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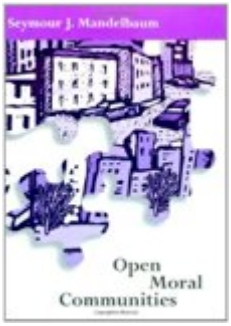
Seymour Mandelbaum. *Open Moral Communities.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000. 240 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-262-13365-4.



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Pluralism, postmodernism, and other relativist philosophies must struggle with a common challenge. If relativism is indeed, as a popular view characterizes it, the philosophy of different strokes for different folks, how do relativists and pluralists prevent themselves from falling into the abyss of nihilism? How do they make decisions? How do they act?

The typical philosophical response to these questions is to start with epistemology and to then try and show the possibility of action, usually by limiting the reach of the philosophy. For instance, cultural relativists allow for the possibility of action by allowing judgments within a culture and by denying their legitimacy between cultures. In Open Moral Communities (*OMC*), Seymour Mandelbaum takes a decidedly different approach. OMC is about communities: what they mean, how they arise, what role they play. But if communities are the answer, what is the question? In my view, OMC's larger contribution is in developing an innovative response to the tension between relativism and action.

Mandelbaum knows -- and we know -- that even the most committed relativists and communitarians can act without giving up their philosophies. Thus, the task is not so much to salvage the philosophy of relativism as it is to understand how, through various professional practices, this dilemma is resolved. Said differently, professional practices embody the profession's response to a situation and the sociology of these practices can teach us about a profession's capacities.

The practices themselves come from different settings. A police Department's search for answers after a police action in Philadelphia provides one setting. A land-use planning dispute in New Jersey provides another. The conversations among the community of planning theorists about their practices provides yet another, and an investigation of plans for a city yields insights into how this tension gets codified. Together, these practices are the grist for Mandelbaum's mill as OMC struggles to provide a coherent account of how communities insulate themselves and yet can be outward looking as they grapple with serious issues that confront them.

We don't have to go far into the cases to recognize Mandelbaum's communitarian stripes. OMC's message is loud and clear: To understand how decisions are reached in a pluralistic environment, first understand what constitutes community in that environment and then see how competing demands of different communities get negotiated. But this is hardly new. Communitarianism is clearly the ascendant philosophy in the social sciences and the professions and is home to a diverse group of philosophers that includes Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer. So, the question is: what is distinctive about Mandelbaum's position?

One way of assessing this is to ask how communitarian positions differ in the role that they accord to reason and rationality in their philosophy. This is Amartya Sen's question in his Romanes lectures of 1988. We know, Sen tells us, that communities create social identities that fundamentally impact human activities. But, does this mean that reason is simply a derivative of social identity and that there is no real choice in how identities develop? Some strong versions of communitarianism maintain exactly this position by saying that rationality is always someone's, i.e., some community's, while other communitarians leave room for a more general notion of reason in the formation of social identity. Mandelbaum evades this debate rather skillfully. Instead of rationality, he opts for sensibility. Sensibilities are shared over a community and sometimes even across communities and although OMC is silent about how sensibility, reason, and rationality are linked, one possibility is to treat sensibility as an action-oriented reason. This is an important turn. It allows OMC to go beyond the philosophical problem to the sociological one. Rather than having to explain how rationality yields contextual knowledge, Mandelbaum can delve into an examination of practices. Since sensibilities as action-oriented reason start as contextual and hence communitarian, the issue that dominates philosophy is a non-issue for OMC. It also sets Mandelbaum apart from other communitarian theorists, for instance Charles Taylor, for whom community evolves through a dialogical reason, i.e., one that presumes the context of a dialog.

There is more. Responding to the crucial question of how communities partition themselves, Mandelbaum draws on three ideas that he gives the status of myths. A myth is something that is not realizable, but it is not incorrect either. Folklore, for example, has a mythical quality to it: although not verifiable, it is worthy of belief. The three myths in OMC define the nature of communities as contractual, deep, and open. The myths perform an instrumental function in allowing a pluralistic philosophy from becoming unbridled relativism. For instance, a homeowners association is a contract that brings stability and comfort in an environment that might otherwise be chaotic. One might think of it as a constraint although there are good examples to show that it is not unchangeable. Similarly, deep bonds between members of a family (community) can put on hold the constant questioning that a relativist position implies, although we know that no bond is so deep as not to be broken. Most professional societies (read communities) have open membership policies yet prudence, expediency, market conditions that demand tougher membership standards, and such other demands can bring closure to their boundaries.

All in all, Mandelbaum's attention is lavished on the many mundane yet important practices that comprise our daily lives. His style is to examine these practices and to see them as cogs that uphold his communitarian perspective. That the expanse of what he regards as practice is capacious allows Mandelbaum to address some of these issues not only from a historian's or a sociologist's empirical perspective but from a philosophical one as well. OMC is both a description of how the world works and also a normative model of how we should imagine ourselves as simultaneously belonging to many different communities.

The normative stance is certainly not new but it holds water because Mandelbaum recognizes the danger of indecision that it poses and shows how the commitment to open moral communities can help us to negotiate this risk.

Reference:

Sen, Amartya. ***Reason Before Identity*** (The Romanes Lecture for 1998). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.