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Autonomy Unbound

Paul Barry Clarke



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Introduction: Whither Autonomy

The notion of autonomy occupies an ambiguous position in contemporary thought. On the one hand it is taken as central to modern life, even to the point of being regarded as a significant good.¹ On the other hand, autonomy is a concept that has taken such a battering from some communitarian and post-modern sources that it is a commonplace, in some areas of thought, that autonomy is at best an ephemeral illusion and, at worst, impossible.

There are a number of specific accounts of this latter kind of claim, many of which differ in detail. They do, however, have some common features and do, therefore, cluster as a claim having a general form. At its clearest it seems that autonomy is a notion that, like humanism, stands for an impossible yet hegemonic western project, that is based on a set of past, and mistaken, presumptions. If this is so then it follows that an end to those presumptions would mean the elimination of autonomy and cognate notions from both theoretical discourse and from praxis.² The autonomous *self*, it is often argued, does not exist and if the *self* did exist it would, in any case, not be *autonomous*.

In contrast to claims that are dismissive of the concept and idea of autonomy, are a set of claims and practices that place the notion as central to much, if not all, liberal thought, to liberal conceptions of freedom and, sometimes, to cognate conceptions of the self. Without some concept of autonomy, it is sometimes argued, there could be no individual action, no significant sense of individuality, no sense of responsibility and no account of praise or blame for actions undertaken. In that sense autonomy is central to liberal democratic life. To undercut autonomy is, therefore, to undercut the assumptions on which liberalism and even democracy rest.

The divide between modes of thought that permit, and modes of thought that deny, autonomy is often taken to be great, perhaps insurmountable, resting as it does on what appears to be not merely incommensurable, but also incompatible notions of being.

Here I want to diagnose what underlies this divide, seek out some of its causes, analyse its importance, and suggest that the divide may not be as great as it sometimes appears. Those that affirm and those that deny the significance and actuality of autonomy do, I will argue, share sufficient components of a tradition of thought that makes what appears incommensurable at least partially commensurable. Notwithstanding the objections, I will argue that autonomy can and indeed ought to be asserted

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not as a simple notion but rather as a complex of ideas, not all of which apply to all people at all times. Autonomy, I will suggest, is an idea that lies deep in western political consciousness.

I will argue that an account of autonomy which takes seriously the communitarian notion that we are historical beings must, therefore, include some account of the religious as well as the secular roots of autonomy.

I will argue that it is the transformation of the theistic basis of western society that has made a re-assertion of a genuine range and diversity of concepts of autonomy possible. Contra those post-modern thinkers who argue that the 'death of God' eliminates the basis for autonomy, I will argue the opposite: the presence of God in the world may well have introduced the idea of autonomy but its instantiation in particular religious practices effectively eliminated its practical significance.

While the application of the idea of autonomy to persons is relatively recent, the idea underlying personal autonomy has a long lineage in a variety of earlier forms and is contained as a value in numerous sources in western thought. In ancient times it is found as the concept of 'autarchy', the sovereignty of the city-state. In early medieval thought it is found in the historically critical arguments that distinguished church from state. In early modern times it was given a uniquely individualistic and ethical twist: the sense in which we now know it. In this sense its best known representative is Immanuel Kant³ who held that autonomously acting according to the moral law was the basis of morality.⁴ In liberal thought John Stuart Mill drew a distinction between individual and society based on the autonomy, or as he put it, the 'sovereignty', of the individual to pursue their own independent ends always providing that the pursuit of those ends produced no harm to others (Mill, 1979).

Such views well express the mood of an era. Such individuals must, one presumes, have been autonomous in a certain understanding of that term even if, in another sense, their actions were determined according to the laws of efficient causality.

If people were not free from the law of efficient causality then they were not free from the dictates of the laws of physics and of science. Their autonomy, in such a case, would be political or empirical not metaphysical and not a personal power. And this introduces another distinction into the concept of autonomy that makes it yet more problematic. For how can one be autonomous if, at the same time, one's actions are wholly determined?

There is a radical sense to the notion of autonomy that is related to this point. And it springs from the apparent tension between the idea that the will is given and the observation that we live in a world already given to us.

The idea of *conscientia*: seems to make the individual responsible before God not only for their actions but also for the contents of their consciousness.

So understood, autonomy includes both inner and outer components, a self of a certain kind and a world of a certain kind. The self must be capable of initiating action and the world must be capable of yielding to certain sorts of actions. Not surprisingly with a concept that has inner and outer directed components there are tendencies to emphasize one at the cost of the other.

There is an entirely long lineage of attempts to deal with autonomy by treating it in an entirely empirical way, such attempts already rest on a historically shaped view about who is to count as autonomous.

There are a complex of issues here, suffice to say for present, that one implication seems to be that what counts as an individual is far from unproblematic. When Nozick starts his account of liberty by saying that he will assume that there are individuals and that they have rights (1974, p.ix) he is doing no more than carry through a tradition of thought going back to Locke, if not earlier. But the presumption of individualism is just that; a presumption. This kind of challenge, if taken seriously, is a serious one, for it undercuts much of the presumptions on which the contemporary political, ethical and juridical world in the west has been built. If individuals are not natural units or natural kinds but social units or, what I have elsewhere, called social kinds (Clarke, 1988, p.132) then the fundamental principle of their individuation is itself social. If social it has historical beginnings.

The origins of individualism are generally placed with the breakdown of medieval society, and it is certainly at that point that it began to emerge as a distinct political, social and ethical force, but its roots go much deeper. As early as St. Paul we find an early articulation of criteria by which individuals, as we now understand them, are distinguished and individuated. The same idea of individualism turns up again in St. Augustine, St. Thomas, in Dante, Marsiglio and Descartes and subsequently runs through our history and culture as not merely a secular idea but a secular idea with theological foundations.

What these issues show is that the while there is indeed a strand that assumes the conditions of autonomy and then attempts to deal with it as a merely empirical or political problem this approach does rest on assumptions that are part of our theological, metaphysical and social history.

It seems clear that individuals (and therefore any autonomy that they may have) do not come pre-individuated, as bare datum or as brute facts. It is unlikely that there are any such datum or facts at all, but even setting that issue aside it applies not at all to individuals. If individuals are kinds at all, as they may well be, they are a combination of social kinds as well as natural kinds, and such kinds require social criteria to individuate them, and social criteria carry the presumptions, assumptions, pre-conceptions and prejudices of society with them.

Not only do the pragmatic or practical arguments in favour of autonomy fail to do that, they also fail to provide arguments to defend the

concept of autonomy against challenges from within the society in which they are made. All of the empirical or pragmatic conceptions of autonomy fail to deal with some fundamental challenges to the very possibility of autonomy that have arisen from within so-called autonomy valuing societies. If people are not self-positing beings then how can their existence be autonomous? If they are not responsible for the contents of their consciousness then how can their being be autonomous? If they are not autonomous in their being how can their inner-life be autonomous and if they are not autonomous in their inner life how can they be ethically autonomous? And if none of these conditions are met how can they be politically autonomous?

What underlies such claims of autonomy is the development of a new idea, the idea of political autonomy, together with the development of the theology of individualism; a theology latent in western Christianity from its beginnings. Theological and corporate autonomy became secularised, individualised, and politicised in the cities, guilds, republics and states of early Europe.⁵ The consequence of this development was, and indeed still is, that when the idea of autonomy was developed as an individualistic ethical notion and as a political notion it also carried considerable existential weight.

To be a conscious subject is a condition that seems necessary to autonomy, but to be a subject is already to be a prisoner of, subject to, the self. The very idea of subjectivity contains ambivalence within it. It expresses on the one hand a relation of subordination as in the idea of the subject of a monarch, who may well be absolute, and on the other hand, a relation of independence as a subject to, and of, oneself. In the latter case the subject is, as it happens, subject to no one except its own self.

There is a sense of being a subject that implies that subjectivity is to be in absolute obedience to another. There is an alternative sense in which such obedience to others is completely absent and the subject, which is to say the subject of consciousness, is obedient only to itself. But these different meanings of subjection are not wholly distinct. That which is a subject of consciousness is also subject to itself. This is to admit and to raise immediately the problem of who defines one's self. If it is not one's self but another, be that other a person, a group, or nature, then how can a subject be self-governing? The subject is indeed subject to something outside of itself, and if that is the case then is subject to the monarchy of group or nature or happenstance or whatever. If the subject is so bound then how, and in what sense, can he/she be autonomous? It seems that subjectivity is required for autonomy but subjectivity is always a condition of subjection. Once one sets aside liberal formalism it seems that autonomy is impossible.

To summarise, objections to the idea of autonomy have several principal contemporary sources.

One is found in some communitarian arguments and more generally in any kind of holistic arguments that take society as prior to the individual. In an extreme communitarian form, from what one might broadly understand as Anglo-American political thought, the objection has developed as a reaction to some strands of liberalism.

A second, and related objection that comes from what might loosely be called post-modernist structuralism, holds within its discourse the view that the subject is dead, dispersed or decentred, that is, a subject to outside forces. Autonomy is thus either difficult or impossible.

These objections to autonomy emerge from a variety of different directions and apparently different intellectual traditions. While it may seem that dealing with all the objections would be impossible, I will argue in this book, that it is not impossible but there are difficulties. These difficulties are eased, however, by the fact that some of the trends against the value of autonomy share some common ground.

The first kind of objection hinges on the idea that as the self is a social construct it takes its sense of identity from the community that has constituted it. This kind of argument rests on the claim that as the self does not posit itself but is a social construct so the idea of autonomy makes little or no sense. This can be expanded into the idea that while autonomy is an individualistic notion, individuals are not prior to society they are consequent to it. *Ipso-facto* there can be no autonomy. Put in a slightly different vein the idea of autonomy over-values the idea of the individual, possibly at the expense of undervaluing the community.⁶ As noted above, this kind of claim is found in some sociological perspectives and, politically, in some radical or extreme communitarian arguments.

The second kind of claim is structurally similar but more radical in some respects. It comes from a different direction but its force is structurally similar. Put at its most extreme it turns out that it is not only individuals that are products of social situations, and social structures, it is also humanity itself that is a social and historical product; the product of an era, and a western era at that. Humanity and its values, including the value of autonomy, are western products. After Nietzsche, humanity, it is claimed, has been unmasked as an impossibility and the unmasking of humanity brings it to an end. Heidegger took this Nietzschean point further and attempted to show that the values of humanism were themselves western products (1993) and products of a limited vision. As products that are artificially sustained so it might seem they cannot be long sustained. In Foucault's words '...as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' (1973, p.385).⁷

These surface tensions represent deep and underlying tensions. The tensions exhibit themselves in philosophical, theoretical and theological

discourse; between being and existence; between self and other; between inner and outer; between human and citizen; between individual and society; between a world that one makes and a world in which one is made; between private thoughts and public action; between responsibility for self and responsibility for others; between the here and now and the future yet to come. These tensions are at the heart of our culture. They are fundamental, deep, incapable of any final resolution and, not surprisingly, therefore, exhibit themselves as fundamental to the concept of autonomy. I do not know whether autonomy is the most fundamental of the concepts that links these complex and competing dimensions of being, but it is a definite contender for that honour. It is a bridging concept in a variety of ways, and at a multiplicity of levels. It is, therefore, a difficult concept with which to deal as well as a tantalising one.

The concept of autonomy may appear as a quick fix for a range of political and social ills, while also, and perhaps paradoxically, appearing in the hands of some as an excuse for inaction in a range of areas of political, personal and social justice.

As a concept, autonomy has been spread too widely, and too thinly. Too much has been demanded of and expected of it. Whatever that concept may turn out to include and imply, it seems that it is a complex notion and certainly not one that can provide any kind of quick fix.

It also seems to me that an age that is happy with quick fixes is an unhappy age.

I offer, therefore, not a fix, quick or otherwise, but merely a brief, and in the nature of things, inadequate, tour around some aspects of a concept with which it is impossible to deal. But that impossibility reflects no more than the status of human life itself; it too is impossible, yet it too exists, has being, meaning, ethical conceptions, political ideas and activities.

It appears even that human life has, occasionally some degree of self-creation; a characteristic, it is said, that belongs to the now departed gods and not to the remaining humans. It is also said, on some accounts, to be part of the concept of autonomy. But even if this turns out to be the case it is not without its own problems, for self-creation might well be creation without responsibility. Creation without responsibility, whether that be of self or of something else is a potentially dangerous thing. Yet self creation, if dealt with through an air of responsibility, might well be a value to be embraced. But if embraced, it can properly be embraced only in a socially responsible context. If autonomy takes the broadly Hobbesian line, it would be inclined to selfishness and self-aggrandisement. It would fit that characteristic of mankind that Hobbes gave as 'a perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death' (1968, p.161).

In this excessively individualistic conception of autonomy Hobbes is not alone for even if the deeper objections to autonomy could be set aside

and autonomy asserted, it is often taken that it would be little more than another form of selfishness. There is a well established trend of thought which links autonomy so closely to individualism that it sees autonomy as little more than a justification for individual aggrandisement.

There is some force behind arguments of this kind. Autonomy does depend on some degree of individuality, therefore it might be regarded as requiring individualism. Individualism, so the argument goes, is basically selfish, hence autonomy is a notion that justifies selfishness. Further, individualism denies the importance and the significance of the community. To the extent that the individual and the community are separated so the individualism is likely to enhance selfishness. The upshot is a clash of individuals all asserting their autonomy.

If that were the outcome of autonomy it would be a sad business indeed and a concept scarcely worth defending. On the contrary it would be a concept that should be attacked and undercut at every opportunity.

Needless to say this is not the concept of autonomy that I have or that I defend. It seems to me that autonomy is possible only within a social context and only within certain sorts of social context at that. If it is used selfishly it will be ultimately self-destructing. Autonomy, I will argue, is possible only in certain carefully prescribed *social* situations.

Autonomy is not, therefore, a merely individual property. It is a social property that is expressed individually.

Notes

- 1 For instance Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*.
- 2 See, for example, Richard Bernstein, *A New Constellation*, and Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*.
- 3 *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; *The Critique of Practical Reason*; and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* are central to Kant's practical thinking on autonomy.
- 4 It was said that Kant's life was governed by the idea of 'The Moral Law Within and the Starry Heavens Above'.
- 5 See, in particular, Anthony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought*.
- 6 The claim is made in various ways and with varying degrees of subtlety and refinement. Typical of the view that individuals are socially constructed in some way is e.g., Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*. A critique of the possible effects of an unmodified autonomy is provide by Hiram Caton of Griffith University Brisbane in his essay on *Autonomy*. I am indebted to him for drawing my attention both to his perceptive essay and to the dangers of such a model of autonomy. I am not sure that I have dealt with all his (rightful) concerns, but I hope I have gone some way towards ameliorating the worst excesses of autonomy without dispensing with some of its useful and important aspects.
- 7 See also J. Derrida 'The Ends of Man'.

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PART I
AUTONOMY BOUND



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1 A Confusion of Concepts

There is no clear and settled understanding of the meaning of 'autonomy': it is a contested concept. To be autonomous, *auto nomos*, is to give the law to oneself, to be self-governing. But this apparently innocent and uncomplicated formula hides considerable difficulties. The formula of giving the law to oneself might refer to external laws and empirical circumstances or it might refer to inner dispositions and mental states. To give the law to oneself might be taken in a way that concerns less the self than the law within which the self operates. Where the self is an independent variable it might concern the effect the law has on the self. Where the self is a dependent variable, it might concern the law that the self gives to itself, to its own governing principles or it might combine inner disposition and external circumstance as mutually interconstituting.

With such a complexity of possibilities, the path of the idea of autonomy is bound to take many twists and turns. The basic distinction found in the very idea of the concept is between the inner and the outer and it is these different dimensions to autonomy that hold the concept in tension or even pull interpretations of it in completely different ways. When pulled inward the emphasis is frequently on the self, when pushed outward the emphasis is frequently on external circumstances. When held in tension the form, nature and aspects of the tension are sufficiently variable and varied as to produce a multitude of different possibilities. It is these possibilities that form the major part of the contestability endemic to the concept of autonomy.

Related to, but not entirely the same as autonomy, are the concepts of freedom and liberty. Generally there is an overlap between these concepts but there are circumstances in which they might pull in different ways. They might separate completely where there is a complete absence of law, Hobbes's state of nature for instance. Similarly, in a situation where the law is entirely given by others, but where there are areas untouched by law that permit a good degree of self-governance. Again Hobbes is the guide with his model of liberal absolutism. Nonetheless the concepts generally overlap to some degree and to pull them apart completely is to risk damage to one or the other. There is a well-known argument against the Hobbesian view that a condition without any law is not a state of freedom at all. 'Liberty is not licence' is the formulation provided by Locke and repeated by countless

others. Liberty requires law. However, as Rousseau suggests and Kant makes clear, a law given by others, removes freedom, morality, and the possibility of rationality. Without these characteristics autonomy would not be possible for Rousseau or for Kant who valued rationality as a fundamental condition.

What Rousseau and Kant both do is tie freedom and autonomy closely together, so much so that, for Kant, full freedom requires autonomy of the will. Here it is the will that gives the law to itself, it is the will that is free. Effectively it is the will that is the lawgiver to itself. It may be the case, Lockean fashion, that freedom requires law but it does not follow from such a requirement that others should give the law or that it should be external to the self. Self control and self-restraint is an important part of some conceptions of autonomy and for some this requires freedom of the will. So for Rousseau's *Savoyard Priest*, freedom of the will is a central part of his creed. In another account, the lapsarian account of the growth of inequality, it was, for Rousseau, freedom of the will that was the hallmark of humanity. It was freedom of the will, the faculty of free agency, that distinguished that which was human from that which was animal. Kant, followed this in all fundamental respects but cast the net wider attempting to catch not just those who are human but all rational creatures. Kant (1960) leaves us in no doubt that all rational creatures acting freely have and exhibit the capacity of autonomy of the will. This idea of a will giving the law to itself, is sufficiently complex that Kant was required to modify his original position and introduce two concepts of will, *wille* and *willkur*.

By contrast to the relation between freedom and autonomy of the will found in Rousseau and Kant, the liberal tradition generally denies the faculty of free will or, even if it fails to deny it completely, certainly sets it aside. So Hobbesian liberal absolutism is consistent with determinism and John Stuart Mill's essay 'On Liberty' begins by making it clear that he was not interested in the doctrine of philosophical necessity but in social or civil liberty. The disinterest in the idea of the autonomy of the will is not confined to Mill, it finds numerous contemporary expressions. So we find the sentiments expressed by Bay (1965, pp.22-3) characteristic of much liberal thinking.

For purposes of political theory even when the task is to discuss "freedom" it is unnecessary to take a stand on the free-will issue. What matters in politics is not to discover whether man is or is not free in an ultimate sense where it is of no demonstrable factual consequence which answer is affirmed. For purposes of political analysis a freedom concept with clear behavioural implications is needed, a concept of *empirical* rather than *transcendental* freedom.

Perhaps so, but in such a case, where empirical freedom is asserted independently of freedom of will, meaningful concepts of autonomy might turn out to be quite restricted, or even incompatible. Again Bay (1965, p. 97) shows the problem, using Reisman's words, he defines the autonomous as those

who on the whole are capable of conforming to the behavioural norms of their society... but are free to choose whether to conform or not... The person here defined as autonomous may or may not conform outwardly, but whatever his choice, he pays less of a price, and he *has* a choice; he can meet both the culture's definitions of adequacy and those which (to a still culturally determined degree) slightly transcend the norm for the adjusted.

In spite of Bay's earlier attempts to avoid the inner and the outer in his treatment of freedom the inner dimension comes to the fore in his treatment of autonomy. The choice of conforming outwardly, or not, implies an inner dimension that can make that choice. Further, the very point of conforming outwardly implies the existence of an inner aspect to action. It is the inner aspect that makes the conceptualisation of the outer aspect meaningful. Without the one the other is but an empty phrase. But one, the inner dimension, is admitted. It becomes less amenable to empirical scrutiny. It may even be beyond the reach of such scrutiny. It may even imply, if not a transcendental component, at least a component that heads in that direction.

Even Raz, who is certainly sympathetic to the personal dimension to autonomy and has made it the basis of a contemporary argument for perfectionist liberalism, seems unwilling to engage in the deeper aspects of the mind. So we find that 'autonomy [is] a life freely chosen' (1988, p.371) and that this requires mental abilities. These include the abilities to

form intentions of a sufficiently complex kind, and plan their execution. These include minimum rationality, the ability to comprehend the means required to realise his goals, the mental faculties to plan actions, etc. (1988, pp.372-3).

This is quite distinct from self-realisation, for a life of self-realisation might be stumbled into or otherwise found in some way that is inconsistent with autonomy. Raz avoids the problem of freedom of the will and the problem of the self that are characteristics of Rousseau's claims to humanity and Kantian morality. In that he follows, but modifies, a long tradition of liberal thought.

Contestable concepts, as Gallie (1964) pointed out when he introduced that idea, arise because of, among other things, appeals to exemplars that

can either be interpreted differently or just are different. There are no innate ideas and no powers or knowledge independent of experience. The passivity is sufficiently marked that Hobbes regards freedom of will as impossible as a contradiction in terms.

Whereas Hobbes takes it that free will is a contradiction in terms, Descartes takes it that action is the outcome of willing, a faculty that he says is distinctive of humanity and the source of his greatest contentment. The thinking 'I' is not merely a substance divorced from the material world it is a substance that can affect the material world. It can be the cause of an action, even while it is not itself caused. In later hands this became the idea of the autonomous will.

On the face of it there is no reconciliation to be made between Hobbes and Descartes. Their outlook rests on premises that are so fundamentally different as to defy any kind of reconciliation. Hobbes is a monist, a materialist and a determinist. Descartes is a dualist, claims that matter and mind are substances, and advocates the power of free will. In certain respects, therefore, their philosophical foundations are incompatible.

Given the differences in the fundamental ontological outlook found at the outset of the development of the modern conception of autonomy it would certainly be an appealing option to throw in the towel at this point and merely remark that little can be said beyond the observation that the concept is used in a variety of ways. Given also that variety, one might take the line that little more can be said. Such a move is appealing and seems indeed to have had its appeal, it would also I think be mistaken. The distance between Hobbes and Descartes is great and the distance between those that have followed is as great if not greater. So the modern concept of autonomy as expressed in liberal theory takes little account of the workings and power of the self. Those theories that have taken some account of the workings and power of the self have found this so difficult to deal with that they have diminished or ended the concept of autonomy and often the idea of liberalism as well. Indeed there is a perfectly reasonable way of reading the liberal- communitarian debate as an instance the divisions caused at the outset of modernity.

There are a variety of solutions to an impasse of this kind. The one I propose to take is to find what, if anything, the apparently incommensurable outlooks represented by Hobbes and Descartes have in common. The differences between Hobbes, and the bulk of English liberalism that followed, and Descartes and the concerns that followed are great. The exemplars too are different at crucial points. Some of those points are incompatible, for instance the conflict between monism and dualism and

between determinism and free will. Clearly it is not possible to be a monist and a dualist simultaneously of the same objects. Similarly one cannot be simultaneously a determinist and a non-determinist with respect to actions of the same kind and the same scope at the same point in time. In other respects they are incommensurable, a slightly different idea, as for instance in the difference between the third and first person accounts which form an integral part of their outlook and methodology. In other respects they are commensurable as, for instance, in their emphasis on the individual.

Whatever the differences between Hobbes and his successors and Descartes and his successors might be, what they tend to share is an initial concern with the individual. This is no mere accident. Both Hobbes and Descartes were writing at a time when the individual was emerging as a clear consequence of the breakdown of the medieval order. What they and their successors held in common was the phenomenon of individualism and consciously or unconsciously (probably the latter) a need to explain what Maine was later to call the shift from 'status to contract'. Hobbes and Descartes may have differed in fundamental respects about what counted as an individual, and about what powers the individual did, or did not have, but what they agreed upon, it seemed was that there were individuals and that they counted in some significant social and political senses.

It certainly seems to be the case that standard accounts of autonomy require individuality. It is therefore, a legitimate task to examine some of the objections to individuality and show that there are a variety of ways in which individuality can be construed, constructed and even reclaimed: the structural similarity between this kind of question and the question raised by the communitarian is clear. They may appear to come from different traditions or different aspects of the same tradition, but the overall point is similar. The communitarian argument, in its most general form, depends on the assumptions that the individual is, in significant ways, the outcome of social forces and not a major producer of those forces. The individual, in so far as one can talk about such beings is, therefore, to be explained, finally, in social terms. The individual is an historical being rather than an a-historical being and is not, therefore, some fixed and a-historical entity having either a final ontology prior to society or a set of causal powers prior to society. In some, more extreme versions, individuals are mere ciphers of society, cannot be individuated distinctly from their social and historical locations and have no ontological status at all or causal powers.

Autonomy may be an expression of recent times but underlying it is a deep history and a deep set of concerns. The way in which the concept of individuality is used reveals the basis of some fundamental concerns and

expressions of the perception of the contemporary capacities of humanity. Unravelling that is to begin to unravel the confusion of concepts surrounding the idea of autonomy.

I Autonomy and Individuality

Autonomy is always an account of something done by some identifiable and distinct doer; there can be no account or assumption of that which is autonomous without some account, or assumption, of that which is individual. Individuality is the basis of autonomy and the individual might be a state, group, organisation, or human individual. Individuality is tied to the notion of subjectivity. Human individuality without some account of subjectivity could not provide an account of autonomy. In the language of post-modernism, without subjects there can be no autonomy.¹ Without either individuals or subjects there can be nothing to be identified or re-identified as the source of the autonomy. If there is no source there is no identifiable action, and if no action there is nothing subsequent to it.

To extend the implications of this, a subject without a subsequent is nonsense, as is an actor without actions and an act without consequences. Both subjectivity and autonomy require a presumption of, and an account of, presence; of someone or something, that can act into the world. There is a sceptical perspective within which presence, subjects, actors, agents, do not exist, do not have independent causal powers with which they could act into the world, and are not, in any case, distinct from the world in a way that would allow a putative independent agent to act into the world. I will deal with this in due course but for now I want to set it aside.

It is clear that the appeal to individuality goes deep.² So both classic, and to some extent more recent and reconstructed liberal conceptions of freedom and autonomy depend on, at least, some conception of individuality. The operative concept here is 'some' conception of individuality and it is around this that most arguments hinge. The limit point at the individual end is found in the view that society is the product of individual actions. The extreme form of this kind of argument is exhibited most clearly in Hobbes's conception of individuals as standing logically, if not historically, prior to the society of which they are the nominal constructors (1946, pp.183-228). To a lesser extent a similar argument to individuality is found in Locke,³ and in Rawls. It turns up in a slightly reconstructed form in Mill,⁴ who does move from an initially unremitting individualism to a view that reconstructs that position, to a point that he

seemed to regard as a kind of qualified socialism. In any case the argument to individuality exists in some form or other in all such arguments, and it exists not as mere decoration but is important to the force of the argument, and to the general position.

The point can be generalised to most, if not all, social contract theories. Such theories do assume at least some priority to the individual, no matter how this priority might subsequently be modified. There can be no contract without contracting parties, and a party must be indivisible. But the contract may subsequently modify the individuality and there is a serious question as to how far the modification of individuality might proceed before it undercuts the existence of the contractors. At that point there seems no longer to be a social contract, although it might have existed as some, at least hypothetical, starting point.

If individuality and the assumed powers and capacities that flow from that are the modern starting point for the conditions of autonomy then there is some interest in pinning down the individual origins of such assumptions. Hobbes and Descartes clearly show evidence of assumptions of individuality prior to society and show evidence of individuals having a pre-social power. But while these are modern exemplars they are also relative latecomers in the development of individualism. What makes Hobbes and Descartes successful is that they appealed to an age that implicitly, at least, has already accepted their individualistic assumptions.

The political and social hallmark of individualism is social contract theory for that theory requires distinct contracting parties. There are three different kinds of points that can be made about contracting parties in the development of Western society. The first is that even prior to social contract theory and the 'shift from status to contract', and even in the quite tightly drawn circumstances of feudal life, individuality held some importance. The second is that even status conditions can be undercut by those individuals who appear as more than items of mere status. The third is that even where individuality occurs it can be sacrificed by individuals to sociality. A clear and paradigmatic example of the first and second cases can be found in some very early social contract arrangements. The oath of Wessex, for example, dating to the ninth century, provided a clear arrangement between Lord and Serf, wherein the Serf agreed to obey the Lord and serve him, but always provided that the Lord took care of and protected the serf. A clear and paradigmatic example of the third arrangement occurs when individuals undercut their own independence in favour of excessive sociality. It is found

most clearly in Rousseau⁵ who, while beginning his hypothetical history with a-social and pre-social individuals, ends his account with civilised creatures who live outside of themselves, in the eyes of others, rather than within themselves.⁶ Their individuality is sacrificed to the care of the embryonic self.

In itself this transference and transformation is not unremittingly bad, but, as Rousseau points out, it quickly turns to the demands of *amour propre*. As that occurs individuality is sacrificed to a life outside of one's self: individuality effectively disappears. Rousseau's civilised, and overly prideful being, is, we might say, significantly decentred, for the prideful self is located outside the self, in the opinions of others. Paradoxically the age of individualism produced anything but individuals, it signalled rather their end as they sought to shift the management of their consciousness to a place outside themselves: into society. This is a paradox that needs to be approached with care.

There is a significant sense in which Rousseau produced the first fully worked through account both of a decentred subject and of the mechanism by which that decentring could occur. He did so, however, not with approval but with a sense of distaste. The distaste arises from the insincerity of the decentred, if 'civilised', subject. The theme is one that recurred throughout the period in which Rousseau was writing. The enlightenment is often treated as a period of model and fully centred subjects: it is far from that. The concerns of the effect of society and of civilisation are writ large on the intellectual accounts of human beings of that time. Living outside of one's self, living in the eyes of others, dancing to the tune of others, engaging in self effacing behaviour are concerns of the time as much, if not more, than the centring of subjectivity in a single and autonomous source.

Consider, for instance, *Rameau's Nephew*, by Diderot. Here we are treated to the sycophant *par excellence*, the character who acts as required and then announces, 'There you have my pantomime; it's about the same as the flatterer's, the courtiers, the footman and the beggars' (Trilling, 1974, p.31). The implication is that all who engage with others, engage in a pantomime. If they always act in that way, outside of themselves then they cannot be independent beings, they cannot even be individuable, for they have surrendered their individuality to the social matrix in which they find themselves. If they cannot be true to themselves then their individuality is in question and their centredness is in question. Given that, there are no clear and discernible parties to a social contract. If that is lacking, so the

individuality required for autonomy is lacking. Rousseau and his successors draw attention to that possibility in a way that is never entirely disposed of.

Take also, for instance, Werther who, in Goethe's novel attempted to act, in a way that kept him true to himself. The task turned out to be impossible and he ended up as a shattered and disintegrated being. The age may have been a discovery of self, or a re-discovery of self, but it was also an age that threw that concept into doubt, that de-centred and turned it over almost as soon as it turned it up,⁷ that found it impossible to retain a centre. In all these cases the difficulty is familiar to contemporary eyes. Individuality there may appear to be, but its exercise involves such compromise that it remains in many cases as an elusive ideal. Individuality becomes subsumed to the actualities of the world and the demands of praxis.

Social contract theorists, no matter what their precise ilk, belong to a particular historical period. That period is represented by the breakdown of traditional order and the emergence of individualism. Its precise dates are unclear, there are traces in the twelfth and even, possibly as early as the ninth century as with the Oath of Wessex. It is a period completed, however, by the seventeenth century and has the characteristic of freeing people from their previous bondage of ascribed status. The period and its change is most tellingly represented in Sir Henry Maine's remark that the history of this period is represented in the 'movement from Status to Contract' (1861, p.100). As individuals were freed from the shackles of the medieval circle so their assigned positions and relations were replaced with contractual relations. When so freed they emerge as individuals, and, as individuals, it is necessary that they renegotiate their position in relation to society and other individuals.

This may seem as if it is merely a point of historical description, but its significance extends well beyond that, for individuals may be historical products but they are products that emerged in times of breakdown and change and not in times of internal coherence, stability and easy continuity. Social contract theory, even in its earliest expression, depends, therefore, historically and logically on some degree of individuality. Contractual relations imply individual and contracting parties. Individuality is required, at least, to enter into a contract and regard one's self as a freely contracting and individual party to that contract. To some extent all liberal arguments depend on this historical condition and on this logical requirement.

By contrast communitarian arguments, of which there are a vast and rich variety, ameliorate these conditions to some extent by arguing that individuals are the products of society. They live in and subsist in society,

are not prior to that society, and as such they cannot, therefore, be contracting parties to society. As a critique of liberalism this kind of argument is fairly recent. But the foundation of communitarian outlooks are not of recent invention. They have a lineage at least as long as liberal arguments but as a general outlook they long precede that and are exhibited in those theories that regard individuals as components of some larger order. The paradigmatic model is that of 'right order' where individuals exist in society in a particular social and theological place. The place of the individual is, to borrow a phrase of Bradley's (1920) to maintain his/her 'station and its duties'.

Some kind of communitarian structure and thinking seems to be so widespread that it appears to be almost the norm. Even today it is found, albeit in modern form, in most parts of the world; modern China; the South East Asian 'Democracies'; most of Africa; India, many of the Islamic states to name but a few.⁸ If one includes such examples then some version of communitarian thinking seems to be widespread, even dominant both geographically and historically and Western thought does seem to be exceptional in its presumption of individuals as prior to society. It does not follow from this, however, that *some* notion of individuality is not found elsewhere, nor does it imply that the presumption of individuality in western thought is unchallenged or unproblematic, nor is it even unproblematic among those who have taken it as some kind of starting point to their thought. What is implied is conceptions of individuality can take many forms, need not slavishly follow the western model and can in those many forms furnish a foundation for autonomy. That said not just any account of individualism will do and not just any account of individuality will do. This generates a potential problem for frequently individuality is construed in ways that fire the political agenda of those who construe the notion. What I will show in the next section is that individuality, like Austin's words, can be dealt with in a variety of ways.

II How To Do Things With Individuals⁹

The first condition of autonomy is individuality. To be autonomous is to be individual and independent in, at least, some respects. Autonomy requires a notion of individuality; for that which gives the law to itself must, be individuable. An autonomous action is an action that is traceable to an individual of some kind. Individuality is a necessary but not sufficient

condition of autonomy, and any account of autonomy must, therefore, give some account of individuality.

The second condition of autonomy is that individuals be able, in some sense or other, and no matter how weakly, to give the law to themselves.¹⁰ The exact sense or senses of giving a law to one's self has already received some treatment and will later receive some amplification.

Objections to individuality take many forms but they also show some commonality. That objection might be sociological in source, as much communitarian argument seems to be, or it might be philosophical as in post-Cartesian arguments. It might even be post-humanist in that autonomy is treated as a humanistic value and as humanism has come to its end so autonomy has also come to its end. In all these cases, while the absence of individuality is not the sole objection to autonomy, it is a central objection to it.

Conversely an argument that shows the existence of individuality does not automatically show autonomy, nor does it completely specify the kind of individuality required for autonomy. Individuality might be of groups, corporations or similar collective social forms. Indeed autonomy is often applied in that collective or group sense, as in the idea of the autonomy of states. Collective or group autonomy is significant and important in a variety of senses not least the sense of the self-determination of a people or nation. For the moment I intend to side step that kind of issue in favour of a concern with individual autonomy; primarily with the idea of personal autonomy, while nevertheless noting that the correlative form of individuality to group autonomy is personal individuality or the individuality of persons.

Autonomy is a term that has been applied to, among other things, the gods, to states to God and to people. Indeed there is some historical evidence to suggest that the idea of what we would now call autonomy, began with the earliest accounts of the gods of the ancient Mesopotamian pantheon and then descended to Mediterranean city states or political communities, before moving sideways as an idea about the nature and power of the Hebraic-Christian God and descending yet again, this time to people.

This seems to suggest that autonomy is primarily a theistic notion of some kind that has been applied to people; and that kind of hypothesis is worthy of examination. It may, for example, be the case that the idea of autonomy depends on a particular conception of the hierarchy between God and man and when the relation God - man is inverted so autonomy is deconstructed. Such a radical challenge to the idea of autonomy cannot be

avoided but it is a challenge that can be dealt with only after some of the prior conditions of autonomy have been more fully specified.

In this section I want to examine some of the bases on which challenges to the individuality of persons have been made and suggest that they are not generally sufficiently conclusive to completely eliminate human individuals from discourse, argument or theory.

Wherever a claim of autonomy is made it is made of an indivisible unit of some kind. The gods, notwithstanding their position in the pantheon can be distinguished in terms that separate them as individuals. States can be distinguished in terms that separate them as individuals; in this case the individual state. God is distinguished as the font and origin of all else, the prime substance dependent on nothing or no one else, and hence the ultimate individual.

People, it is often argued, can be distinguished as individuals although sometimes that is hedged around with claims that individuality is a product of social circumstances, in particular the social circumstances of western society since the 12th to 17th century and onward. Individuality and/or subjectivity may be the basis of personal autonomy and much, although by no means all, arguments to autonomy have been taken to be of persons: so called personal autonomy. But any argument to self-determination is an argument to autonomy and need not be personal.

What follows from this is that the minimal necessary condition of autonomy is individuality and that individuality can be, as with groups or corporations, quite formal. As formal individuals it is required that they be indivisible, identifiable and re-identifiable under some relevant concept or criteria. Even if individuals are understood in a formal sense, the notion that people can be individuated in some meaningful and relevant way separately from their cultural condition is far from unproblematic and draws attention to at least two types of objection to the idea of autonomy.

The first objection is an analytic one, to the effect that there are no continuing individual persons. If there are no persons having continuity then there can be no persons acting autonomously. The basis of this objection is fundamentally temporal or diachronic i.e., there is no continuity of personal identity through time. The second kind of objection is a social one. People, or more precisely persons, it is argued, are constituted by, and in, the social relations of which they are parts. They can be neither individuated nor identified separately from those social relations. Hence there can be no autonomy for there are no separate persons. The basis of this objection is predominantly spatial. Either of these objections, if completely valid, would

indeed be serious objections to the very foundations of autonomy, for they would undercut the possibility of individuality on which autonomy rests.

What is required for individuality in its minimal formal sense is that whatever is to be individuated can be picked out, or distinguished, from the background, that it can be enumerated and that it can be distinguished from other individuals. By the logical formula of the identity of indiscernibles, that which is indiscernible is identical, and cannot be counted as a separate individual; $(x)(y) ((x = y) \rightarrow (x = y))$.

The requirement of individuality with respect to autonomy, however, cannot rest on a mere formality. The formal requirement must be met but it must be met in a certain way. Of course there can be no autonomy without individuality but if autonomy is giving, or includes some component of giving a law to oneself, then that self must be individuable. It also includes a clear requirement for continuity through time. The giving and obeying of a law has a clear temporal component, if a law is given at time t_1 the first opportunity to obey it is at time t_2 . The giving of a law and the obedience to that law are not simultaneous. That which is autonomous needs, therefore, some continuity through time, it cannot be a merely mereologically constructed being or even a being constructed according to some feigned psychological fancy as Hume's criteria of personal identity had it. Indeed for Hume (1978, pp.252-253) the idea of continuity through time was just feigned: a fiction of the imagination and human beings were

...nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other sense and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same perhaps for one moment. The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time nor identity.

This kind of attitude to the problem to individuation and identity is broadly related to mereological conceptions of identity; where identity is taken as a collection of features that overlay rather than underlay phenomena. Identity is not contained within the object itself, for the object is always a construct. At its extreme it is a construct formed by the setting of its components where its components have no internal unity and are not gathered, or set, on any internal principles. Nelson Goodman (1951, p.128) gives a clear example of mereological principles applied to a material object - a table.

We feel no need to hypostatise an underlying core of individuality to explain how a leg and a top, which differ so drastically, can belong to one table. Yet when we consider the table at different moments we are sometimes told that we must inquire what it is that persists through these temporally different cross sections. The answer is that, as with the leg and the top, the unity overlies rather than underlies the diverse elements.

Here the table is functionally equivalent to Hume's 'feigned identity' of human beings. In both cases unity overlies the item in question. In the case of Hume's human being the unity is feigned, that is to say constructed, across time. In the case of the table the unity spatially overlays the item.

This presents two distinct problems of individuation, temporal and spatial. Hume's 'feigned identity' focuses on the first and temporal problem while spatiality is at the root of a second kind of problem with the idea of autonomy: the autonomy of persons. Taken together temporal and spatial difficulties come to a head in the problem of the identity of persons. Persons, or, as that term has its own problems, at least people, occupy social and cultural space and their individuality is certainly related in some way to their social and cultural identity. There are grounds, some of them good, for regarding the criteria on which people have been socially distinguished as the constructions of society and not as self-chosen by those who have been so individuated. If this were entirely true then *pace* the mereological account it would seem that such constructs would overlay personal identity and would not be based on some underlying entity or personal principle that was constitutive of a person in some basic essentialist and existential sense.

To give an example that Jim is not John seems relatively unproblematic if one is making a physical distinction. However, Jim's condition of being rich, advantaged, well educated and upper class cannot be entirely distinguished from John's position of being poor, disadvantaged, ill educated and lower class. In a social sense the two positions are inter-related. To put this another way, the relations between John and Jim are governed internally.¹¹ In some societies and some situations this is easy to see. Where a society consists of masters and slaves or lords and serfs it is easy to see, from the outside, at least, that the relations are governed internally.

There are perspectives from which people appear to be physical objects and, therefore, individuable under physical object criteria. For instance, from the perspective of the distant outsider people do appear as physical individuals and, as physical objects, identifiable, re-identifiable and innumerable. But this kind of individuality can be merely minimal or even token. It does seem that the distance an observer has from the people that

they observe often has some significant bearing on how easy or hard the individuation process is.

To take an example a stranger in a strange land who does not share the customs or language of the inhabitants would be able to distinguish the inhabitants almost only on the basis of physical criteria. The strange people may appear as merely physical individuals. In some cases, however, that kind extreme distance produces not merely an objective perspective of physical individual people but also a massing of the individuals so that they cannot be meaningfully distinguished, identified and re-identified. Something like this process seems to underlie statements of the kind 'all people of country 'x' look the same.' It may also underlie the inability that is often found to appreciate the individual sufferings of distant, and sometimes even not so distant, peoples sharing mass tragedy. A group of famine-ridden people is often seen as a *group* of famine ridden people rather than individuals each suffering their particular tragedy. Here it is the group that is counted and regarded as the individual rather than its component people.

By contrast the idea of having a biographically distinct life is not without its difficulties. Biographies tend to shade off into each other, they overlap, intersect with each other and intersect with collective and intersubjective understandings. Over time they shade off into the collective understanding of the past so that they become somewhat like Edmund Burke's conception of the contract between the living, the dead and the future. The author in the autobiography appears to become embedded in the biographies of others and the biographies of others tend to become embedded in the author. As this happens, so people seem to inhabit a flow of time, or have a flow of time pass through them in which the ghosts of past people, the ideas and imaginations of past communities¹² and the prospects of their possible future worlds come to inhabit their particular biography. As it does so then the particular biography seems far from particular, far from self-contained and may even appear as dispersed. Such a dispersal places the individuation of people as subjects or as individuals in doubt, and if that is in doubt so is the automatic assumption or presumption of one of the necessary conditions of autonomy. In its extreme form this kind of perspective may well lead to the end of individuality and with it the end of the possibility of autonomy.

Even this apparently complex state of affairs is over-simplified for people appear in dual perspectives to themselves, and, in certain circumstances to others. They appear not merely as inhabitants of an entirely dispersed and intersubjectively formed self-consciousness, but also as

objects to themselves and others. To put this in another and significant way, a way that I shall expand on in a later chapter, people are fundamentally aspectival beings.

As aspectival beings they look at themselves from a number of different perspectives. The well known drawing of the duck/rabbit that puzzled Wittgenstein (1968, p.194) illustrates the point. In that drawing does one see a duck or does one see a lady? It depends. Both aspects are equally valid. Some will see a duck, some will see a lady but most people can be brought to see both alternately although not, and this is significant, together. This kind of shift in perception is a shift in aspect, a shift in seeing, what some psychologists referred to as a *gestalt* switch: a switch of aspect that modified the whole perspective.

This shift, a shift of aspect, applies quite clearly to the way in which people perceive themselves. No one looks entirely at themselves only from the inside. Nor do they look entirely at themselves from the outside. Certainly they take an insider's perspective on themselves but they are also bound to take or attempt to take an outsider's perspective on themselves. That outsider's perspective is not merely of their physical/bodily activity and presentation it also includes their internal dimension. In both cases an act of double reflexivity occurs for even as one acts the critical external perspective is interrogating both the motive and the maxim of action. Even as one thinks about the motive and maxim so the critical external perspective has the opportunity of interrogating the action, the motive, the maxim and the self that incorporates action, motive, and maxim into its domain of self affirmation.

A clear consequence of this is that the perspective of one's self which emerges is of a set of complexities coming from what appears to be a never ending Pandora's box of self perspectives. Those self-perspectives are fed from and in turn feed the developing shifts between the internal and external perspective that we place on ourselves, or in which we find ourselves placed.

That external and critical aspect of ourselves that interrogates the internal aspect may seek to deceive, may ask false or trivial questions, may avoid genuine interrogation. Self-deception is always possible and probably frequent. But this Pandora's box of the self is also paralleled in the act of *verstehen* which is necessary to the comprehension of individuals as something other than objects. We never see individuals completely from the inside and always carry some interpretation of our own into the interpretation of the other. But in both cases this shift of perspective is

necessary to the comprehension of self and other if that perspective is not to be distant, alienated and unbalanced.

That we can take an external vantage point on ourselves enables us to understand ourselves as possible objects of apprehension by others and, in doing that, we come to comprehend the objectivity of others as part of what they are. Taking an external vantage on ourselves is necessary to the comprehension of ourselves as something other than merely solipsistic or merely intersubjectively passive and/or dispersed beings and is necessary to the comprehension of others as subject, not as mere object.

People are, therefore, both individuals and intersubjective beings. They are individuals in a physical sense certainly, but their individuality is not so confined, for the aspectival faculty and power of people encourages, even requires them, to perceive themselves as individuals not merely in a physical sense but also in a cultural, psychological and biographical sense. This aspectival capacity of people also suggests that individuality and the criteria for individuality are not entirely physical but also social, cultural, biographical and psychological. If this is the case then the act of individuating self and others requires a reflective process; a process that shifts between internal and external vantagepoints and between different aspects of internal vantage points.

All of this requires some change of aspect, some shift between internal and external perspectives and vantage points. That in turn seems to ameliorate the view that there are no individuals or only passive individuals, individuals understood as merely intersubjective or intersubjectively dispersed products. On the contrary that kind of perspective depends on collapsing the subjective perspective that individuals appear to have of themselves into some kind of intersubjectivity and there is no reason to think that such a collapse can ever be complete.

Correlatively there is no reason to think that, in normal times at least, a collapse into a complete and unremitting aspect of objectivity is infinitely sustainable. The qualification about normal times is required for it does seem that it can be sustained for considerable periods of at least some external groups of people, and indeed something like that seems to have occurred in some genocidal activities and in times of war.

It does seem that the shift between an internal and external vantage point or aspect is both an ineliminable and healthy part of being. Being without both an internal and an external perspective and a contrast between them would be existence, perhaps, but no kind of being at all: it would lack the reflection necessary for being. Being must know itself as being and

(probably) as a being. A purely external perspective would be as an observer from afar: as a stranger in a strange land. And a stranger in a strange land is in danger of seeing everyone and everything as mere object. What is required for a reasonable and sound perspective on individuality and individual being is a dual perspective: a continual shift between an internal and an external perspective on self and others. This shift of aspect/perspective may sometimes have the effect of appearing to make individuality disappear, but that very effect is no more than a by-product of individuality and not to be mistaken for its fundamental absence.

This shifting between internal and external vantage points seems to be necessary to the act of individuation of people in other than a merely formal way, but as soon as it is admitted, it seems to raise a separate set of problems. If individuals are not individuated entirely and completely on the basis of external and objective criteria then individuality seems to depend at least partially, on social and cultural factors.

On the surface this seems to be no more than a product of different aspectual positions but it goes deeper than that for it is both a logical consequence of working through the criteria of individuation as applied to people in an empirical and logical sense, as well as historically, logically and empirically correct.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the factors that lead to a developed conception of individuality will always be present in social life. The paradigmatic model of the later development of the individual is found in western forms of life from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries onwards. But the factors that produced that conception of the individual are not always present. Indeed they are rarely present. In turn that implies some forms, perhaps most forms, of life do not, or at least need not, produce individuals in the western sense.¹³

If that is the case then insofar as autonomy rests on individuality then autonomy cannot be a mere given of human life but must, if it exists in a developed sense, be the outcome of some kinds of social life. Forms of social life that produced or generated individuality would be forms of social life that might also produce autonomy, while forms of social life that did not generate individuality, or that disposed of it, would be forms of social life that did not, indeed could not, generate developed conceptions of autonomy.

To some extent this observation might be taken to ameliorate the claim made earlier that autonomy has three levels, conditions or grounds, an actual existence and possible development. In fact it supports it for the existence and development of autonomy requires social conditions of a certain sort,

but those social conditions require some minimal capacities on which to work. Those capacities are of people not of societies for there is no good reason and no good argument yet developed to show that if autonomy did occur a mere intersubjective arrangement by itself can produce the individuality required to explain that autonomy.

An objection to autonomy based merely on a claim of the impossibility of, or even mistakenness of, the idea of individuality will not by itself succeed. This is not to say that as a matter of fact there are not societies or situations where the requisite individuality that is required for autonomy is not developed or valued sufficiently to make autonomy a developed or valued faculty.

All people do have means for expressing and admitting some degree of individuality although in many cases the individuality is not valued. A society with no expression of individuality or distinctness between its members, where its members are merely and only the bearers of the society, is as absurd an extreme as a society where its members are entirely and merely individuals that are not socially embedded in any way.

The self-criticism and self-reflection that occurs in every society and which is the possibility of its continuance also provides the possibility of the break or rupture that might well produce significant outbursts of autonomous action. There is a tendency to think that reflection and reflexivity is a feature of modern societies, that it is individualism that has produced the distance between individual and society which in turn has produced the reflective capacities. That it was Kant, writing in a fractured world, who first noted that the faculty of reflection tends to lend credence to the apparently unsettling nature of reflexivity. But reflection, or at least an aspect of it, is also necessary for producing social continuity and inhibiting deviance.

All societies have certain expectations of their members and in tightly controlled situations those expectations are, more or less, automatically adhered to. But even that adherence requires reflection on self-performance, adjustment of that performance and behaviour and a return to norms or equilibrative states.

Even in an insider's society a limited outsider's perspective is required. Even a society with performance expectations and little or no deviance performance and requires some reflection on behaviour, style and task. What this implies is that a completely closed society, a completely self-replicating society, requires its members to use *some* reflective capacity, to take some external perspective on themselves, on their own behaviour,

merely in order to complete the replication. The classic account is in Rousseau when he writes of how even in the idyllic first communities people began to judge themselves and their own performance and appearance against the performance, appearance and expectations of others. The mirror of the self requires self-reflection and therein lies not only the basis for the continuance of societies but also the basis for their change and even breakdown. People are not, it seems, and cannot ever be mere ciphers in even the most tightly controlled and static society. A comprehension of self and of justified action always requires some individual reflection.

Such individuality when it does appear is not a mere chimera although it can of course be over-emphasised, over-valued and over estimated.

It is also, and relatedly, the case that one image can be concentrated on to the near exclusion of the other producing an incorrect account of the favoured view.

Yet something like these kinds of claims can be found but to deny one at the expense of the other in some metaphysical or ontological sense is clearly mistaken. To say that society exists and prescribes individual behaviour and action is not properly to justify the absence of individuals. To say, for example, that individuals are the bearers of structures is fine providing the imagery is equivalent to the image of the duck-rabbit and is not a denial of the equally valid aspect that individuals are actors in the continuance of and the changes of structures. Similarly, to say that individuals are but discursive constructs is fine providing the opposite imagery that individuals construct discursive patterns is not a complete denial of individuality. Any denial of both aspects is a hypostatisation of the image and that produces its own false metaphysics, its own false entities, its own peculiar and unbalanced metaphysics and its own strange and wondrous theories. In some communitarian arguments, and in some post-modern arguments, the pole that has sometimes been hypostatized is toward the social end, the structural end or the discursive end.

In all such models individuals disappear. One form of hypostatisation that makes individuals disappear is in radical communitarianism but another is well expressed in structuralism, neither or both of which exhaust the chimeral possibilities. The basic communitarian claim rests on the view that consciousness is socially determined. If socially determined, it cannot be independent; choices and the circumstances within which choices are made are given to the individual and not given by the individual. Sandel puts this kind of point tellingly in a critique of Rawls' conception of the self. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls had claimed that the 'self is prior to the ends which

are affirmed by it' (Sandel, 1982, p.54). Rawls had ruled out a Kantian conception of the subject as occupying either a transcendental or noumenal realm. As Sandel argues (1982, p.54), in Rawls' view:

any account of the self and its ends must tell us not one thing but two things: how the self is distinguished from its ends and also how the self is connected to its ends.

If the former condition cannot be met the self and its ends turn out to be identical, the self just *is* its ends - 'a radically situated subject' as Sandel puts it. If the latter condition cannot be met then the self is not connected to its ends it is, 'a radically disembodied subject' (1982, p.54). It is clear that if the self were merely the affirmation of its ends then it would not be autonomous in any rich or strong sense. Someone who was completely caught up in the vagaries of existence would have no room for standing at a critical distance from that existence and acting in ways distinct from it.

It seems quite clear that this kind of objection is seriously mistaken. As I have argued above no one can be so caught up in the vagaries of existence as to lose all sense of individuality and all sense of distance.

At the very least there is a reflective capacity that is engaged in the monitoring of even the most routine of performances. That performance extends to doing things appropriately, doing things well and to performance of style.

In all these cases some kind of self-distance, some kind of critique of existing performance, and style, if not of the overall structure and tradition is required as a condition of community continuity.

No one completely disappears under the weight of society or community: the switch between engagement and disengagement is always required. This is not to say that the switch is turned into a virtue, that reflection is always valued and nurtured, clearly not.

There is a slightly different point as to whether the anthropological capacity of causal power or freedom of will follows from individuality, but whether it does or not I will argue later that even if it turns out that there is no such causal power relating to action into the world it would not preclude every kind of autonomy, for instance, what I shall call poetic or hermeneutic autonomy.

There is an opposite pole to this debate, and an opposite hypostatizing tendency and this is the tendency to elevate individuals and to make society disappear. As society disappears so there is sometimes a set of overblown

claims to autonomy that rest on an automatic and developed capacity to autonomy of all sane adult human beings. Such arguments run too far in the opposite direction and rest on, indeed probably must rest on, the claim that individuals are prior to society.

There are at least two distinct ways of commenting on the role and power of society in such models. Either society does not exist at all, 'there is no such thing as society, there are only individual men and women and their families'¹⁴ was one well known formulation, or relatedly society is just the set of certain individuals;¹⁵ it is a convenience of a mereological kind.¹⁶ In classical forms of liberal theory this condition of the individuality and autonomy of individuals is more or less automatically assumed.

It is clear enough that the effect of making individuals disappear, as some communitarian and some post-modern accounts of the matter suggest, is the simultaneous elimination of their autonomy. After all that which does not exist cannot be autonomous and the effect of making individuals appear, emerge and to be present is usually to make them independent, if not also autonomous.

Where individuals are presumed to be prior to society, so it is presumed that they are autonomous in some sense or other. After all if society is the product of, set of, or a construct of individuals who were not subject to social forces then they are autonomous at least with respect to social forces. Liberal societies take the conception even further, however, and tend to assume the autonomy of all rational adults. Autonomy is a more or less automatic property of the requisite individuality.

Two sorts of claim about prior autonomy need to be distinguished here. The first, which I have already alluded to, is a condition of making any kind of choice no matter how limited the range of choice might be. Even people in extremely constrained societies have some choices and some opportunity for the exercise of choice. Whether that is valued or not is another issue. Such a faculty can reasonably be regarded as a foundation of autonomy in the sense that it is that faculty which when developed can lead to a fuller practice of independent choosing.

The second claim about prior autonomy, is the assumption that autonomy is an automatic condition of existence, an assumption that is widespread in liberal societies, in at least a moral and juridical sense, but possibly and also in terms of social welfare, public policy and the responsibility for one's desert or plight.

The first assumption is justifiable and even seems to be required whereas the second neither follows from the first nor is justified on separate

grounds. It is presumed as a condition of a certain view of social relations, but that is a different matter altogether.

But if individuality cannot be presumed and is an aspect of sociality, and if autonomy in the second sense cannot be presumed but is to be created, then neither individuality nor autonomy cannot be presumed as a foundation of liberal governments. It is, rather, a consequence or outcome of certain policies that promote individuality and autonomy.

This has an interesting consequence, for if liberal governments require individuality and autonomy, and if neither of these can be presumed but must be acquired, even taught, then the assumptions and apparent presumptions of liberal governments must themselves be acquired.

The effect of such a outlook is radical not to say revolutionary for it implies that this base or laissez faire liberalism is both incoherent and fails to meet its own goals. It can be done only by political action. Liberal governments are, therefore, bound to intervene to produce their own conditions. Liberalism is not a self-contained text but must step outside itself and outside its own justifications in order to produce the conditions within which it can justify itself.

Individuality is not, it appears, something that can be presumed in any but the most minimal and formal sense. Individuality can, however, be acquired in certain social circumstances and insofar as autonomy is valued so its pre-conditions, at least in the form of individuality, can also be valued. It does not follow from this that the form of that individuality need be a-social or anti-social. On the contrary the aspectual nature of a genuine individuality requires a social context and a social matrix against which and within which it develops. Individuality is not atomism.

The maxim that, 'No man is an Island unto himself' might have been openly and clearly held in Donne's medieval circle, but that it often appears not to hold of individualist forms of social arrangement is just that, an appearance. Stepping outside the tightly drawn confines of the text is required for a deeper conception of either the individuality or the autonomy provided by much liberalism and denied by some communitarian/ post-modern thought. That in turn requires an account of individuality and autonomy that reaches inwards rather than concentrating on the merely formal aspects of condition and sanity. Inwardness does seem to have been a significant part of the development of both individuals and of autonomy and it is this that distinguishes some, but not all, parts of western society from some others where role behaviour is tightly circumscribed and reflection is relatively limited. Developed individuality and individuality of