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What's Special About Culture? Identity, Autonomy, and Public Reason

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Abstract. This article challenges the widespread and influential claim - made by many liberals and non-liberals - that cultural membership is a prerequisite of individual autonomy. It argues that liberals like Joseph Raz and Will Kymlicka, who ground autonomy in culture, underestimate the complex and internally diverse nature of the self, and the extent to which individual agents will often be shaped by many different attachments and memberships at once. In 'selectively elevating' one of these memberships (culture) as the most important to one's autonomy or identity, culturalist liberals present a skewed and simplistic account of individual autonomy and, hence, of liberalism. Instead, autonomy should be seen as arising not out of any particular membership or attachment, but out of the interaction between those different memberships which shape the individual's understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. This alternative account holds important implications for liberal theory, particularly the tensions between 'political' and 'comprehensive' liberals about the scope of liberal principles and the nature of public reasoning about justice.

Key words: communitarianism, Kymlicka, Raz, political liberalism, comprehensive liberalism.

It has become increasingly common in the literature on liberalism and multiculturalism to argue that personal autonomy is dependent upon membership of a particular culture. Joseph Raz, for example, has argued that "individual freedom and well-being [depends on] unimpeded membership in a respected and prosperous cultural group" (Raz, 1994: 178), and that only "through being socialized in a culture can one tap the options which give life a meaning." (Raz, 1994: 177). Avishai Margalit has argued that cultural "forms of life . . . are frames that present the individual with a range of choices among options, giving meaning to the person's choice, and thus forming his or her identity." (Margalit, 1997: 82). And Will Kymlicka has argued that liberalism "should be concerned with the fate of cultural structures" because it is only through being a member of a culture that "people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the options available to them and intelligently examine their value." (Kymlicka, 1989: 165). Common to these and other culturalist thinkers, then, are a set of claims about

the nature of freedom and the conditions under which it might be exercised. Insofar as liberalism is committed to defending the ability of individuals to live lives in the pursuit of ends that they themselves have endorsed as worthwhile, they argue, it should also attach value to cultural membership because it is one's embeddedness in a cultural community which provides the background conditions necessary for autonomous choice to take place. One's culture provides the range of options from which one can choose when deciding what to do with one's life, and the historical and linguistic tools with which to evaluate the relative worth of these options (Kymlicka, 1989: 162 – 181; Raz, 1994).

This culturalist approach fulfils two important functions: one political and the other philosophical. Firstly, it provides a liberal response to the very real changes in the ethnic, cultural, and religious composition of many liberal democratic states. It reveals more clearly the demands of liberal toleration in an era of increased migration, globalisation and social change and presents a powerful justification for taking the identity claims of individual citizens seriously. Secondly, it represents a direct response to those communitarian critics who worry that liberalism leads to atomism and a breakdown of community. Critics like Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre have argued that liberalism is necessarily rooted in a mistaken conception of the *self* (as 'unencumbered' of its ends and attachments) and *agency* (as a purely voluntarist process) (Sandel, 1982; MacIntyre 1996). Culturalists suggest that these criticisms are mistaken because the concepts of individuality and agency at the heart of liberalism presuppose that persons are, in fact, 'encumbered' by the ends and ideals afforded to them by their cultural community. Liberals who foreground culture have suggested that liberalism does not (or should not) subscribe to a conception of agency which is purely voluntarist or cognitivist, but rather one which incorporates both the process of 'discovering' the particular attachments one shares, and deciding what one should do and what one believes to be valuable on the basis of these discoveries.

In this article I explore (and ultimately reject) the culturalist approach. I do so by challenging some of the claims advanced by Will Kymlicka about the link between culture and autonomy. In doing so, I touch upon the work of other culturallist thinkers, such as Joseph Raz. Both Raz

and Kymlicka converge on two fundamental claims: (a) that liberalism is rightfully understood as a *comprehensive* doctrine, rooted in the value of individual autonomy, and (b) that cultural membership is a necessary condition for this autonomy. In addition to sharing a commitment to culture, therefore, they also share a rejection of the kind of ‘political liberalism’ advanced by liberals like John Rawls and Charles Larmore (Rawls, 1993; Larmore, 1996). Raz’s perfectionism stands opposed to Rawlsian political liberalism and its requirements of ‘epistemic restraint’, rooting itself instead in thicker ethical notions such as well-being and autonomy (Raz, 1986). Similarly, Kymlicka has argued against adopting the Rawlsian position, as, like Raz, he believes that the model of public reasoning at its heart is too demanding of citizens and misunderstands the character of autonomy and cultural membership. The problem with Rawls’ political liberalism, he says, is that it assumes people can be “communitarians in private life and liberals in public life. But,” he asks, “is this a coherent position?” (Kymlicka, 1995: 160).

I argue that it is. Or, at least, I suggest that it is more coherent than Kymlicka believes. My aim is two-fold. Firstly, in section 1, I seek to show that the culturalist approach to understanding individual autonomy is rooted in a simplistic account of the self and agency, and hence, should be rejected as a basis for liberal theorising about justice. I therefore aim to show that claim ‘a’, above, is correct, but that claim ‘b’ is not. Secondly, in section 2, I argue that once reject the normative strategy underlying culturalism it is possible to resolve some of the tensions between political liberals and comprehensive liberals about the scope and content of liberalism.

1. Liberalism and Culture.

Culturalists seek to disprove the communitarian claim that liberalism presupposes an unencumbered self which chooses the life it leads from “a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity.” (MacIntyre, 1981: 32). They do so by suggesting that a self unencumbered in this way would not be capable of autonomy because autonomy is a process of evaluating the relative worth of one’s encumbered

attachments. Agency is necessarily a process both of *discovering* the roles one occupies (and their attendant obligations) and *evaluating* their relative worth (Kymlicka, 1989; Kymlicka, 1997; Raz, 1986; Raz, 1994; Tamir, 1993; see also Moon, 1993).

Let us assume that this argument holds. What does it tell us about liberalism and autonomy? Kymlicka believes that having shown that liberal autonomy presupposes a cognitivist element (i.e. that autonomy presupposes some social or community based framework within which one can frame and revise one's ideas about the good life), he is able to argue for the importance of *culture* to liberalism. That is, he feels that his arguments about community membership and identity allow him to make substantive claims about the necessity of cultural membership to autonomy. "[F]or meaningful individual choice to be possible," he states, "individuals need not only access to information, the capacity to reflectively evaluate it, and freedom of expression and association. They need access to a societal culture." (Kymlicka, 1997: 84). And Raz agrees, stating that culture is a precondition for, and "gives shape and content to, individual freedom" (Raz, 1994: 178). However, the claim that autonomy presupposes a framework of values, memberships, and commitments is distinct from – and does not justify – the subsequent claim that we need access to a 'culture' in order to act freely. Kymlicka and Raz are too hasty in making this connection, and are wrong to do so.

In seeking to rebut the communitarian critique, Kymlicka and Raz incorporate too much of the communitarian argument into their own theories, and hence, fall into the same trap that communitarians and certain other theorists make about the nature of personal identity and freedom. Namely, they selectively elevate certain attachments and memberships as more ontologically and normatively significant than others. For communitarians like MacIntyre, for example, the context in which we locate our conception of who we are and what we want (and which therefore provides the background conditions for our deliberations about value) is ultimately derived from our membership of a *particular* community over and above all others, namely, our 'political' community. True, they admit that we will also be members of other, more specific communities and groups and associations (religious groups, for example, or ethnic or gender groups), but these more specific groups will "derive their moral worth from

the extent of their contribution to the (politically defined) common good, or, at least, their compatibility with it" (Badhwar, 1996: 7). As MacIntyre states, the "ordering of goods within the activities of individual lives . . . is found to be inseparable from the ordering of these goods in achieving the common good." (MacIntyre, 1994: 288). Similarly, Sandel's rejection of the procedural republic and the deontological morality of the Enlightenment in favour of a teleological approach draws upon Aristotle's claims about the normative and ontological supremacy of citizenship as the membership capable of binding one's other attachments together and providing unity to the self (Sandel, 1982). For MacIntyre and Sandel, therefore, I am in an important sense a citizen over and above anything else, and thus I approach (or, at least, I *should* approach) any situation or conflict or decision *as a citizen*. My role as a citizen unifies my self and, hence, it will provide the lens through which I examine not merely my political roles and ideals but everything else as well.

But it is by no means clear why *this* particular membership is necessarily any more definitive of a person's identity than any other. Indeed, it is not at all clear why *one* particular value need be (or should be) conceived as more important than any other or, if it is, exactly who *decides* which role or membership occupies this important role.

The tendency to define certain groups and individuals by virtue of particular 'essentialisable' facts or traits about them is all too apparent in the history of politics and political thought. Aristotle's claim that women and slaves were 'naturally' unsuited to political office is, perhaps, the most obvious example, but we can find it too in Plato and Nietzsche. More recently, however, essentialism has been widely denounced for its exclusionary implications. Essentialising one's ethnicity or gender or sexuality, for example, as the most important or defining aspect of one's identity has been rightly criticised for misconstruing *social* constructs and labels as *natural* facts about persons and hence opening the way to quite substantial exclusions and inequalities. The kind of argument that claims women are naturally unsuited to political office, for example, is cut from the same cloth as those which claim that black people are naturally more lazy than white people, that Jews are naturally selfish, and that gays are naturally promiscuous. Such arguments have always been popular among racists, anti-

Semites, and homophobes who find it easier to justify socially-constructed inequalities in terms of biology or natural fate.

Thus, essentialism in this biologically determinist sense has been widely (but not wholly) rejected in contemporary political philosophy in favour of an approach which avoids ascribing particular ends and interests to persons by virtue of their particular memberships or traits, and rightly so. But while the tendency to convert *social* identities into *natural* identities is rare, the strategy of selectively elevating certain social or political roles as more important – and more defining of one's identity – than any other is still widespread. Indeed, it is enjoying something of a renaissance in contemporary political theory. Outside communitarianism the strategy of selective elevation finds its most obvious normative expression among the more radical advocates of 'identity politics', and in those who have sought to invoke the importance of nationality or culture to identity and freedom. For some radical feminists, women and men are conceived to be ultimately defined by their membership of their particular gender group, in the sense that their more specific goals and projects, and their wider understanding of who they are and what opportunities are open to them, are ultimately determined by their gender (or, more accurately, the social norms which determine the roles associated with gender). For feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, and many second-wave feminists, the social, political, and cultural significance afforded to gender by society is so pervasive and inescapable that it represents the implicit structure (the 'objective standard') against which men and women come to understand their various, more personal goals and projects (*including* their membership of a particular 'political' community) (MacKinnon, 1987; Dworkin, 1981).

We can see the strategy of selective elevation at work in arguments advanced by other thinkers too. Nationalists like Yael Tamir, for example, have argued that it is one's religious membership of a *national* community which is of supreme importance, and provides the lens through which one might understand one's wider commitments and obligations (Tamir, 1993). Similarly other theorists and political activists have argued that it is one's religious identity, or ethnicity, or race which is most significant. Culturalism is but one further example of this kind

of argument. Culturalist liberals like Kymlicka and Raz share the strategy of selective elevation, in their claim that it is a person's membership of a particular *cultural* community which dominates their identity, which structures their more particular goals and ideals, and which (under conditions of discrimination and exclusion) denies them access to political discourse by excluding them from those resources or goods which make these discourses accessible to them. The culturalist argument is not that we will only be members of cultures. Raz in particular is attentive to the fact that we will be members of different groups at the same time. Rather, it is that our cultural membership, as opposed to any other, which will provide the overarching structure of values and ideas within which we will be able to evaluate and order our smaller, more localised memberships and roles. Consequently, the culturalist argument is not that cultural membership confers an important set of goals and understandings which must be evaluated in the context of others. It is rather that cultural membership represents the background context within which deliberations about all our other attachments and ideas must take place. Our culture is not subject to revision in the same way that our other attachments might (and should) be; rather, it provides the resources necessary for autonomous reflection to get off the ground. Culturalists are clear on this. Raz, for example, argues that membership of a cultural group "is of vital importance to individuals . . . one's cultural membership determines the horizon of one's opportunities. Of what one may become, or (if one is older) what one might have been." (Raz, 1994: 177). And Kymlicka, states that our cultural membership provides the necessary context in which we can make "judgements about how to lead our lives. In this sense," he says, "our culture not only provides options, but it also provides [what Ronald Dworkin calls] the 'spectacles through which we identify experiences as valuable'" (Kymlicka, 1997: 8). To those who have suggested that in appearing to place cultural membership beyond the scope of autonomous reflection he is endorsing a "rather communitarian view of the self" (Kymlicka, 1995: 91), Kymlicka states that liberals should not in fact be concerned with trying to provide individuals with the resources to question the requirements of their cultural membership, but merely the "freedom to move around *within* one's societal culture" (Kymlicka, 1995: 90, emphasis added).

When beginning from such foundations, it is not difficult to establish a link between these particular defining memberships and personal autonomy. If one's identity or self-understanding is understood to be inextricably tied to one's religious or cultural or national membership, for example, it follows that one's ability to reflect upon and interpret one's ends, or to make meaningful choices about one's life, will be undermined or thwarted in the event of this membership being denied, or robbed, or rendered inaccessible. Similarly, if one's capacity to reason is held to be rooted in (and made possible by) one's embeddedness in a particular community, attachment, or group, then it is going to be incompatible with any normative theory which requires that persons deliberate independently of this attachment, or requires that persons should be capable of evaluating the worth of this attachment itself. Furthermore, when beginning from such foundations, it is not difficult to argue for the special recognition of certain groups at the expense of others under the auspices of protecting individual autonomy.

But neither the agent nor autonomy should be understood in this way. Persons will often find themselves faced with dilemmas and conflicts arising precisely out of the fact that they draw their identity from a *multiplicity* of roles and communities and memberships at any one time, and that often no single role or value among them holds the answer to what they should do, or how they should act, in response to the specific circumstances which face them. A Muslim or Sikh or Jew, for example, will indeed understand herself as a member of a particular church (or a possessor of certain religious beliefs), but she will *also*, at the same time, understand herself as a 'mother', a 'daughter', a 'wife', a 'friend', a 'woman', a 'citizen'; she may be a member of a particular club or social group; she may have a job, or occupy some other office or role. Now, it is entirely possible, of course, for her to consider one of these roles to be more important to her than any other (depending upon her own particular view on this). However, to hold that *one* of these memberships or roles should necessarily be posited by philosophers as *necessarily* more important than any other (as the source of identity which people use to order their other memberships and obligations), or *itself* a precondition for autonomous reflection and choice is undermined when we realise that even in such

communities, persons will often find themselves forced to make decisions which cannot be resolved merely by an appeal to a *single* membership or allegiance.

"Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual . . . [and when they do] we must engage in what are called trade-offs - rules, values, principles must yield to each other to varying degrees in specific situations" (Berlin, 1997: 10 – 15). The Jehovah's Witness who is faced with the decision of either allowing her son a life-saving blood transfusion or letting him die, for instance, is genuinely faced with a tragic and agonising choice between (at least) two aspects of her self. Her commitment to her religious beliefs might lead her to the conclusion that the 'ingestion' of blood is morally wrong, but she will also be a 'parent' who loves her son, who has hopes and aspirations for him, and who does not want to see him die. She might also be a 'wife' who must take into account the views and feelings of her husband, and so on. Similarly, a member of a strict religious community who must decide whether to send his child to an orthodox school which will prepare him for a life of strict religious observance (at the expense of providing the child with the capacity to compete for jobs and pursue a living of his own choice on a free and equal basis with others), or to a non-orthodox school which has a better reputation for its teaching in 'non-religious' subjects like mathematics, science, and languages, is compelled to choose between two conflicting accounts of what the 'best interests of his child' might be. Again, depending upon that individual's grasp of his or her own beliefs and ideals these various roles might all be understood in terms of her membership of her religious community. The Jehovah's Witness might, for example, conclude that acting 'in her son's best interests' requires letting him die (if she understands her son's 'best interests' are entirely determined within the context of the orthodox religious beliefs that she holds), just as the religious parent might believe that his child's best interests are served by sending him to a religious school, even though this might be at the expense of him gaining certain qualifications that he might have obtained if he had gone elsewhere.

The point that concerns us here is not what these people should decide (or indeed, whether in cases such as these the choice should be left to the parents), but that the resolution of such a

complex moral and personal dilemma arises out of a process of deliberation which pits the various roles and obligations one feels at any one time *against* one another. Such decisions cannot be simply or easily resolved by an appeal to the values embodied in a single community because a large part of what makes the dilemma so difficult is precisely that the course of action mandated by one set of commitments conflicts with that mandated by another. The dilemmas arising out of our various memberships may not be merely 'reasoned away' or dissolved by an appeal to the over-arching values which prevail in the cultural community to which we belong because, often, these values will be as much in the balance (to be weighed against others) as any other value or obligation or commitment that we feel. We can choose to subordinate certain of our ends to certain others, of course, but what we cannot do is claim that these certain ends will be the same for *all* people (or all members of a particular group) or that these attachments lie outside the deliberative process (and thus unquestionable and fixed). One's roles and obligations need not always conflict. But it is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which they do, and in these circumstances our dilemmas are not easily resolved by referring to a single set of values or beliefs which wholly define the solution. In such circumstances, "[w]e are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss," because the obligations in question cannot always be subsumed within a larger system of value, or be measured against a single standard" (Berlin, 1997: 11).

As we have already mentioned, it is not unusual in the literature for supporters of the strategy of selective elevation to acknowledge the diverse and multiple roles that individuals will occupy at any one time. The issue is not, therefore, whether people will find themselves embedded in different communities, but which of these communities is conceived to be the most important in terms of autonomy and identity-conferral. Communitarians like MacIntyre, for example, do not deny that we will occupy many social roles at once, and that these social roles will require us to act or to think of ourselves in a certain way. However, MacIntyre believes that this represents a fundamental problem at the heart of the modern condition: modernity forces us to think of ourselves as shaped by our many different social roles without giving us the resources we need to bring all these roles together into a single unity, he argues; hence, the fact that the self is multiply embedded in different roles represents (in the

modern world) a constraint upon freedom, rather than a structural condition of it. The Enlightenment, he says, has liquidated the “self into a set of demarcated areas of role-playing” (MacIntyre, 1996: 205); the paradox at the heart of the modernity is that it presents a world split (or ‘compartmentalised’) into separate spheres of activity which are conceived to exist in isolation from one another (MacIntyre, 1999: 311 – 329), while exalting a conception of the individual as unified and autonomous. In the absence of a political community built upon a shared set of constitutive values, capable of providing unity to the various roles that we occupy at any one time, MacIntyre argues, the modern agent must ignore or *play down* those divergences and differences that exist within it in the interests of establishing some sense of unity within itself. “The divided self . . . has to have developed habits of mind that enable it not to attend to what it would have to recognise as its own incoherences, if it were to understand itself apart from its involvements in each of its particular roles in each distinct sphere” (MacIntyre, 1999: 326). Consequently, autonomy requires self-deception.

This is clearly an illiberal conclusion, and is intended as such. But it is not clear why individuals should impose unity on themselves at the expense of acknowledging the complexity of their various obligations and roles and allegiances. Furthermore, as I suggested earlier, it need not be the case that our various roles and memberships will *conflict* at all. After all, a single individual may exhibit very different qualities and attitudes in different aspects of his life without rendering himself hopelessly divided or confused about his own identity or wider interests. He could be competitive while playing football, co-operative when sharing in housework, determined when pursuing his career, passive and amiable when among friends, and yet still be able to conceive himself as a single person or ‘self’. True, the various aspects of our lives often embody their own norms and assumptions and codes of conduct but acknowledging as much does not compel us to conceive persons as fractured or unable to understand their lives as anything more than a series of dislocated roles or commitments. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that our various roles require us to conduct ourselves differently at different times that their convergence can often cause such anxiety and confusion; when work intrudes upon the realm of the family, for example, or when stresses or worries in our family lives encroach upon our ability to act as we might like in our working lives, and so on,

we might find ourselves unsure of how to act or which norms to follow. We need not reason away the complexity of the relationship between our various memberships and obligations in order to understand ourselves as a unified agent. True, we *might* do so as a means of rendering our decisions less difficult or painful (we might choose to live our lives in denial of our own inconsistency on certain matters), but it would be wrong to claim that such self-deception is *required* in order for us to make meaningful decisions about our lives (and in order for us to be held responsible for these decisions). Indeed, liberalism actually attempts to *mitigate* instances of self-deception or self-delusion by insisting that persons be given as much information as possible upon which to base their decisions. Autonomous choices, for the liberal, are necessarily choices made in the light of as much information as possible in the circumstances, and autonomous agency is born out of a process of deciding and acting in as informed a manner as possible. *Contra* the culturalists, liberals should be sceptical of the idea that the correct view on a particular course of action or set of values should be derived from a single set of beliefs or moral values, and should instead encourage the idea that good decisions might more appropriately arise from individuals being exposed to a wide range of perspectives and arguments that they can use to better evaluate the issue at hand. Many liberals have suggested that this should be an important component in a programme of liberal education (Gutmann, 1990; Callan, 1997; Brighouse, 2000).

The general conception of autonomy that I am outlining, then, and which I suggest is more coherent than that advanced by culturalist liberals, is thus: when reflecting on what we should or should not do in certain circumstances we do not retreat into a realm of pure reason, nor do we necessarily consult the set of ideals and values embodied in one membership or role. Rather we *advance* into the realm of lived experience in all its complexity and diversity. By occupying a particular perspective (or set of perspectives) within me, I am able to grasp the way in which this perspective fits with the wider network of preferences and commitments which make me who I am, and weigh my competing interests and inclinations and duties as a result. It is, therefore (in an important sense), agency *itself* which brings together our various experiences. By deliberating upon the validity or significance of our particular ends and attachments from the perspective of those other attachments that claim us, we bring the

various aspects of ourselves together into a whole. By working out for myself what my various values and commitments and ideals mean to me (and how I should act in response to them) by examining them from the conjoined perspective of my *other* values and commitments, that is, the various aspects of my life are brought together through the very process of reasoning and acting in the world. Certain circumstances, of course, will reveal the incompatibility of my commitments in all their clarity and complexity. But it is in bringing these values together, in reconciling them as best I can in order that I might decide what to do in such circumstances, that they most obviously come together to form the understanding I have of the world and of my own interests, preferences, and ends. Far from displacing the 'unity of the self', then, the modern autonomy-supportive state forces us to acknowledge the complex interaction of ideals and values and obligations which occurs within us (by providing us with the resources, and the requisite 'space' in which to explore these values and obligations for ourselves), to recognise the important demands that these (impersonal and personal) claims make of us, and to bring these competing aspects of our lives together in such a way that their convergence can provide a basis for meaningful decision and action in the world. By examining a particular ideal or belief or course of action from the perspective of my other values and beliefs and ideals, that is, I am able to decide on the validity or significance of these beliefs and values for myself, *not* from a separate and dislocated plateau of pure reason, or from the perspective of one particular membership over all those others which influence me, but from the perspective of those many commitments and perspectives which shape my deliberations and make me who I am.

2. Liberalism, Deliberation, and the Politics of Multiple-Embeddedness.

What, then, are the normative implications of the strategy of selective elevation? In particular, what are the implications of its rejection for liberal political theory? Returning to the characterisation of the strategy of selective elevation presented in section 1, it is clear that it supports widely differing normative ends, depending on which membership is held to be most significant. Communitarians like Sandel and MacIntyre conceive our various allegiances to be understood through the lens of the shared values embodied in our political community, hence,

they argue that the principal function of politics is to reveal what these values are, so that they might inform an appropriate set of policies for that community. Those who emphasise gender have often argued that politics should be 'gendered' in a way that foregrounds this aspect of our identity (Hekman, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Young, 1990; Young, 1997). Those who argue for the supremacy of national identity tend to argue for the political recognition of nationality; those who emphasise religious membership tend to argue for special rights or provisions for religious groups, and so on.

The liberal culturalist variant of this argument has primarily been used to defend the politicisation of cultural groups via the allocation of group-specific rights or provisions. At the level of public policy, this approach has often been used to justify the exemption of certain groups from pre-existing laws. Examples of such exemptions are common and widespread in the literature and include the exemption of Muslims and Jews from laws governing the humane slaughter of animals for meat, the exemption of Sikhs from laws requiring the wearing of motorcycle helmets, and the exemption of members of the gypsy community from laws governing the amount of time children must spend at school per year (Barry, 2001: 32 – 62; Parekh, 1990; Poulter, 1998). At the deeper normative level, the argument for politicisation has been employed by culturalists against what Brian Barry has called the liberal 'strategy of privatization', and against political liberalism in particular (Barry, 2001: 19 – 54). This strategy describes the approach that we find most obviously in the work of liberals like John Rawls and Charles Larmore, who argue that the cultural, religious, and other values which people hold should be considered private, in the sense that their truth should not directly inform principles of political association or public policy (or the mechanisms by which policies and principles are decided). Political liberalism therefore builds upon an important tradition in liberalism which suggests that principles, institutions, and policies which claim their legitimacy in the truth of a particular comprehensive doctrine will often lead to conflict in societies which are divided on precisely these questions of truth and value. It is therefore a practical and philosophical response to cultural diversity: the ends and obligations embodied in the various roles we occupy at any one time may well be important in the conferral of identity, but they cannot provide a foundation for the legitimacy of social and political

institutions in liberal democratic states because the truth of these values will be quite reasonably rejected by others for whom the source of truth lies elsewhere. Political liberals like Rawls and Larmore therefore suggest that in the interests of deriving regulative principles of political association and, hence, legitimate public institutions, individuals ought to reason in ways which do not appeal to the truth of their own comprehensive doctrines or the falsity of others' but the value of broader principles upon which diverse people can agree despite their deeper disagreements about the good (Rawls, 1983; Larmore, 1996; Moon, 1993).

There is a two-fold assumption at the heart of political liberalism, then: (a) that the legitimacy of political principles and institutions cannot be provided by the truth of ethical or moral values, including liberal values like individual autonomy, but rather through agreements made by differently situated individuals, and (b) that these differently situated individuals will be capable of reasoning with others without appealing to the truth of the values or commitments embodied in those various memberships which shape their identities.

These two assumptions have come under intense criticism from non-liberals and liberals alike. Assumption (a) has been criticised by those liberals who believe that liberalism is necessarily a comprehensive doctrine, and that liberal institutions should be concerned primarily with encouraging substantive goods like individual autonomy or well-being (for example, Gutmann, 1999; Wall, 1998). In particular, some critics suggest that the commitment to 'political autonomy' that we find in Rawlsian political liberalism requires that persons conceive themselves as autonomous more generally, and that, therefore, political liberalism collapses into comprehensive liberalism. Assumption (b) has been criticised by liberals and non-liberals who believe that the requirement that persons do not appeal to the truth of their cultural or religious commitments in political debates is too strong, and that many people will not be able to do this (for example, Gray, 1995; Young, 1990).

Raz and Kymlicka criticise both assumptions. Both conceive liberalism to be a comprehensive doctrine rooted in the value of individual autonomy, and both reject the form of political reasoning at the heart of political liberalism as unrealistic. Kymlicka's claim, as we mentioned

earlier, is that political liberalism is too demanding of citizens because it requires that they deliberate differently in 'public' life to 'private' life. This, he says, requires persons to adopt a schizophrenic understanding of themselves as one kind of person in public and another in private. The political liberal approach therefore embodies obvious problems for the culturalists. If one were to hold that an individual's capacity to reason about their life was made possible by their membership of one attachment or group identity over all others, as Raz and Kymlicka do, it follows that one would have to reject any approach to politics which required that individuals reason in ways which do not appeal to the values embodied in that group at any time. Such an approach would require persons to reason in ways that are not possible.

However, if we acknowledge that persons do not necessarily reason in this way (as we did in section 1), and that the background context against which they evaluate the content of their lives (and everything else) is provided by their membership of many and different communities at once, the political liberal approach seems less controversial, and the requirements it makes of individual citizens seem less demanding. The rejection of the strategy of selective elevation that we find in the culturalist liberalism of Raz and Kymlicka suggests that persons will inevitably reason from different perspectives and in different ways in different circumstances, and hence, will often understand themselves differently in different circumstances. It is precisely the fact that we do not draw our view of the world from a single attachment or membership that enables us to reason from different perspectives as appropriate. We will not resolve disputes among family members in the same way that we resolve disputes between work colleagues, for example. We will invoke different rules and we will think and act and justify our actions differently. Among family members we will invoke sentiments and sympathies which have no place or relevance in business meetings. Among friends we will resolve conflicts by appeals to bonds of loyalty and trust which do not apply in the same way among people with whom we are differently associated. The fact that we are differently constituted therefore allows us to use those methods of reasoning which are appropriate to the situation at hand. The consequence of MacIntyre's suggestion that we derive our identity from our political community above any other, or Kymlicka's claim that it is

our *cultural* group which determines my ideas about value, is, as we have already suggested, that we must necessarily reason in all circumstances in the same way. We must view all our relationships and resolve all our conflicts through the lens of the political community (MacIntyre) or our cultural group (Kymlicka). We must always resolve conflicts, and always make decisions, as a *citizen* of a particular community, or a member of a particular culture. If conflicts between values or courses of action occur, the argument goes, we resolve them by consulting the values embodied in that one membership which provides the background context for our reasoning about value. However, if we subscribe to a liberalism which acknowledges our multiple-embeddedness and which does not seek to arbitrarily elevate one of our attachments above all others as necessarily most defining of our identity, then we need do no such thing. The critique of the selective elevation of value (and liberal culturalism in particular) captures something important about persons, namely, that they will not always reason in the same way, but will instead reason differently depending on who they are talking to and what outcomes they desire.

What the rejection of the strategy of elevation makes possible, then, is a conception of liberalism which occupies a middle-ground between communitarianism on the one hand and political liberalism on the other through its commitment to the comprehensive value of autonomy (appropriately conceived). Communitarians argue that we are defined primarily by our political community (and hence, by those ideals and commitments which arise out of political deliberations with others). Consequently, they argue, our political community necessarily shapes our understanding of those other, more personal, attachments which constitute our identity. Political liberals argue the opposite: they claim that we are able to engage in the appropriate form of public reasoning about justice and politics regardless of what we believe and feel in other aspects of our lives, and regardless of the constraints placed upon us in these other, more personal, commitments and memberships. For the political liberal, reasoning about politics in the appropriate way is possible and necessary regardless of whether we value autonomy in our lives more widely.

There are significant problems with both of these positions. The communitarian claim that we are (and should be) primarily shaped by our political community over and above all others seems arbitrary for all the reasons we have thus far outlined. Meanwhile, the political liberal commitment to the principle of autonomy in the political realm but not on the private realm is problematic. The idea that individuals can be autonomous in public while at the same time suffering under conditions of oppression and hardship in private is difficult to maintain. The conditions that prevail in one's private life (that is, in the realm of the family, faith and other personal relationships) deeply effect the kind of life one is able to lead (and, importantly, conceive for oneself) in public. Feminists have pointed this out most forcefully, but they are not alone in doing so. The argument presented herein hopes to make possible a conception of liberalism which retains the political liberal aim of establishing legitimate political institutions in circumstances of diversity by appealing to a conception of autonomy which is consistent with this aim, which takes the multiple and overlapping memberships of individuals seriously, and acknowledges the necessarily comprehensive nature of this ideal. In rejecting the selective elevation of value, the argument herein recognises that persons will (and should) reason differently in different circumstances but that these deliberations presuppose and require the agent to be *autonomous* in the sense that they are able to genuinely reflect upon their various ends and attachments, and to explain and justify their position in a way appropriate to the circumstances. Whether they are reflecting upon their religious beliefs, their ascribed social roles, their career choice, their responsibilities as a father or friend, or the rightful character of the state, persons will need to be able to examine the content of their lives in the light of their various other attachments and the attachments and concerns of others. And they will do so as multipally embedded, autonomous individuals who are made autonomous by the occupation of different memberships and roles which are capable of providing the requisite perspectives on the range of choices and courses of action they face, as appropriate.

The rejection of the selective elevation of value therefore goes some way in resolving the philosophical tensions between those liberals who argue for the 'strategy of privatization' and those liberals and non-liberals who believe that cultural and other identity-conferring groups

should be politicised. It supports a conception of liberalism which is 'political' in the sense that the rules which legitimate and regulate the structure and conduct of public institutions are rightfully derived from the collective public deliberations of all persons who are to be governed by them, but is 'comprehensive' in the sense that it acknowledges the need for the deliberative process by which individual agents decide on the rightful character of the state to be conceived to be circumscribed by certain substantive commitments (for example, to individual autonomy). The account of autonomy outlined above effectively theorises a basic assumption of political liberalism (that persons will be able to deliberate differently in different contexts, and therefore as a citizen when the circumstances demand), and suggests a way in which political liberals like Rawls and Larmore can retain their commitment to public deliberation about regulative principles of justice in a way that is compatible with a more comprehensive commitment to individual autonomy.

The strength of this account, therefore, is that (a) it provides a way out for political liberals who have in the past seemed trapped by their own implicit support for autonomy, and (b) it underwrites (and makes plausible) the traditional liberal strategy of securing a basic set of civil, political, and economic rights for all individual persons without the need of (or justification for) the allocation of group specific rights for cultures. Once we understand that culture is not necessarily more important to individual identity and autonomy than any other membership that the individual holds, the principal argument in favour of politicising cultural groups through the allocation of group specific rights loses much of its force. And as soon as we understand that political liberalism can appeal to an appropriately conceived idea of individual autonomy without forsaking its central commitment to establishing a set of rules of political association through the collective deliberation of those persons who are to be bound by them, then we can better understand an appropriate liberal response to issues concerning the clash between civil rights and cultural practices which should be supported by political and comprehensive liberals alike.

Broadly conceived, the response underwritten by the rejection of the strategy of selective elevation is to embrace the traditional liberal commitment to the strategy of privatization, and

to secure those basic civil rights for all that persons will need in order to decide for themselves as to the worth of the particular memberships and commitments they hold and which shape their wider life-goals. One's 'political' identity can and should be considered distinct from the various other identities which shape one's wider ideas about the world, but only in the same way that one's religion or ethnicity or gender should be considered distinct. It is distinct from, and not independent of, other sources of identity. A liberal political community does not represent a stand-alone community in which individuals must deliberate as if they were unencumbered selves (Sandel) or mere 'ciphers' (Gray), it is rather a community in which, under the right conditions, persons will be capable of deliberating *as a citizen* against the background of their other, wider memberships and attachments. Their understanding of what it means to be a citizen may well be influenced by the ideas embodied in their other memberships, but it does not follow from this that persons cannot think of themselves in the appropriate way at the appropriate time when considering a particular range of questions.

Kymlicka is therefore right that liberalism cannot accede to the demands of cultural groups who wish to impose the kind of 'internal restrictions' on their members that would undermine their ability to evaluate the worth of their particular allegiances and to exercise their rights. This may have implications, for example, for the kind of education that minority groups must provide their children, and the kind of practices in which groups can engage in the name of their cultural values. It might also undermine the case for the kind of group-specific legal exemptions that we mentioned earlier. The precise policy implications of this argument will rightly emerge out of the public deliberations of those involved, under conditions specified by liberal principles, and will depend upon the empirical circumstances at hand. The role of liberal theory is to fix the conditions under which more specific deliberations about policies and institutions might be had, and decisions about policy might be made.

But Kymlicka is wrong to argue that the protection of individuals from internal restrictions on the free exercise of their civil rights requires the politicisation of group identities or the complete rejection of political liberalism. Individual autonomy can only be realised under legitimate social and political institutions which seek to provide the basic rights and freedoms

necessary for persons to understand themselves as free and equal citizens of a political community. And autonomy makes possible the forms of public deliberation capable of affording genuine legitimacy to institutions under circumstances of diversity. The responsibilities of the liberal state do not begin and end with securing autonomy. They must provide the appropriate conditions under which individuals might reason productively with one another about the rightful ends of the state and – in cases when autonomy clashes with other values – what should be decided. Political liberalism therefore needs to appeal to the value of individual autonomy as it is the value that makes liberal public reason possible, but it should appeal to a conception of autonomy of the kind outlined herein; one which embraces rather than denies the complex, diverse attachments that individuals will hold at any one time, and which provides the conditions under which debates as to the legitimacy of institutions and policies might be meaningfully had.

3. Conclusion.

In this article, I have sought to challenge the growing tendency among certain liberal thinkers to politicise cultural identity claims and groups on the grounds that culture provides the necessary background conditions for autonomy. I have done so by suggesting that the claim that our culture provides the background conditions for autonomy rests upon the strategy of selectively and arbitrarily elevating a single aspect of one's identity as normatively and ontologically more significant than any other in a way that cannot be sustained and which should be replaced with an alternative conception which is more attentive to the complexity of human identity and experience. Having argued as much, I have suggested that this alternative conception of autonomy is largely consistent with the political liberal aim of establishing the legitimacy of social and political institutions under circumstances of diversity, and effectively theorises a basic and necessary (and often criticised) assumption made by political liberals in a way that renders it consistent with comprehensive liberalism. The capacity of individuals to engage in the appropriate form of reasoning as to their ends and attachments is an important value in liberalism, and it is necessarily comprehensive in nature. This provides a guide to the development of public policy and the actions of state institutions.

But the way in which persons deliberate in different aspects of their lives will be different, and the reasons they find compelling or reasonable or ridiculous will differ depending upon the circumstances in which they find themselves, the people they are talking to, and the other considerations they believe to be relevant at any one time. Consequently, I suggest that liberalism should not seek to politicise cultural groups, because the principal liberal argument in favour of doing so (i.e. that it is necessary for autonomy) is false, and that realising this allows one to better grasp the strengths and weaknesses of political liberalism by more adequately theorising the assumptions embodied within it.

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