

Ömer Faruk Uysal, *Komüniteryanizmin Siyasal Ontolojisi*, Ankara: Nobel Akademik Yayıncılık, 2024, 177 p.

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Liberal ontology's¹ rejection of any authority limiting individuals has resulted in the uncontrolled expansion of personal freedom. However, the growing appeal of this tendency does not imply that liberal ontology is immune to criticism or that it represents the sole legitimate mode of thought. Indeed, in his book, *Komüniteryanizmin Siyasal Ontolojisi* (*The Political Ontology of Communitarianism*), Ömer Faruk Uysal argues that liberalism, by absolutizing individual freedom, undermines social cohesion by eroding societal norms, ultimately precipitating social disintegration. This work also fills a significant gap in Turkish academic literature, offering the only comprehensive exploration of the liberal critique of communitarianism.

Yet, it is important to note that the author resists the oversimplification of communitarianism as merely a critique of liberalism. As the book emphasizes, communitarian thought has historically been defined by its robust criticisms of

- 1 By liberal ontology, the author means a liberal perspective that shares basic common features such as the recognition of the individual as an autonomous being, the claim to universal rationality, and the prioritization of individual rights over social goals. However, the author also states that there are different types of liberalism, but it is likely that this generalization was made in order to express his criticism more directly.

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liberalism, which has, in turn, conferred upon it a predominantly negative connotation. The author, however, argues that communitarianism should not be confined to this role; rather, it ought to be regarded as a constructive and affirmative philosophical framework capable of offering a viable alternative to liberal ontology.

In this context, the author suggests that communitarianism provides ontological, epistemological, and axiological principles that challenge and potentially supplant the foundational assumptions of liberalism. He grounds his argument in the philosophical contributions of four pivotal thinkers—Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, and Michael J. Sandel—who are widely regarded as representatives of communitarian thought in contemporary political philosophy. Through their works, the author seeks to demonstrate that it is feasible to construct a conception of existence that prioritizes the community over the individual, along with a moral framework that champions the common good, as embraced by the community, over the individualistic moralities promoted by liberalism (p. 10).

The first chapter introduces readers to an attempt at defining communitarianism, grounded in a comprehensive review of existing communitarian literature. This task is significant, as it becomes apparent that thinkers often labeled as communitarians do not necessarily identify themselves in this way, and the literature lacks a generally accepted definition of communitarianism.

As previous studies on the subject have highlighted, communitarians primarily critique several aspects of liberal thought: the liberal individual, described as unencumbered by any allegiance or ties; asocial individualism, which posits that individuals can exist independently of the society to which they belong in terms of purpose, value, and identity; universalism, which disregards the unique elements of specific cultures; subjectivism, which reduces different conceptions of the good to the arbitrary preferences of individuals; and neutrality, which avoids taking a stance on differing conceptions of the good (p. 33). In contrast, communitarians emphasize that the community is foundational to a good life; that political participation is essential for individuals to lead fulfilling lives; that identity is shaped by social obligations and values; and that the self is embedded in social commitments and values that are not merely matters of personal choice (p. 35).

In the second chapter, readers are presented with a more nuanced exploration of communitarian thought, with a focus on the works of MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor, and Walzer. Drawing on the debates and arguments of these thinkers, the chapter reveals the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of communitarianism: First, communitarians agree that our place in community is crucial to the formation

of our essential identity. This is the ontological basis of communitarianism in terms of “the ontological priority of society” over individual. In other words, according to them, the individual is not the cause of the existence of society, but rather society is the cause of the existence of the individual (p. 69). On the other hand, individuals conceive, understand and interpret the world within the context of the society into which they are born. When it comes to our understanding of things, we cannot ignore the knowledge we have inherited from the society that existed before us (p. 90). Indeed, this assumption, which the author conceptualizes as “the contextuality of understanding,” establishes the epistemological basis of communitarianism (p. 107). Finally, society serves as the moral foundation necessary for the existence of morality. Even individual moral preferences depend to some extent on the existence of this foundation that provides impersonal standards of good and evil. Thus, good and evil do not vary according to our individual preferences; rather, the social context, which also influences our preferences, ensures morality for individuals. This principle, which the author describes as “the impersonality of the good,” is the axiological assumption of communitarianism (pp. 107-108).

According to the author, these three basic assumptions constitute the essence of communitarianism and make it a strong alternative to liberalism rather than a mere criticism. In other words, what makes it possible for MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor and Walzer to be characterized as communitarians are their basic assumptions such as “an ontology in which the community takes precedence over the individual, an epistemology conditioned by context, and a particular axiology in which impersonality is emphasized” (p. 47), on which their criticisms and objections to liberalism are based. Thus, the author claims that these principles form the communitarian basis of their thought (p. 108). Based on these principles, the author concludes that communitarianism is not in fact a negative approach to criticizing liberalism; on the contrary, it is a positive doctrine that is unique to liberalism. Indeed, communitarianism is not merely a critique, but rather a more robust alternative that can replace liberal assumptions (p. 108).

The third chapter delves into the limitations inherent in the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions underlying positive communitarianism (p. 110). One of the key criticisms addressed is the ambiguity surrounding the concept of society, which is central to communitarian theories. Some critics point out that communitarian writings lack a clear definition of society, while others argue that the concept is employed inconsistently or in unrelated ways (p. 110). These issues are collectively described as ambiguities, highlighting a fundamental challenge in communitarian thought. Another significant critique stems from the

tension between heteronomy and the liberal ideal of autonomy. Critics argue that communitarianism's strong emphasis on community and contextuality imposes a restrictive framework on individual thought and action (p. 123). In their view, this obsession with context anchors individuals to the present, thereby limiting their capacity to engage with universal principles or transcend local circumstances (pp. 123-124). The chapter also delves into criticisms summarized under the concept of relativism. Communitarianism's assertion that each society possesses a unique rationality rooted in its own knowledge and value systems, and its rejection of universal criteria for evaluating practices across societies, is seen by some as a pathway to moral relativism (p. 136). This perspective raises concerns about the inability to establish universally applicable ethical standards. Acknowledging these critiques, the author concedes that communitarian thinkers have not provided entirely satisfactory responses to these challenges. These unresolved issues are presented as the limits of communitarianism's philosophical framework (p. 150).

Nevertheless, the author argues that these limits are tolerable shortcomings. Indeed, this book argues that liberal ontology, with its overemphasis on individual differences, has uniformed all individuals and distanced them from social bonds. This situation has led to the emergence of individuals who are far from social commitment and feel no responsibility. According to the author, these problems caused by liberal ontology can only be eliminated by replacing it with another ontological thought, which –despite all its limitations– is communitarian ontology.

Beyond all these discussions, readers may find the absence of practical solutions for everyday politics and the lack of clarity on how the throne of liberalism can be displaced by communitarian thought to be important shortcomings. These shortcomings seem to be resolved by the author's limitation of the problem to the field of ontology. Indeed, the author argues that ontology is of vital importance to individuals. It is not known whether this explanation will satisfy the readers, but according to this book, the main problem today is that we perceive our own existence on the basis of a liberal ontology. Replacing this with a communitarian ontology as an alternative would be an effective remedy for this issue. Moreover, nowhere in the book does the author attempt to replace liberalism with communitarian practices. Nevertheless, the author does not deny that this might be possible for future work.

Another notable shortcoming is the generalization of liberalism throughout the book. It becomes clear only through a small footnote in the introduction that the form of liberalism being critiqued is, in fact, American liberalism. That said, the discussions in the conclusion may give the impression that the problematic of the text is shaped around the cultural shifts associated with American liberalism, including

elements often debated in queer theory. However, it is obvious that some liberals would not be in favor of this culture either. Therefore, it would be better to elaborate on this issue rather than simply glossing over it. Nevertheless, this shortcoming can be ignored because it does not weaken the author's main arguments.²

The extent to which the book provides practical solutions to the challenges of 'liberal ontology' remains open to debate. Even so, it offers a valuable exploration of the fundamental principles of communitarianism, addressing a significant gap in Turkish academic literature. Moreover, the author goes beyond merely addressing this gap, inviting readers unfamiliar with the subject to explore alternative philosophical perspectives. Although the framework for its concrete proposals is not as clear as its abstract criticisms, this book stands out as the most comprehensive analysis of communitarianism written in Turkish for those interested in communitarian thought.

References

Uysal, Ö. F. (2024). Communitarianism: A Corrective or an Alternative?. *İnsan ve Toplum*, 14(3), 109-122. <https://dx.doi.org/10.12658/M0740>

2 At this point, it should be noted that in an article in which the author expresses his main claims about communitarianism in a more concentrated way, the issue of queer culture is not mentioned at all (see Uysal, 2024).