation for sustainability, although there have been few explicit defences of ecological nation building or econationalism. Yet, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has reminded us, capitalist print media have enabled the development of nations as 'imagined communities'; and they are often imagined as 'belonging' to a particular territory or homeland. This is certainly the case for many indigenous peoples. Indeed, Anderson explains that all communities beyond small, face-to-face local villages or tribes are imagined in the sense that each of us does not personally know all the members of the community. Although national communities may be imagined in a variety of different ways, they are always imaged as limited and sovereign. As Anderson puts it, 'No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind' (Anderson 1991: 5-7).

The environment is often imagined as part of the national community, and protecting (or exploiting) the environment can be part of nation building. Think, for example, of 'national parks', which serve as a source of national pride, or of native fauna or flora that are taken to symbolise the nation (the American eagle, or the kangaroo and emu on the Australian coat of arms). Both enable different kinds of 'environmental patriotism'. Think also of the idea of permanent sovereignty over natural resources, which emerged as developing countries sought to throw off the yoke of colonialism and wrest control of their own 'national' resources and assets, such as oil, timber and minerals.



The Nazi legacy is probably the primary reason why there have been very few explicit defences of ecounationalism as a source of ecological renewal and restoration. Indeed, it is more common to find analyses of the racist implications of ecological nationalism (e.g. Hage 1998). Historically, nation states have more typically exploited rather than protected the environment for nation-building purposes. Yet this is now becoming more difficult as environmental awareness grows. Environmentalists regularly exploit the idea of the 'national environment' to exhort or persuade. Just as national parks or native species provide a source of national pride (on a par with national galleries), the degradation of such parks or the loss of native species can be described as a 'national disgrace'. To the extent that these parts of nature fall within national jurisdiction, then we ('the nation') have the responsibility to look after these parts as our own, as a national public good. As de-Shalit (chapter 5 in this volume) has pointed out, thinking of the environment in terms of a 'national asset' does at least help to head off individualistic and purely instrumental orientations towards non-human nature. Many developing countries have exploited this idea of the environment as a 'national asset' as something that should be protected against genetic pollution or the rich world's hazardous waste.

Now at this point, the sceptical reader might say: nice try, but surely cosmopolitanism is the 'natural' meta-political theory of environmentalism in our contemporary globalising world? David Held, not Hegel, should be the movement's guiding political philosopher. Cosmopolitanism, like many forms of environmentalism, challenges the way boundaries are drawn around particular communities – including nation states. They all seek to transcend the norms of particularistic communities and encourage the application of more general, abstract principles of justice that apply to all people, irrespective of where or how they are situated. Indeed, bioregionalism and ecoanarchism have attracted concerted critiques from within and beyond green political theory for being out of touch with the forces of globalisation. More generally, developing effective political communication and co-ordination between different polities is crucial to resolving transboundary ecological problems (as it is in so many other issue areas). This challenge emerges most obviously among nation states, but it also applies to relationships between any bounded communities or 'tribes'. Walzer's thin, supra-tribal principle of 'respect for particular communities' (read: 'self-determination of the tribes') does not seem an obvious candidate for ensuring global environmental justice, even if we interpret this principle in democratic terms.

However, before we explore the case for destabilising or transcending political boundaries and moving beyond conventional accounts of

citizenship and democracy (via, for example, ecological citizenship and cosmopolitan democracy), I want to take one step back. While I will be making a case for cultivating wider social and ecological loyalties, I still want to defend the loyalties of particular communities, because this is where social learning typically takes place. So rather than begin with the best or worst cases of ecocommunitarianism (reflected in the character of the ideal bioregional citizen or the econationalist xenophobe, respectively), I want to begin somewhere in the middle of these extremes. Exploring the character and motivations of a reasonably well adjusted but not particularly worldly or active citizen might help us explore what it might take to move to a *relatively* more worldly kind of ecological citizen (since a communitarian would not accept that citizens can ever be *completely* worldly).

### A children's tale

The character of the Water Rat ('Ratty') in Kenneth Graham's children's tale *The Wind in the Willows* provides a useful entry point into an interrogation of the ecological potential and limitations of communitarianism.<sup>3</sup> Ratty is deeply attached to his riverbank. He knows its moods and currents, and its inhabitants, in all their particularity. Doubtless he would fight the good fight if it were threatened in any way. Ratty *belongs* to the riverbank, and he has little taste for travel or things foreign, as the following conversation with his friend the Mole attests:

'Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World', said the Rat. 'And that's something that doesn't matter, either to you or me. I've never been there, and I'm never going, nor you either, if you've got any sense at all. Don't ever refer to it again, please. Now then! Here's our backwater at last, where we're going to have lunch.' (Graham 1930: 10)

Yet Ratty is not a xenophobe, and he means no harm to strangers. He is a decent friend and a kindly soul – indeed, he is extraordinarily patient with the impudent Toad. He has a strong sense of place and a strong loyalty to those he knows. But his narrow horizons and wilful ignorance of distant lands and their troubles beyond the Wild Woods are unsettling. I suspect that no amount of tutoring in the principles of cosmopolitan democracy or the long-term fate of planetary ecosystems is likely to change his primary loyalties, which lie with his friends and his riverbank.

<sup>3</sup> The inspiration for using Ratty comes from David Miller (2000).

Ratty represents one of the more benign faces of communitarianism. He is clearly not a neo-Nazi. However, a cosmopolitan would say that Ratty is not the type of citizen we need to meet the ecological challenge, particularly if we take that to mean successfully tackling the global ecological crisis. Ratty may care about his own riverbank, but he is too insular to grasp or care about abstract notions such as complex interdependence, global environmental change, the ecological footprint and the increasingly skewed distribution of wealth, environmental amenities and ecological risks. The multifaceted dimensions of globalisation suggest that any environmentalists worth the name must necessarily be cosmopolitan. Ratty appears as the complete antithesis of the well travelled, well read, computer literate, politically aware and actively engaged cosmopolitan citizen of the world. Those who campaign against tropical deforestation, global warming or the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes or GM products are typically engaged and interact in political communities at multiple levels of abstraction – spatially, politically, economically and ideationally. In this respect, such environmental activists conform quite closely to the archetype of the cosmopolitan citizen of the world. Their compassion and concern extends not only to all of humanity, but also the rest of nature – non-human species and ecological communities included. (I must add here that I am acquainted with some of these selfless, frequent-flyer activists, who follow the environmental multilateral negotiations on climate change or hazardous wastes, and are therefore obliged to live out of a suitcase and in a permanent fog of jetlag. They have travelled everywhere, but come to *belong* nowhere, a sad irony to which I shall return).

Both archetypes clearly have their limitations, but Ratty is the foil for this essay not simply because he embodies so many of the strengths and limitations of communitarianism but also because I must confess to feeling some affection for him. Although Ratty, at first blush, may appear too insular and old-fashioned to serve as the exemplar of the modern environmental citizen, I think we have a lot to learn from him nonetheless. Although he is ignorant of so much, his life is grounded and he has a strong sense of place. More importantly for the argument I wish to wage, it would not take much to open Ratty's eyes to the world *since he already has a well-developed capacity for empathy* – something he has learned from his local community and environment. I would wager that his lack of interest in things beyond the Wild Wood stems from local contentment, not complacency or xenophobia, which makes him both lucky and rare. However, Ratty – like most people – could never become a fully fledged citizen of the world.

### A cosmopolitan reply

Now it is at this point that green cosmopolitans might wish to pull out their trump card: surely local action is insufficient to arrest the growing gap between those who generate ecological risks and those who suffer the consequences. The complex forces of globalisation have enabled the spread of ecological risks in space and time, and new cosmopolitan norms and political institutions are therefore required to ensure that the generators of these risks are held accountable to the victims. This is the essence of David Held's defence of cosmopolitan democracy, and he draws heavily on environmental examples to make his case. The uneven distribution of ecological risks has created a serious democratic deficit that can only be addressed by the development of an overarching global cosmopolitan law, or 'democratic public law' (Held 1999: 106). In a similar vein, Andrew Dobson has argued that we need to acknowledge new obligations owed by those who have accrued an 'ecological space debt' to those individuals who have been denied their putative share of ecological space (see Dobson, chapter 13 in this volume). Dobson has enlisted the idea of the ecological footprint as the basis for developing norms of global environmental justice that represent 'thick cosmopolitanism', and he has argued that the obligations we in the West owe to others for our oversized footprint is a matter of justice, not charity (Dobson 2004). Linklater (chapter 7 in this volume) has likewise argued that we are most likely to develop cosmopolitan emotions when we realise our actions are causally responsible for harming others and their physical environment.

However, a communitarian would say that whether or not individuals and communities take responsibility for causing harm is context dependent. Just to take two examples: an obligation not to cause harm to combatants is absent during war and it was mostly absent during the colonial period – in both cases because genuine empathy and respect for the other are missing. The fact that soldiers or colonialists might know they are causing harm is not enough to engender any sense of responsibility towards those who are harmed. However, the situation can change dramatically when the 'other' belongs to a community with which one identifies. Harm is important, but it is not enough when respect for the other is absent.

However, even where respect for others is present, it is still unclear whether those who can be shown to *indirectly* cause harm at a distance will *feel compelled* to take steps to change their own behaviour to prevent future harm, and/or to compensate for past harm. The huge difficulties in tracking chains of causation and apportioning blame and responsibility

are likely to mean that the situation is typically muddy rather than clear, and that people will not take responsibility in the absence of a clear line of causation that can be tracked back to their own behaviour. In short, the collective action problem here will inevitably lead to buck-passing of a kind that undermines the crucial motivation issue.

So the *primary* ecocommunitarian response to transboundary ecological problems would still be to work creatively with the moral resources within particularistic communities towards sustainability. Bioregionalists and other ecocommunitarians would say that buck-passing within such communities is much more difficult, and therefore much less likely, the more intimate the social relationships, the thicker the social bonds. In such communities, the basis for taking action to protect or help others in such contexts is a sense of belonging and affinity, not causation per se. It is precisely because social bonds are weak or missing at the global level that cosmopolitans reach for the harm principle or notions of affectedness, rather than the idea of our common humanity or our common planet, as a basis for moral obligations. However, Richard Rorty has argued that we cannot resolve this problem simply by calling it a conflict between reason and sentiment, or justice and personal loyalties, in the hope that the appeal to justice will exert some special pull. From a non-Kantian perspective, these moral dilemmas can only be seen as a 'conflict between alternative selves, alternative self-descriptions, alternative ways of giving meaning to one's life' (Rorty 1998: 48).

We humans belong to many different kinds of community, and the ethical obligations that we owe to others derive from the different relationships that constitute those communities. How far our communities and associated loyalties might extend in time and space will always be a moot point. However, the reason why human loyalties are typically more intense at the more embodied, face-to-face level is because this is how humans *learn* to become social beings.

Martha Nussbaum has described compassion as forming 'a psychological link between our own self interest and the reality of another person's good or ill' (1996: xi). It is something that develops in childhood out of intense attachments to people (and places) with whom (or which) we are in immediate or close relation. Cosmopolitans like Nussbaum, of course, are concerned that human compassion embrace all of humanity (while many cosmopolitan environmentalists wish to extend this to 'all beings'). Patriotism – love of one's territory and community – too often invokes an 'us' against 'them' that can easily degenerate into the neglect or humiliation of the 'them' in times of crisis.

Yet, wherever the circle of human compassion *ends*, it always *begins* with the local. The fact that cosmopolitan arguments must always work

by *analogy* with local, embodied relations (such as the family, which is extended to the 'homeland', 'motherland', 'fatherland' or the 'human family') is itself telling. The home, the family, the neighbourhood, the school – this is where we learn the meaning and value of self, society and nature, of citizenship and solidarity with others (sometimes including non-human others). As we have seen, capitalist print media enabled our 'imagined communities' to extend to nations, and further developments in modern communication technologies have enabled the development of a complex and overlapping set of 'virtual communities' that transcend traditional borders. But all of these imagined and virtual communities are still situated somewhere in time and space – they are not boundless.

Translating this discussion back to Ratty, without some knowledge and attachment to our *own* riverbank – to this riverbank, not any old riverbank – I find it hard to understand how one might be motivated to defend *other* riverbanks. The same can be said for concepts such as humanity in general or species or ecosystems in general. Without some knowledge of, or familiarity with, particular persons or particular animals or plants, it is hard to understand how one might be moved to defend the interests of people in general or species in general (since these are abstract categories that cannot be *personally* experienced all at once). And it is these formative, local, social and ecological attachments that provide the basis for sympathetic solidarity with others; the reason for caring in general and not just in particular.

We might say of our cosmopolitan environmental activists that they have selflessly forsaken their own personal embeddedness and sense of place in an effort to turn around the increasing dis-embeddedness brought about by the complex and uneven processes of economic globalisation. Ironically, then, the cosmopolitan activists are campaigning to make it possible for the Ratties of this world to remain content on their own riverbank (or else to discover contentment if they never had it before). They are acting globally *so that others may live locally*.

Now it might be said that the community of humankind is itself a bounded community that is situated in space and time. So is the planet as a whole. Just as newspapers and books have enabled our 'imagined communities' to extend to nations, photographs of the Earth taken from outer space by NASA have enabled many of us to imagine ourselves belonging to a planet that is finite, fragile and floating in a sea of infinite black space. Environmental documentaries invite us to think of the Amazon as 'the lungs of the world'. Wildlife documentaries bring exotic creatures into our living rooms, and teach us their habits and hardships. New media create new, imagined communities and new identities.

From an ecocommunitarian perspective, here lies the possibility of extending our sense of community, our sense of belonging and our sense of affinity with others. This extension must be both affective and cognitive, since the core of the communitarian case is that extending our sense of *belonging* provides a far more potent basis for political motivation to protect non-human species and victims of environmental injustice than does the more abstract idea of *affectedness*. The success of ecological citizenship based on the idea of the ecological footprint (Dobson) or cosmopolitan democracy (Held) presuppose, for their success, a sufficient affinity or social bond between perpetrators and victims for the former to take responsibility for affected others in distant lands. This is an uphill battle, and we therefore need to do a good deal of cultural work before the political work, the new institution building, can succeed (as George Bush Jr. has discovered in the case of Iraq). This cultural work requires ongoing intercultural dialogues of a kind that familiarise the members of different communities with the way of life of the other, in their uniqueness and particularity. This familiarisation process can never reach the levels of intimacy of our local attachments, but it can dispel myths and misunderstandings, and provide a basis for discovering common ground and working on shared problems, including ecological ones. Once the culture of relating becomes sufficiently familiar and respectful, institution building can begin. But this new institutional building cannot and ought not obliterate pre-existing communities.

### **A final word on democracy**

The discussion has finally brought us, in a roundabout way, to democracy. It should hardly be surprising that the communitarian understanding of democracy is based around the idea of community and belonging. The argument here is that democratic politics presupposes a degree of mutual trust and reciprocal recognition based on a common language and cultural identity (e.g. Miller 1995). Self-determination is a *collective* goal of a political community that presupposes a shared political culture and a sufficient degree of social solidarity to enable the pursuit of common goals in ways that transcend individualistic and sectional interests. The principle of self-determination *presupposes a pre-existing self*, understood in collective rather than individualistic terms. Where communitarians divide is over whether this collective 'self' is the national community, the tribe or the linguistic community. I think Kymlicka is perhaps the most convincing here in arguing that

democratic politics works best 'in the vernacular', that is, among those who share a common language and mass media (Kymlicka 2001: 121–2).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of the communitarian democratic ordering principle of 'belonging' is that the unavoidable and continuing character of linguistic social bonds enables the development of *societal learning*. Sustainability is an uncertain quest that requires social collectivities continually to adapt to new circumstances and challenges. Of course, social learning and mutual understanding can also develop within transnational communities. Take, for example, the community of scientists, state delegates and environmental NGOs that periodically congregate around environmental treaty negotiations. However, it might be said that political communities that merely coalesce around particular, transnational or international debates or problems are occasional and transient political communities where the prospects for collective social learning and hence mutual understanding can never be as deep or lasting as in territorially based communities.

However, for the more heroic cosmopolitans, such as David Held, national, linguistic or cultural ties should have neither moral nor legal significance, since the core question in any democracy should revolve around who is affected by decisions. Held believes that all citizens of the global polity should share 'a common structure of political action' understood as 'a cluster of rights and obligations which cut across all key domains of power, where power shapes and affects people's life-chances with determinate effect on and implications for their political agency' (Held 1999: 105). Only then can power be held accountable wherever it is located – whether in the state, the economy or the cultural sphere. These reforms follow from Held's analysis of the way the processes of globalisation have enabled sites of political, economic and cultural power – including states – to become increasingly *disconnected* from the consequences of exercises of such power. In Held's global polity, individuals would be able to enjoy multiple forms of citizenship at the local, national, regional and global levels. The world would be made up of diverse and overlapping political communities, and each layer of

<sup>4</sup> Such vernacular communities are seen as providing the primary forum not only for democratic participation in the world today, but also for the legitimation of other levels of government (federal, international). This is why politics that transcends the vernacular (such as that which takes place in Brussels in the EU or internationally) is invariably elite-dominated, and why mass opinion on the issue of enlargement of the European Union is usually opposed to elite opinion (Kymlicka 2001: 122). For all the talk about the development of a postnational constellation in Europe, the vast majority of environmental organisations are located at the local or national level, not the regional level.



political community would have limited jurisdiction according to a set of filter tests which are largely based on the 'affectedness' principle (Held 1995: 235–6).

However, the great danger of the affectedness principle is that it could be enlisted as a basis for *restricting* participation only to those directly affected by proposed decisions or policies. In this sense, the principle dispenses with the whole idea of community, replacing it with a set of abstract individuals who enforce their rights under a global law. Self-rule is achieved by individuals in possession of abstract rights bestowed by global law, not by participation in the collective life of particular communities. Abstract, legally mediated social integration replaces concrete social interaction in the demos. Understood in these terms, the principle of affectedness – applied without qualification – carries the potential to serve as a basis for exclusion rather than inclusion in political deliberations, preventing those who are merely concerned (as distinct from affected) from engaging in democratic politics. As Saward points out, the application of such a principle would undermine the very concept of citizenship as an inclusive, enduring achievement (Saward 2000: 37–8). This is not to say that 'affectedness' cannot supplement 'belongingness', but it ought not and cannot obliterate it.

### Conclusion

Nowadays, it seems both communitarians and cosmopolitans reject both a particularism that excludes the rest of the world and a cosmopolitanism that is blind to local attachments. Yet they reach this apparent consensus from very different starting points – starting points that have different ethical and political consequences. Ecocommunitarians would take particularistic communities as the primary point of focus for building sustainable societies, working with local knowledge and local 'resources' (both 'natural' and moral). This is not enough, to be sure, but it provides the basis for developing ecological selves and wider ecological affinities. Moreover, the task of cultivating wider social and ecological loyalties must happen in the only way that communitarians know how: building additional layers of *community* that loosen (as distinct from dislodge) the hold of local, national and regional affinities so that they may be adjusted to encompass a wider network of still particularistic relationships. In times past, travel was the best cosmopolitan education. In contemporary times, new communication technologies provide a powerful means of building new communities. In this way, our Ratty can learn about other riverbanks and their inhabitants beyond the Wild Wood.

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