

*Intercollegiate Studies Institute International Student Essay Contest:
“Can Character and Communities Survive in an Age of Globalization?”*

A Conflict of the Good

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Introduction

Globalization transforms the world. Global markets replace the local; popular culture replaces the traditional; secular values replace the religious. Levels of wealth, health, prosperity, income, and personal freedom increase because of the forces that globalization unlocks.

Globalization not only brings many changes, however, but also brings many arguments over these changes. These arguments range widely, yet perhaps their most interesting aspect is this: even when two people agree that globalization brings a single change, they often disagree regarding its moral quality. Both see the same thing, yet one sees evil while the other sees good.

It is because these judgments are more ethical than economic that the debate over globalization is often interminable. As a fruitful argument over geometry cannot advance without a shared set of geometric postulates, so also a fruitful argument over globalization cannot advance without a shared set of moral principles, a set that communitarians and globalists lack. Furthermore, as I will show, any search for this hypothetical set of shared principles will fail: community and globalization are built on fundamentally disparate philosophies that offer only opposing views regarding the end of society and, ultimately, regarding the end of man himself. It is only by looking at this hidden struggle that we can truly understand the visible; it is only by looking at this struggle that we can understand how true character and community can survive in an age of globalization.

A small error in principle is a great error in conclusion.¹ Thus, the first step of this essay will be to describe carefully and exactly the essences of community and globalization. The second part will then use these descriptions to analyze how and why globalization and community conflict with each other. Finally, by this analysis, the third part will reveal the only way in which character and community can thrive amidst and despite an increasingly globalized world.

1: Community and Globalization

Every community exists for some function: as Aristotle writes, men come together only to gain some good.² A true community is therefore not simply an aggregate of people unified by place, but a society unified by purpose. As the organs in an animal have more unity than a heap of stones, so too the groups in a community have more unity than a mass of men: in both cases, the parts work as a whole for the end of the whole. Because of this, no community can exist simply for community's sake; as an animal starves if it seeks no food, so also does a community perish if it seeks no end. As Nisbet has observed, community must either perform some function or die.³

This function's nature separates communities from other associations. A community's function, or end, is internal, not external, to the community: one cannot characterize it without also characterizing the means used to reach it.⁴ These means are closely bound to the

¹Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, trans. J.L. Stocks, in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W.D. Ross, vol. 1, Great Books of the Western World, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 8 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 362.

²Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W.D. Ross, vol. 2, Great Books of the Western World, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 9 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 445.

³Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (Oakland, CA: ICS Press, 1990), 52-59.

⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 184, 187-188.

community's end because this end does not consist in making something but in making its members into something. Communities, in other words, exist not primarily for their members to make or to do something perfectly but for their members to reach some perfection. Any human perfection, however, arises from repeated actions corresponding to this perfection;⁵ this is why every community trains its members. In short, every community exists to lead its members to virtue.

It is for this reason that an objective idea of the good is essential to each community. Community could no more build virtue on a shifting idea than an architect could build a structure on a shifting foundation. This absolute aspect of the good gives community its strength, for men are willing to sacrifice for something, not because they believe it advantageous, but because they believe it right. For this reason, the value to which the community is dedicated comes not from the assent of the community but from something entirely external to it. If a community does not have this assurance of its purpose, it will soon die, for no one acts for anything in which one does not believe. To survive, therefore, a community must have some unchanging, objective standard of the good; as Nisbet writes, it must have some dogma.⁶

This framework of community, though small, may nevertheless be profitably compared to globalization.

Globalization always increases the number of choices available to men: by shrinking the world, it expands man's range of action, as globalization's progress throughout history shows. Before widespread globalization, the world was divided by embargoes, tariffs, taboos, censorships, oceans, and distances; trade in products and ideas occurred primarily within these

⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, The Great Books Series, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 9 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 349.

⁶Robert Nisbet, *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 23.

divisions. Globalization, however, destroys the economic, political, and cultural walls that separate men from men and thereby increases the number of choices available to men.

Globalization, no matter what its form, obliterates barriers and allows men to move freely in a spacious sphere of opportunity.

The result of this freedom is greater efficiency and productivity. All may enter the market; all may compete; all, therefore, must work harder to reach every business's goal: to make and to keep a customer.⁷ If one does this poorly, one's business will fail; if one does this well, one's business can thrive. For this reason, productivity around the world has exploded in the last century. Businesses have increased productivity by human ingenuity, by outsourcing production, by better organization, and by other means; they respond to customer's desires quickly, compete for customers skillfully, and respond to changing tastes rapidly. One might list examples for many pages, but the overall principle is too well known to need further explanation: by rewarding the efficient and by punishing the inefficient with astounding rapidity, globalization makes the world a far more efficient and productive place.

It is difficult to see how increased efficiency and productivity could conflict with the goals and ends of community. To this conflict, therefore, I now turn.

2: The Problem

It seems that any conflict between globalization and community must only be superficial; indeed, it seems that globalization would help more than it would hinder communities.

Globalized nations often see vast increases in wealth, prosperity, productivity, and efficiency, for globalization promises and delivers an abundance of goods from which people may choose.

These goods can save and indeed have saved some communities from famine and death. One cannot minimize the importance of this aspect of globalization; it is an unforgettable testimony to

⁷Theodore Levitt, *Marketing Imagination* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 5.

the dynamic power of the global economy. Nevertheless, it is not despite this power but because of it that globalization harms communities.

This is plain when one considers the ways in which globalization might increase efficiency. The first way is by spurring innovation and creativity. The other is by moving men to center their lives about work, for when work replaces family, religion, and local community as the hinge of life, one naturally becomes more efficient. Globalization therefore provides an incentive to subordinate the values of community to those of efficiency and productivity. In the communal ideal, on the other hand, the pursuit of virtue is superior to the pursuit of wealth. As Joseph Pieper writes, the classical belief is that we should toil that we may rest and not rest that we may toil.⁸ Globalization inverts this order: time for community is secondary to time for work. Many examples could be given: many people, for instance, know fathers who almost see their children more during their week of vacation than during the rest of the year. In this and like ways, subordinating community to business becomes the normal situation in the globalized world because it is the model of efficiency. Subordinating business to community becomes the exception, for globalization often punishes those who fail to adhere to its standard. As Pieper writes, this entire process leads to man's bondage to "the whole process of usefulness . . . in such a way that the whole life of the working human being is consumed."⁹ The phenomenon of retirees restarting their jobs out of boredom illustrates this point well: they have subordinated all goals to the pursuit of wealth for so long that they have lost the ability to pursue other goals. Globalization increases efficiency. For men to give all for efficiency, however, they must give up all community.

⁸Joseph Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary, with an introduction by Roger Scruton (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 4-6.

⁹*Ibid.*, 42.

Obviously, this search for efficiency does not take up all leisure; nevertheless, the leisure that remains is subtly transformed. This is because a company's success does not consist in simply making products; as stated, business success consists in making and keeping customers. From Mandeville's infamous contention that private vices produce public benefits,¹⁰ however, it is but a short step to the insight that the production of vice is in businesses' interests. For this reason, driven by ever-greater competition for the consumer, globalization has spurred businesses to devise sophisticated advertising techniques that, when viewed from the standards of most communities, are the most corrupting of all history. It is not in the interests of car, clothing, or diet food companies to promote moderation, modesty, and temperance but ostentation, vanity, and gluttony. It is easy to confirm this by viewing advertisements: many appeal to vice but almost none appeal to virtue. From the perspective of community, then, globalization serves to lure men from perfection to pleasure. A hypothetical scenario easily captures the conflict of interest between community and company: a head of marketing must do everything he can to sell his company's video games or lose efficiency; nevertheless, that same man will surely be less than thrilled if his son begins to play those same video games eight hours a day.

A globalist here would surely object that this is an unfair characterization of globalization. Globalization simply gives people what they want. If people do not want to adhere to what community calls virtue, it is not globalization's fault but the fault of the people.

¹⁰Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 2 vols., with a Commentary Critical, Historical, and Explanatory by F.B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988, accessed 10 December 2007); available from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1863>.

Globalization is no more at fault for the fall of community than is a grocer for the gluttony of a customer: each simply provides something good that can be misused.

This response is valid within the philosophical framework of globalization, for in this framework nothing is objectively good. As Mises says, no one is qualified to judge what another should do because no one can say what will make another happy.¹¹ The search for absolute ends and the best way to happiness always ends in arbitrary decisions.¹² Globalization, therefore, seems better than community, for it removes men from arbitrary societal and legal pressures and delivers them into nearly complete freedom from coercion. In a world such as this, where only the action of desiring makes something desirable,¹³ no one could object to globalization; it allows each person to act as he wants, and thereby allows him to choose that which will best lead him to happiness.

This response is invalid, however, within the philosophical framework of community. Each community possesses some ideal of virtue; the attainment of this ideal, according to the community, perfects man and makes him truly happy. This ideal is not good because anyone has chosen it: instead, people ought to choose it because it is good. For this reason, increasing the number of available choices is not an unqualified good: if it leads people from virtue, it is an evil. To say that this means that a community must force virtue on people is to caricature community, for forced virtue is not virtue. One cannot force a plant to grow, but one can nourish it. A community's ideal of freedom is not, therefore, freedom from coercion so as much as it is freedom for excellence. Within this ideal, rules are no longer arbitrary fetters that hold one back

¹¹Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action*, 4th ed., rev. [book online] (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1996, accessed 14 December 2007); available from www.mises.org/humanaction/pdf/humanaction.pdf; Internet.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

from self-fulfillment, but the guides that allow one to reach it.¹⁴ Neither is authority burdensome, for it rules for the good of the governed, not for the good of the ruler.¹⁵ Rules and authority limit and shape choices; nevertheless, they train men for their own good and lead them to true excellence.

Therefore, the ultimate principles behind globalization and community are irreconcilable. The former is based on the idea that each individual can determine his own good, and that the best way to ensure happiness is to multiply choices and remove obstacles. The latter is based on the idea that each individual should seek some preexisting good, and that the best way to ensure happiness is to train men to strive for it. The former believes something is good because it is desired; the latter believes something is desirable because it is good. One believes man creates his end by himself; the other believes man is created for his end by Another.

This is the ultimate difference between community and globalization. It is not superficial. It is so profound, in fact, that ultimately there is only one thing that can allow community to survive in an age of globalization.

3: The Solution

The state is not the solution. Large modern states cannot help their citizens towards one ideal because no large modern state possesses only one ideal. Nevertheless, the state can help by leaving communities alone; this is not identical with simply leaving individuals alone, however. Instead, this means that the state must not usurp the natural powers and functions of communities such as family or village.¹⁶ Acts of these sorts have spurred the decline of communities

¹⁴*Aquinas: Political Writings*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 96-98.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 78-80.

¹⁶Joshua P. Hochschild, "Globalization: Ancient and Modern," *The Intercollegiate Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 45-46.

before;¹⁷ today, similar assaults attack the family. In many places, parents grow increasingly powerless to affect what their children learn, with whom they meet, or what they do. It is through these actions that a family traditionally hands down the values necessary for its existence; without the ability to exercise them, the family soon perishes. Likewise, it is absurd to expect a small village to exist as a community when it lacks the ability to govern itself in more than the most trivial matters. When community is neither stunted by something that has appropriated its natural tasks, nor fettered by something that prevents it from performing them, then it will have an opportunity to thrive.

Nevertheless, this is neither a sufficient, nor ultimately a necessary condition for a community's success, for it presupposes healthy communities that may fill the void left by the government's retreat. This brings us to the one thing that might allow a community to survive despite the most oppressive government intervention or the most rampant globalization: the community's idea of the good.

Only an idea of the good permits a community to exist, as we have seen, for without it virtue and a communal struggle towards virtue are meaningless. Many groups in the modern world, however, have no idea of some absolute end or good. Popular science, thought, and philosophy is atomistic: just as to suggest that a man might consist in more than a shuffling of atoms seems ridiculous, so also to suggest that a community might consist in more than a shuffling of men seems absurd. When people join those things that they once called communities, they now join them not as absolutely true and good but as only true and good by their consent. For this reason, people see religion as more a matter of sentiment than of intellect; for this reason, in some places divorce is nearly as common an ending to marriage as death. One

¹⁷Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 141-145, 247.

may argue that the homogenizing forces of globalization have caused the decline of these ideas, or that the decline of these ideas have caused globalization. An indubitable truth remains: no community can survive without an ideal for which its members are ready to sweat, to sacrifice, to fight, and to die.

An ideal of this sort is necessary for any community to survive in more than a pale and spectral form. This brings me to my final point: only religion can provide the necessary ideological coherence that might allow communities to survive in an age of globalization.

This is because only a religion can claim to possess that kind of value for which one would be willing to sacrifice. A community itself does not produce the values on which it depends, for ultimately every community is contingent and temporal; nevertheless, each community claims to possess a standard of virtue and behavior that is necessary and eternal. Religion provides the justification that community cannot. Simply put, all community depends on an idea of the good, and an idea of the good is the fruit of religion; for this reason, those modern attempts to establish community without the foundation of religion will inevitably fail. Secular and humanist philosophies that refrain from defining the good for man provide an insufficient foundation upon which the edifice of a community may be built, as recent attempts to foster community show.

Thus, character and community can survive in an age of globalization. The power of globalization may seem inexorable, yet the force applied against the early Christian communities in Rome was surely no less than the forces applied against communities today. Likewise, Islamic communities in Europe encounter the forces of globalization and yet often retain a surprising coherence. Communities have retained, retain, and will retain their coherence only because they burn with an idea; no other fire can temper and strengthen community. Until

families, religions, or small towns blaze with hard and lasting ideas, ideas that can only be provided by religion, the quest for community will inevitably fail in a globalized world.