

Interview

“Choice flows from how I interpret my identity, and part of my identity is that I am the son of my parents.”

Political philosopher > ZYRV] ; ŽDR_UM] talks to THE FOCUS about community and family, parents and children – and why *The Godfather* is his favorite movie. Any philosophy that sees the individual primarily as a member of various communities will have plenty of positive things to say about the family. The family is a school for responsibility and civic virtues, the nucleus of the state, and a corrective to the individualism of the free market. Last, but not least, it is also a school for humility.

A9@E@D+;ÔC86? 7C2?<



EYV 7` Tf d+You are seen as a “communitarian” but you don’t feel too comfortable with the label. Could you tell us why?

> ZYRVJ DR_UVJ+Well, let me begin by describing how that label does fit. I have argued against what I see as the excessive individualism of market-driven societies. And I have argued that a good society requires a stronger sense of community and of mutual responsibility than we often find in such societies. So I have argued for a

greater emphasis on citizenship, civic virtues and the common good. In that sense, it would be fair to call me a “communitarian”. However, the term “communitarian” sometimes refers to the idea that we are all obligated to adhere, uncritically, to whatever values the majority favors. I reject this idea. In many times and places, community has been invoked to defend uncritical conformity to hierarchy and tradition. Community, understood in this way, can be suffocating. I don’t want to be seen or interpreted as a defender of the oppressive aspects of community. My work attempts to articulate a corrective to the excesses of American-style individualism, and that corrective has to do with a greater emphasis on the moral ties of family and community.

EYV 7` Tf d+Are we to understand community as a place where the important questions are already settled and resolved?

DR_UVJ+No, by no means. One of the central questions of political philosophy is to figure out how to live together when we disagree about values, about morality, and about what the “common good” consists in. And there is no society in the world where this question doesn’t arise.

Some political philosophers say that because we don’t agree about big moral questions, the way to organize society is to try to come up with laws and policies that are neutral with respect to morality. In my book *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?*, I challenge this idea. I don’t think it is possible or even desirable to try to be neutral towards the competing moral convictions that citizens bring to public life. I think instead that the way to contend with the pluralism of modern societies is to welcome all moral convictions and to engage with them in public dialogue.

EYV 7` Tf d+But doesn’t that require a highly-developed culture of dialogue?

DR_UVJ+ Yes, and creating a culture of civil dialogue isn’t easy. We need to learn the art of democratic discourse. It doesn’t just happen; it is an educational project. What we need is a kind of civic education that includes not only knowledge and interest in public affairs but also the ability to engage in reasoned argument and debate about public questions and the common good.

The political parties have by and large failed at this, and the media now encourage the lowest form of shouting matches rather than reasoned deliberation about the common good. Our schools and universities need to see

xE` dVRd` _ Z_ af S]ZT RS` f e
SZX bf VdeZ` _d Zl R TzZT
d\Z] eYRe_ WUd e` SV
f æf dU R U Tf JæZReVUŽ



it as part of their mission to educate young people to be active, critically-minded citizens capable of engaging in public discourse about morally contentious questions. And the family is another institution that can shape and cultivate the ability of all of us to develop these civic capacities.

EYV 7` Tf d+So in your view, the community is a framework for debate. But how should a community deal with an individual who feels fenced in and wishes to break out and do something completely different?

DR_UV]+I'd say that what you are describing is similar to what happens in a family quarrel. There can be conflicts across and among cultures and civilizations, but the deepest conflicts and disagreements are often within cultures and traditions, or even families. Those are disagreements about how best to interpret shared histories, experiences, and life stories.

Think of a more mundane example. If you are engrossed in a novel or in a movie that is rich and compelling, you might have a disagreement with someone who is equally engrossed about what should happen next. You may even come to the end of the novel or the movie and say, "That is a terrible ending! Really, if they had understood what this story is about, they would have had a different ending!" And you could have a reasoned argument about that with someone. But it would be an argument within and about a shared narrative. The disagreement would be about how best to make sense of the story. You couldn't have that argument with someone who lacked familiarity with the characters, who didn't in some way identify with them, or who wasn't absorbed by the story.

EYV 7` Tf d+So despite that shared experience, we defend our position because we have chosen what we think is right for us. Isn't that closer to a more liberal position than you are suggesting?

DR_UV]+No, because our disagreement involves a clash of competing interpretations, not choices. The disagreement is not about what I want or prefer but about what is the best interpretation of this character, this story, this narrative. If it were just a matter of personal choice, then you could use the image of a smörgåsbord, where you choose what you like and I choose what I like – and there's nothing to argue about. But when we argue about what a particular character in the novel or in the movie should have done or would have done, we are really arguing about what is the best interpretation – of the person and the story, taken as a whole.

C6DF > æ
> ZYRV] ; ŽDR_UV]

> ZYRV] ; ŽDR_UV] h Rd S` c_ Z_ > Z_VRa` Jd Z_ "*" &\$Ž
9V def UZ/U Re 3cR_UVZl F_ZjVcdZj _VRc 3` de _
R_U d/TVZjVU YZl U Te cReV Z_ "**)" W ^ @i WdUk
h YVd/ YV h Rd CY` UVd DTY` JRcŽ 9Zl VRc]j h cZŽ_Xd
YV]aVU]Rf`_TY eV xT` ^ ^ f`_ZRCZR` ^ ^ gV^ V_d
R]eV` f XY DR_UV] adWVd e` dW YZ` d]VVRd R_
Vi a` _V_e` Wkaf S]Z] aYZ] d` aYj` ħh YZY dVAd e`
deV_XeV` ^ ^ cR] R_U TjZ] V_XRXV^ V_eZ` eV
af S]Z] daYVd/Ž
DR_UV]ħh Y` YRd eRf XYea`]Z]Z] aYZ] d` aYj Re
9RcRdU dZ TV "**)! ŁYZ` d]V]W aVcReVd gVj` ^ f TY Z_
eV af S]Z] daYVd/Ž 9Zl d/TV_eS` ` \ ; f deZTV+H YRed
eV CZYeEYZ_X e` 5` OYRd SVW_ eR_d]ReU Z_e
WVWV_]R_Xf RXVd R_U d`]U` gVc" Ž` ^ Z]Z` _ T` aZ/dŽ
9Zl]VTeV d/d` _ [f deZTVħh YZY ReeRTef a e` "!!
def UV_ed VRTY eZ` V eVj` RdV` WVdVUeYRgV SVT` ^ V
eV Wde 9RcRdU T` f cV e` SV ^ RUV WV] RgR]RS]V
` _]Z_V ih h Ž f deZTV9RcRdUŽ cV` R_U` _ eV]gZŽ _
Rc` f_U eV h` d]UŽ > ZYRV] DR_UV] d/Xf]Rc] XZjVd
Xf Vde]VTeV d/d R_U eR] dZ T]f UZ_X eV ad/deXZ f d
CVZŽ =VTeV d/d` _ 334 CRUZ` %Z` #!` * Ž: #!` " ! Ł4YZ` R
? Vh dh W\ _R^ VU DR_UV] eV x` ^ deZ V]V_eR]
Wd/Z_ Wk f dV` W eV j VRc` Z_ 4YZ` RŽ 9V Žl ^ RccZU
h ŽY dh` Xc` h`_f a d` _dŽ

EYV 7` Tf d+How does that help in deciding what to do? Take, for example, somebody inheriting a family business: does he or she have to accept the inheritance? Is he or she bound to continue the business in the time-honored tradition?

DR_UV]+Not necessarily. The person faced with the decision clearly has a choice to make. The interesting question is how one's past, and one's sense of obligation to parents and family, should bear on that decision. Such major life choices often require us to wrestle with competing aspects of our identity – our identity as the child of our parents as against our identity as having a certain calling that cannot be fulfilled if we take over running the business. Suppose, for example, that a child really has a gift as a musician: that calling is an important part of his or her identity. But so is his or her

identity as a son or daughter, or the grandchild of this long family tradition. That involves a clash about what is the fullest realization of any individual's identity. One of my favorite movies is a story about a family – *The Godfather*. In many ways, it is a story about the American immigrant experience, but it is also a story about the pressure that family and tradition exert on identity. There's a scene where Michael Corleone tells his fiancée that he wants to break free of the family business. But then circumstances conspire to draw him back. What makes this a fascinating story is that it says something deep about this human experience. You see

x> ZYRVJ 4` dV` _V
 dæf XXJvd è ScvR\ W\WŁ
 R_U_Z æVV_UYV
 U Vd_ ãR_UeYReZ_R
 hRj Zl YZl æRXVUj Z̄

Michael Corleone struggle to break free, and in the end he doesn't, and that in a way is his tragedy. I find that a poignant tale.

EYV 7` Tf d+What is it that enables families to resolve their conflicts despite deep divisions? Many companies would love to create that kind of cohesion in their workforce. Is it about creating a shared context?

DR_UVJ+The most successful global companies that I have observed go beyond a shared context and manage over time to develop a culture. I think that what is required is finding a way to translate a context into a shared culture. The term "culture" is borrowed from the world of anthropology and sociology, and we often think of cultures as histories of countries and peoples. But the shaping and creation of cultures is also an educational project. What distinguishes a context from a culture is the presence of some shared values, and those values have to be cultivated and developed. And this takes us back to the idea of education; developing a culture requires civic education – shared values don't just bubble up.

EYV 7` Tf d+When you talk about education, it has a ring of rational planning to it. But many families experience life as a sequence of twists and turns. In your book *The Case against Perfection*, you yourself called parenthood "a school for humility."

DR_UVJ+Yes. That book grew out of a worry that bears directly on the question of families and new technology. I served for four years on the President's council on Bioethics at a time when we were discussing new genetic technologies that would enable parents for example to choose the sex of their children, or to improve their height or their physical strength and ultimately to influence their children's intelligence or athletic prowess or musical ability. I think what is wrong with the aspiration to use biotechnology to create stronger, smarter, more handsome children is that it risks turning parenthood into an extension of the consumer society. It risks turning children into commodities. This is at odds with the ideal of unconditional love of parents for children. In the wider context of human life it is important that parenthood should consist of surprises, of the unpredictable.

EYV 7` Tf d+You can hardly blame parents for wanting to do the best for their children.

DR_UVJ+Yes, we want to do the best for our children, but it's an important fact about parenthood that we can't control how our children turn out. Did you ever see the movie *Gattaca*? It plays out a science fiction scenario of parents routinely choosing their children's genetic characteristics. Parents go to a genetics counselor to pick and choose the hair color, eye color, height, and skills of their children-to-be. Later on in the movie, there is a brilliant piano concerto being played, and you see that the pianist has six fingers on each hand, not five. You can imagine the parents saying "I want my child to be the world's greatest pianist." But what if that child really wanted to be a baseball player, and it is very hard to do that with an additional finger? Parenthood is, and should remain, a moral education in humility.

EYV 7` Tf d+What moral obligations do you see in families? And how do we find the right balance?

DR_UVJ+Well, it is interesting that the question of obligations in families has now been reversed in many ways, focusing on the parents' obligations towards their children. There is relatively little attention paid to the question of children's obligations to their parents. I think that is connected to the individualism that we were speaking about earlier.

