

AUTONOMY

In truth the whole of post-Enlightenment thought has been concerned with the notion of freedom. Whatever the avowedly primary principle in any given philosophical scheme, in truth the thinker's concern is with the patterns in which human reason should be organised. Post-Enlightenment thought is by definition concerned with a spectrum of thought spanning the macrocosmic organisation of society through to the microcosmic condition of individual human beings in a world in which a god is no longer sovereign and in which feudal social structures are no longer to be supported.

From the roots of German modern philosophy in Kant and Hegel there was a concern with the nature of human reason: a free will which can operate without genuflecting to a god or to an aristocracy. English philosophical thinking through Hobbes, Locke and Hume made the secular state possible by displacing obedience to god but at the same time implicitly suggested that universal truths were impossible to support in theoretical terms. The German idealists required a system which could advance such universal truths. The basis for such truths would be human reason. Even in the modern thought of Habermas there remains a concern with rationality and communicative action. So Hegel and Marx sought to tie a theory of the inevitability of the effect of reason on human history into larger philosophical systems. Perhaps demonstrating a return to a doubt in the viability of universal truths, French deconstruction and post-structuralist theory have sought to probe the bases of such truths.

The notion of autonomy is a core part of the development of reason. By developing human reason we come to understand the autonomy of individuals: their value as individuals, whether understanding the human condition or founding human rights; the need to displace oppressive social structures, embracing both the dismantling of feudal power and fighting sex and race discrimination; and the complexity then of rethinking how separate autonomous individuals can be understood as combining (or not) into societies.

Autonomy has a difficult place in my schema. The notion of autonomy has become significant in modern political theory because it establishes a middle ground between social responsibility and personal freedom. In the age of human rights it is useful to think of individuals as being autonomous: that is, in this sense, having inalienable rights which attach to them simply as a result of their humanity. It also establishes the primacy of the interests of the individual over the social. And this is its weakness. Taken to limits which are not even its extremes we may quickly come to think of individuals as being, for example, entitled to be treated as consumers with a right to any social good or private pleasure which they may consider attractive, and in

consequence downplay the importance of the greater good of society or even of the greater good of the greatest number. This sort of autonomy worships the individual, purports to grant them rights, but in truth locks them into a cycle of consumption and a false appreciation of what is truly valuable about their personhood. Yet, in a time which values autonomy it seems unappealing to think of diluting the preservation of the interests of the individual behind some greater social good. In this time we mistrust the means by which society may choose to select or to impose what is supposed to be the greater good of the greater number onto individuals: it is precisely to control the unfettered exercise of this social power that we come to prioritise the autonomy of the individual.

In this way “consumer rights” have become a metaphor displacing valuable human rights in popular, political discourse (as though we only count for anything if we are buying something) and “choice” has become a mantra in which we are, for example, no longer patients putting our well-being in the hands of medical professionals but rather we are consumers of medical services choosing which service provider shall receive our custom. I deserve to be treated properly by the Health Service because I am person, not because I have some fatuous contract with the service provider.

On this process you may choose to consider the concept of individualisation; the following discussion considers aspects of autonomy particularly as they relate to work I was doing on the problem of autopoietic theories of law and their careless marginalisation of the place of the individual human being, thus requiring a comparison of attitudes to systems theory with attitudes to autonomy: as part of this discussion I come ultimately to a consideration of social atomisation.

Our starting point is with the concept of autonomy as it relates to human rights [this material was written originally in about 1994 and has been only lightly edited since then].

Autonomy and human rights

Locating human rights in a political debate about autonomy

There is a complex problem as to the level of autonomy to be expected of citizens and to be exploited by citizens through their justice system. One of the clearest analyses of this position is in Ingrams’s *A Political Theory of Rights*, which looks at the understanding of what constitutes a “human right”, what the moral claims are of a human right, and how they should be conceived of politically. Her initial position is that the classical view of individual rights sees them as goods which are “owned” in some way by individuals on the basis that they are human; but she prefers to see rights as being created and protected through the filter of subjective political and moral belief which in turn undermines any claim to their objective existence as inalienable rights.

The concentration on “autonomy” is considered to be the better understanding of the conception of rights, based on a Kantian position about the value of the human being which is involved in a social contractual inter-action. She then develops her position to take a stand related to Habermas’s “social conversation” of developing consensus about rights. The foundations of her position deserve some analysis to understand the qualities that are imputed to the individual in this area. As she puts it:

“[The reigning conception of rights] demystifies rights by showing them as logically tied to certain normative descriptions of ourselves. In the Lockian world what we must do to discover rights is to recapitulate the conception of persons as self-owners.”

Rights are embedded in normative theories about the world; they do not grow out of objectively existing criteria. That is, we cannot seek to demonstrate that there is some a priori justification for human rights in objective, philosophical terms. Rather, it is by reference to normative criteria of right and wrong that we can argue for the utility, the desirability or the need for human rights. Human rights have a moral purpose and they have a political purpose as a result. Philosophers scratch their heads when asked to explain what human rights are or what their intellectual basis can be. Human rights discourse does not have a clear intellectual pedigree, as Costas Douzinas explains, even though we may think that we can spot the seeds of ideas which are broadly akin to human rights thinking in many key philosophers. Rather, it is in our history and political reaction to it that we can see the seeds of human rights thinking. Historically we can point to an intellectual reaction to the horrors of the Second World War which created an international consensus that we must “never see those days again” and so human rights have been enshrined in many international treaties and municipal systems of law to protect the individual against outside blocs of power.

Instabilities in human rights talk

The current vogue for human rights does not command universal assent. Macintyre, for example, derides belief in rights as at “one with belief in witches and in unicorns”. Etzioni interestingly has called for a “moratorium on rights” – based on the view that too many rights and too much “rights-talk” has weakened individuals’ link to their societies – while the focus is trained instead on “responsibility” – so that individuals can be reminded of their obligations to fellow citizens instead of thinking of themselves as distinct units divorced from social ties. The American communitarian line of the 1990’s, of which Etzioni was a leading light – echoes perhaps a more traditional socialist message of the individual as a moral agent. As a reaction to the “me culture” of the Reagan and Thatcher years, the communitarians were following a centrist agenda which sought to turn our heads back from a focus on “me, me and only me”, towards the needs of our communities. A focus on low public spending and on individual wealth creation had led to the reduction of our public spaces and of our communal ties. A result, rhetorically at least, of Thatcher’s notion that “there is no such thing as society” meaning

that our front gardens may look pretty enough but beyond the gate there was only mess, confusion and disintegration of social spaces. It should come as no surprise that the late 1990's, principally under the quasi-communitarian administrations of Clinton and Blair (both of whose advisors were strongly influenced by the communitarians), saw the "refurbishment" of public spaces, buildings and so forth. Private capital re-developed buildings as part of the booming property markets and private finance (such as PFI and PPP in the UK) was used to refurbish public buildings like hospitals. A mixture of political styles which merged leftist concerns with our communal life with rightist agendas of using private capital in public sector infrastructural projects, in Giddens's phrase, moving "beyond left and right".

Rather than being centred solely on personal gain and the role of personal achievement for self-selected goals, the individual in Ingram and Held's analyses, is necessarily involved in and concerned by the social ramifications of their choices. As Ingrams has it:-

"Apparent ontological disputes turn out to be misleading ways of canvassing the merits and demerits of different conceptions of persons ... conceptions that favour certain traits such as separateness and independence may be regarded by some people as less revealing of human nature or less attractive morally, than ones which identify traits such as sociability and connectedness."

The consideration of the person, in this analysis, must take account of the public aspect to the individual. Essentially, this position is the foundation of Rawls's and much of liberal democracy's consideration of the individual. The sole level of majority consensus in democratic societies is that there is some point at which the choices exercised by the individual inter-act with the social.

The discussion to follow does not seek to tease apart the idea of autonomy so much as to identify some problems with the notion of autonomy which is bound up with human rights talk. It pursues some of the ideas considered above in so doing.

Problems with human rights talk: irrationality, freedom and moral pluralism

One key criticism which can be levelled against the liberal democratic analysis is the reliance on rationality in the individual agent. What is not accounted for is selfishness or bare-faced irrationality. In the selection of moral questions, there is much scope for the selection of purportedly "irrational" (or perhaps more accurately "non-mainstream") moral choices. Take Rawls's veil of ignorance behind which all the members of society are asked to lurk and from behind which they cannot know what their station in society will: the rhetorical purpose of which is to show us that in such a situation we would all choose to have equality and fairness, and thus that that is the sort of society to which we should aspire now. It is supposed that we would all act rationally in making our decision as to what kind of society we would like once the veil is taken down: it is assumed that we would all choose, cautiously, a society built on fairness. However, if we stop

assuming that everyone will always act rationally, we might find that this mythical plebiscite would generate a different sort of society. Thus, I may not elect to be part of a society in which, assuming I don't know what role or riches or lifeworld I will be given, everyone is equal and equally free. I may instead choose to gamble on an unequal society on the basis that I think my own resourcefulness and determination will lead to me being a winner eventually, even if I lose the lottery and am placed in straitened circumstances to begin with. After all, this sort of risk-taking is very much the late modern, capitalist way: all investment involves risk, all money-making ventures involve risk, and therefore the money makers of our society are necessarily risk-takers who will act irrationally in Rawls's scheme.

The liberal-democratic view is centred on the requirement of moral pluralism. If individuals are to have autonomy, they must be free to make their own life-choices. The theory is that considering a person to be an end in herself is to respect her distinctive capacity to create and pursue her own aims and projects. This freedom depends upon the ability to for individuals to hold different opinions as to the good life. Herein lies the essential difficulty: how to marry the idea of moral pluralism with social, or group, action.

Rethinking the individual as being autonomous

The autonomic viewpoint throws its concentration on the individual as the *fons origio* of its conception of social structures. In the rightist, libertarian position Nozick formulates a similar position with reference to the autonomous subject as "a being able to formulate long-term plans for its life". Similarly, in Raz's conception of "significant autonomy", the concept requires the ability to "adopt personal projects, develop relationships, and accept commitment to causes through which their personal integrity and sense of dignity and self-respect are made concrete."¹ Ingram's structure of autonomy focuses more explicitly on a Kantian position. One of its basic elements is that autonomy defines freedom negatively as belonging to a rational will "being able to work independently of *determination* by alien causes." From here springs the more useful positive concept of freedom where individuals choose self-imposed laws. "What else then can freedom of the will be but autonomy - that is, the property which will has of being a law unto itself"². The primacy of the system and the availability of communication replaces self-determining will where the power to communicate and choose is abstracted to the system.

Systems theory and the individual

The problem with the systems-theoretical conception of the individual, in Luhmann and others, is that this central relationship is obfuscated. The restraint that might be offered by a freely communicating system are that the choice is taken away from communication between individuals and located in choices selected and elected by the autopoietic

¹ Raz: *The Morality of Freedom*,

² Kant: *The Groundwork Metaphysic of Morals*

communication. As Rawls has it: “acting autonomously is acting from principles that we would consent to as free and equal rational beings.” The autopoietic view, naively stated, suggests that the individual is served by an autopoietic transfer of inputs from the outside world to the system and the communicative outputs of that system. The individual’s position is protected and enhanced by this osmotic discourse. The purist autonomic position would suggest that this removes the power from the individual. However, the social implications of the individual maintaining control over moral and political choices are that there could never be meaningful consensus. Ingram, for example, moves explicitly towards the position held by Habermas that the difficulties of resolving these disputes can only be solved through an ongoing discourse which is aiming for the “ideal speech situation”.

Does autonomy mean choice?

The result is an uncomfortable compromise of the basic assertion that it is the individual who makes the choices: the individual has to choose *a la carte* instead.

“Choice is represented by the role given to consent. The idea of independent validity is captured in the thought of principles that any free and equal rational being would endorse.”³

Is autonomy to be tied up in the idea of choice in a way that is necessarily linked to consent? Logically, consenting does not pre-suppose the exercise of choice. The two may be linked in some circumstances but consenting to a state of affairs cannot be equivalent to the exercise of free choice. To consent to something, in a social context, requires choice from a menu rather than choice from all the possibilities which the individual can conceive of. The issue of how free any individual is to choose in any event, is a question of politics. However, this does not remove the underlying question. What is the relationship between choice and consent to a list of choices? Autonomy, in its ordinary use would indicate a general freedom to choose. Closing down the options to an menu of consent necessarily implies a compromise of that autonomy.

Any political programme must provide a menu at some point: even if it is simply a selection between frameworks in which comparatively free choice is to be exercised. In Ingrams’s analysis then, the exercise of autonomy necessarily involves the potential for the compromise of entirely free choice.

In this way Kant moves towards the social contract position, where individuals are held to be morally autonomous but are also held to have consented to an agreed collection of moral (and other) choices:

“Our own will, provided it were to act only under the condition of being able to make universal law by means of its maxims - this ideal will which can be ours is the proper object of reverence; and the dignity of man consists precisely in his

³ Attracta Ingram: *ibid*

capacity to make universal law, although only on condition of being himself also subject to the law he makes.”

So how to permit the individual to grow within the social in this justice system? Law is both a system of norms and standards and yet some part of the law must fight against systemic imposition of norms and standards which overlook the fragility and distinct validity of each individual. Imposition of such norms must be explicitly political if the justice system is to function effectively. Otherwise, the role of the justice system must be to permit individuals to communicate their aspirations for their own lifechoices to the outside world. This is the central problem of equity and the central question about autopoiesis / systems theory, as considered elsewhere on this site.

Fragments and notes on the autonomic view

In the selection of moral questions, there is much scope for the selection of purportedly “irrational” (or perhaps more accurately “non-mainstream”) moral choices. The irrational supposes the individual, the separate, the other. There is the problem of prioritising the individual over the social, on the one hand, as well as the concomitant problem of losing the individual in the perfection of the social. As [Ingram] put it:

“... these rights claims cannot be treated as subject to assertion or denial independently of the theoretical context in which they are embedded. So we should see scepticism about individual rights as a misleading way of disputing theories that give rights as a misleading priority to individual over communal interests.”

There is fundamental disagreement about the individual and profound misunderstanding about the capacity of the individual in many important contexts.

“...the notion that rights are given in a conception of ourselves such as self-ownership illuminates disagreements about the context of rights.”

That individuals are thought of differently highlights the basic differences in many political and philosophical systems. These differences frequently remain undiscussed because they are not recognised in the majority of cases. The concomitant result is the uncertainty of the place of the individual within these systems and the crisis of human identity that results. To talk of the individual rather than the social, or to talk of the concrete-individual rather than the theoretical-social is to adopt a political stance (explicitly or otherwise) because that focus exposes the driving direction of the theory. This is true even of the “grand theories” like autopoiesis. To put the individual at the end of the queue of objects of consideration is to say that the importance of the individual is secondary to that of the social-theoretical.

Autopoiesis must become explicit in its consideration of the place of the individual within the communicative system. This is the essential difference between Teubner and Luhmann. Luhmann is clear in his position on the role of mind in the discussion. Teubner prefers what is in fact a sloganeering approach to the individual. The position stated in Teubner’s *The Law as an Autopoietic System* is determinedly brief. The failure to consider terms such as “autonomous” within the drift of the discussion of system, illustrates the tension that exists in this field.

“Thus the scheme of rights we endorse is inevitably connected with our judgements about the importance of certain liberties to our philosophically favoured conception of the person.”

The failure to state a position at all appears to be an endorsement of a position.

“... an alternative conception must make good its own claim to adequacy by tying itself more firmly to the interests that rights are to protect.”

The issue for autopoiesis is how it conceives of legal rights and rights more generally. Ingrams’s position is clear to this extent: there is no possibility of creating rights without passing those rights through a moral and political filter that is shaped by the creator’s normative convictions. In Ingrams words “the first task in working through a contractarian approach is to fix the appropriate conception of the person”, and further:

“... our thinking about rights takes place against certain background beliefs that are not in question within the liberal democratic perspective: (1) that citizens are to be treated as equals from the point of view of politics; (2) that certain liberties, such as the liberty to practice a religion, are of fundamental importance; (3) that disagreement about the fundamentals of human existence is to be tolerated (even regarded as a good thing) rather than stamped out by force.”

The autopoietic view must be clear about the roots of its view of legal rights and the movement of the legal system. The disagreement between that and the autonomic view is that the autonomic view gives rights pre-eminence in its conception of the subject.

The liberal-democratic view is therefore centred on the requirement of moral pluralism. If individuals are to have autonomy, they must be free to make their own lifechoices.

“The thought is that treating a person as an end is respecting her distinctive capacity to set and pursue her own aims and projects.”

This freedom depends upon the ability to for individuals to hold different opinions as to the good life. Herein lies the essential difficulty: how to marry the idea of moral pluralism with social, or group, action.

“Now in the context of moral pluralism the good a person identifies and pursues is not a good shared by all. So equal respect for persons cannot flow from the thought that others are due the respect we claim for ourselves because they are like us in sharing our judgements of what makes life worthwhile. Instead, equal respect must come from the thought that what matters is that people develop and exercise their capacities to form and implement their own plans and projects. This is the thought of people as capable of autonomous life and of autonomy itself as so deeply valuable an ideal that we shape our politics to secure it.”

The autonomic viewpoint throws its concentration on the individual as the *fons origio* of its conception of social structures. In the autonomic view:-

“The ideal of autonomy flows from the thought that individuals have a moral personality that enables them to discern good and evil for themselves.”

The autonomic position can be stated more explicitly:

“Autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values.”⁴

In another statement of the autonomy principle:

“...a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan.”⁵

How does this autonomy to plan arise if the space between the individual and the system is taken away from the individual? Can the plan be created in the absence of knowledge of the society in the context of which the choices will be exercised? The autopoietic theory does not address the importance of the exercise of choice. Choices are selected within the system. Is this a central distinction or does the project of the autonomic view in fact require the generation of systemic choice?

In the rightist, libertarian position Robert Nozick formulates a similar position with reference to the autonomous subject as

“... a being able to formulate long-term plans for its life, able to consider and decide on the basis of abstract principles or considerations it formulates to itself and hence not merely the plaything of immediate stimuli, a being that limits its own behaviour in accordance with some principles or picture it has of what an appropriate life is for itself and others.”⁶

The issue for the autopoietic position is then whether taking this decision-making into the system enhances these possibilities for autonomous action by placing them within an achievable context.

In Raz’s conception of “significant autonomy”, the concept requires the ability to

“... adopt personal projects, develop relationships, and accept commitment to causes through which their personal integrity and sense of dignity and self-respect are made concrete.”⁷

To return to Attracta Ingram:

“Autonomy is not prejudiced because we discover ourselves already loaded with projects and aims when we start to reflect. The crucial point is that we regard these commitments as open to question...”

⁴ Gerald Dworkin: *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, 20. The question is then whether this capacity is taken away in the construction or the analysis of an autopoietic legal system: if so, would it matter?

⁵ John Rawls: *Theory of Justice*, 408

⁶ Robert Nozick: *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 49

⁷ Raz: *The Morality of Freedom*,

Does the autopoietic system re-frame these questions? Ingram's structure of autonomy focuses more explicitly on a Kantian position. Its basic element is that autonomy defines freedom negatively as belonging to rational will "being able to work independently of *determination* by alien causes." From here springs the more useful positive concept of freedom where individuals choose self-imposed laws. "What else then can freedom of the will be but autonomy - that is, the property which will has of being a law unto itself"⁸. The primacy of the system and the availability of communication replaces self-determining will where the power to communicate and choose is abstracted to the system.

The problem with Teubner's conception of the individual is that this central relationship is obfuscated:

"Kant's view is that the law we make is no mere subjective standard for assessing actions but one that we can will to be universal ... So if we follow the Kantian line here, we need to think of making moral laws that are intersubjectively valid because they express an agreement in moral judgements that is the terminus of many independent deliberations and judgements. How the many independent deliberators are to arrive at one and the same moral conclusion is the key problem here and the one that post-Kantian contract theory addresses."⁹

The restraint that might be offered by a freely communicating system is that the choice is taken away from communication between individuals and located in choices selected and elected by the autopoietic communication. As Rawls has it: "acting autonomously is acting from principles that we would consent to as free and equal rational beings."

The autopoietic view, naively stated, suggests that the individual is served by an autopoietic transfer of inputs from the outside world to the system and the communicative outputs of that system. The individual's position is protected and enhanced by this osmotic process. The purist autonomic position would suggest that this removes the power from the individual. However, the social implications of the individual maintaining control over moral and political choices are that there could never be meaningful consensus. Ingram, for example, moves explicitly towards the position held by Habermas that the difficulties of resolving these disputes can only be solved through an ongoing discourse which is aiming for the "ideal speech situation".

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⁸ Kant: *The Groundwork Metaphysic of Morals*

⁹ Attracta Ingram: *Political Theory of Rights*,

¹⁰ Attracta Ingram: *ibid*

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In Ingrams's words:

“The ideal of autonomy that I have been putting together is the vision of people determining, to some extent, their own lives in the light of principles they would endorse as free and equal persons.” [my underlining]

The underlined phrase supposes a conditionality in these rights. The questions at this point become more complex. There must be an adequate range of options from which to pick. There is a requirement of rationality in all these models. What does it mean to be rational: what guarantees are there in Rawls's original position that rational rather than risk-taking choices would be made?

In contrast, what does the system offer in terms of rationality and free choice? The assertion of the autonomic models are that the choices have to be made, or analysed as being explicitly by persons. The autopoietic position contains the possibility that the questions are not met and answered but rather that solutions are presented through the operation of the system.

In Ingrams's own position, there is the possibility that solutions to problems arise not from those in whose benefit the problem is resolved but rather from within the operation of a system that administers their rights:

“Laws that prohibit the abuse and maltreatment of slaves are not founded on claims made by slaves on their own behalf, but on claims originating either from slaveholders, or from the general interests of society (which does not include the interest of slaves).”

The history of the US constitution is one in which the “inalienable rights of man” have been asserted for three centuries while the rights of former slaves have been asserted for only three decades. Here is both the fear and the salvation: the salvation is the idea that within the system there is the ability to set the slave free; the fear is that the slave may sit in chains for a long time before the system reacts.

In the autonomic view, “[individuals] are politically free as members of a polity that is internally self-governing.”¹¹ The issue is how the polity is internally self-governing. Citizens must regard themselves as able to give justice to each other. “Citizens are politically free with respect to justice in that their civic status is regarded as independent of which conception they hold, which religious affiliation, if any, which political convictions, and so on.”¹² But how do these citizens communicate? Is the communication systemic or inter-personal?

And yet Ingrams persists:-

“The point is that respect for autonomy is not consistent with governments deciding moral issues on behalf of citizens ... political participation, just institutions, and independence of state paternalism are valuable to individuals not merely as a means to autonomy, but as an intrinsic part of what autonomy is.”

Does this resistance to paternalism extend to the closed system? If so, what other system do we use to determine society's moral choices? Does this make systemic choices immoral too? Where has the conception of “consent” above gone to?

“If we are to deal with the fundamental problems of justice in our political culture we have to find some point of contact with each other on the basis of which we can agree common principles of right.”¹³

Can this be achieved in the context of system too? See autopoiesis.

¹¹ Attracta Ingram: *ibid*

¹² Attracta Ingram: *ibid*

¹³ Attracta Ingram: *ibid*

Atomisation

The case against liberal autonomy based on community, deployed generally by those suspicious of leftist/liberal libertarianism

This argument is best summarised by Sean Sayers:¹⁴

‘The communitarian critique focuses particularly on the ‘autonomous’ individual of liberal social theory, who is supposed to exist prior to, and independent of, social relations. We are essentially social beings. Our needs and desires, our ability to reason and choose, our very being and identity as moral selves, are formed only in and through our social relations and roles.’

MacIntyre in *After Virtue* suggests that we have lost the coherent social order which previously had given our societies a sense of value and identity. Instead, as Sayers puts it:

‘Modern societies has been dissolved into a mass of atomic individuals each pursuing their own arbitrary desires and preferences. The picture of the individual and society given in liberal social theory is thus, according to MacIntyre, in some important respects true: not as an account of universal human nature, but as an account of the way people have actually become in modern society...[Looking back] to the Aristotelian tradition of the ‘virtues’ as a model for communitarian values with which to criticise liberal modernity. ... If we are necessarily and essentially social beings, then modern society cannot be understood as the mere negation - fragmentation, destruction, loss - of community. If the idea of the unencumbered self is a mythical creation of false theory, it cannot give a true picture of the self in contemporary society.’

As Walzer expresses the need for social connection combat the drift towards atomistic autonomy:

‘We are in fact persons and we are in fact bound together. The liberal ideology of separatism cannot take personhood and bondedness away from us. What it does take away is the *sense* of personhood and bondedness.’¹⁵

The suggestion here is that our loss of social bonds is not an actual loss of bonds but rather, merely, a supposed loss of bonds which we come to feel to be true even if it is not objectively the case. So, as Sayers expresses this idea:

‘In response to a philosophy like Walzer’s, one must therefore ask: who are we? Whose ‘shared values’ are we talking about? ... By portraying the idea of loss or lack of community as illusory, the suggestion is that nothing more is needed to overcome it than a change in our understanding. Everything is all right as it is. the

¹⁴ ‘The Value of Community’ by Sean Sayers (*Radical Philosophy*).

¹⁵ Walzer, ‘The Communitarianism Critique of Liberalism’, *Political Theory*, vol.18, 1990, p.10.

fault is in our minds, not in reality. Neither Walzer nor Taylor wish to endorse this conclusion, but their theories imply it nevertheless.’

Taylor blames the breakdown of society on liberal individualism. However, separation and divorce are all a part of modern life: therefore, it is not a deterioration of society, rather it is a difference in the structure of that society. Divorce has become a feature of the new structure: rather than heralding the end of the world, we are living in a time of change. As Syers suggests, this seems to be the view which Rorty adopts in advocating what he calls ‘postmodernist bourgeois liberalism’ and which Rawls advocates in his ‘political not metaphysical’ account of justice. These key US liberal thinkers consider that modern liberal society is already a ‘community’ of autonomous individuals.

The key question here for these communitarian views which are suspicious of autonomy is whether or not the modernity which has given rise to this autonomy is a positive or a negative phenomenon. The communitarians consider it to be destructive of traditional social relations and therefore bad for society as a result of destabilising those constructs. By contrast, late modernists like Beck and Giddens point to the opportunities which are offered to people by the freedom they have to construct their own lifestories and to pursue their own ambitions. In this sense those people who used to lose under the traditional social mores – women who were paid little and had few employment prospects than men; ethnic minorities; working class children who had worse health and education services than their middle and upper class counterparts – had the opportunity both to better themselves in a more egalitarian society with better job prospects and to indulge their own legitimate strangeness – see the average exoticism of everyday life which more and more of us experience.¹⁶ Thus destabilisation of traditional mores has meant opportunity of a meaningful kind for many in our society, albeit the change in established social mores has generated fear.

As Sayers has encapsulated this debate:

‘Both [views of communitarianism] portray the impact of modernity as negative. They lament the destruction or the danger of destruction of the traditional forms of community, and oppose the value of community to that of individual autonomy as if these were exclusive of each other. However, if contemporary society is not simply the negation of community but rather a different form of it, then it cannot validly be criticised by appeal to the abstract notion of community as such. ... The transition to modernity has not been an entirely negative process. The destruction of traditional social relations has occurred through their replacement by new and different ones. What Communitarianism portrays as a process of mere loss can also be seen as the creation of the autonomy of the self and an individual identity relatively independent of family and social position.’¹⁷

¹⁶ “Such relative autonomy is a real feature of the modern self.”

¹⁷ Sayers also said: “...social relations based on private property and market exchange - *is* fragmenting and destructive: not of community or society *as such*, but rather of a particular form of society, namely traditional society.” The trouble with this view is that traditional society was always based on disparities of private property rights and income.

[to be continued ...]