

ISOLATED CASES

*The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment
Philosophy and Romantic Literature*

NANCY YOUSEF

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THE ANXIETIES OF AUTONOMY
IN ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHY
AND ROMANTIC LITERATURE

Nancy Yousef

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To Jonah Sebastian Siegel

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NANCY YOUSEF

New York

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Isolated Cases

Introduction

Isolated Cases is about an imagination of human origins so counterintuitive that it meets resistance as soon as it is ventured, yet so compelling that it is formulated again and again, leaving a rich reaction in its wake. It is a well-established fact of intellectual history that a range of philosophies identified as “enlightenment” strove to define the human being as independent, free-standing, and irreducibly individual. The fraught but powerful ideal of autonomy stands among the key inventions that received opinion attributes to the enlightenment, sometimes as a celebrated innovation, but more recently as a damaging fiction needing to be exposed.¹ Yet it is obvious that human individuals are born and develop in intimate and constant contact with others, that dependence is our inescapable first condition and interaction with others necessary for our survival and formation. Banal and yet crucial, these truths about human beginnings are set aside in philosophies that assume some combination of isolation and self-sufficiency to be the basis on which more complex forms of human life—individual and social—ought to be theoretically reconstructed and examined.

Efforts to conceive the mind’s autonomous workings and the individual’s autonomous survival in a state outside of and prior to society hypothesize independence as the original or fundamental human condition. Hobbes offers the classic articulation of this notion, first arguing that the view of man as a “creature born fit for society though received by most, is yet certainly false,” and then proposing a *presocial* “natural state of men.”² Yet Hobbes does not begin with a “return” to nature. Rather, his starting point is a radical and overt departure from the common view: “It may seem a wonderful kind of stupidity,” he

concedes, “to lay in the very threshold of this doctrine such a stumbling block before the reader as to deny *man to be born fit for society*.” How and why the philosopher feels compelled to overturn or somehow get behind the obvious—and to do so openly, with the confidence that what passes for obvious will not bear the scrutiny of a second glance—are vital questions that have been lost sight of in the contention over Hobbes’s well-known conclusions. So while the Hobbesian view of human beings locked in a brutal egoistic struggle for survival has typically been the focus of analysis, it bears repeating that his vision opens up only by an oddly deliberate turning away from the familiar truth that “to man by nature, as soon as he is born, solitude is an enemy.”³

Hobbes was, of course, not alone in hypothesizing a counterintuitive origin for human forms of life. His work is only the most well known example of the striking emergence of questions about the foundation of communities in late-seventeenth-century political thought. As the philosopher Charles Taylor observes, the principal innovation of theorists such as Hobbes, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke is a new “atomistic” starting point for reflection. Where previously “the existence of the community was something taken for granted,” now it must be “justified relative to a more basic situation,” one in which the individual is imagined to be “on his own.”⁴

It is manifestly strange that highly influential conceptions of the individual would begin by ignoring, refuting, or setting aside the fact that human beings are born and formed in relation to others. *Isolated Cases* is about a distinct set of particularly rich and complex challenges to that initial denial. Although tightly bound to one another through intellectual history, the four well-known works of philosophy and literature at the heart of this book—Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men*, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography*—hardly present themselves for consideration as a group under traditional generic or historical rubrics. The terms under which they can be seen as coherently related to one another are defined in the course of this book, but it is possible to state at the outset that each questions, criticizes, and ultimately repudiates the possibility of imagining that human beings (as minds, as political or moral subjects, as protagonists of a life history) can be conceived as essentially independent. Such a characterization of these works will itself strike some readers as odd. Do I not mean to say just the opposite, particularly about Rousseau, dreamer of the noble savage, or Wordsworth, lyricist of the egotistical sublime? In fact, I will be arguing that these works appear to

propose precisely what they demonstrate to be impossible, that each *renounces* an ideal of independence. That renunciation in and of itself, surprising though it may be in some cases, is not what makes these texts unique. Their peculiarity lies in containing, acknowledging, and making sense of the drive to reject and deny the ordinary view of human “fitness” to social life that I have just touched on above in Hobbes. The authors at the center of this book eschew a straightforwardly affirmative revaluation of sociality and instead incorporate a sympathetic and unmythified apprehension and expression of the anxieties and desires that compel (and make compelling) imagination of an original self-sufficiency. In the process these writers find ways to make the obvious fact of human dependence remarkable—fragile and imperative at once—without simply reasserting the obvious and thereby simplifying the forms of human relationship.

IGNORING THE OBVIOUS; INVENTING THE PAST; REMEMBERING

Before turning to a more precise outline of these paradoxical challenges to autonomy, it will be helpful to recollect how ideals of individual independence typically associated with the enlightenment are articulated. Although introduced as conjectural or speculative, the invented origin is nevertheless inevitably accorded the same force—to explain or move or enlighten—with which we are prone to credit the past. “It is with commonwealths as it is with particular persons, they are commonly ignorant of their own births and infancies,” notes Locke in the *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), preparing his readers for an entirely speculative history that is nevertheless *not* meant to be taken as fantasy. Lost to memory, but recovered in philosophical reflection, is a first period before the “love and want of society” brought individuals together. In that forgotten time and place, men dwelled in a “state of perfect freedom to order their actions . . . without depending on the will of any other man.”⁵ This original, albeit forgotten, era of independence and freedom becomes the basis for Locke’s conception of the individual, trumping the temporal and existential priority of the most readily recognized and observed first stages of human life. The “weakness of infancy” is thereby distorted, misremembered as a transient inessential phase, an “imperfect state” that is not yet the state of being human. Every child undergoes a virtual metamorphosis after which, chrysalis-like, dependence is sloughed off: “The Bonds of [children’s] Subjection are like the

Swaddling Cloths they are wrapt up in, and supported by, in the weakness of their Infancy," writes Locke, "Age and Reason as they grow up, loosen them, till at length they drop quite off and leave a Man at his own free Disposal." Only one man was ever rightly conceived from the start—Adam, the first man, whose perfection consists in having been originally independent, "capable from the first Instant of his being to provide for his own Support." Only the "man at his own free disposal" whom the child mysteriously becomes is the proper subject of philosophical reflection on the "state of nature."⁶

Locke draws on the rich confluence of political and epistemological formulations centering on individuals in isolation that preceded his work. The self-defining Cartesian *cogito* is an invention contemporaneous with Hobbes's state of nature (*Discourse on Method*, 1637; *Meditations*, 1641; *De Cive*, 1642; *Leviathan*, 1651), arrived at by an equally bold, unconcealed turn away from the received and the familiar. The work of philosophical construction (to build knowledge "upon a foundation which is completely my own") begins *after* a narrative about the impulse or compulsion to isolate oneself in order to find truth or, rather, to found the truth on one's self alone.

The discovery of the *cogito* occurs in a place "where I have been able to live as solitary and retired a life as I could in the remotest desert," but it would be a mistake to think that Descartes's reflections *begin* in solitude. The dramatization of retreat does not simply frame the epistemology; it is intrinsic to its methodology. This bears emphasizing because Descartes's account of a past in which others filled the mind with ideas can seem simply prefatory and even superfluous to his meditations. The point of his work can seem to lie solely in the results of his method, in the affirmation of self-determined truths. In fact, the philosophical reasoning that forms the substance of the *Meditations* only begins in the fourth part of the *Discourse on Method*, the first three sections of which comprise an account of Descartes's early schooling, travels, military service, and immersion in social life—experiences that shape the adult now seeking retirement. The formative role of that past is itself implied in the opening lines of the *Meditations* ("Several years have now passed since I first realized how many were the false opinions that in my youth I took to be true"); yet it is easy to forget that the philosopher "*withdraws* to solitude" from another prior place not only because the achievement of the *Meditations* has the effect of making that past seem irrelevant but also because so many subsequent philosophies of knowledge simply start from the isolation at which Descartes actually takes pains to arrive.⁷

In a subtle but critically significant variation of the Cartesian imperative to think for oneself, Diderot's concise formulation, "*l'homme est né pour penser de lui-même*," fuses and confuses end and aspiration (to think for oneself) with origin and nature (to be born as such). This erasure of the turn away from something common, received, inherited—a crucial first methodological step in both Hobbes and Descartes—has profound implications for the theorization of independence. "The word principle," Condillac writes in an accurate but pointed etymology, "is the synonym of beginning."⁸ Descartes's solitary retreat—which he himself presents as idiosyncratic—becomes the virtual cradle of human thought out of which knowledge of self and world comes to develop, *as if from a real beginning*. Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689/1706) presents its examination of the foundations of human knowledge as a recovery of the origins of individual mental development rather than as a heuristic speculation. Voltaire only follows the author of the *Essay* when he credits the work with offering a "history" of the soul.⁹ And yet, even as (or perhaps necessarily because) the mind in isolation becomes the normative model in theories of human understanding, it is worth remarking that the nascent mind often takes inhuman form. Certainly well-known figures such as Locke's "white paper void of all characters," Condillac's fully formed statue whose senses are animated one by one, or La Mettrie's related "*homme machine*" illustrate the fundamental empiricist premise that everything we know we learn by experience. But the very artifice of these figurations masks the strangeness of their isolation and isolatability in a way that representation of human infants never could.¹⁰ As disembodied solitary objects, these philosophically conceived models appear to belong to what the contemporary moral philosopher Annette Baier has described as a "supernatural realm," one deliberately removed from our "natural habitat as persons" which is—in Baier's deceptively simple formulation—"among other persons."¹¹

That seminal enlightenment philosophies of individual origins and development entail a forgetfulness about the need for other persons has not escaped remark, but it is worth pausing briefly to note how common recognitions—such as Baier's—of the crucially ignored fact of dependence have become. In his comprehensive history of modern ethical thought (aptly entitled *The Invention of Autonomy*), J. B. Schneewind observes that most theorists of natural law simply "ignore the fact that we start as newborn babies." The substance of that remark—relegated to a footnote by Schneewind—is the focus of Tzvetan Todorov's "Living

Alone Together,” an essay recently featured (along with responses) in *New Literary History*. “If we look at definitions of the human in the mainstream of European thought,” begins Todorov, a widely held presupposition emerges: “the fact of living with others is generally not conceived as being *necessary* . . . we perforce accept a definition of man as solitary and nonsocial.” The same neglected fact motivates the political theorist Seyla Benhabib, who proposes that any “renegotiation” of an enlightenment legacy must begin with this first principle: “the subject of reason is a human infant, whose body can only be kept alive, whose needs can only be satisfied and whose self can only develop within the human community into which it is born.”¹² These remarks, ventured in different contexts for different purposes and with different degrees of emphasis, are the merest indication of the extent to which critiques of the self-determining autonomous subject that were so explosive and contentiously debated just a few decades ago have become virtually commonplace.¹³ My small sampling is also indicative of how critical reflections on the philosophical history of the individual arising from different disciplines share an arresting and powerful simplicity. In spite of diverse interests and aims, Baier (a feminist, ethicist, and Hume scholar working in the Anglo-American tradition), Schneewind (a historian of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century moral philosophy), Todorov (a structuralist anthropologist), and Benhabib (a political scientist working within the framework of Habermasian discourse ethics) are all driven to observe that the social and relational matrix within which the single self arises has generally been ignored in the philosophical tradition—and do so by recalling us to the same simultaneously profound and mundane facts of infant need and dependence.

The reminder that we were infants before being persons—that we are essentially parented beings—will inevitably strike many readers as a psychoanalytic discovery or, indeed, as *the* discovery of psychoanalysis. The philosophical influences on the origins of psychoanalysis aside, it is worth considering the possibility that the confluence of psychoanalytic and philosophical critiques of autonomy might not represent a finding but (to paraphrase Freud) a *re*-finding that the individual is ineluctably, constitutively dependent on others, a *re*-finding of the pathos and implications of that dependence.¹⁴ Contention between the two fields has unfortunately obscured and simplified the intellectual history they share, a small part of which is represented in the works that are the focus of this book. It may be important to ask *why* so much contemporary thinking about individuals recalls us to that obvious, common truth

which Hobbes turned aside from, but my own question is, rather, *when* did we forget we were born and raised? The necessary presence of other persons may be something we now, again, take for granted as constitutive of individual formation, but the preparation for its recollection may go back even farther than we typically look for it, back to places where we would not expect to find it.

PHILOSOPHY WITH LITERATURE, ENLIGHTENMENT WITH ROMANTICISM

While one need not look too far or too deeply into enlightenment philosophy and romantic literature to discover individual selves conceived as detached and independent, this book asks whether a certain dialectical formation in intellectual history itself—whereby an autonomous subject has been both positively presented as an achievement and negatively identified as an object of critique—has made it difficult to gauge the depth of the fissures within the material that history describes.¹⁵ Is it possible for a single text to function as both paradigm and counter-paradigm of a given idea, for it to be understood in its own time or in our time as the expression of two mutually exclusive ideas? Such theoretical questions arise in interpretive practice, in the struggle to account for the detailed workings and troubling specificities of particular texts—even, perhaps especially, texts that seem familiar in advance of a first reading. At the core of *Isolated Cases* are three powerful but distinctive approaches to the problem of how to make apparent what is evaded, denied, or disowned in the claims of originary autonomy on which the most widely accepted theories of mind and morals in the period are based. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men*, William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* form an arc of critical argument and imagination in the history of the autonomous subject so coincident with that history as to generally be seen as cohering with it rather than straining against it. My title is meant to gesture toward the complex evidentiary role of instances in the works I discuss and their reception. From Rousseau's natural man to Shelley's monstrous creature, from Locke's isolated philosophical mind to Wordsworth's remembrances of solitary youth, the texts in which these figures are constructed present remarkably nuanced reflections on their own conceptualizations. The isolation of my cases both allows them to be studied as discrete instances and also makes them exceptional, and therefore in need of close attention.

Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality amongst Men* (1755) is a locus classicus of the premise of original independence. And yet, as recent work in a variety of fields has begun to suggest, the longing for primitive life with which Rousseau was and is still so often associated is actually misconceived when it is taken either as a vision of the past or as an object of nostalgic yearning.¹⁶ His hypothesis of an original state in which human beings lead solitary and self-sufficient lives is pursued rigorously and nonteleologically to the point of generating a crucial theoretical impasse: the movement from "nature" to "society" is not presumed to be inevitable so that the impossibility of constructing a logical or causal transition from asocial independence to social life is insistently foregrounded. The longing to "return" to a natural state is exposed as a longing for existential otherness, a longing to be something other than—rather than more essentially—human. I structure my analysis of the *Discourse on Inequality* (in chapters 2 and 3) around the complex reception of the hypothetical state described in this seminal work, in efforts to see it as somehow empirically verifiable. What might it mean to take as true what Rousseau offers as conjectural, to identify an impossible fantasy with such concrete objects of knowledge as primates, or with such spectacularly exceptional cases as the various "savage" children who were objects of fascination throughout the eighteenth century?

Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805/1850) is both a splendid indulgence in the myth of a return to the state of nature and a definitive relegation of such an origin to the realm of lyric invention. The poet's history of the "growth of a mind" (the focus of chapter 4) recounts the enabling virtues and possibilities of imagining one's self formed apart from others, but it does so even as it makes clear the inevitable factitiousness of the kind of life story it tells, enclosing the poet's recollections within a narrative frame that insistently makes present the intersubjective context on which the poet's imagination of autonomy depends.

If Rousseau's *Discourse* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* are cases in which the questioning and repudiation of originary independence are paradoxically achieved by theoretical and imaginative indulgence in that very ideal, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) differs in explicitly casting its story of the birth and formation of a uniquely solitary individual as a supernatural event. The fictional structure allows for a rendering of isolated individual development that gestures toward verisimilitude while at the same time decisively reconceiving the ideal of original independence as a monstrous and aberrant version of the human. The

paradox of the novel (explored in chapter 5) is one of formal displacement and estrangement whereby philosophical elements that, in another context, would be taken for a normative model of intellectual development are rendered, or exposed as, fantastic.

The figures of Rousseau's natural man, Wordsworth's "child of nature," and Shelley's monster have a critical philosophical power most apparent when set against antithetical reconstructions of individual history that would trace the development of each thought and idea back to an originally solitary and fundamentally independent mind. Accordingly *Isolated Cases* begins with Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (chapter 1) as perhaps the most influential philosophical narrative of an isolated "mind" developing from simple sensations to complex ideas, and concludes with John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (composed 1853, published 1873) (chapter 6), a seminal nineteenth-century life story that is at once a poignant transmission and striking indictment of the Lockean legacy.

One trajectory of the argument of *Isolated Cases* follows the self-sufficient inward subject who is the protagonist of Locke's *Essay* from an enlightenment origin as a figure of normativity, a theoretical model for all minds, to its nineteenth-century manifestations as tragic anomaly—as a monster who has the upbringing of a philosopher and as a philosopher made monstrous by preternatural cultivation of the mind alone. Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mill's *Autobiography* are perhaps the clearest repudiations of self-determination as a starting point for reflection on individual formation, but Rousseau's *Discourse* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* are equally powerful renunciations of autonomy. This is not to say that these texts are related solely on the terms defined in *Isolated Cases*. Each of the nineteenth-century narratives included in *Isolated Cases* is informed by eighteenth-century philosophical precedents, and all are substantively engaged with topics (including education, influence, the role of literature in self-discovery and self-definition, the mutually exclusive spheres of intellectual pursuit and affectional life, the tempering of fantasies of uniqueness with fears of solitariness) that deserve to be pursued across the lines of historical periodization that the works themselves cross. The connections between individual texts, it is worth emphasizing, are both historically specific and significant: Locke is Rousseau's principal target at a crucial juncture in the second *Discourse*; Locke's *Essay* and Rousseau's *Discourse* are imaginatively transformed sources in the *Prelude* and in *Frankenstein*; Wordsworthian romanticism is presented as the saving alternative to philosophical despair in Mill's

Autobiography, even as Locke's *Essay* remains the framework for Mill's analytic psychology. Intellectual and cultural history bind these particular works together, evincing the persistence of eighteenth-century concepts of individual origins in the nineteenth century, and manifesting a dynamic and critical exchange of ideas between eras.

Without attempting anything like a broad historical narrative, *Isolated Cases* is inspired by recent efforts to think anew the relationship between the enlightenment and romanticism. The "more dialectical account" of the two periods Marshall Brown recently called for would not simply substitute emphasis on the continuities between an "eighteenth century preromanticism and a Romantic post-Enlightenment" for the more familiar stress on romantic "reactions" to eighteenth-century tendencies. It would instead recognize how particular strains of enlightenment thought are "refined and subsumed" by romantic writers. If, in Brown's Hegelian-inflected proposition, "the self-knowledge of Enlightenment is what we know as Romanticism," then recognition of the complex historical relationships between the two periods will necessarily deepen understanding of each period on its own.¹⁷ For example, the particular shape of monstrosity Mary Shelley imagines in *Frankenstein* is both a critical inversion of enlightenment constructions of natural man and an acutely accurate version of Rousseau's critique of those same constructions. Neither straightforwardly opposed to its eighteenth-century sources nor straightforwardly incorporating them, the later text complicates our understanding of the material it both draws on and transforms.

As a "counter-enlightenment" *philosophe* or romantic "precursor," standing between or even overlapping the clear outlines of two periods, an undeniably pervasive and for that reason nebulous "influence," Rousseau is the necessary transitional figure at the heart of this project.¹⁸ Posing as much a formal challenge as a historical one, the diversity of his works (including novels, philosophical essays, treatises, autobiographies, and more) demands an interdisciplinary engagement approaching that which (it is useful to recall) many of his nineteenth-century readers brought to bear. The body of his works, moreover, presents an exemplary case of the dynamic relationship between philosophical and literary writing that is typical of the period from enlightenment to romanticism. His principal subjects—solitude, nature, liberty, social structure, trust, corruption, virtue—are not separately explored in literary and philosophical texts but are diffused throughout works that mingle facts and fabulations, arguments and entreaties, appeals to reason and to sentiment.

Any student of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries knows that the style and subject matter of literary and philosophical works are not as distinct as they are today, or even as they would become late in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ But to see that the boundaries between literary forms and genres, including expository or nonfictional modes, are fluid does not help us understand the relations between works which make quite different claims about their descriptive or normative value—or lack thereof. Philosophy “and” literature in this period do not amount to undifferentiated textual material but constitute a field of subtle variations in which specific formal distinctions can make significant conceptual differences.

Ironically philosophers, more than literary critics, have insisted, in recent years, on the difference that literary forms and representations can make in radically modifying theoretical approaches. Moral philosophers especially have come to look to literary texts for complex forms of representation, contextualization, and exemplification. It bears emphasizing that it is most often to nineteenth-century literature that philosophers have turned to enrich modes of ethical investigation that have their sources in the enlightenment.²⁰ One might speculate in passing that the persistent return to this period is itself evidence that some of the most substantive responses to, and transformations of, problems raised in eighteenth-century philosophical writing took *literary* form in the nineteenth century.

PHILOSOPHICAL SUBJECTS

“Abstract,” “ghostly,” shaped from “loss” and “deprivation,” victim of an “illusion” of its own unified integrity—these are some of the terms used by the neo-Aristotelian ethical philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his provocative 1981 study, *After Virtue*, to describe the kind of subjectivity constructed by enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Berkeley, and Butler.²¹ An “urge to escape the finitude of one’s time and place” in a doomed attempt to “compare ourselves with something absolute”: so the contemporary neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty characterizes both the scientific and transcendental aspirations of post-Cartesian philosophy.²² “Stripped of all constitutive attachments,” the “antecedently individuated subject” central to liberal political theories from Locke to Rawls, according to the communitarian political philosopher Michael Sandel, is presented as the “agent of choices [it does] not really choose,” barred

from the knowledge that it “move[s] in a history [it] neither summon[s] nor command[s].”²³ Though clearly resonant with the substance of French poststructuralist critiques of the subject that are familiar to literary critics, these representative revaluations of the enlightenment legacy have yet to find a firm place in literary studies. Whatever else might be said about the gap between the enthusiastic advocacy and actual practice of interdisciplinarity, I would venture to suggest that (with few exceptions) the widespread neglect and even dismissal of significant and related currents within philosophy threatens to leave literary critics constrained within strangely self-imposed limits on the ways that we pursue the implications of the paradigmatic shift in the understanding of individualism that has taken place in both fields.²⁴

Isolated Cases aims, in part, to complicate the simpler forms of juxtaposition between a past commitment to an illusory autonomous self and recent demystification of that self. The critical imagination of autonomy identified through the readings presented here touches on several related but distinct developments in contemporary philosophy. The communitarian imperative to rethink individualism is clearly akin to feminist critiques of the ostensible centrality of autonomy in the philosophical tradition. To these two broad trends we must add the equally feminist identification of counterstrains within that tradition as well as the complex engagement with ethics running through a certain line of Wittgensteinian interpretation. I will touch briefly on each of these in turn, but first a note on terminology is in order.



The terms *autonomy* and *independence* share as primary definitions the idea of being “self-governing.” Earliest usages of both terms in this sense—referring either to the will of a political entity or of a person—date to roughly the same period (between 1611 and 1640, the age of Hobbes and Descartes). *Independence*, with its extended definitions of freedom from authority, influence, and other forms of reliance on others, has broader application than *autonomy*, but the terms are largely synonymous. To be independent, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, is to be “self-governing, autonomous, free”; to be autonomous is to be “self-governing, independent.”

Since Kant, however, *autonomy* has often been used among philosophers to refer to freedom of the will in a more narrow and specialized sense. The term is central to Kant’s theorization of moral judgment as