we need not be thus attached to their coat-tails for ever.

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Liberalism and its Problems

MICHAEL PARKER

During the early years of our lives we come to participate increasingly in a world with others. Whilst there is a sense in which we are immersed in a social world at or very near the moment of birth itself, it is in childhood that our participation in the world of human affairs becomes articulate. For it is through such participation that we come to understand about the world, about our relationships with other people and about ourselves as individuals. However, the developmental nature of personal identity and its emergence from webs of interpersonal interdependence introduce a creative tension into the child's world. For with the emergence of our 'sense of self' we become aware of the differences between our own needs and understandings and those of others.[1] With the emergence of my 'self', the world of which I am part is revealed to be one of moral difficulty for me as an individual. It is a world which constantly challenges me to work out meaningful ways of living together with others whilst at the same time challenging me to create a meaningful life for myself.[2] It is a concern with this tension, and in particular the accompanying danger of communities responding in an oppressive way to the attempts by individuals to work out and

create meaningful ways of living for themselves, that leads liberal individualists to demand that the first, and perhaps only, responsibility of communities is to protect the rights of individuals against interference by others.[3] The world into which we are born and in which we grow up as children is morally problematic in ways which reveal morality to be both complex and multi-layered. Moral problems are, on the one hand, problems for us because of our embeddedness in shared ways of life with others. But they are also, on the other hand, problems for us as individuals, and this is thrown into relief by the frequent need to uphold the rights of individuals against their community.

Liberal individualism

Liberal individualists explain the moral world in terms of the competing interests of individuals. In this they can be said to stress the differences between people and their essential separateness rather than their similarities and shared interests. Liberals argue that it is just because the human world is made up of individual people each with his/her own desires,

interests and conceptions of the good, each possessing the ability to freely choose his/her own way of life, that moral difficulty is a central feature of our lives. Our moral language reflects a shared need as individuals to work out ways of living together, again as individuals, and reflects also the difficulties we face in so doing.

The power of the liberal's emphasis upon the needs and interests of individuals lies in its demand that any workable understanding of the moral world must relate in a meaningful way to the actual decisions which individual people have to make in their everyday lives. That is, it claims to tie us to the moral concerns of real people. Liberals argue that this leads naturally to a conception of morality which is concerned with how individuals ought to live their lives in a world which is made up of individuals with competing conceptions of the good. Indeed, liberalism has often been said to involve more than simply an *emphasis* upon the needs and interests of individuals and has sometimes been interpreted (often by liberals themselves) as presupposing an individualistic *ontology*. That is,

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), patron saint of liberal individualism.

liberalism has been seen to rest upon a presupposition that only individuals have genuine existence. In this respect, Arblaster, for example, points out that liberalism involves a commitment to,

> ... seeing the individual as primary, as more 'real' or fundamental than human society and its institutions and structures.[7]

From here it is a small step to arguing, as Bentham did, that,

> The community is a *fictitious* body,
> composed of individual persons who are
> considered as constituting as it were its
> members (emphasis mine).[8]

Liberals have thus sometimes been led to the conclusion that societies and communities are to some extent less real than the individuals which make them up, and this leads liberals to argue that communities cannot have value over and above the value of the individuals of which they are constituted; that the needs of communities ought never to be put above those of individuals. From a liberal perspective it makes no sense to attribute rights or duties to groups such as families because,

> Individual interests are the *only* interests.[9]

Thus it is that liberal individualism has been argued to comprise both a descriptive and a prescriptive aspect. Liberals claim not only that the world consists of individual people each of whom has the ability to freely choose their own way of life, but also that the needs and interests of individuals constitute the highest good. Hence what ought to be of most value ultimately for the liberal is the actual freedom of individuals to make these kinds of choices. It is this which enables liberals to argue for the importance of upholding the rights of individuals against the demands of their communities, and it is essential that any account of the morally complex world in which we live is at least sometimes able to do this. For, the liberal emphasis upon the value of respect for the needs and interests of individual people undoubtedly resonates with one of our most important ethical intuitions. As Berlin puts it,

> I wish my life and decisions to depend
> on myself, not on external forces of
> whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's
> acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not

an object, to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes.[10]

The problem of shared understanding

Despite the advantages of the liberal conception of an antecedently individuated subject it can in some ways be seen to raise as many problems as it solves. I argued in my introduction to this paper that during the early years of our childhood we come increasingly to be able to participate in a shared world with others, and that it is through our participation in this world that we come to be aware of its moral dimension. Any workable moral theory must be capable of explaining how it is possible that we come to share a moral understanding with others. The liberal individualist shows us the importance of being able to uphold the rights of individuals against their community but, given the individualistic ontology which frames liberalism, the explanation of the growth of shared moral understanding is inevitably problematic. As children we are introduced into worlds of human affairs and come to share in the ways of life of others. We come to be able gradually to participate in such shared ways of life. How can the individualist explain this within an ontology of distinct individuals?

It seems clear that at the very least the growth of moral understanding involves coming to see at least some things as 'right' or 'acceptable' or 'good'. This does not as it stands seem a particularly contentious claim. To say this is not to make a statement about particular moral practices but to argue that the very possibility that children will come to understand any moral practice at all depends upon the fact that they come to see at least some practices in broadly moral ways. The ability to come to know some things as 'right' or 'acceptable' or 'good' itself presupposes something like a 'standard' by which these might be judged. This is another way of putting Wittgenstein's point about the impossibility of a private language.[11] Such a standard cannot be private or individual for the reason that if private it would cease to be a 'standard'. To know something as 'right' or 'acceptable' or 'good' presupposes an understanding of what it is for something *to be*

'right' or 'acceptable' or 'good' and to do this, as both Wittgenstein and Hamlyn argue, is essentially to be able to 'appreciate the force of a norm'. It is precisely this which is impossible in private. For it is only possible to appreciate the force of a norm given that one has been brought to see some things as 'right' and others as 'wrong' in the process of being introduced into ways of life by other people.[12] What this implies is that the possibility of coming to have moral understanding depends upon the possibility of something like 'correction by others'.

Furthermore, if one is to be corrected by others, it would seem to follow that one must see them in some way *as 'correctors'*. Not all human action is correction. If understanding is to be possible children must come to be able, perhaps gradually, to distinguish between those actions which are correction and those which are not. It follows from these considerations that the possibility of being corrected by something and hence of understanding involves something like,

> ... seeing that something as a being with certain intentions, and thus normally with desires, interests, etc. in other words as a person or something person-like.[13]

The possibility of the growth of moral understanding presupposes an intentional context in which the relevance of the act of correction can be recognized. That is to say that it has to be seen to be motivated in personlike ways and this means that the possibility of the growth of moral understanding depends upon the child being treated as a person *by other people*. It follows that any theory of shared moral understanding must recognize that it is a condition of its possibility that the child enters into an intersubjective, intentional context of correction from the first moments of life. It must in short be a social theory *from the bottom up*.

What these considerations mean, taken together with my earlier comments, is that the explanation of morality cannot be simply individualistic. For, whilst it remains the case that liberalism identifies an important dimension of our moral world in its concern for the protection of individual rights, it nevertheless overlooks the extent to which the very possibility of morality and our moral understanding are tied to the fact of our social embeddedness and to the fact that we are introduced into shared ways of life by others. Such considerations point to the importance of the recognition of a fundamental sociality of human beings as a condition of any moral thinking at all, and in particular of any shared moral understanding. The very possibility of moral understanding depends upon our embeddedness in ways of life with other people, and it is an implication of this that communitarians are right to argue against what they perceive to be the liberal attachment to the concept of an antecedently individuated subject. For given such a subject, the growth of moral understanding and of moral concern would be impossible.

Political liberalism

There is however, it seems to me, no *logical* contradiction at least between our moral concerns being related to or emerging out of our social embeddedness and the liberal claim that the freedom of individuals ought to be the justification for moral judgements; and in the light of communitarian criticism of the conception of an individualistic ontology, some liberals have attempted to preserve the prescriptive force of liberalism by arguing that the link between political liberalism and ontological individualism is unnecessary and can be broken without undermining the force of liberal *political* argument itself.[14]

Michael Sandel notes that,

> By virtue of its independence from ordinary psychological and teleological assumptions, this liberalism, at least in its most contemporary versions, typically presents itself as immune from most controversies to which political theories have traditionally been vulnerable, especially on questions of human nature and the meaning of the good life.[15]

Responding to criticism of his 'A theory of Justice', Rawls for example has acknowledged that,

> It may seem that this conception [justice as fairness] depends upon philosophical claims I should like to avoid, for example, claims to universal truth, or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons...[16]

and goes on to say, a few pages later,

> [However], a conception of the person in a political view, for example, the

conception of citizens as free and equal persons, need not involve, so I believe, questions of philosophical psychology or a metaphysical doctrine of the nature of the self.[17]

Thus liberalism as a prescriptive theory is said to have been liberated from its anchor in a descriptive metaphysical framework. But as Susan Mendus argues, whilst it may be possible for the liberal to argue that liberalism does not imply a dependence upon any special theory of human nature in the sense of attributing essential desires, wants, needs, etc. it is difficult to see how it might escape its dependence upon a particular kind of theory or view of the *self*. For liberalism, even Rawls's political liberalism, requires at the very least, that subjects are able to achieve a certain distance from their circumstances. For if I wish to,

> ... be the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will[18]

I must be capable of 'viewing myself' from a certain metaphorical distance. That is, I must be capable of becoming an object to myself.

For, despite Rawls's argument that the claims of political liberalism do not depend upon any particular conception of the person, Sandel insists that,

> ... there is [a] sense in which this liberalism does indeed imply a certain theory of the person. It concerns not the object of human desires but the subject of desire, and how this subject is constituted. For justice to be primary, certain things must be true of us. We must be creatures of a certain kind, related to human circumstance in a certain way. In particular, we must stand to our circumstance always at a certain distance, conditioned to be sure, but part of us always antecedent to any conditions. Only in this way can we view ourselves as subjects as well as objects of experience, as agents and not just instruments of the purposes we pursue.[19]

It seems clear that if liberalism is to retain any content as a political theory, it requires, at the very least, something like the concept of the self sketched here. For the theoretical power of liberalism arises out of just that ability to separate the self both from others and from the world which Rawls, in his later work, seems to be seeking to deny.

> [For even the 'political' Rawls relies

upon the claim that] ... each is a being who chooses his ends and who values certain primary goods as instrumental to their realization.[20]

The price of independence

Sandel and others go on to criticize liberalism for its failure to recognize that the demand that we view ourselves as free and independent choosers comes at a price.[21] For in order to conceive ourselves as such we must, they argue, deny the facts of our social embeddedness and view such facts merely as 'values we happen to espouse at any given time'.[22] And this is a significant cost indeed. For,

> ... we cannot regard ourselves as independent in this way without great cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons or daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic.[23]

Indeed this is more than simply a matter of identity. For it is out of my social embeddedness that moral problems are *problems for me*. My concerns for individual freedom and my respect for others, for example, which are so central to liberalism arise out of the fact that I am socially embedded.[24] If I step back from my social embeddedness behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance or into an original position, I detach myself from the moral concerns which prompted me to see the moral difficulty as a problem in the first place. And this means that the liberal's attempt to explain the moral world in terms of individuals leads to a model in which it is impossible to explain just why it is that moral concerns are *problems for us*. The world thus conceived is insipid, degendered and peopled by morally neutral beings which bear little relation to our own understanding of our world and the force of our moral concerns.[25]

> To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments such as these is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth.[26]
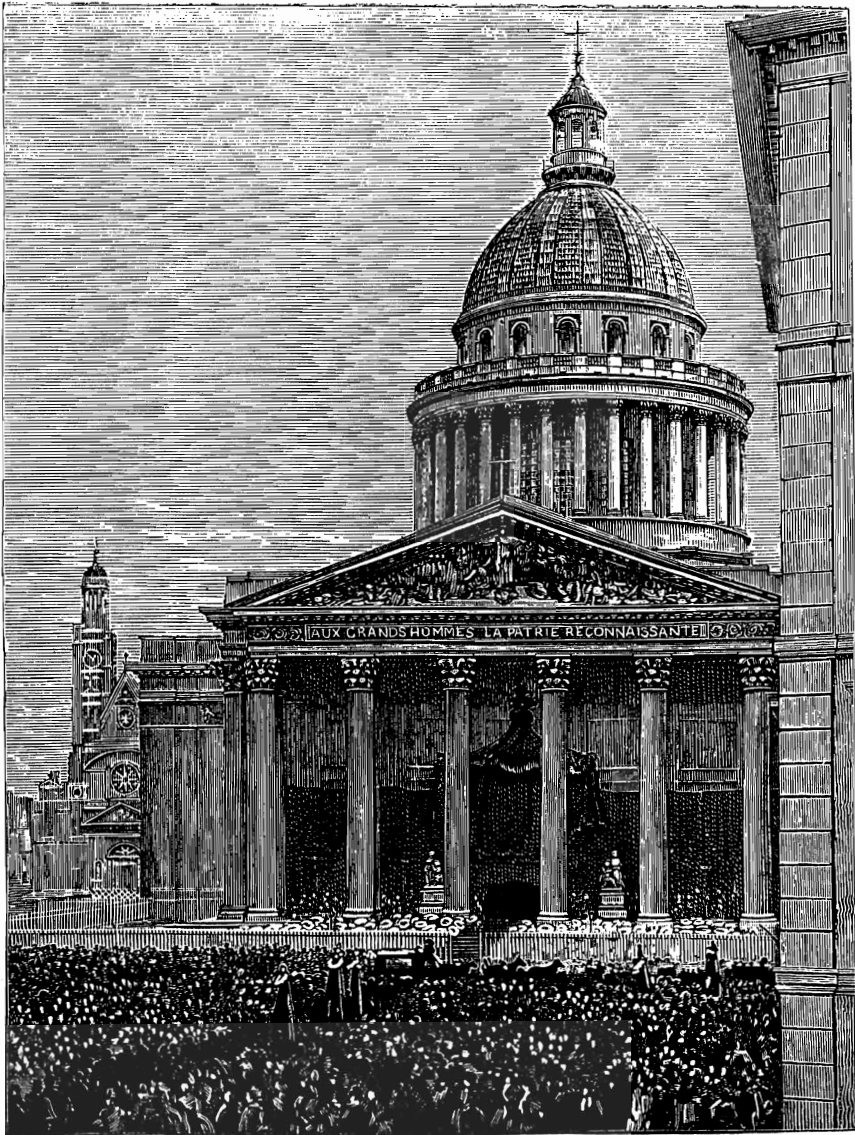
The Pantheon in Paris, an embodiment in stone of shared communal values.

There is then a sense in which liberalism, even in its new 'political' guise, is incapable of explaining an important, indeed essential, element of our moral world and that is just why it is that we have moral concerns at all. This is more than simply a logical point. For, if the new Rawls and other political liberals are willing to concede, as they seem to be, that the origins of our moral concerns and understanding lie in our social embeddedness, how can political or methodological liberalism

ever be expected to function? If I am able to reach the level of detachment from my attachments required by political liberalism in order to make moral judgements, then I must inevitably lose contact with the problematic nature of such attachments. On the way to the original position the world drifts away and the world becomes unproblematic and hence amoral. If, on the other hand, our attachments do not fall away then liberals seem to have no option but to accept that I am unable to make

the detached moral judgements required by justice, and hence liberalism remains an idealistic dream. What these considerations mean is that methodological liberalism fails against its own criteria, *as a method*.

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On the Justification of Political Violence

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Violence presents political philosophers with problems of both definition and justification. Political philosophers are concerned with the organized violence of the state and with violent rebellion against it. There is general agreement that such violence involves the deliberate use of force which harms, or violates, people physically. There is disagreement, however, about whether it is proper to extend the definition of violence to cover the threat of harm; psychological harm; damage to property; and the violation of interests by political systems and structures. Difficult as the definition of violence may be, the problems of