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*Liberalism and Communitarianism**

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It is a commonplace amongst communitarians, socialists and feminists alike that liberalism is to be rejected for its excessive 'individualism' or 'atomism,' for ignoring the manifest ways in which we are 'embedded' or 'situated' in various social roles and communal relationships. The effect of these theoretical flaws is that liberalism, in a misguided attempt to protect and promote the dignity and autonomy of the individual, has undermined the associations and communities which alone can nurture human flourishing.

My plan is to examine the resources available to liberalism to meet these objections. My primary concern is with what liberals *can* say in response, not with what particular liberals actually have said in the past. Still, as a way of acknowledging intellectual debts, if nothing else, I hope to show how my arguments are related to the political morality of modern liberals from J.S. Mill through to Rawls and Dworkin. The term 'liberal' has been applied to many different theories in many different fields, but I'm using it in this fairly restricted sense. First, I'm dealing with a political morality, a set of moral arguments about the justification of political action and political institutions. Second, my concern is with this modern liberalism, not seventeenth-century liberalism, and I want to leave entirely open what the relationship is between the two. It might be that the developments initiated by the 'new liberals' are really an abandonment of what was definitive of classical liberalism. G.A. Cohen, for example, says that since they rejected the principle of 'self-ownership' which was definitive of classical liberalism (e.g. in Locke), these new liberals should instead be called 'social

* This paper was first presented at the annual meetings of the Canadian Philosophical Association at McMaster University, May 1987.

democrats.¹ My concern is to defend their political morality, whatever the proper label.

What is their political morality? It begins with some basic claims about our interests, claims which I hope will be unobjectionable. Our essential interest is in leading a good life, in having those things that a good life contains. That may seem to be pretty banal. But it has important consequences. For leading a good life is different from leading the life we *currently believe* to be good – that is, we recognize that we may be mistaken about the worth or value of what we are currently doing. We may come to see that we've been wasting our lives, pursuing trivial or shallow goals and projects that we had mistakenly considered of great importance. This is the stuff of great novels – the crisis in faith. But the assumption that this could happen to all of us, and not just to the tragic heroine, is needed to make sense of the way we deliberate about important decisions in our lives. We deliberate in these ways because we know we could get it wrong. And not just in the sense of *predicting* wrongly, or of calculating uncertainties. For we deliberate even when we know what will happen, and we may regret our decisions even when things went as planned. I may succeed brilliantly at becoming the best pushpin player in the world, but then come to realize that pushpin isn't as valuable as poetry, and regret that I had ever embarked on that project.

Deliberation, then, doesn't only take the form of asking which course of action maximizes a particular value that is held unquestioned. We also question, and worry about, whether that value is really worth pursuing. As I said, this process of questioning the value of our projects and commitments is the stuff of great literature – we tell stories to ourselves and to others about what gives value to life, from children's fairy tales to Dostoevskian epics. But they only make sense on the assumption that our beliefs about value could be mistaken. And the concern with which we make such judgments only makes sense on the assumption that our essential interest is in living a life that is in fact good, not the life we currently believe to be good. Some people say that our essential interest is in living our life in accordance with the ends that we, as individuals or as a community, currently hold and share. But that seems a mistake – for our deliberations are not just predictions about how to maximize the achievement of current ends and projects, taking them as predetermined yardsticks. They are also

1 G.A. Cohen, 'Self-Ownership, World-Ownership and Equality: Part 2,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 3 (1986), 79

judgments about the value of those ends and projects, and we recognize that our current or past judgments are fallible.

I mentioned that I hoped these claims would be unobjectionable. But Rawls himself seems to deny them. He often says that our highest-order interest is in our capacity to form and revise our rational plans of life. And Marx says that our highest order interest is in our capacity for freely creative labour. But, as Dworkin says, this puts the cart before the horse. 'Our highest-order interest is not an interest in exercising a capacity because we find that we have it ... but rather we develop and train capacities of the sort that [they] describe because we have a certain interest' – namely, an interest in having as good a life as possible, a life that has all the things that a good life should have.²

The capacities that Rawls and Marx describe are crucially important – they allow us to examine and change the conditions in which we live – but our interest in them stems from our higher-order interest in leading a life that is in fact good. Rawls emphasizes deliberating about the value of activities, Marx emphasizes acting on these deliberations – but obviously neither makes sense without the other. Both are concerned that individuals not be forced to take current social roles and expectations as predetermined yardsticks of a valuable life. So I don't think that Marx or Rawls really disagrees with the sketch of our essential interests that I've presented. The claim that we have an essential interest in revising those of our current beliefs about value which are mistaken is not, I hope, an objectionable one.

But while we may be mistaken in our beliefs about value, it doesn't follow that someone else, who has reason to believe a mistake has been made, can come along and improve my life by leading it for me, in accordance with the correct account of value. On the contrary, no life goes better by being led from the outside according to values the person doesn't endorse. My life only goes better if I'm leading it from the inside, according to my beliefs about value. Praying to God may be a valuable activity, but you have to believe that it's a worthwhile thing to do – that it has some worthwhile point and purpose. You can coerce someone into going to church and making the right physical movements, but you won't make someone's life better that way. It won't work, even if the coerced person is mistaken in her belief that praying to God is a waste of time. It won't work because a valuable life has to be a life led from the inside.

So we have two preconditions for the fulfillment of our essential interest in leading a life that is in fact good. One is that we lead our life

2 Ronald Dworkin, 'In Defense of Equality,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1 (1983), 26

from the inside, in accordance with our beliefs about what gives value to life; the other is that we be free to question those beliefs, to examine them in the light of whatever information and examples and arguments our culture can provide. So individuals must have the resources and liberties needed to live their lives in accordance with their beliefs about value, without being imprisoned or penalized for unorthodox religious or sexual practices, etc. – hence the traditional liberal concern for civil and personal liberties; and they need the cultural conditions necessary to acquire an awareness of different views about the good life, and to acquire an ability to intelligently examine and re-examine these views – hence the equally traditional concern for education, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, artistic freedom etc., for the things that are needed to judge what is valuable in life in the only way we can judge such things – i.e. by exploring different aspects of our collective cultural heritage.

This account of our essential interest forms the basis of liberal political theory. According to Dworkin, political theories are best understood as working from an ‘abstract egalitarian plateau,’ according to which ‘the interests of the members of the community matter, and matter equally.’³ Each theory, therefore, must give an account of what people’s interests are, most comprehensively conceived, and an account of what follows from supposing that these interests matter equally. According to liberalism, since our most essential interest is in getting these beliefs right, and acting on them, government treats people as equals, with equal concern and respect, by providing for each individual the liberties and resources needed to examine and act on these beliefs. This requirement of justice is *primary* because our interest in leading the good life is our most essential interest.

That, in the barest outline, is the political morality of modern liberalism. That may not be what people think of as liberalism, for it has become part of the accepted wisdom that liberalism involves abstract individualism and scepticism about the good. The simplest response is that neither of these assumptions enters anywhere in the theories of Mill or Rawls or Dworkin, and it’s remarkable how often this accepted wisdom gets passed on without the least bit of textual support. I’ll look at just two examples. Unger claims that liberals defend liberty because our choices are ultimately arbitrary, incapable of rational criticism or justification. This ‘principle of arbitrary desire’ underlies the liberal belief in the illegitimacy of governmental interference in the way

3 Dworkin, ‘In Defense,’ 24

people lead their lives.⁴ Jaggar claims that ‘the liberal justification of the state presupposes that individuals have certain fixed interests,’ and that ‘human nature is a presocial system.’⁵ This ‘abstract individualist’ belief that our interests are fixed and known prior to society underlies the liberal concern for the freedom to revise or reject our social roles and relationships.⁶

But both of these claims are misconstruals of the liberal position. Mill’s argument for liberty doesn’t rest on the claim that our goals are ultimately arbitrary, or that our goals are presocially fixed. On the contrary, liberty is needed because we *can* be mistaken about even our most fundamental interests, and because some goals *are* more worthy than others. Liberty is needed precisely to find out what is valuable in life – to question, re-examine, and revise our beliefs about value. This is one of the main reasons why we desire liberty – we hope to learn about the good – and Mill says that our desire should be respected because it is not a vain hope. Freedom in society is important not because we know our good prior to social interaction, or because we can never really know our good, but because it helps us come to know our good. If we couldn’t learn about the good, part of his argument for liberty would collapse. The same is true of Rawls, Dworkin, Nozick and Raz.⁷ They all argue for a right of moral independence not because our goals in life are fixed, or are arbitrary, but precisely because our goals can be wrong, and because we can revise and improve them. Not only is the received wisdom a misinterpretation of modern liberalism, but modern liberalism *couldn’t* be based on it. If ‘abstract individualism’ or ‘moral scepticism’ were the fundamental premise, there’d be no reason to let people revise their beliefs about value – there’d be no reason to suppose that people are being made worse off by being denied the social conditions necessary to freely and rationally question their commitments.

4 Roberto Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Macmillan 1984), 66-7; Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totawa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld 1984), 194

5 Jaggar, 42-3

6 Jaggar, 86

7 J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government*, H. Acton, ed. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1972), 114-31; Dworkin, ‘In Defense,’ 24-30; Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981), 410-11, 436-40, 498-504; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press 1971), 206-10; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), 291-305

This then is the defense of liberal politics. But, communitarians argue, the defense fails. I now want to look at five different communitarian arguments that attempt to explain why it fails. The five arguments can be summarized this way: the liberal view of the self 1. is empty; 2. violates our self-perceptions; 3. ignores our embeddedness in communal practices; 4. ignores the necessity of social confirmation of our individual judgments; and 5. pretends to have an impossible universality or objectivity.

So, first, the emptiness argument. Being free to question all the given limits of our social situation is self-defeating, Taylor says, because

complete freedom would be a void in which nothing would be worth doing, nothing would deserve to count for anything. The self which has arrived at freedom by setting aside all external obstacles and impingements is characterless, and hence without defined purpose, however much this is hidden by such seemingly positive terms as "rationality" or "creativity."⁸

True freedom must be 'situated,' Taylor argues. Talking about 'going beyond the given altogether,' or about subordinating *all* the presuppositions of our situation to our rational self-determination, is finally empty, because the demand to be freely self-determining is indeterminate, it 'cannot specify any content to our action outside of a situation which sets goals for us, which thus imparts a shape to rationality and provides an inspiration for creativity.'⁹ We must accept the goal that the situation 'sets for us' – if we don't, then the quest for self-determination leads to Nietzschean nihilism, the rejection of all communal and cultural values as ultimately arbitrary:

one after the other, the authoritative horizons of life, Christian and humanist, are cast off as shackles on the will. Only the will to power remains.¹⁰

MacIntyre too sees Nietzsche's nihilism as the logical consequence of this absolute self-determination view of free individuality, this view which denies that communal values are 'authoritative horizons.'¹¹

But this argument misconstrues the role that freedom plays in liberalism. According to Taylor, liberals teach us that the freedom to form

8 Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979), 157

9 Ibid.

10 Taylor, 159

11 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth 1981), ch. 9

and revise our projects is inherently valuable, something to be pursued *for its own sake*, an instruction that Taylor rightly rejects as empty. Instead, he says, there has to be some project that is worth pursuing, some task that is worth fulfilling. But the concern for freedom within liberalism doesn't take the place of these projects and tasks. On the contrary, the liberal defense of freedom rests precisely on the importance of those tasks and projects. Liberals aren't saying that we should have this freedom for its own sake, because freedom is the most valuable thing in the world. Rather, it is our projects and tasks that are the most important things in our lives, and it's because *they* are so important that we should be free to revise and reject them, should we come to believe that they are not fulfilling or worthwhile. Our projects are the most important things in our lives, but since our lives have to be led from the inside, in accordance with our beliefs about value, we should have the freedom to form, revise and act on our plans of life. Freedom of choice, then, isn't pursued for its own sake, but as a precondition for pursuing those projects and tasks that *are* valued for their own sake.¹²

12 Of course, some liberals seem to believe that the exercise of such freedom of choice is also intrinsically valuable, something to be valued for its own sake. Isaiah Berlin (*Four Essays on Liberty* [London: Oxford University Press 1969], 192) attributes this position to Mill. And indeed Mill does suggest that we should exercise our capacity for free choice because it is our 'distinctive endowment' (Mill, 116). But Mill immediately goes on to say that exercising that capacity is important, not for its own sake, but because without it we gain 'no practice either in discerning or desiring what is best' (*ibid.*). Robert Ladenson ('Mill's Conception of Individuality,' *Social Theory and Practice* 4 [1977], 171) cites a number of other passages which suggest that Mill is best understood as having 'attached the greatest importance not to the mere exercise (or existence) of the capacity for choice, but to certain states of affairs and conditions which he believed are the consequences, under favourable conditions, of its free exercise.'

Claiming that freedom of choice is intrinsically valuable may seem like a direct and effective way of defending a broad range of liberal freedoms. But the implications of that claim conflict with the way we understand the value in our own lives in at least two important ways:

(1) Saying that freedom of choice is intrinsically valuable suggests that the more we exercise our capacity for choice, the more free we are, and hence the more valuable our lives are. But that is false, and indeed perverse. It quickly leads to the quasi-existentialist view that we should wake up each morning and decide anew what sort of person we should be. This is perverse because a valuable life, for most of us, will be a life filled with commitments and relationships. These, as Bernard Williams has argued at length, give our lives depth and character. And what makes them *commitments* is precisely that they aren't the sort of thing that we question every day. We don't suppose that someone who makes twenty marriage choices is in any way leading a more valuable life than someone who has no reason to question or revise an original choice. A life with more auton-

So no one disagrees that tasks and projects have to be our concern and goal – that is just a red herring in the debate. The real debate is not over whether we need such tasks, but whether they must be set for us by society. This is the heart of the communitarian position, and it raises very different questions. If some purposes or ends must be taken as ‘given,’ must they come from communal values or practices which are taken to be ‘authoritative horizons’? If freedom indeed has to be ‘situated,’ does it follow that the individual has to be understood as ‘situated’ in some specific communal role or practice? I think it is one of the central fallacies of communitarianism to make this equation. The ‘purposes’ which are presupposed in the liberal account of the value of freedom could come from an acceptance of communal ends as authoritative horizons, but they could also come from freely made personal judgments about the cultural structure, the matrix of understandings and alternatives passed down to us by previous generations,

mous marital choices is not even *ceteris paribus* better than a life with fewer such choices.

(2) Saying that freedom of choice is intrinsically valuable suggests that that the value we attempt to achieve in our actions is freedom, not the value internal to the activity itself. This suggestion is endorsed by Carol Gould (*Marx's Social Ontology* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1978]). She accepts that action is directed at achieving the purposes internal to a given project, and that ‘one is *apparently* acting for the sake of these purposes themselves posited as external aims.’ But she goes on to say that truly free activity has freedom itself as the ultimate end – ‘thus freedom is not only the activity that creates value but is that for the sake of which all these other values are pursued and therefore that with respect to which they become valuable’ (Gould, 118).

But this is false. First, as Taylor rightly points out, telling people to act freely doesn’t tell them what particular free activities are worth doing. But even if it provided determinate guidance, it presents a false view of our motivations. If I am writing a book, for example, my motivation isn’t to be free, but to say something that is worth saying. Indeed, if I didn’t really want to say anything, except insofar as it’s a way of being free, then my writing wouldn’t be fulfilling. What and how I write would become the results of arbitrary and indifferent and ultimately unsatisfying choices. If writing is to be intrinsically valuable, I have to *care* about what I’m saying, I have to believe that writing is worth doing for its own sake. If we are to understand the interest and value people see in their projects we have to look to the ends which are internal to them. I do not pursue my writing for the sake of my freedom. On the contrary, I pursue my writing for its own sake, because there are things that are worth saying. Freedom is valuable because it allows me to say them.

The best liberal defense of individual freedoms is not necessarily the most direct one. The best defense is the one that best accords with the way people on reflection understand the value of their own lives. And, if we look at the value of freedom in this way then it seems that freedom of choice, while central to a valuable life, is not the value which is centrally pursued in such a life.

which offers us possibilities we can either affirm or reject. Nothing is 'set for us,' nothing is authoritative before our judgment of its value.

Of course in making that judgment, we must take something as 'given' – someone who is nothing but a free rational being or a freely creative being would have no reason to choose one way of life over another.¹³ But what we put in 'the given' in order to make meaningful judgments can not only be different between individuals but also can change within one individual's life. If at one time we make choices about what's valuable given our commitment to a certain religious life, we could later come to question that commitment, and ask what's valuable given our commitment to our family, etc. The question then is not whether we must take something as given – but rather whether an individual can substitute what is in 'the given,' or whether on the contrary the given has to be 'set for us' by the community's values. Taylor's argument against 'absolute freedom' fails to show anything in support of the claim that the given *must* be the authoritative horizons of communal values. There is nothing empty or self-defeating in the idea that these communal values should be subject to individual evaluation and possible rejection.

One can weaken the communitarian objection by arguing that even if we *could* get our purposes this way, unset by the community, we nonetheless *should* treat communal ends as authoritative. We should do this because the liberal view relies on a false account of the self. The liberal view, we've seen, is that the self is, in an important sense, prior to its ends, since we reserve the right to question and reappraise even our most deeply held convictions about the nature of the good life. Sandel, however, argues that the self is not prior to, but rather constituted by, its ends – we can't distinguish 'me' from 'my ends.' Our self is at least partly constituted by ends we haven't chosen, but which we *discover* by virtue of our being *embedded* in some shared social context. Since we have these constitutive ends, our lives go better not by having the conditions needed to select and revise our projects, but by having the conditions needed to come to an awareness of these shared constitutive ends.

He has two different arguments for this claim that are worth separating, which I've called the self-perception argument and the embedded-self argument. The self-perception argument goes like this: the Rawlsian view of the 'unencumbered self' doesn't correspond with our 'deepest self-understanding' in the sense of our deepest *self-perception*.

13 Taylor, 157; Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 161-5

According to this objection, if the self is prior to its ends, then we should, when introspecting, be able to see through our particular ends to an unencumbered self. But as Nozick and Sandel note, we don't perceive our selves as being essentially unencumbered – Rawls' conception of the self as 'given prior to its ends, a pure subject of agency and possession, ultimately thin,' is 'radically at odds with our more familiar notion of ourselves as being "thick with particular traits."'14 If we were Rawlsian selves,

to identify any characteristics as *my* aims, ambitions, desires, and so on, is always to imply some subject "me" standing behind them, at a certain distance.¹⁵

There would have to be this thing, a self, which has some *shape*, albeit an *ultimately thin* shape, standing at some *distance* behind our ends – to accept Rawls, I would have to see myself as this propertyless thing, a disembodied, rather ghostly, object in space, or as Rorty puts it, as a kind of 'substrate' lying 'behind' my ends.¹⁶ In contrast, Sandel says our deepest self-perceptions always include some motivations, and this shows that some ends are constitutive of the self.

But the question of *perception* here is at best misleading. What is central to the liberal view is not that we can *perceive* a self prior to its ends, but that we understand ourselves to be prior to our ends, *in the sense that no end or goal is exempt from possible re-examination*. For re-examination to be meaningfully conducted we must be able to see our self encumbered with different motivations than we now have, in order that we have some reason to choose one over another as more valuable for us. Our self is, *in this sense*, perceived prior to its ends, i.e. we can always envisage our self without its *present* ends. But this doesn't require that we can ever perceive a self totally unencumbered by any ends – the process of ethical reasoning is always one of comparing one 'encumbered' potential self with another 'encumbered' potential self. There must always be some ends given with the self when we engage in such reasoning, but it doesn't follow that any *particular* ends must always be taken as given with the self. As I said before, it seems that what is given with the self can, and sometimes does, change over the course of a lifetime. Thus there is a further claim that Sandel must

14 Sandel, 94, 100, quoting Robert Nozick

15 Michael Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' *Political Theory* 12 (1984), 86

16 Richard Rorty, 'Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,' in R. Hollinger, ed., *Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1985), 217

establish – i.e. not only that we can't perceive a totally unencumbered self, but that we can't perceive our self without some *specific* end or motivation. This, however, requires a different argument, which I call the embedded-self argument.

This third argument contrasts the communitarian view of moral reasoning as self-discovery with the liberal view of moral reasoning as judgment. For Sandel, as with MacIntyre, the relevant question is not 'what should I be, what sort of life should I lead?' but 'who am I?' The self 'comes by' its ends not 'by choice' but 'by discovery,' not

by choosing that which is already given (this would be unintelligible) but by reflecting on itself and inquiring into its constituent nature, discerning its laws and imperatives and acknowledging its purposes as its own.¹⁷

For example, he criticizes Rawls' account of community, because

while Rawls allows that the good of community can be internal to the extent of engaging the aims and values of the self, it cannot be so thoroughgoing as to reach beyond the motivations to the subject of motivations.¹⁸

On a more adequate account, communal aims and values are not just professed by the members of the community, but define their identity – the shared pursuit of a communal goal is 'not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.'¹⁹ The good for such members is found by a process of self-discovery – by achieving awareness of, and acknowledging the claims of, the various attachments they 'find.'

But surely it is Sandel here who is violating our deepest self-understandings – for nobody thinks this self-discovery replaces or forecloses judgments about how to lead one's life. We don't consider ourselves trapped by our present attachments, incapable of judging the worth of the goals we inherited (or ourselves chose earlier). No matter how deeply implicated we find ourselves in a social practice or tradition, we feel capable of questioning whether the practice is a valuable one – a questioning which isn't meaningful on Sandel's account. (How can it *not* be valuable for me since the good for me just *is* coming to

¹⁷ Sandel, *Limits of Justice*, 58

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150

a greater self-awareness of these attachments and practices I find myself in?) The idea that moral reasoning is completed by this process of self-discovery (rather than by judgments of the value of the attachments we discover) seems pretty facile.

In places, Sandel admits it isn't just a question of self-discovery. He says that the boundaries of the self, although constituted by its ends, are nonetheless flexible and can be redrawn, incorporating new ends and excluding others. In his words, 'the subject is empowered to participate in the constitution of its identity' – on his account 'the bounds of the self [are] open and the identity of the subject [is] the product rather than the premise of its agency.'²⁰ The subject can, after all, make choices about which of the 'possible purposes and ends all impinging indiscriminately on its identity' it will pursue, and which it will not.²¹ The self, constituted by its ends, can be 'reconstituted,' as it were – and so self-discovery isn't enough. But at this point it's not clear whether the whole distinction between the two views doesn't collapse entirely.

There are *apparent* differences here – Sandel claims that the self is constituted by its ends, and that the boundaries of the self are fluid, whereas Rawls says that the self is prior to its ends, and its boundaries are fixed antecedently. But these two differences hide a more fundamental identity – both accept that the *person* is prior to her ends. They disagree over where, within the person, to draw the boundaries of the 'self' – but this question, if it is indeed a meaningful question, is one for the philosophy of mind, with no direct relevance to political philosophy. For so long as Sandel admits that the *person* can re-examine her ends – even the ends constitutive of her 'self' – then he's failed to justify communitarian politics, for he's failed to show why individuals shouldn't be given the conditions appropriate to that re-examining, as an indispensable part of leading the best possible life. And amongst those conditions should be the liberal guarantees of personal independence necessary to make that judgment freely. So long as a person is prior to her ends, then Sandel has failed to show why the liberal view of the self is wrong, and hence why liberal political morality is wrong. Sandel trades on an ambiguity in the view of the person that he uses in defending communitarian politics – the strong claim (that self-discovery replaces judgment) is implausible, and the weak claim (which allows that a self constituted by its ends can nonetheless be reconstituted), while attractive, fails to distinguish him from the liberal view.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 152

²¹ *Ibid.*

MacIntyre's argument in *After Virtue* suffers from a similar ambiguity. Sometimes he argues for an 'embedded self' view:

we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles ... the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"²²

Like Sandel, MacIntyre's argument against 'liberal individualism' rests on this claim that 'the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity,'²³ so that deciding how I should live is just a matter of coming to an awareness of the various narrative 'histories' or 'stories' I'm 'embedded' in, and interpreting the goods specified in them. He contrasts this with the 'liberal individualist' standpoint, according to which

I am what I myself choose to be. I can always, if I wish to, put in question what are taken to be the merely contingent social features of my existence.²⁴

MacIntyre rejects the possibility that our membership in these communal roles can be put in question. But like Sandel, he also says that the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in these communal traditions, practices and roles

does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community.²⁵

He says that the good life is one spent in search of the good life, and this search apparently can involve rejection of any of the particular roles I find myself in: 'rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it.'²⁶ But if we can, after all, put in question the 'rightful expectations and obligations' of the roles and statuses we inhabit, if we can reject the value of the goods internal to a given prac-

22 MacIntyre, 204-5, 201

23 Ibid., 205

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

tice, then it's not clear how MacIntyre's view is any different from the liberal individualist one he claims to reject. MacIntyre's defense of communitarian politics requires that my good be the good of someone in the social roles I currently occupy, but that's implausible, since we believe that we can question the value of such roles and statuses. When MacIntyre allows for such questioning, his argument against the liberal view collapses.

MacIntyre and Sandel both say that the liberal view ignores the way we are 'embedded' or 'situated' in our social relationships and roles. Of course, as reflexive, 'self-interpreting beings,'²⁷ communitarians emphasize that we can interpret the *meaning* of these constitutive attachments. But the question is whether we can reject them entirely should we come to view them as inherently trivial or even degrading. On one interpretation, we can't, or at any rate, we shouldn't. On this view, we neither choose nor reject these attachments, rather we 'find' ourselves in them – our ends and goals come not by choice, but by 'self-discovery.' A Christian housewife in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage can interpret what it means to be a Christian, or a housewife – she can interpret the meaning of these shared religious, economic and sexual practices. But she can't stand back and decide that she doesn't want to be a Christian at all, or a housewife. I can interpret the meaning of the social roles and practices I find myself in, but I can't reject the roles themselves, or the goals internal to them, as worthless. Since these attachments and ends are 'constitutive' of me, as a person, they have to be taken as given in deciding what to do with my life – the question of the good in my life can only be a question of how best to interpret their meaning. It makes no sense to say that they have no value for me, since there is no 'me' standing behind them, no self 'prior' to these constitutive attachments.

It's unclear which if any communitarians hold this view consistently. It isn't a plausible position, since we can and do make sense of questions not just about the meaning of the roles and attachments we find ourselves in, but also about their value. Perhaps communitarians don't mean to deny that, perhaps their idea of our 'embeddedness' isn't incompatible with our rejecting the attachments we find ourselves in. But then the advertised contrast with the liberal view is a deception, for the sense in which communitarians view us as 'embedded' in communal roles incorporates the sense in which liberals view us as independent of them, and the way communitarians view moral reasoning as a process of 'self-discovery' incorporates the sense in which liberals

27 Sandel, 'Procedural Republic,' 91

view moral reasoning as a process of judgment and choice. The differences would be merely semantic.

The fourth argument I want to consider is the social confirmation argument. This argument does not deny that we understand ourselves as sovereign moral agents (i.e. that we have the capacity, and indeed the task, of judging the value of the purposes we could pursue), but claims that we need considerable social affirmation of that judgment in order to have any confidence in it. Government should encourage certain communal values, and discourage non-conforming values, in order to try to ensure that our judgments are confirmed by society. This point is suggested by Williams and Unger, but I think it is a powerful motivation for many communitarians, and it has certainly been a worry for many liberals.²⁸ The point isn't that unconstrained individual choice is logically empty (as in Taylor) or that it presupposes a mistaken self-understanding (as in Sandel). Rather the concern is that this vaunting of 'free individuality' will result not in confident mastery of one's environment, not in the confident subordination of it to one's purposes, but rather in existential uncertainty and anomie, in doubt about the very value of one's life and its purposes. To put it melodramatically, the tragedy of the human situation is that we do indeed think of ourselves as morally sovereign – that we alone can make these judgments, others can't make them for us – but at the same time, we can't believe in our judgments unless someone else confirms the judgment for us. No one's life goes well if led according to values they've chosen but don't really believe in, and the confirmation of others is needed for firm belief.

Now no one disputes the importance of securing the social preconditions of self-respect – i.e. the conditions which give a person 'the secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out.' Rawls, for example, calls such self-respect the most important primary good.²⁹ Liberals believe that self-respect is secured by providing the conditions for freely judging and choosing our potential ends. Some people, however, think rather the opposite – that is, we only have confidence in our moral judgments if they are protected socially from the eroding effects of our own individual rational scrutiny. We lack faith in our own judgments, and social confirmation must come in to supplement, guide, or even limit, individual reflection and choice.

28 William Galston, *Justice and the Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980), 44-5; Rawls, 441-2, 543-4

29 Rawls, 440

This is a very difficult question which I won't be able to answer to anyone's satisfaction. While some people obviously can sustain a sense of the worth of their purposes despite an absence of social confirmation (e.g. a woman who in a traditionally sexist society nonetheless believes women and men to be equals), it's also likely that the spread of the idea of individual self-determination has generated more doubt about the value of our projects than before. But it's worth noting one important difference between the two positions. The liberal view operates through people's rationality – i.e. it generates confidence in the value of one's projects by removing any impediments or distortions in the reasoning process involved in making judgments of value. The communitarian view, if this is what underlies their critique of liberalism, operates behind the backs of the individuals involved – i.e. it generates confidence via a process which people can't acknowledge as the grounds of their confidence. We have to think we have good *reasons* for our confidence. We would lose that confidence if we thought our beliefs weren't rationally grounded, but rather merely caused. As Kant says

we cannot possibly conceive a reason consciously receiving a bias from any other quarter with respect to its judgments, for then the subject would ascribe the determination of its judgment not to its own reason, but to an impulse. It must regard itself as the author of its principles independent of foreign influences.³⁰

We can see ourselves as having come to a judgment for external causal reasons, but we can't stay with it unless we endorse it as independently valid.³¹ Williams correctly says that it is a social or psychological, not philosophical, question which sorts of conditions, upbringing and public discourse help foster confidence in moral judgments.³² But if it's fostered by giving people causal reinforcement – causes rather than reasons, as it were – then it must do so behind the backs of people. This seems ironic, given Williams' vehement critique of 'Government House' Utilitarianism for precisely such manipulation of people's moral beliefs, and his desire for transparency in ethical practices.³³ In any event, this solution is in conflict with the liberal view, which desires

30 I. Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Moral,' in *The Moral Law*, H. Paton, ed. (London: Hutchinson 1948), 109

31 Raz, 300

32 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press 1985), 170

33 Williams, 108-110, 199

a society that is transparently intelligible – where nothing works behind the backs of its members – where all causes are turned into reasons. Liberals clearly wouldn't then support a program for increasing moral confidence by a process that distorted conscious reasoning – i.e. that causally influenced judgments independent of reasons.

Since the only plausible justification for communitarian politics works behind the backs of people, it is incompatible with the liberal vision of an undistorted, transparent community. Of course, that hardly settles the issue, since it might be that one values undistorted transparency only if one has a prior commitment to the liberal view of the relationship between individual purposes and communal values. But it does mean that communitarianism can only be endorsed from the third-person perspective. As sociologists, we can agree that people's lives might go better if they had the moral confidence which comes when communal practices and traditions are taken as 'authoritative horizons' and critical reflection on them is discouraged. And Williams is certainly right to castigate those who extol uncertainty rather than accept that possibility.³⁴ But from the inside, from the first-person perspective, I can't endorse that *my* life be made to go better in that way. The confidence we desire in our moral judgments is, therefore, essentially a by-product – it supervenes on thought activity directed towards another end (i.e. making the right judgment in the light of good reasons). It cannot be directly pursued.

The fifth and final argument I want to consider is that which accuses liberals of having an untenable account of morality as transcultural and ahistorical. Or, more accurately, it accuses 'Kantian' liberals, like Rawls and Dworkin, of this, as contrasted with 'Hegelian' liberals, like Dewey, who recognize that a political morality can only be defended by reference to the shared values of a particular historical tradition or interpretive community. This is Rorty's argument. But this criticism, and the contrast it's based on, are distressingly obscure in Rorty. In fact, Rorty conflates four different ways of drawing the contrast, and it's not clear that any of them is persuasive when made to stand on its own. The first way he describes the contrast focuses on the question of moral agency. Here he cites, and repeats, Sandel's claim that we should

think of the moral self, the embodiment of rationality, not as one of Rawls' original choosers, somebody who can distinguish her *self* from her talents and interests

34 Ibid., 169

and views about the good, but as a network of beliefs, desires and emotions with nothing behind it – no substrate behind the attributes.³⁵

Now this argument stands or falls – I think falls – with Sandel's 'embedded self' argument. But I mention it just to distinguish it from the next way that Rorty draws the contrast, a way that he thinks is equivalent to the first, or at any rate, is a 'corollary' of it. He goes on to accuse Kantian liberals of an 'account of "rationality" and "morality" as transcultural and ahistorical,'³⁶ and advises liberals to drop these 'Kantian buttresses.' Instead, liberals should try to convince our society that it 'need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well.'³⁷ Rather than appeal to any ahistorical theory of justice,

the moral justification of the institutions and practices of one's group ... is mostly a matter of historical narratives ... rather than of philosophical metanarratives.³⁸

But Rorty doesn't urge this on us because we've adopted a Sandelian view of moral agency (although Rorty presents it as a 'corollary'). On the contrary, Sandel's view of moral agency, as much as any other, could be *philosophical* grounds for questioning entire sections of our historical traditions – for example, those Kantian-inspired sections according to which 'the sharing of values is without ethical significance,'³⁹ or which encourage people to 'put in question what are taken to be the merely contingent social features of [their] existence.'⁴⁰ According to Unger and MacIntyre, these aspects of our historical tradition, which they both say run very deep in our culture, and are embedded in our everyday life and institutions, have disastrous consequences for our ability to sustain a sense of individual integrity and shared community. These are all criticisms of our historical tradition on the basis of that philosophical view of the self that Rorty has endorsed. It's just not true that restricting moral justification to appeals to our historical tradition is a corollary of Sandel's view of the self.

35 Rorty, 217

36 Ibid., 216

37 Ibid., 217

38 Ibid., 218

39 Unger, 68

40 MacIntyre, 205

The real reason Rorty rejects 'philosophical meta-narratives' is that he believes there *are* no such things – that is, there are no reasons which aren't reasons internal to a historical tradition or interpretive community. And this is true whatever the relationship is between the self and its ends. We have to drop the 'Kantian buttresses' of a 'trans-cultural and ahistorical' account of rationality and morality,⁴¹ not because of any *moral* theory about whether our ends are or are not constituents of the self, but because of an *epistemological* theory which says that 'rational behaviour is just adaptive behaviour of a sort which roughly parallels the behaviour, in similar circumstances, of the other members of some relevant community.'⁴² For Rorty, this epistemological theory applies as much to physics as it does to ethics.

But is it true that Kantian liberals have some unacceptable view about transcultural moral truth? Rorty gives the example of liberals who responded to the Vietnam war by

attempting to rehabilitate Kantian notions in order to say, with Chomsky, that the war not merely betrayed America's hopes and interests and self-image, but was *immoral*, one which we had no *right* to engage in in the first place.⁴³

But what kind of 'Kantian notions' are involved in making such claims, and why should we give them up in favour of 'Hegelian' notions about appeals to historical tradition? There are in fact three possible 'Kantian notions' involved here, three different ways of drawing this contrast, which Rorty runs together.

First, there is the question of the *meaning* of our moral language. When we say things such as 'slavery is wrong,' do we mean by that 'we don't do that around here,' or do we mean something which isn't tied in this way to our current social practices? Rorty thinks the former – when a person appeals to morality, she appeals to a shared consciousness of beliefs and emotions 'which permit her to say "WE do not do this sort of thing." Morality is, as Wilfred Sellars has said, a matter of "we-intentions."⁴⁴ Unfortunately for Rorty, Sellars was wrong to say that. When a Muslim woman in Egypt says 'sexual discrimination is wrong' she does *not* mean 'we don't do that around here.' On the contrary, she is saying that precisely because it *is* done around

41 Rorty, 216

42 Ibid., 217

43 Ibid., 219

44 Ibid., 216

there, and always has been done, and is very firmly embedded in all the myths, symbols and institutions of their history and society. She is saying 'discrimination is wrong, although it is approved around here.' Now if Rorty was right about what moral language *meant*, then she would be contradicting herself. She'd be saying 'we don't do that around here, although we do do that around here.' But of course we can make sense of her claim – we know exactly what she means. So it's just not true that when we say 'X is wrong,' we *mean* 'we don't do X around here.'

Rorty does allow that we sometimes denounce the values of our own community. He thinks such denunciations take the form of appealing, in the very meaning of our language, to the values of some *other* specific community. But while the Muslim woman may well gesture at some other community as a moral example, her claim that discrimination is wrong doesn't mean 'The Xs don't do it in their community.' If she stopped gesturing to that community (because, for example, they begin to discriminate), and instead appealed to some other example, the meaning of her claim wouldn't have changed at all – she wouldn't now mean 'The Ys don't do it in their community.' She hasn't made two different claims which have different meanings. Any theory of meaning that says she has changed the meaning of her claim is simply mistaken. The meaning of our moral language isn't tied in this way to claims about the values of any particular community. When we criticize or defend the values of our community, the meaning of our claims is not captured by statements like 'WE do this' or 'THEY don't do that.' If *this* is the contrast between Kantian and Hegelian liberals, then Hegelian liberals are simply wrong.

But perhaps the contrast isn't in their theory of meaning, but in their account of *philosophical method*. Once we know what people mean by their moral statements, how do we go about examining them? Perhaps the difference is this – Hegelian liberals start with our intuitions and institutions, our shared values and community standards. Kantian liberals, on the other hand, start by fashioning an objective and ahistorical standpoint, and ask what is valuable from there. Or so says Michael Walzer, whom Rorty approvingly cites:

One way to *begin the philosophical enterprise* – perhaps the original way – is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion for oneself (what can never be fashioned for ordinary men and women) an objective and universal standpoint. Then one describes the terrain of everyday life from far away ... But I mean to stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground.⁴⁵

45 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell 1985), xiv (emphasis added)

But if *this* is meant to be the crux of the matter then the debate is simply a non-starter, for this contrast is wholly spurious.

There are certainly serious disagreements about the enterprise of political philosophy. But it is wrong to say that they are importantly about where “to begin the philosophical enterprise.”⁴⁶

Even Plato and Kant start with such local and particular ethical opinions as that justice is ‘truth and returning what one takes,’ and claim that we are *led* to philosophy, we are ‘impelled to go outside its sphere and to take a step into the field of practical philosophy in order to escape from the perplexity of opposing claims.’⁴⁷ Of course the real target here is Rawls, and his ‘original position,’⁴⁸ but the criticism is just as misplaced against him. Rawls also starts with our widely shared intuitions about fairness, and notes that they are vague, incapable of providing guidance in those cases where help is needed. We need some way of teasing out their meaning and implications. This, of course, is where, and why, he invokes the device of the original position. We *start* with ‘commonly shared presumptions’ about sources of unfairness in determining principles of justice – for example, that people shouldn’t be able to use advantages in power to affect the selection process in their favour – and use these shared intuitions to construct a decision-making process ‘that incorporates these commonly shared presumptions.’⁴⁹

One should not be misled, then, by the somewhat unusual conditions which characterize the original position. The idea here is simply to make vivid to ourselves the restrictions that it seems reasonable to impose on arguments for principles of justice,⁵⁰

i.e. the restrictions imposed by our shared intuitions. The premise of Rawls’ argument isn’t the original position, as some sort of a transcendental standpoint from which we survey the moral landscape, and choose all our moral beliefs. On the contrary, we *start* with the shared moral beliefs, and then describe an original position in accordance with those shared beliefs, in order to work out their fuller implications. We

46 J. Cohen, ‘Review of *Spheres of Justice*,’ *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), 467

47 Kant, quoted in J. Cohen, 467

48 See, for example, Walzer, 5, 79.

49 Rawls, 18

50 Ibid.

are to look at the original position 'as an expository device which sums up the meaning of these [intuitions] and helps us to extract their consequences.'⁵¹ It is a device for working through the meaning and consequences of our shared moral beliefs.

So the idea that there is some great difference between Hegelian and Kantian liberals on this question of where to *begin* the moral conversation is wholly spurious, a spurious way of avoiding the need to examine the arguments of Kantian liberals. Where there may be a difference isn't in their beliefs about where to begin the philosophical enterprise, but about where that enterprise *must end up*. For Walzer and Rorty, 'the notions of community and shared values mark the *limits* of practical reason,' not just its point of departure.⁵²

Now if this was just a *prediction* about the limits of practical reason, then it wouldn't be objectionable. It would be just speculation, and we'd have to wait and see how far the reasons have taken us at the end of the day. We'd have to see whether there are standards of rational persuasion which aren't tied to a particular historical tradition. Perhaps, at the end of the day, the only reason we can give for our actions is that 'this is what we do around here,' i.e. which appeal to localized and particular standards, not shared by others. This is certainly possible, and Dworkin allows for it.⁵³ In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre says that the best reason we have to reject trans-cultural accounts of rights is the same reason we have to reject the existence of witches – i.e. that every attempt to show that they do exist has failed.⁵⁴ Now that is the right *kind* of argument, and if it were true, and if it could be generalized to other sorts of trans-cultural moral theories, then we'd have good reason to accept that Rorty's prediction about the limits of practical reason had turned out to be true. But notice that this isn't an objection to trying to give Kantian arguments – on the contrary, it's one of the things we can *conclude* from such arguments at the end of the day. MacIntyre's claim is based on an examination of these arguments, and he concludes, what was an open question at the beginning of the day, that none of these arguments is compelling. The only weakness in MacIntyre's argument, of course, is that his examination of the arguments is so incomplete, his conclusion far too hasty. It's

51 *Ibid.*, 21

52 J. Cohen, 467

53 Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (London: Harvard University Press 1985), 176

54 MacIntyre, 67

too early in the day to draw such conclusions, and any predictions are rather idle ones at this point.

But in fact Rorty and Walzer aren't just predicting that there are such limits to practical reasoning. They claim to *know* such limits exist – they claim to know this *in advance of the arguments*. They claim to know that reasons will only be compelling to particular historical communities, before these reasons have been advanced. Now this, unlike the question of where to begin the conversation, certainly does distinguish Rorty from Kantian liberals who don't accept that we can know in advance what are the limits to practical reason. This way of drawing the contrast between Hegelian and Kantian liberals is very different from the other ways, despite Rorty's conflation, and in order to distinguish it clearly we can call it, to use a neutral term, the dogmatic objection to Kantian liberalism. There are no grounds for deciding in advance what the limits of practical reasoning are. Rorty and Walzer simply presuppose what MacIntyre attempts to show – i.e. that Kantian liberal theories won't work. If MacIntyre is too hasty in his examination, Rorty has decided he doesn't even have to examine the theories – and that is just dogmatism.

So Rorty's 'Hegelian' argument against the 'Kantian notions' involved in Rawls' and Dworkin's view of morality can be taken in three ways – the first, about the meaning of moral language, is false; the second, about the starting-point of moral conversation, is spurious; and the third, about the limits of moral conversation, is dogmatic. There may be other, more defensible moral objections to the view of the self that I've tried to outline and defend, or to the broader political theory which is based on it.⁵⁵ But we get nowhere towards identifying these problems by invoking old slogans about 'abstract' or 'atomistic' individualism, slogans which have stood in the way, or taken the place of, serious analysis. Progress will only be made when the rhetoric is dropped.⁵⁶

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55 I discuss communitarian objections to these broader issues of liberal political theory in chapter 4 of *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press forthcoming [1989]).

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