Chapter 13

Disasters and Communitarianism

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Abstract There has not been a sustained application of communitarian ethical theory to the topic of disasters, as far as I am aware. While there is an occasional reference to communitarian ethics in disaster management discussions, this does not amount to a philosophical treatment of either the contribution that communitarian ethics might make to the complex moral problem of disasters, nor does it amount to an examination of its philosophical difficulties and weaknesses. The aim of this chapter is to take a step towards filling this gap in the literature.

Keywords Disasters · Communitarianism · Morality · Justice

13.1 Introduction

There has not been a sustained application of communitarian ethical theory to the topic of disasters, as far as I am aware.¹ While there is an occasional reference to communitarian ethics in disaster management discussions, this does not amount to a philosophical treatment of either the contribution that communitarian ethics might make to the complex moral problem of disasters, nor does it amount to an examination of its philosophical difficulties and weaknesses. The aim of this chapter is to take a step towards filling this gap in the literature.

Disasters challenge ethical theories because they frequently exceed the grasp of our ordinary ways of moral thinking. Disasters pose ethical dilemmas by their scale and their effects. No ethical theory (with the possible problematic exception of act utilitarianism) has a template that neatly fits a disaster and prescribes unambiguously a sure course of action. So, my purpose in this chapter is not to articulate a communitarian ethical template for use in disastrous situations, but to look at the moral landscape that disasters produce from the vantage point of a communitarian

¹ For example, I have been able to find only two works that directly connect ethical communitarianism and the problem of disasters. They are Saban (2016) and Ackerman (2008).

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stance. From this view certain features will stand out and call for our ethical attention, features that perhaps other normative approaches miss or do not emphasize.

Additionally, as can be expected, the ethical challenges that disasters occasion serve to emphasize both the base commitments of an ethical theory as well its weaknesses. The critical question that I will pose at the end is whether communitarianism is an attractive moral approach for people grappling with the ethical demands of disasters.

I will first lay out in a somewhat rough fashion the main elements of a communitarian ethics. Secondly, I will discuss the many ways in which the communitarian moral view applies to the various stages of disasters and how this view highlights values that other normative approaches do not. In particular, I will highlight the importance of community in thinking ethically about disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, as well as the implications of the communitarian view for questions concerning distributive justice and disasters, and value conflicts between community disaster victims and non-community responders. Thirdly, at the end of the chapter, I will pose a number of critical questions of the communitarian approach to disasters.

13.2 What Is Communitarianism?

As with any approach to moral thinking and choice, communitarianism cannot be neatly summed up and described without philosophical controversy. Thinkers in the communitarian tradition subscribe to different versions of the theory and emphasize alternative aspects of it. For the classical expression of philosophical communitarianism see Walzer (1984), MacIntyre (2007), Taylor (1992b), and Sandel (1998). The philosophical articulation of the communitarian moral view was, in large part, a critical response to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1999), first published in 1971, that revitalized political philosophy and that fixed a liberal moral and political view as the dominant normative outlook in political philosophy.² In response to Rawls' work, the main themes of ethical communitarianism are articulated in the 1980s, and in later decades a political communitarian literature emerges that is less concerned with the niceties of philosophical debate and more concerned with a critique of Western culture. Consequently, for the purposes of this chapter I have chosen to divide my discussion of communitarianism into two parts. The main one is an account of the philosophical grounds of communitarianism and second part is a brief look at the political version of communitarianism.

²For discussions of communitarian critiques of liberalism see, for example, Walzer (1984), Mulhall and Swift (1996), and Avineri and de-Shalit (1992).

13.2.1 *Particularism and Partiality*

Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* offered an account of justice that was viewed by most readers as a defense of a universalist liberal political philosophy. By this it was understood that his principles of justice prescribed values that were supposed to have application to all persons, regardless of their particular circumstances, their historical period, or their social context.³ The so-called universalist hypothesis was seen as an essential element of the liberal worldview and was a main target of communitarian critique and shaped communitarian ideas on an alternative particularist social ethics. While Rawls's early work was a prime focus of communitarian criticism, other liberal thinkers who grounded their ethical and political values in universalism were also subject to criticism. For example, the libertarian views of Robert Nozick (2013), the liberal philosophers Brian Barry (1996) and Richard Dworkin (1978), as well as the capability theorists, Martha Nussbaum (2001) and Amartya Sen (2000), were all criticized for their universalist account of the source of moral and political value.⁴ More generally, any view that grounded values in a conception that purported to transcend the social and historical traditions and practices of particular communities were subject to criticism from communitarians.

There is a further epistemological dimension to the communitarian criticism of universalist liberalism. Communitarians are skeptical about claims to the authority of Reason, or of human nature, of universal human rights, and so on – each of which purports to ground and justify the universal normative claims of liberalism. Instead of transcendent universalist values, communitarians rather avert to the authority of practice and tradition that is anchored in a particular, historically located community. Hence, the critique of universalism is both that moral and political values are particular to communities and also that knowledge of these values comes from an education in, and participation in, the traditions and practices of a particular community.⁵

A consequence of rejecting transcendent moral and political values is that, on the communitarian view, the source of a person's ethical outlook, her normative view on the world, is anchored in the particular circumstances of her upbringing, and her ties to family and community. These are the values that make sense to her, that, as it were, illuminate the moral landscape for her. It follows from this that it makes no sense to adopt a neutral, *impartial* moral stance – in fact, such a stance is incoherent on the communitarian account. It also follows from this view that there is no Archimedean point from which to make judgments concerning the validity of one's

³It should be mentioned that Rawls disputed the communitarian criticisms and interpretation of *A Theory of Justice* and his *Political Liberalism* (Rawls 1996) is, in large part, a response to communitarian concerns.

⁴For a discussion of Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach in the context of disasters see Gardoni and Murphy (2010).

⁵This is not to say that communitarians think that criticism of ethical practices and traditions cannot be made. Instead, it is argued that criticism takes place internally to the culture and community in question.

own moral outlook. Impartiality with respect to moral judgments is thus also rejected by communitarians as a universalist liberal fiction. Moreover, the community out of which particularist values emerge is regarded as itself valuable. In fact, since it is the source of our values, the community acquires a central place in thinking about and addressing moral questions. The community's composition and its continuity are vital as the foundation of moral agency. Instead of moral objectivity or impartiality which are tied to the liberal universalist view, the communitarian calls for and requires an attitude of critical and reflective partiality towards one's own community and its values. This attitude of partiality towards one's own community, its norms and its historical continuity, will be vital to assessing the communitarian contribution to thinking about disasters.

13.2.2 *The Communal Self*

We have seen how communitarianism, in rejecting liberal universalism and value neutrality, anchors its ethical conception in a particular view of the self and moral agency. For example, Sandel (1998) has argued that Rawls's liberal argument depends on a notion of the self as abstracted from its social, historical, cultural, and ethical context. This "unencumbered self", Sandel argues, is required by Rawls's theory to choose between candidate principles of justice. However, in the absence of a particular social and historical context, Sandel argues that a person *could not* choose moral principles, since she would be stripped of precisely the qualities that make choice possible, namely, an agency embedded in and emerging from a particular community. People grow up *somewhere* and their moral self is the consequence of the practices and beliefs that structure their experiences. The liberal idea of a universal, abstract self thus became a foil against which a communitarian conception of moral agency was developed. Michael Walzer, in his influential *Spheres of Justice* (1984), for example, argues that the problem of justice must begin with the idea that people start out with a particular, inherited relation to goods that they inherit, as an historical fact, from their communities. He says (1984, 8), "Without such a history, which begins at birth, they wouldn't be men and women in any recognizable sense, and they wouldn't have the first notion of how to go about the business of giving, allocating, and exchanging goods."

Charles Taylor (1992a), focusing his critique on Robert Nozick's libertarian individualism, has described the universalist conception of the self as an "atomistic" view in which persons are understood as implausibly disconnected from a particular social context in which they are nurtured and their agency formed. Taylor complains that Nozick's idea of agency is a reduction to the idea of mere choice, choices untheatred to a cultural background that would make sense of them. He says (1992a, 47):

The crucial point here is this: since the free individual can only maintain his identity within a society/culture of a certain kind, he has to be concerned about the shape of this society/culture as a whole. He cannot, following the libertarian anarchist model he sketched, be concerned purely with his individual choices and the associations formed from such choices to the neglect of the matrix in which such choices can be open or closed, rich or meager.

The atomistic self that Taylor criticizes here is not only disconnected from its social background and community but also conceived as essentially acquisitive. The universalist liberal self is presented as rational in the sense of instrumental rationality, i.e. a self that calculates for his own advantage. Thus, the liberal self is not only adrift from community but also regarded by some communitarians as a threat to community by disentangling the individual from the attachments of their social background necessary for forming a robust moral agency.

Therefore, in summary, liberal individualism both as a metaphysical theory and as an account of practical agency is rejected by communitarianism. Instead communitarianism gives normative priority to the community and understands an individual's agency as an emergent property of the social and historical background that forms and shapes a person's scheme of values. It rejects normative justifications that rest on universal claims to epistemic authority and rejects a moral psychology that is grounded in an acquisitive account of moral agency.

13.3 Political Communitarianism

I want to mention briefly a movement in communitarian thought that is less concerned with the intricacies and details of philosophical arguments and more concerned with advancing a politically conservative campaign to undo what it regarded as an erosion of tradition values. Communitarianism as a philosophical theory does not specify which community values and practices are justifiable since, obviously, this will depend on the particular community in question. What I am calling political communitarianism has a particular agenda aimed mainly at Western liberal democracies and laments what it takes to be a loss of “community spirit” that is to be found in traditional conceptions of family, good neighborliness, local autonomy, and self-reliance. Possibly the clearest statement of political communitarianism can be found in the many works of Etzioni, and, in particular, in his book *The Spirit of Community* (1994). Lastly, political communitarianism is particularly skeptical about the value of the state and its agencies and frequently regards the state and government as interfering with local community autonomy. Again, this skepticism will have obvious consequences for the way communitarians think about the role of the state in the preparation for, response to, and recovery from disasters.

13.4 Disasters and Communitarianism

As I mentioned in the introduction, communitarians have written very little on the problem of disasters and even less on the challenges to ethical thinking that disasters represent. For instance, Naomi Zack's book *Ethics for Disaster* (Zack 2009) and her article “Philosophy and Disasters” (Zack 2006) mention a variety of ethical approaches to disasters, but she makes no mention of communitarianism as an option. While there are a couple of communitarian sources that directly engage with

disasters, which I will discuss below, we will have to rely largely on a construction of communitarian insights and, hopefully, this will be sufficient to get a general picture of a communitarian perspective on the ethical dilemmas that disasters occasion. For someone sympathetic to this approach to moral thinking there is fertile ground for further thought and writing.

It might strike readers who are familiar with the extensive social science literature on disasters as odd that communitarian ethics is so underrepresented in the philosophical thinking about disasters. After all, the importance of community is a common theme in discussions of disasters. Indeed, it is one of the attractions of the communitarian approach that it places so much importance on the role of the community. Liza Saban, whose recent work offers the clearest and most sustained defense of the value of communitarianism for thinking about disasters, writes (Saban 2016, 61):

.... An applied communitarian ethics approach in disaster resilience is both normative and a political framework for promoting administrative ethical engagement because of its emphasis on social bonding and participation, and, crucially, its commitment to community values and social meanings of needed goods to guide policies designed to protect and promote them.

She goes on to apply Walzer's communitarian account of social goods to inform her discussion of the role and ethical responsibilities of public administration officials in preparing for and responding to natural disasters.

Robert Ackerman (2008) employs a communitarian political view in his discussion of how to mitigate the effects of disasters. He writes that (2008, 2):

Communitarians value the role of civil society – the tapestry of voluntary associations such as civic clubs, neighborhood organizations, corporations, labor unions, religious institutions, charitable organizations, educational institutions, and even Robert Putnam's bowling leagues – in stepping forward to meet various needs in time of disaster.

It is this community network that ought to be the first line of defense when disaster strikes and what people rely on rather than immediately turning to outside agencies such as the government to meet their post-disaster needs.

Both Saban and Ackerman thus premise their communitarian approach to disasters on the central place of communities in the preparation for, response to, and recovery from disasters. It seems natural that an ethical theory that places a supremely high value on communities would resonate with those concerned with the moral challenges of disasters, where the role of community is so central to a successful response to calamity.

However, it is important to keep in mind that *any* ethical approach to disasters will value the contribution that community can play in ameliorating the consequences of disasters, but each approach will value community for different reasons. What we need to be clear about here is the specifically communitarian reasons for valuing community. In other words, we have to focus on moral particularism, ethical partiality and the notion of the communal self, and how these ideas inform the communitarian concept of community in the face of disaster. The value of the communitarian approach depends not on how much attention it gives to the role of the

community, but on the specific reasons it advances for the normative importance of community.

To get an idea of the distinctiveness of the communitarian approach we can begin by asking: What is bad about a disaster for a communitarian? The question may sound odd because its usual answer is so obvious that it does not often need mentioning. For most normative approaches, what is bad when a disaster occurs is the harm caused to the persons affected by it. Natural and non-natural disasters massively diminish victims' well-being, their life prospects, and their ability to function as citizens and moral agents. In most instances it is the aggregate of these harms that contributes to our calling an event a disaster in the first place. An earthquake in a remote and uninhabited region is not a disaster and an event that harms a few individuals is likewise a misfortune for those affected, but not usually counted as a disaster. The point being that what is bad about a disaster is usually understood as a summing of the direct and indirect harm that befalls individuals.

It is important to recognize that the communitarian approach goes beyond this focus on individuals and this is a major part of what would be distinctive about the communitarian approach. As we have already seen, the community itself has moral standing for the communitarian. Its moral worth is not merely its instrumental value to the individuals who compose it. It has value independently of its members. The values, practices, and traditions of a community have ethical standing and so what is bad about a disaster is not only that its occurrence harms some number of individuals, but that it threatens the existence of the community itself. For the communitarian, the calculation of the amount of harm occasioned by a disaster thus extends to the possible loss of the community itself. So, part of what is bad about a disaster is the threat of the disappearance of the independent good that the existence of an ongoing community represents.

The displacement of victims after Hurricane Katrina's flooding destroyed long-standing neighborhoods in New Orleans and is an example of a loss of community and also an example of the consequences for people who lose the anchoring sense of place and values that communities provide. Thus the measurement of their loss must go beyond their individual suffering and their loss of property to include also their loss of community. But still further, the fact of this latter loss is itself something ethically bad and not merely an aggregate of individuals' feelings about the destruction of their community life.

Beyond a concern with the preservation of community, communitarians are also advocates of the value of community in addressing and confronting problems such as disasters. In this they resist what they take to be the atomistic individualist view that, for example, a template of human rights captures the full range of moral problems and remedies. If the community is not only the source and anchor of a person's values, but also the necessary and binding connection that gives purpose and meaning to an individual's existence, then the community is the ethical lens through which disasters must be addressed. Therefore, once a disaster strikes, in addition to the threat a disaster poses to the existence of a community, it is the community that structures the ethical response to the disaster.

The communitarian view that the community is best placed to address the challenges of disaster is best understood from the perspective of the opposite view which is well-articulated in the philosophical literature and a view that is frequently aired by the press in post-disaster situations. On the philosophical front, Naomi Zack has argued at length that disasters create what she calls a “second state of nature”. She writes (2006, 76):

Disasters may block or delay and disrupt the distribution of necessities. Civilians’ inability to create in a short period of time a useful social condition that will sustain their lives means that some will lie, steal, and kill to get what they need to protect themselves. As a result, the second state of nature may more resemble a brutal Hobbesian condition than a peaceful, cooperative, and productive Lockean community. Such conditions of social disorganization require central authority for efficient reorganization and repair and for keeping the peace.

Disasters are *second* states of nature because the condition into which people are thrown by a disaster is temporary and does not provide grounds for the establishment of a new social contract. More relevant to our discussion though are Zack’s notions that, firstly, disasters destroy social bonds, secondly, that the ethical restraints of society are likewise destroyed, leading victims to “lie, steal, and kill,” and thirdly, that the proper agency of response to disasters is “the government”. Communitarians challenge each of these claims.

While the empirical evidence is, of course, mixed, there is plenty of research that points to community resilience in the face of disaster and, indeed, points to the value of social bonds in the aftermath of calamity. Rather than destroying community ties, disasters have often been shown to demonstrate the depth and value of existing social bonds. Nancy Rosenblum, for example, writes that (2016, 202): “Disasters bring to bear neighbors’ local knowledge, their experiences of reciprocity among ‘decent folk,’ of spontaneous rallying and improvised collective action.” Chris Gilligan (2008, 311) argues that awareness of the basic communitarian premise of the primacy of the community is “stifled by the formal routines of everyday life,” and that the ethical value of community is most clearly demonstrated precisely on those occasions when disaster strikes. He goes on to say (2008, 312): “In this sense disasters, perhaps more than any other kind of event, reveal that elusive phenomenon that Etzioni refers to as a ‘spirit of community’.”

These claims directly challenge Zack’s Hobbesian-like definition of disasters. Rather than throwing victims into a state of nature where their innate selfishness is revealed, disasters serve to reveal the precise opposite, namely, the fundamental social bonds that anchor a person’s values in a network of reciprocity based on a shared ethical outlook. Zack’s view is often rehearsed in a less sophisticated way by the media. However, there is evidence that “lying, killing, and stealing” (and, in particular, looting) is not the dominant note in post-disaster situations. For instance, Rodriguez, Trainor, and Quarantelli (Rodriguez et al. 2007) have argued that in the case of Hurricane Katrina, emergent prosocial behavior was the norm rather than the general criminality and looting that was widely reported by the media. They conclude their study by stating that (2007, 100): “The various social systems and the people in them rose to the demanding challenges of a catastrophe. Equally impor-

tant, the behaviors that did appear were overwhelmingly prosocial, making the anti-social behavior seem relatively minor in terms of frequency and significance.”⁶

Finally, political communitarians, in concert with the above ethical points, argue that the proper, and often actual, first response to disasters is the community, in its various formal and informal organizational structures, rather than the government. They go further and make the argument that the state’s response sometimes not only interferes with, but also actively opposes the community’s spontaneous, ethically based aid for neighbors. John P. Clark, for example, argues (2013, 201) that during the Katrina crisis, “the state wreaked havoc not only by its exclusion of citizens from the city and its failure to deliver aid to storm victims, but also through its active persecution of those citizens who sought to save and rebuild their communities.” This attitude is part of political communitarian’s general antagonism towards, and skepticism concerning the value of, the government and the state. Political communitarians would thus argue that the local community is best placed to respond to disasters, at least initially, and that the state should provide assistance, where necessary, in accord with the community’s expressed wishes and values.

One could argue that these examples speak in favor of the general communitarian proposition that the community, understood as the primary source of ethical values, is the proper lens for understanding and addressing the moral difficulties of disasters and catastrophes. It could then be argued that both the importance of community in mitigating the effects of disasters and communitarianism’s unique placement of the community at the center of ethical concern together support taking communitarianism seriously as an approach to understanding the moral dimensions of disasters. In the final section I will challenge this argument by claiming that the inference from the centrality of community in disaster mitigation to the adoption of a communitarian perspective is weak, at least as far as the limited arguments currently available in the philosophical literature.

13.5 Disasters and Communitarian Justice

13.5.1 *Distributive Justice Between Communities*

In this section I want to move on from how the larger questions concerning what makes disasters ethically bad for communitarians and why communitarians take themselves to be correct in placing the community at the center of their ethical concerns regarding disasters, to the consequences of this view for the practice of disaster prevention, response, and mitigation. While, as I have said, very little has been written on the topics addressed in this chapter, what follows is necessarily a construction of the kinds of things an advocate of communitarianism *would* say on these issues. This fact opens up an area for research since, as we will notice below, communitarianism

⁶On this topic also see Sandin and Wester (2009).

has much to add to important debates concerning the role of the government, first responders, public health administrators, and the medical profession in dealing with the practical issues of addressing the consequences of disasters.

I first want to look at the consequences of the communitarian commitment to particularism and partiality. In the broader scheme of philosophical and political debate, this commitment raises questions about the distribution of resources following a disaster. There are two dimensions to this issue. The first is the extent to which non-affected communities are morally obligated to provide aid and support to communities affected by disaster and catastrophe. Moral universalism with its foundational commitment to impartial moral judgment that does not distinguish between the ethical needs of persons based on their membership of a community, has no difficulty on this score. The distribution of resources following disaster should be based on need, combined with considerations of efficiency. The clearest example of this kind of moral reasoning is to be found among utilitarians.⁷ On the political side, liberal cosmopolitans likewise subscribe to impartiality when assessing the obligations of persons and states in addressing needs.⁸

The first issue above asked about the obligations of non-affected communities towards affected communities; the second issue asks about the obligations of communities affected by disaster towards other communities also affected. Once again, the universalist impartialist position on this matter is quite clear, at least in the abstract – partiality towards or favoring one's own community *merely* because it is one's own community is morally arbitrary and thus a moral fault. I should note here that there are universalist impartialist grounds for partiality in cases, for instance, where attention to one's own community is the most *efficient* way of meeting the most need. But, once again, *mere* membership of a particular community is not, on its own, grounds for moral partiality. A further caveat should be noted before I get to the main issue of distributive justice in cases of disaster for communitarianism. It is quite possible to be a liberal communitarian – that is, someone who defends traditional liberal values but from a particularist and partialist standpoint. In other words, a liberal communitarian would, in most cases, make the same moral and political choices as a universalist liberal, but for very different reasons. This caveat is important because what follows is a discussion of the moral implications of the communitarian position on partiality rather than a description of the moral choices that communitarians may make in practice.

On topics closely related to these two issues, particularists have argued, in the context of a defense of national partiality and defenses of patriotism, that community membership extends or intensifies the degree and type of obligation that members have towards one another. For example, David Miller has argued that (1988, 647): “The duties we owe to our compatriots may be more extensive than the duties we owe to strangers, simply because they are compatriots.” If we translate this into the context of a disaster, then it follows that, for a communitarian, a just distribution of resources for preparing for and mitigating the effects of a disaster could favor members of one's own community. In other words, partiality towards one's fellow community members

⁷For a classic expression of this view see Singer (1972).

⁸For a classical expression of this view see Pogge (1994).

can be justified and morally required on particularist grounds. Of course, this matters only in circumstances where there is a scarcity of resources or obstacles to distribution. However, the point to emphasize here is that the particularist and partialist premises of the communitarian position have important consequences for how to think about questions of distributive justice in the context of disasters. This is an area of inquiry and research that has not been developed in the literature.

13.5.2 Disaster Interventions and Community Goods

The ethical guidelines that inform the decisions and actions of state agencies charged with disaster preparedness, first responders, and those responsible for disaster recovery, are often expressed in the universalist language of human rights. This approach makes the assumption that there is a concordance between the ethical views of victims, state agencies, and rescuers in terms of their moral priorities. In other words, there is often a general assumption that the hierarchy of goods that one side subscribes to is mirrored on the other side. The communitarian view challenges this assumption and this has important consequences for how to think about disaster interventions all along the scale of preparedness, response, and recovery. If what counts as ethically good, as well as the arrangement of a community's moral priorities, is particular to its traditions and practices, then an argument can be made that outside agencies should calibrate their disaster interventions in alignment with those goods and priorities. The communitarian thus demands more than the usual community consultation in disaster planning and response but seeks a genuine comprehension of the particular ethical stance of a community and that disaster planning and response be appropriately tailored to the ethical needs of the community. In my view, this is the most obvious area in which a communitarian approach to the discussion of the ethical challenges of disasters can make an important contribution. Adopting a communitarian ethical view here would have significant practical consequences for disaster management that go well beyond the more abstract philosophical issues that have been addressed in this chapter. A detailed working out of this aspect of communitarianism in relation to disasters would be a welcome addition to the literature.⁹

13.6 Criticisms

There are numerous criticisms of communitarian ethics and I will not rehearse them here in any detail.¹⁰ However, I will consider a few issues that have particular relevance to thinking about disasters.

Firstly, perhaps the most pressing issue for the existing literature is its assumption that a concern with community and an emphasis on the needs of community

⁹ Liza Saban's (2016) work here is a useful start in this direction.

¹⁰ For a representative example, see Carney (1992).

members is *in itself* an argument for the communitarian position. As I have mentioned several times, universalist liberals have good reason to focus on the importance of communities. The evidence strongly suggests that engaging with communities, and sensitivity to their perceived needs, makes disaster interventions more efficient and effective. Another reason that a universalist liberal may place community at the center of their concern is out of respect for the traditions and practices of its members. However, these two reasons, efficiency and respect, are not communitarian reasons for privileging community. Therefore, merely pointing out that community is important in disaster management is not enough on its own to make the case for communitarianism. The case needs to be made by anchoring the importance of community in the premises of a communitarian ethics. At present, this has not been done in detail and counts as a deficiency in the existing literature.

Secondly, it is not obvious that placing the community at the center of ethical concern is always the right approach to the challenges of disasters. There is a persistent problem of defining the meaning of "community," beyond abstract philosophical definitions that have limited practical use. This is more pressing in modern pluralistic societies where individuals often have multiple connections across a variety of often loosely defined associations. Capturing these kinds of associations under the label of "community" threatens to severely dilute the meaning of "community" and thus reduce its practical and ethical significance. On the other hand, maintaining a deeper conception of community that requires more embedded ties and connections between members threatens to limit the scope of the communitarian approach to more traditional societies and exclude modern pluralistic societies altogether. While it is true that many philosophical and political communitarians are critical of modern pluralistic societies for their lack of traditional community values, the immediate ethical problems that disasters pose demand a response to societies as they are and not how they ought to be.

Thirdly, even if the notion of community could be defined in a satisfactory way, community membership is a crucial practical problem for disaster management. In particular, questions arise of who is included and who is excluded from membership? And who decides this question? If disaster preparedness and response is supposed to align with community values then whose understanding of these values counts? Who counts as a member thus takes on a great importance since it determines whose voice should be listened to. Furthermore, hierarchical communities, for example, traditional patriarchal societies, where power is invested in a few members, and many community members are excluded from power, pose a pressing ethical challenge for outsiders.

Fourthly, following on from the point made above, non-community members involved in disaster planning and rescue may face considerable ethical quandaries when their own ethical standards conflict with those of a community. In such instances, whose ethical viewpoint should prevail? While a communitarian argument for the ethical autonomy of communities may seem persuasive to some, it does not follow from this that non-community members ought to sacrifice their own ethical viewpoint in the morally fraught circumstances that disasters inevitably present. An additional argument would need to be made here and it would have to be a particularly strong argument to obligate someone to act in a way that they believed to be unethical. Once

again, there are numerous interesting and important arguments to be made here both for and against the communitarian position in the context of disasters.

Lastly, disasters are extreme events and expose ethical theories to apparent contradictions, conceptual confusions, and difficulties. Communitarianism is not immune to these challenges. For example, the sorts of community virtues that are championed by communitarians, in particular political communitarians, such as good neighborliness, family support, and community togetherness, are, in some extreme circumstances likely to lead to worse rather than better outcomes.¹¹ It would be a service to the literature for a communitarian position on these kinds of extreme circumstances to be fully articulated and defended.

13.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained the normative commitments of communitarianism and discussed a communitarian approach to thinking ethically about disasters. I also noted the limited philosophical literature on this topic. While a communitarian approach to disaster theory is initially attractive because of its emphasis on the role community in preparing for, and mitigating the consequences of, disasters, much more philosophical work needs to be done to fully articulate a communitarian approach and to respond to the several criticisms I raised above.

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¹¹The ways in which communities may become obstacles to good outcomes in disaster situations are discussed in Kipnis (2013) and Kodama (2015).

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