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DOES COMMUNITARIANISM REQUIRE INDIVIDUAL INDEPENDENCE?*

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ABSTRACT. Critics of liberalism have argued that liberal individualism misdescribes persons in ignoring the degree to which they are dependent on their communities. Indeed, they argue that persons are essentially socially constituted. In this paper, however, I provide two arguments – the first concerning communitarian descriptive claims about persons, our society, and the communitarian ideal society, and the second regarding the communitarian view of individual autonomy – that the communitarian theory of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel, relies on individuals either being independent from their communities or having a community-independent desire. This is indicative of a deep contradiction in communitarian thought.

KEY WORDS: autonomy, communitarianism, communitarians, community, individual independence, individuals, inner citadel, liberalism, social constitution

In this paper I lay out two arguments, the intent of which is to show that the communitarian theory of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel, relies on individuals either themselves being independent from their communities or having within them something which is independent from their communities. This will strike many readers as odd, for communitarians argue that persons are essentially socially constituted. Indeed. If this paper is correct, it indicates a deep contradiction in communitarian thought.

We must first have some understanding of what it means for communitarians to be committed to the view that persons are socially constituted.¹ To begin, I offer one short quotation each from Sandel, MacIntyre, and Taylor:²

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¹ This paragraph is adapted from my “Communitarianism, ‘Social Constitution,’ and Autonomy,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (1999), p. 122.

² Other communitarian writings include: D. Bell, *Communitarianism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); M. A. Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment*



[C]ommunity describes not just what they *have* as fellow citizens but also what they *are*, not a relationship they choose . . . but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.³

Separated from the *polis*, what could have been a human being becomes instead a wild animal.⁴

One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.⁵

of *Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991); W. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); M. Walzer, "Liberalism and the Art of Separation," *Political Theory* 12 (1984), pp. 315–330; and M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). Walzer's and Glendon's positions are, at times, closer to the liberal position than the three thinkers I consider here. Sullivan's are closer to those three thinkers, but I will not consider his work here. Bell's position is perhaps more stringently communitarian in the sense of that term I use here than any of those discussed here, but it also invokes problems Taylor, MacIntyre, and Sandel try to sidestep.

³ M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 150; see also M. Sandel, "Moral Argument and Liberal Toleration: Abortion and Homosexuality," in A. Etzioni (ed.), *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp. 71–87 [originally: *California Law Review* 77 (1989), pp. 521–538]; and M. Sandel, "Political Liberalism," *The Harvard Law Review* 107 (1994), pp. 1765–1794.

⁴ A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 98; see also A. MacIntyre, "Critical Remarks on *The Sources of the Self* by Charles Taylor," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994), pp. 187–190; A. MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to my Critics," in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 283–304; A. MacIntyre, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992), pp. 3–19; A. MacIntyre, "Moral Philosophy: What Next?" in S. Hauerwas and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 1–15; A. MacIntyre, "The Magic in the Pronoun 'My,'" *Ethics* 94 (1983), pp. 113–125; A. MacIntyre, "Moral Rationality, Tradition, and Aristotle: a Reply to Onora O'Neill, Raymond Gaita, and Stephen R. L. Clark," *Inquiry* 26 (1983), pp. 447–466; A. MacIntyre, "How Moral Agents Became Ghosts or Why the History of Ethics Diverged From That of the Philosophy of Mind," *Synthese* 53 (1982), pp. 295–312.

⁵ C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 35; see also: C. Taylor, "Précis of *Sources of the Self*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994), pp. 185–186; C. Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994), pp. 203–213; C. Taylor, "Can Liberalism be Communitarian?" *Critical Review* 8 (1994), pp. 257–262; C. Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 16–43; C. Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in N. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 159–182; C. Taylor, "The Significance of Significance: the Case for Cognitive Psychology," in S. Mitchell and M. Rosen (eds.), *The Need for Interpretation: Contemporary Conceptions*

The idea common to these three quotations and the three thinkers more broadly is that an individual being on her own cannot be a person, a *human* being, a self. To be such, requires being “made” by others, being in a *polis*, being among others. A being without others can be nothing more than a “wild animal.” This is much more than a political thesis that communities should be emphasized over individuals or a criticism of another positive theory (although it may motivate those). It is a positive metaphysical claim about the nature and possibility of personhood – which, however, can have implications for moral and political theory. In the rest of this paper, the communitarian requirement that persons be socially constituted will be taken to mean that *our very being as persons is derived from the existence of our community*. This means that personhood – and all it involves – is essentially dependent on community, and that we cannot be persons without community. Absent community, we lose our essential nature as persons.⁶

It will likely be objected at this point that the communitarian need not try to ground his project in the nature of persons or even in the accepted understandings of persons. The objection might continue by insisting that communitarians ground their ideal of the individual only in substantive moral premises about how one ought to live (premises more substantive than those accepted by liberals). Although the communitarians I discuss do make the normative move encouraged by the objector, they also make the descriptive moves discussed here (as will be shown). Hence, the arguments against *them* stand even if a different theory would ward them off. One might think, for example, of the merely political communitarianism endorsed by writers like Amitai Etzioni.⁷

of the Philosopher's Task (New Jersey: The Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 141–169; C. Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); and C. Taylor et al. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶ For a more extensive exploration of the social constitution thesis, see my “Communitarianism, ‘Social Constitution,’ and Autonomy.”

⁷ For a good introductory exposition of Amitai Etzioni’s view, see his “A Moderate Communitarian Proposal,” *Political Theory* 24 (1996), pp. 155–171, where he talks of “the admittedly more complex concept of a self congenitally contextuated within a community” such that individuals have an “uncommunitized” part and a “communitized” part that should both be maintained in “a balanced, responsive community” (pp. 157–158) and where he recognizes that the “state’s role . . . is as a last resort” (p. 160). On such a view, “communities are free to follow whatever value consensus they achieve but only as long as it does not violate a particular set of overarching values” (p. 163). So long as those overarching values include some notion of individual rights (or their equivalent), no liberal should have a problem with this. Also see his *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996) and two of his edited

I turn now to the two arguments that although communitarianism requires social constitution, it also implicitly requires the opposite: the independence of the individual from the community, by which I mean (a) the ability of individuals to remain persons without any social structures and (b) a corresponding ability to choose voluntaristically – i.e., without the choosing being determined by the individual's community. The first argument I present involves communitarian descriptive claims regarding persons, our current society, and the society communitarians ostensibly seek to establish. The second revolves around the communitarian picture of autonomy.⁸

volumes, *The Essential Communitarian Reader* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) and *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities*.

⁸ For liberal responses to the communitarian critique, see: A. Buchanan, "Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Ethics* 99 (1989), pp. 852–882; S. Caney, "Liberalisms and Communitarians: A Reply," *Political Studies* 41 (1993), pp. 657–660; S. Caney, "Liberalism and Communitarianism: A Misconceived Debate," *Political Studies* 40 (1992), pp. 273–289; S. Caney, "Rawls, Sandel, and the Self," *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* (1991), pp. 161–171; A. J. Cohen, "A Defense of Strong Voluntarism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998), pp. 251–265; D. Conway, *Classical Liberalism: The Unvanquished Ideal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 65–100; A. Gutmann, "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985), pp. 308–322; S. Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); C. Kukathas, "Liberalism, Communitarianism, and Political Community," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996), pp. 80–104; C. Kukathas, "Against the Communitarian Republic," *Australian Quarterly* 68 (1996), pp. 67–76; W. Kymlicka, "Communitarianism, Liberalism, and Superliberalism," *Critical Review* 8 (1994), pp. 263–284; W. Kymlicka, "Liberalism and Communitarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988), pp. 181–203; M. Moore, *Foundations of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); M. Moore, "Justice for Our Times," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 23 (1990), pp. 459–482; and J. Paul, and F. D. Miller, Jr. "Communitarian and Liberal Theories of the Good," *Review of Metaphysics* 43 (1990), pp. 803–830. For overviews of the debate between liberals and communitarians, see S. Gardbaum, "Law, Politics, and the Claims of Community," *Michigan Law Review* 90 (1992), pp. 685–760; P. Neal, and D. Paris, "Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 23 (1990), pp. 419–439; and especially S. Mulhall, and A. Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, second edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992). For feminist perspectives on the debate, see E. Fraser, and N. Lacey, *The Politics of Community: A Feminist Critique of the Liberal-Communitarian Debate* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); S. Hekman, "The Embodiment of the Subject: Feminism and the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Journal of Politics* 54 (1992), pp. 1098–1119; and S. M. Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). For discussions related to the conception of the self in the debate, R. Beiner, "Revising the Self," *Critical Review* 8 (1994), pp. 247–256; A. L. Carse, "The Liberal Individual: A Metaphysical or Moral Embarrassment?," *Noûs* 28 (1994), pp. 184–209; J. B. Elshaintain, "The Communitarian Individual," in A. Etzioni (ed.) *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities*, pp. 99–109; M. Mosher, "Boundary Revi-

ARGUMENT FROM DESCRIPTION

Communitarians characteristically claim that individuals are socially constituted – MacIntyre claims that social ties “constitute the given of my life,”⁹ Sandel insists that such ties are constitutive “attachments” that we do not “voluntarily incur,”¹⁰ and Taylor argues that the individual possesses her identity by participation in community.¹¹ Although the proper understanding of “social constitution” is debatable, straightforwardly understood it is a descriptive thesis about persons and how they come to be and remain what (or how) they are. Communitarians are concerned that we can’t make sense of ourselves as essentially agents of choice and insist that liberal individualism misdescribes persons in ignoring the degree to which they are dependent on their communities. They claim that liberal individualism misdescribes persons as individualist, voluntarist, independent, and autonomous. Thus, MacIntyre tells us that for liberals,

a society is composed of individuals, each with his or her own interest, who then have to come together and formulate common rules of life. . . . Individuals are thus . . . primary and society secondary, and the identification of individual interests is prior to, and independent of, the construction of any moral or social bonds between them.¹²

He opposes seeing individuals as *voluntarily* entering society with already established interests. He claims that the liberal view “envisages entry into social life as . . . the voluntary act of at least potentially rational individuals with prior interests who have to ask the question ‘What kind of social contract with others is it reasonable for me to enter into?’”¹³ The same claim is found in Taylor’s work. He expresses dismay in what he sees as a seventeenth century turn in attitude towards communities (by liberals) whereby they are no longer simply assumed to be present, but are seen as requiring contractual formation.¹⁴ He thinks this leads to “an atomist

sions: The Deconstruction of Moral Personality in Rawls, Nozick, Sandel and Parfit,” *Political Studies* 39 (1991), pp. 287–303; and D. Ortiz, “Saving the Self,” *Michigan Law Review* 91 (1993), pp. 1018–1022.

⁹ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 220.

¹⁰ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 179.

¹¹ See, for example, C. Taylor, “Hegel: History and Politics,” in M. Sandel (ed.) *Liberalism and Its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984) pp. 177–199, esp. p. 182 and C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 25–52.

¹² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 250; see also R. Scruton, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach: Essays* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), pp. 302, 308, and 326.

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 251.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 193.

model, which sees society as a locus of collaboration and rivalry between independent agents with their individual goals." He defines that "atomism" as "a condition in which everyone defines his or her purposes in individual terms and only cleaves to society on instrumental grounds."¹⁵ In the atomistic outlook, he says, "people come to see society purely instrumentally," indicating that they take themselves to be capable of opting out of society.¹⁶

Despite claiming that liberal individualism misdescribes persons, communitarians often claim that the problem with our society is the presence of liberal individualism; they claim, that is, that our society is individualist.¹⁷ But if the existence of the liberal individual is a fact about our society, the reader of a communitarian text is left wondering, how can liberal individualism be a misdescription? Either the communitarians' claims are baldly incompatible or, at bottom, they harbor a different kind of objection: liberal individualism misdescribes what communitarians want us to see as the "real" (i.e., communitarian-minded) self, which is, unfortunately, hidden under our empirical (and individualist) selves, burdened as they are by the liberal doctrine of our culture. This sort of objection would not deny that ours is an individualist society – populated by individualist selves – but would argue that there is a "deeper" fact about the persons in our society.

If communitarians take the suggested route and respond to our query by suggesting that we (or at least, *they*) have a "deeper" view of what we want to be, we must ask where this "deeper" view – and the "deep" desire for community that it includes – originates. To be consistent, the communitarian would need to answer that it originates in community. For if this desire *were* independent of community, it would indicate a limit to the dependence of the individual on the community that fails to cohere with the communitarian claim that we are socially constituted. It would imply either that the self, as a unitary (i.e., non-partite) entity, is more independent than communitarians generally admit or that they are relying on there being within each of us a deeper "real" self that is independent of community and which has (paradoxically) communitarian-minded desires. Of course, it's precisely such independence communitarians have been arguing *against*!

¹⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 414.

¹⁶ C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 117. For an argument against such claims, see A. J. Cohen, "Liberalism, Communitarianism, and Asocialism," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 2000 (forthcoming).

¹⁷ For related discussions, see Neal and Paris, "Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique: A Guide for the Perplexed," pp. 421–425 and J. Friedman, "The Politics of Communitarianism," *Critical Review* 8 (1994), pp. 297–340, esp. pp. 313 and 318–319.

It is tempting to argue that because not all of us have (or think we have) the deep desires the communitarian suggests we do, that such desires do not originate in community and that as such, communitarians must simply accept the limits just specified. This move is impermissible, though, as it could be that some of us are socially constituted with these desires and some not. Note, though, that if *this* is the case, it only indicates that there are *some* people who desire more of a communitarian-oriented (“constitutive”) community. While that may be an interesting sociological fact, it does not get communitarians what they want, for the liberal is perfectly happy with individuals forming their own communities and those individuals with “deep” solidaristic desires are welcome to form a communitarian community. Without a claim that this is a desire we *all* share, there is no reason for us *all* to be in such a community and no reason for us to work for the communitarian utopia.

The claim that all persons have a desire for a communitarian community gives communitarians a metaphysico-logical basis (or motivation) for a communitarian society. Its being a descriptive fact that we all desire a communitarian society provides reason for us all to work for it. That is, if it is a metaphysical (descriptive) fact about all of us that we desire a solidaristic community, then we all have a desire that can be used as a premise in an argument for communitarianism: “I desire a solidaristic community.”¹⁸ Yet, any claim that we all *do* share this desire for solidarity, given that some of us think we don’t, necessarily relies on a notion of our having either a deep independent self which contains a desire for solidarity, or more minimally, a deep independent *part* of the self (minimally, the desire for solidarity). That notion – and only that notion – can justify the claim that we all have a desire even though some or many of us don’t recognize it (i.e., the communitarian can use that notion to claim that he knows something about us we don’t). Without such a claim, it is open for the communitarian to try to persuade us of the benefits of his ideal society, but that is a separate and entirely normative project.¹⁹

¹⁸ Much as Thomas Hobbes takes as a premise of his argument the claim that we all want safety and John Locke takes as a premise the claim that we want a known, settled law and an indifferent judge to settle disputes.

¹⁹ Some argue that the normative project is the primary concern of communitarianism. See, for e.g., A. Honneth, “The Limits of Liberalism: On the Political-Ethical Discussion on Communitarianism,” *Thesis Eleven* 28 (1991), pp. 18–34, esp. p. 19, and W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 256. I argue against the communitarian normative project elsewhere (see my “Liberalism, Communitarianism, and Asocialism,” and my “Liberalism and Communitarianism on Anomie and Self-Respect,” ms.).

The use of a deep independent self or desire to justify a particular sort of society is not new. Its prior use by G.W.F. Hegel and some of his followers (particularly Hegelian Marxists as well as fascists), for example, is why Isaiah Berlin argued so forcefully against organic models of the state that emphasize positive liberty. He worried that appeals to what people *really* want – “deep down” – would enable a politically influential theorist or leader to make claims about what people want which even those people would not be in a position to dispute. *They*, of course, could be mistaken about what they *really* want. This move, of identifying the individual’s “real” self with some “organic” whole, allows a group *qua* organic whole to impose its will on its members. If the group attains its goals and its freedom, the individuals who are its members are, *de facto*, made free. *They*, after all, are merely parts of the collective and whether they know it or not, they want what the collective wants.²⁰

Given what I’ve attributed to communitarians, we would be well advised to look more closely at the texts. As evidence that they recognize that individualism is a correct description of Western society, at least since the Enlightenment, one need go no further than one of the earlier communitarian tracts, MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. After expressing approval of the Jacobin attempt to re-instill a culture of virtues, MacIntyre claims:

The true lesson of the Jacobin Clubs and their downfall is that you cannot hope to reinvent morality on the scale of a whole nation when the very idiom of the morality which you seek to re-invent is alien in one way to the vast mass of ordinary people and in another to the intellectual elite. . . . [T]his is . . . the predicament of all those adherents of the older tradition of the virtues . . . who seek to re-establish the virtues.²¹

So individualism is inherent in “the very idiom of the morality” of Enlightenment society, which precedes and leads to our own.²² Still, the idiom of

²⁰ I. Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 118–172, esp. p. 132 (essay originally published in 1958).

²¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 238.

²² For arguments against communitarian romantic views of history, see C. Harvey, “Paradise Well Lost: Communitarian Nostalgia and the Lonely Logic of the Liberal Self,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 1 (1994), pp. 9–14, esp. pp. 10–12; R. Howard, “Cultural Absolutism and the Nostalgia for Community,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 15 (1993), pp. 315–338; J. B. Schneewind, “Moral Crisis and the History of Ethics,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume VIII: Contemporary Perspectives on the History of Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 525–539; and especially, D. Philips, *Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Philips provides the lengthiest and most historically informed discussion, looking at early America (pp. 24–80), medieval Europe (pp. 81–121), and ancient Greece (pp. 122–148). He provides a good distillation of his analysis on pp. 149–156.

a morality, it might questionably be argued, may misrepresent the society in which the morality has place.

MacIntyre, of course, does not confine himself to talking about the past. He tells us that the liberal “individualistic view ... contains within itself a certain note of realism about modern society; modern society is indeed often, at least in surface appearance, nothing but a collection of strangers, each pursuing his or her own interests under minimal constraints.”²³ But even here MacIntyre is skeptical, saying this description holds “at least in surface appearance.” Only the Aristotelian communitarian, it seems, understands what is “beneath” the surface. It would seem that “MacIntyre ... waffles uncontrollably between two inconsistent claims: our communityless or atomistic society is accurately described by political theory, *and* Aristotelians alone understand that our society, deep down, is not atomistic at all.”²⁴

MacIntyre wishes to encourage us to re-instill a sense of community virtues into society. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, he claims (with Aristotle) that membership in a community is necessary for rationality (p. 123) and in *Three Rival Versions*, he advocates a Thomism of a sort that has a similar requirement (see, especially pp. 63–65). As rationality requires community, he wants us to endorse community. MacIntyre wishes to remove what he sees as liberal biases so that we can realize our potential in community with others. “To rescue us from our modern plight, all MacIntyre [thinks that he] needs to do is peel away the distorting layer of liberal ideology that blankets our latently communitarian selves.”²⁵

MacIntyre is not alone in his views that we need to “dig past” our individualistic biases to see that we are – deep down – communitarian souls. According to Taylor, “the free individual of the West is only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilization *which brought him to be and nourishes him*.”²⁶ In some sense this is obviously correct. It is in virtue of living in a free society that we are free (politically). But this does not get to the heart of the claim. According to Taylor, who we are – including those of us who see ourselves as individualistic liberals – is dependent upon our

²³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 251.

²⁴ Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, pp. 90–91; I take Aristotle’s position to be both stronger than MacIntyre’s and Taylor’s and more amenable to liberalism. For a reading of Aristotle conducive to my own view, see F. Miller, Jr., *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); see also C. Rapp, “Was Aristotle a Communitarian?” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 17 (1994), pp. 333–349.

²⁵ Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, p. 106.

²⁶ C. Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985b), p. 206, italics added.

community. The individual, he claims, has the community as “the ground of his identity.”²⁷ “[C]ivilization . . . brought him to be.”²⁸

As with MacIntyre, although Taylor insists that liberalism misdescribes persons, he also recognizes – at times – that it accurately describes our society.²⁹ He claims that “atomist theories of the polity . . . have entered into the common understanding of modern Western democracies,” he talks about the “largely market-atomistic practices of our society,” and he recognizes that “the atomist perspective is not just an error; it corresponds to one dimension of our social experience.”³⁰ So again, we are left wondering if our society is individualist or communitarian – or if this is a false dichotomy caused by undue emphasis on the social constitution thesis as something more than an empirical claim that given we are in society, socialization plays a role in the particular sort of persons we become.³¹

Let’s look now at Sandel. He claims that “[a]t the heart of this [deontological] ethic lies a vision of the person that both inspires and undoes it.”³² It inspires it, we might think, because it is a noble – if false – ideal. It undoes it, we might think, because it misdescribes who we are. Indeed, Sandel claims that “the deontological ethic fails . . . plausibly to account for certain indispensable aspects of our moral experience” and is flawed “as an account of” that experience. Further, “to see ourselves as deontology would see us is to deprive us of those qualities of character, reflectiveness, and friendship that depend on the possibility of constitutive projects and

²⁷ C. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 86.

²⁸ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 206; see also his *Sources of the Self*, pp. 25–52.

²⁹ At one point Taylor seems to recognize this tension. He tells us that “an articulation can be *wrong*, and yet it shapes what it is wrong about” (C. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 38; see also Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, pp. 11–12. One might try to argue, in this way, that although liberalism misdescribes our society, that very misdescription has contributed to the current make-up of society, so that it would not be surprising if it displayed individualist aspects. This, though, is to admit that it now (at least partially) *accurately* describes us. The same can be said of Sandel: “In our public life, we are more entangled but less attached than ever before. It is as though the unencumbered self presupposed by the liberal ethic had begun to become true” (M. Sandel, “The Political Theory of the Procedural Republic,” in R. Reich (ed.), *The Power of Public Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 109–121, here p. 120).

³⁰ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Science*, pp. 105, 287, and 311.

³¹ In my “Communitarianism, ‘Social Constitution,’ and Autonomy,” I call this the “genetic particular social constitution” thesis.

³² M. Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory* 12 (1984), pp. 81–96, here 83.

attachments.”³³ Sandel repeats these sorts of claims in his more recent work:

[T]he image of the unencumbered self is flawed. It cannot make sense of our moral experience, because it cannot account for certain moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, even prize. These include obligations of solidarity, religious duties, and other moral ties that may claim us for reasons unrelated to choice.³⁴

He tells us again that its “vision of the person . . . inspires and undoes this ethic”: “the predicament of liberal democracy in contemporary America may be traced to a deficiency in the voluntarist self-image that underlies it.”³⁵

There are two claims in Sandel’s remarks. First is the claim that liberalism (the deontological ethic) misdescribes persons and their (our) moral experience. Second, however, is a claim that the misdescription of persons and their (our) moral experience leads to liberalism’s undoing. It is because it misdescribes persons and experiences that deontology (Sandel claims) deprives us of the “constitutive” attachments necessary for flourishing individuals and bodies politic. In misdescribing persons, deontology pushes upon those living in liberal societies an image they cannot – so the claim goes – possibly exemplify. That image is of us as individuals

free to choose our purposes and ends unbound. . . . So long as they are not unjust, our conceptions of the good carry weight, whatever they are, simply in virtue of our having chosen them. . . . This is an exhilarating promise, and the liberalism that it animates is perhaps the fullest expression of the enlightenment’s quest for the self-defining subject. But is it true? Can we make sense of our moral and political life by the light of the self-image it requires? I do not think we can.³⁶

Because this liberal description of the person is fundamentally flawed, we cannot, Sandel claims, “coherently regard ourselves as the sort of beings the deontological ethic requires us to be.”³⁷ Being unable to regard ourselves in this way leaves us in a world where we are trying to live up to a publicly endorsed image that we cannot live up to. The situation parallels that which many feminists argue – correctly, I think – women are in.³⁸ The images of femininity that saturate the mass media are unhealthy

³³ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, pp. 179 and 181.

³⁴ M. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 13.

³⁵ Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, p. 203.

³⁶ Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 87; see also *Democracy’s Discontent*, pp. 262 and 205.

³⁷ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 65.

³⁸ See, for example, S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How*

for women to emulate and yet are ubiquitous. Women try to emulate them and cause themselves harm – in some extreme cases, becoming anorexic. Similarly, if individuals (male or female) try to emulate the flawed (and yet ubiquitous) liberal ideal of persons, Sandel is claiming, they will make themselves unhealthy (presumably psychologically) – in extreme cases, isolating themselves from all others. This, according to Sandel, is the undoing of the liberal order. If we cannot reconcile our self-understandings with the official public image of persons, we cannot bear the weight of our society and it crumbles.³⁹

As with MacIntyre and Taylor, so too with Sandel. Though he claims that liberal individualism misdescribes us (leaving us unable to reconcile our self understandings with the liberal description), he also recognizes that contemporary (American) society is largely individualist. He notes that “increasing numbers of citizens view the state as an overly intrusive presence” rather than a constitutive and supportive environment and that “[a]s bearers of rights . . . we think of ourselves as freely choosing, individual selves, unbound by obligations antecedent to rights, or to the agreements we make.”⁴⁰ In 1996, Sandel is candid about the degree to which liberal individualism (“liberalism of the procedural republic”) is present in our society: “it is the theory most thoroughly embodied in our practices and institutions.” He also notes that contemporary citizens “think and act as freely choosing, independent selves.”⁴¹ So again, on pain of repetition, we are left wondering if our society is individualist or communitarian.

What do communitarians urge upon us? Sandel wants a “constitutive community,” in which

the members of a society are bound by a sense of community [where this] is not simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian

Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991).

³⁹ This is largely undefended in Sandel’s earlier work. In “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” for example, he claims that the unencumbered self cannot be a member of a constitutive community (see p. 87). This makes sense, but even with the assumption that *we* are unencumbered (or, at least, see ourselves as such), only leads to the conclusion that constitutive communities cannot survive, not that civil society cannot survive. His argument in *Democracy’s Discontent*, however, is somewhat different. There he seems to claim less that liberalism presents a portrait of the self that is ultimately untenable, and more that a liberal political order itself is untenable because of the vision of the self it requires (see, for example, p. 262). Although both aspects are present throughout his work, their importance and prevalence in his thinking seems to have been reversed.

⁴⁰ Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” pp. 92 and 94.

⁴¹ Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, pp. 24 and 323.

aims, but rather that they conceive their identity – the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations – as defined to some extent by the community of which they are part. For them, community describes not just what they *have* as fellow citizens but also what they *are*, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.⁴²

MacIntyre wants us to recognize that “we all approach our circumstances as bearers of a particular social [psychological] identity”⁴³ and in his more recent works, wants us to accept authoritative communities in which we can be secure in our knowledge, having ruled out subjectivism and provided for social-confirmation of our beliefs and the self-respect that this is claimed to support.⁴⁴ Taylor similarly wants a community in which strong evaluation (Taylor’s term for our ability to evaluate our lower order desires) is supported.⁴⁵ Again, this desire for “constitutive community” is not universally held and explaining why we should seek it mires the communitarian in claims that are either too weak to do the desired work or invoke some notion of a deep self or desire had by all, but independent rather than socially constituted. The communitarian can plausibly claim that *some* of us have solidaristic desires, thereby sacrificing the metaphysico-logical reason to promote community, or he can (implausibly) insist that we all have solidaristic desires.

To review, though communitarians claim that individualism mis-describes persons, they also claim we can only improve our lot by re-emphasizing community and our community-bonds. But if individualism is wrong as communitarians claim, then individuals are, in fact, *now* dependent upon their communities. Communitarians, in fact, make this

⁴² Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 150.

⁴³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 220

⁴⁴ See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 179–180 and A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 127 (esp. pp. 145–148) and pp. 201–202. For injustice as disobedience to authority, see *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 157.

⁴⁵ This is implicit throughout his discussions of strong evaluation and personhood. For an interesting statement on these matters, see C. Taylor, “Replies,” in J. Tully (ed.), *Philosophy in the Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 213–257; the relevant pages here are pp. 249–253. Both Kymlicka and Weinstock (to whom the just-mentioned pages reply) argue that liberalism provides better for self-respect and strong-evaluation than communitarianism does. See D. M. Weinstock, “The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation,” in J. Tully (ed.) *Philosophy in the Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, pp. 171–193. See also O. Flanagan, “Identity and Strong and Weak Evaluation,” in O. Flanagan and A. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 37–65.

claim. On the other hand, they urge us to re-emphasize community because they also recognize that liberal individualism *is* accurate. Of course, they have a deeper sense of what society – and us along with it – can be and want to lift us to our true potential greatness.⁴⁶ They believe that there is, in each of us, a deep communitarian-minded self or, more minimally, desire. Any claim such as this that insists this desire to re-emphasize community is universal must rely on some metaphysical notion of a deep independent (and not socially constituted) self or desire common to all. Any lesser claim is acceptable to liberals but won't get communitarians what they want. It leaves them with purely normative arguments that, as I argue elsewhere, fail to persuade.⁴⁷

Making sense of the communitarian claims I've lain out as anything other than a purely normative project requires recognizing that communitarians believe that there is in each of us a deep communitarian-minded self or, more minimally, desire, and that this is independent of community. It requires recognizing further that, for communitarians, what we think we know of ourselves today – the description we have of citizens of the liberal West – is faulty as a description. To make the point more forcefully, it's not that individualism misdescribes who we are. Rather, it's that individualism misdescribes the deep independent but communitarian-minded self that is within all of us – waiting to be 'liberated' from liberalism.

I note again that if the communitarian is willing to sacrifice the claim to universality and recognize that he must convince us of his political goals on purely normative grounds, he can be freed of the charge here discussed. Taking that route, however, means sacrificing moral ground: the communitarian is left to make his case normatively, and must accept that he may be able to convince some but not others so that wholesale societal change will not be warranted. The normative project has been

⁴⁶ This indicates a third reason to suspect that communitarianism relies on an independent aspect of persons. "Human beings, like the members of all other species, have a *specific nature*; and that nature is such that they have certain aims and goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific *telos*" (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 148, first italics added). His invocation of the Aristotelian concept of *telos* and the "specific nature" that has the *telos* as its goal pervades MacIntyre's work (see also *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 130 and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 66). When discussing the Aristotelianism he favors, he notes that: "Within that teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature" (*After Virtue: Second Edition*, p. 52). This "essential nature" talk sounds decidedly divine – and not social – in origin [but see W. Lund, "Communitarian Politics and the Problem of Equality," *Political Research Quarterly* 46 (1993), pp. 577–600, esp. pp. 583–584].

⁴⁷ See footnote 19.

argued against elsewhere.⁴⁸ Here I am arguing against the metaphysical project.

ARGUMENT ABOUT AUTONOMY

I turn now to the second argument that demonstrates a communitarian reliance on individual independence.⁴⁹ This argument centers on the autonomy of individuals and begins by noticing that in maintaining that persons do not so much *decide* who they are as *discover* it, communitarians deny that we choose who we are even though they also maintain that *of course* we can act independently. How can this be? Let us begin, once again, with *After Virtue*.

When he discusses the “unity of a life,” MacIntyre notes that

what the agent is able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. . . . We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making.⁵⁰

For MacIntyre we find ourselves – that is, discover who we are – already in situations (“we enter upon a stage which we did not design”). We do not, contra Jean-Paul Sartre, make our own situation. This is implicit in the very concept of a narrative, which MacIntyre employs to explain how a human life (or anything else) can have a unity.

Whereas liberals and others have been concerned – not only in the free will debate – to see how it is we can be the “author” of our acts (how we can be said to be responsible for them), for MacIntyre (and communitarians in general),

the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Again, see footnote 19.

⁴⁹ This paragraph owes much to Kymlicka’s discussion in “Liberalism and Communitarianism,” p. 193. Again, for related discussions, see Friedman, “The Politics of Communitarianism,” pp. 303, 308, 312–313 and 317; Neal and Paris, “Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique: A Guide for the Perplexed,” pp. 343–349; and R. Beiner, *What’s the Matter with Liberalism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 31.

⁵⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 213; see also Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” p. 324.

⁵¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216; MacIntyre’s discussion of “characters” early in *After Virtue* supports the argument from description. He uses “character” as a technical term to

Of course, when MacIntyre says “We enter human society,” he does not mean to imply that we were something (persons?) before entering that society. When he insists that the primary question is “of what story am I a part?,” he is presupposing that who I am, fundamentally, is a factor of my social context – my embodied and embedded existence in human society and its stories (“deeply social, embedded in culture and in social practices”⁵²). There is, however, a problem here. Simply put, this insistence on the priority of one’s narrative is phenomenologically unsound.

Perhaps all of us do have some inchoate ideas of our context before we answer the question of what we ought to do, but we do not all ask that question prior to deciding what to do. There may be times when that question is entirely irrelevant (say I witness a gruesome murder, with the victim pleading for mercy and crying for help and I can help with little danger to myself) and some may even be incapable of asking the question.⁵³ MacIntyre, in fact, tries carefully not to make his claim too strong:

What I have called a history is an enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors. The characters of course never start literally *ab initio*; they plunge *in medias res*. . . . The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do; it is in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds.⁵⁴

Even for MacIntyre, *who we are* is not solely who we find ourselves to be. Rather, we have some “degree of authorship.” We discover ourselves in our narratives and the broader context of which they are part, but also “co-author” them (to pick up a clue from *After Virtue*, p. 213 quoted above). According to MacIntyre,

refer to cases where “role and personality fuse in a more specific way than general; in the case of a *character* the possibilities of action are defined in a more limited way than in general. . . . *characters merge* what usually is thought to belong to the individual man or woman and what is usually thought to belong to social roles.” He claims that “One of the key differences between cultures is in the extent to which roles are *characters*” (p. 28). It would seem that characters are the ultimate communitarian persons: their entire way of being is nothing other than what society determines their roles to be. Interestingly, he recognizes that this varies between cultures. Moreover, he is careful to recognize that any individual who is supposedly nothing other than his roles may in fact be at odds with those roles (on p. 29, he talks of an ordained priest who goes through the ministerial motions but whose own beliefs are not in line with those of the church). If one can be at odds with one’s roles, one is *not* one’s roles.

⁵² H. Haste, “Communitarianism and the Social Construction of Morality,” *Journal of Moral Education* 25 (1996), pp. 47–55, here 51.

⁵³ For whether this ability is necessary for persons in *Taylor’s* account, see Weinstock, “The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation,” pp. 174–176; Taylor, “Replies,” p. 249.

⁵⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 215.

the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community.⁵⁵

Even though the communities we find ourselves in have already “authored” a large part of the narrative of our lives, we can transcend the limits of the already authored context to be authors too.

The preceding analysis of his narrative account brings out the somewhat paradoxical nature of individual autonomy that MacIntyre implicitly requires. Although our lives are partly (largely?) authored by contexts and communities in which we largely had no say, we partake in the authoring process. The reader of *After Virtue* should find herself wondering how this can be. If I am *who I am* in virtue of my community,⁵⁶ how do I have any control? Would not whatever control I have be given me by the already existing narrative? Would it not thus simply (albeit indirectly) be the narrative’s control? MacIntyre doesn’t want to give up human freedom – that would be opposed to his own acceptance of such a doctrine within his commitment to Christianity.⁵⁷ Indeed, that is precisely the force and reason for the use of the prefix “co” in “co-author” and for the claim that the self does not have to accept the limitations of the community. But how can we make sense of this?

That we can “co-author” our narrative and transcend the already-existing narrative’s limitations and “exhibit a freedom to violate the present established maxims,”⁵⁸ means, quite simply, that we are each, to some degree, independent and free of that social narrative. This could mean one of two things. First, it could mean that there is a part of us – a “deep self” – that is independent of community even though the “whole” or “greater” self is not. Second and more simply, it could mean that the communitarian’s commitment to the social constitution thesis is only a commitment to our being incapable of surviving without community (not merely physically, but logically) so that the individual could be autonomous to the

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 221.

⁵⁶ Recall MacIntyre’s endorsement of what he sees in “ancient and medieval worlds, as in many other premodern societies”: “the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically human goods are to be attained; I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom. There is no ‘I’ apart from these.” Social ties “constitute the given of my life” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 172 and 220).

⁵⁷ For his explicit statement against determinism, see A. MacIntyre, “Determinism,” *Mind* 66(261) (1957), pp. 28–41.

⁵⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 31.

extent that so long as she is in community, she can do as she will.⁵⁹ This second possibility is perfectly consistent with social constitution as earlier defined (see my introduction) and would save the communitarian from the current argument (though not the previous one).

Before discussing the two possibilities just mentioned, we should note that the communitarian might try to deny our independence and instead insist that although who I am is, in fact, entirely dependent upon the community and its narrative, the narrative is such that it makes me capable of transcending its current limits. They might try to argue, that is, that we can go beyond what the community provides by building on what it provides. To take this route, however, the communitarian must be willing to admit to determinism – of a peculiar sort.⁶⁰ This route commits the communitarian to saying not simply that the community makes me such that I can transcend its limits, but that it makes me such that if I transcend its limits, I do so *in a way of which it is the author*. To deny this is to invoke a degree of independence of the individual from the community. For if I can transcend the community's limits in my own way – in a way not authored or determined by the social narrative – I am independent (if only for the moment) and the argument ends with the communitarian admitting that at least some of us are independent despite his claims to the contrary. Of course, any allowance that persons have a degree of authorship has the same result.

Thus far we've looked only at MacIntyre in reference to this argument. Before going on, we look at Taylor and Sandel. Regarding Sandel, it should be enough to note that although he is responsible for the "constitutive community" language, he admits that "a subject [can] play a role in shaping the contours of its identity."⁶¹ His arguments against the liberal on this point, moreover, seem to rely on the idea that for the liberal, choice is all that matters. That is, he seems to hold that the liberal should not – apparently on pain of inconsistency – be concerned with what one chooses

⁵⁹ In my "Communitarianism, 'Social Constitution,' and Autonomy," "Communitarianism, 'Social Constitution,' and Autonomy," I call this the "sustaining general social constitution" thesis. See also Miller's discussion, in *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*, of the "natural priority of the polis" (pp. 45–56), particularly the "completeness interpretation" (pp. 50–53).

⁶⁰ To fit it into MacIntyre's talk of "narratives," "characters," and "roles," I would call this "role-determinism." In this sort of determinism, one's actions are determined by one's roles where these are in turn determined by one's narratives. Indeed, MacIntyre may accept this, claiming that it "obliterates" the distinction between rational (and hence "free") action and determined action. See MacIntyre, "Determinism," pp. 40 and 35.

⁶¹ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 152.

so long as one chooses. Kymlicka puts this point to pasture rather nicely; I won't address it unnecessarily.⁶² I turn my attention, then, to Taylor.

Taylor says that "what we are as human beings we are only in a cultural community" and that "the fact is that our experience is what it is, is shaped in part, by the way we interpret it; and this has a lot to do with the terms which are available to us in our culture."⁶³ This parallels MacIntyre's insistence that we find ourselves in our narrative and thus discover, rather than choose, who we are – at least (and here's the rub) partly. This theme is a constant in Taylor's work; early in his *Sources of the Self*, he says:

It seems somehow easy to read the step to an independent stance as a stepping altogether outside the transcendental condition of interlocution – or else as showing that we were never within it and only needed the courage to make clear our basic, ontological independence. Bringing out the transcendental condition is a way of heading this confusion off. And this allows the change to appear in its true light. We may sharply shift the balance in our definition of identity, dethrone the given, historical community as a pole of identity, and relate only to the community defined by adherence to the good. . . . But this doesn't sever our dependence on webs of interlocution. It only changes the webs, and the nature of our dependence.⁶⁴

This may seem convoluted, but the gist is straightforward enough: even when we think we are being original or unique we do not – indeed cannot – escape the discursive community. Our being is always tied up with (*is*) the understanding that our community, with its "webs of interlocution," allows us. This is a transcendental condition.⁶⁵ So when Taylor says that "I may develop an original way of understanding myself and human life, at least one which is in sharp disagreement with my family and background,"⁶⁶ he should not, it would seem, be read as allowing independence of the individual from the web his community weaves.

But Taylor too allows some degree of independence. In addition to the previous quotation, he says that:

A human being can always be original, can step beyond the limits of thought and vision of contemporaries, can even be misunderstood by them. But the drive to original vision will

⁶² See Kymlicka, "Liberalism and Communitarianism," especially pp. 182–185, or W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially pp. 15–19 and 47–52. In brief, Kymlicka argues that (1) certain paradigmatic liberals did not hold such a view and (2) such a view is absurd, so to attribute it to anyone who doesn't explicitly state it is too uncharitable. The view is absurd as it leads to the conclusion that if I keep choosing I am made better off – even if my choices "undo" each other.

⁶³ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 87.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 39.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 32.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 35.

be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others.⁶⁷

So originality and the independence it implies are possibilities, but if they become actual, they result in or are symptoms of *anomie*. We could not both be independently autonomous and be intelligible (to others and ourselves). Our understanding, which is for Taylor the foundation of our being, is dependent upon an already existing discursive framework. To have an utterly original thought would leave one “lost in inner confusion.” Other thoughts we may have that seem to be original are less so. They are dependent upon the discursive framework in which we are inducted. But this isn’t quite the end of the matter.

In the passage just cited, Taylor allows that we can have an utterly original thought and that it might not leave us “lost in inner confusion” if “it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others.” This allows that each of us is a maker of our discursive webs (webs of interlocution); like MacIntyre’s “co-authorship,” it allows for a degree of independence. Indeed, Taylor allowed for that once he said we could have original thoughts – even if they would leave us “lost in inner confusion.” The implication is that the discursive web is merely an aggregate effect and that individuals can independently decide whether to contribute to it or not. If we contribute to the makeup of the web independently of its influence (that is, our contribution is not due to the web’s influence), we can also independently *not* contribute to it – indeed, we can choose to disallow its influence on us. All of this is to say that Taylor too refuses to fully endorse the position that who we are is entirely dependent upon our community and admits us some degree of control. Again, one explanation for this inconsistency is a recognition that although he and other communitarians often claim that a person’s *being* (or, to do without the ontological claim, their *way of life*) is largely not a matter of choice, they implicitly rely on a deeper notion of a self that *does* choose (indeed which has choosing as its *raison d’être*). Again, a second explanation is that the communitarian’s commitment to the social constitution thesis is only a commitment to our being incapable of surviving without community (not merely physically, but logically) so that the individual could be autonomous to the extent that so long as she is in community, she can do as she will.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 37.

⁶⁸ As with MacIntyre, there is a way out for Taylor, but it leads to the same conclusions we were led to with reference to MacIntyre: either the communitarian accepts role-determinism or he allows for independence of individuals. The argument would run parallel, substituting “discursive web” for “narrative.”

This argument, as an argument that communitarians implicitly rely on a deep aspect of persons which is not socially constituted, is not as conclusive as the argument from description. There are, I've said, two possible explanations for the apparent inconsistency in communitarian thought – and we've seen this inconsistency in MacIntyre, Sandel, and Taylor. The first explanation is what I am arguing for in this paper: communitarians implicitly rely on a conception of individuals as independent of community or as containing a component independent of community. The second and simpler explanation is that communitarians, in the final analysis, are thoroughly committed to our being incapable of surviving without community (not merely physically, but logically) so that the individual could be autonomous to the extent that so long as she is in community, she can do as she will. This, though, is counter-intuitive.

I suggest that it is not true that a being necessarily loses its personhood upon its egress from community.⁶⁹ Certainly, we can imagine a person leaving all community and experiencing no notable change – even given time. Yet her essence, according to this thesis, would be fundamentally altered – she would no longer be a person.⁷⁰ Even this is not the strongest sort of counter-example we can imagine. We can also imagine, and indeed popular fiction offers examples of, a person leaving her society specifically to retain or augment her personhood (or “humanity”). Such a person may, like Sandel, MacIntyre and Taylor, find the state of the world lamentable and even in opposition to her ability to live “humanly.” She may fear that her continued presence in our morally impoverished society would lead her to a life of a Frankfurtian wanton, a Taylorian simple-weighter or even a mere automaton, only responding to stimuli without any original thoughts. She may, that is, think her life would be one where she merely “went through the motions” of living without ever considering her actions – we might say her life would be one wherein all her choices were authored by her community. Would we say of such a person that she (eventually) loses her personhood upon her egress from community? I'd suggest that only dogmatism would result in an affirmative response. Indeed, when MacIntyre tells us that communal roles can be carried into isolation and Taylor tells us that dialogue “continues within us” they seem to recognize this.⁷¹ If, though, it is not that communitarians see individuals as incap-

⁶⁹ This paragraph borrows from my “Communitarianism, ‘Social Constitution,’ and Autonomy,” §V.

⁷⁰ This requires that she leave *all* community; if she simply leaves one community for another, she can have her personhood retained. It is not the case that her personhood would necessarily be fundamentally altered by changing communities – it may be that both communities sustain personhood in the same way.

⁷¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 173 and Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 33.

able of exiting community, they have to accept the first explanation for their inconsistency: they have to allow that there is a part of us that is independent and not socially constituted.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding, we have seen that despite the main strand of communitarian thought, communitarians implicitly rely on some deep facet of individuals being independent rather than socially constituted. The argument from description shows that communitarians rely on us having a deep, independent (non-socially-constituted) desire for solidarity and the argument about autonomy shows – if I’m right about the counter-intuitiveness of the social constitution thesis as stated – that they rely on a deep self or part of the self that is not socially constituted, but independent and autonomous.

To conclude, I briefly indicate that the communitarian reliance on a deep and independent self is inherently problematic given the communitarian agenda. The root of that political agenda, if there is such,⁷² is not complicated.⁷³ Whatever else they want, communitarians want to strengthen community bonds. Their reason for this is straightforward: since we are who we are in virtue of our community, a better community makes us better.

The problem I wish to bring out here is simple. Relying on an independent deep self or solidaristic desire means recognizing that the social constitution thesis either does not apply to individuals – within whom there

⁷² One commentator writes: “communitarians ... seem to have no politics” (Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, p. 9). Indeed, MacIntyre has said “I give my political loyalty to no program” [in G. Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, tr. R. Crocitto (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 151].

⁷³ This is not to say that a more full-bodied agenda is not complicated. Indeed, communitarianism has been used to argue for various political actions – some of which are mutually contradictory. For example, while Taylor and Sandel have argued (see Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 112–118; Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” pp. 91–95) for decentralization of power (!) so as to make smaller governing bodies which people can identify with, others use communitarianism to argue for a more powerful central government. United States President Bill Clinton, for example, appealed to community to justify nationalizing health care. So too, in an appearance on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour* (11/15/94), Richard Rodriguez encouraged Americans to identify themselves with the nation rather than seeing themselves as atomistic entities. Like Taylor, he believes that liberal individualism is the cause of social problems. Unlike Taylor but like Clinton, he believes we can identify with the nation as a whole to combat those problems.

is a non-socially-constituted component – or is only a weak genetic claim to the effect that because we happen to grow up in community, socialization plays a part on how we become the *particular* persons we do. As liberals do not deny that genetic claim, if communitarians deny they are arguing for a deep independent self or desire for solidarity, and claim only to embrace the genetic claim (hence denying that individuals require community to exist), one should wonder who it is they are arguing against.

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