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978-0-521-76056-0 - The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves

John Christman

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

Who are you?

Really, how would you answer such a question, coming as it does from an anonymous and context-free page in a book? You might give your name, or some other designator that will pick you out (“I am the one reading this book here ...”). But could you give a substantive, descriptive answer? Most likely, whatever comes to mind as a possible answer would depend on the point of asking the question. Different contexts would evoke different, or at least very differently organized, descriptions of yourself. Though the question that is really at issue here – and this will be one of the central themes of this book – is “who should I say you are ...?” And I should quickly add, nothing I have said or want to say in what follows should preclude your answer beginning with the words “We are ...”

Philosophical reflections on the nature of the self are wide ranging of course. One could say, in fact, that concern with the nature of persons, human nature, and the self represents some of the central topics of philosophy, in all its various traditions, throughout its history. Metaphysical accounts of the essential nature of (human) being have abounded in that history. Social and political philosophy, in its way, has taken up such theorizing and proceeded on the basis of assumptions about human nature, the self, and agency to construct or assume models of the subject of political and social institutions.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, counter-currents have developed that decry any such attempt to develop a single, metaphysically grounded, account of what it means to be a person. Emphasis on difference, cultural variation, and variegated modes of living (previously ignored in mainstream theory) has motivated this rejection of all-encompassing models of the self. The question for normative social

<sup>1</sup> I make many observations in this Introduction that will be documented with references in the chapters below. Here I mean only to set the stage for those discussions.

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theory, then, is what conception of the self can be utilized in articulating general principles while taking into account the radical disagreements that have always existed about the nature of the person.

As Michael Sandel has claimed, every political philosophy presupposes a “philosophical anthropology” – a conception of the person assumed as the subject of that philosophy (Sandel 1982). Most such anthropologies are implicit, in that the capabilities, interests, perspectives, and relations of the persons to which political principles apply are never articulated as such. Rather, they are often assumed as background facts, perhaps as aspects of human nature taken to be obvious or universal, and not the controversial subject matter of the particular political philosophy being developed. But political and social institutions guided by principles all presuppose a model of the individual(s) acting within them. What can be called the “subject of justice,” then, names the model of the person that is operative in the principles guiding the workings of political institutions that answer to the dictates of justice.

Notoriously, Western political philosophy in the modern age – dominated by what is broadly characterized as liberal theory – has assumed that the model of personhood to be utilized in these contexts is fundamentally *individualistic*. The subject of principles of justice is first and foremost the individual as such, however many connections and close associations such persons might have in their actual lives. In addition, the picture of the citizen of the just polity includes no specific reference to the marks of social identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, culture, and so on, that many actual individuals might immediately mention when describing themselves. The model person, in the liberal tradition, is characterized without essential connections with past or present others or social factors external to “him.”

This view is now deeply resisted in many quarters. In fact, one could say that an uneasy consensus has developed in opposition to the assumption of a thoroughly individualistic conception of the person (as the subject of principles of justice), a conception where no reference is made to relations with other persons, traditions, historical practices, and social forms. The political self is, in some ways at least, a social self, marked in various ways by indicators of a social identity, however this is conceived.

At the same time, it is also quite controversial to conclude that the interests and perspective that are represented in normative principles are specified at the level of *groups*, such as identity groups. It is a matter of much debate whether social relations as such must be represented as the primary object of interest in political theory. The challenge, then, is to construct models of the person as represented in political theory that, on the one

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hand, make room for (if not assume) the deep interpersonal, social, cultural and historical connections that structure the self-concept of many or all of us. This must be done, however, in a way that avoids begging the question about whether the interests of individuals *per se* should be the fundamental object of social concern.

In the present work, I attempt to wade through some of these deep and murky waters by investigating the various ways in which selves are said to be, not only *social* but, I will stress, *historical*, in the sense of being diachronically structured and subject to change over time. More specifically, I argue that however we model “selves” in political principles, room must be made for the ways in which we are often defined by our social and temporal relations, in short, that we are *socio-historical* selves.

It will also be claimed, however, that the aspect of persons that must be assumed as well as promoted and respected in normative political principles is their *autonomy*. Putting these points together, the central focus of this book is the project of working out a conception of individual autonomy for socio-historical selves operative in principles of justice applying to modern pluralistic societies.

This work can be seen as a continuation of the multi-vocal discussion that has emerged over standard liberal theories of justice, a discussion that includes the allegation that such theories have systematically occluded the representation of persons as socially identified and historically embedded. The challenge to liberal political philosophy – voiced by feminists and other defenders of identity politics, post-modern theorists, communitarians, multicultural theorists, and others – has been wide ranging and voluminous. The liberal response has also been robust. Both sides, it appears, have agreed on the rejection of the traditional liberal conception of the autonomous agent as the separated, independent self of modernist lore. The social self (or in the post-structuralist idiolect, the “de-centered self”) has replaced the unembedded and disembodied autonomous “man” of traditional theory.

What remain to be examined in this exchange, however, are the precise aspects of this socially constituted or de-centered self that must be taken into account in normative theory. Specifically, the question arises whether the idea of autonomy at the center of models of modern democratic theory must be rejected along with the idea of the “lone wolf self.” The way to answer this question is to connect the contours of the socio-historical self with a model of autonomy in order to see if the latter’s requirements preclude the former’s assumptions. Can we see individual autonomy as a property of social selves (specifically socio-historical selves)? I will argue here

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that we can, and for the purposes of constructing at least one (I hope plausible) framework for principles of justice applying to modern, pluralistic societies, I hope to show how this might be accomplished.

## I. THE CONTEXT

As I mentioned, normative political theories, in particular conceptions of justice, always presuppose or assert a conception of the person taken to be the subject of those principles. There are two chief reasons for this (among others): the legitimacy or justification of such principles will, according to a certain tradition, rest upon their being acceptable to those living under them. Such collective endorsement will be postulated or aimed for in ways that reflect the kinds of people whose acceptance is in question, so specifying the political subject determines the nature and possibility of political *legitimacy*. In addition, people's interests will be represented in the structure and aims of those principles. That is, principles guiding the construction and operation of social institutions will assume a profile of basic interests the protection or promotion of which provides the content of those institutional directives. Even if such interests are described formally so as to avoid any substantive conception of the good for human beings, they will still express a broad view of human purposes, needs, and so on and therefore contain a representation of such people whose interests are being so served.

Of course people's interests are expressed in a variety of ways in democratic institutions, notably by their *actual* representatives in legislative assemblies. But we are talking here about something more basic, the model of what a "person" is, fundamentally, in the design and articulation of the basic principles of the constitution. Traditionally, the task of constructing the conception of the citizen represented in these principles has been left to philosophical (and religious) thinkers whose ruminations on human nature have provided metaphysical accounts of personhood to be utilized in politics. As I mentioned, such traditional metaphysical accounts have also been roundly criticized for ignoring several factors central to many people's conceptions of themselves: the importance of embodiment in our natures, the way that intimate relations form the core of many people's self-concept, and the central function that social markers of identity play in this context. Moreover, reflections on the nature of the self can be notoriously free floating, as if a single conception of the person or self can be fashioned without attention to the geographical, social, and historical locations of both the theorizer and her subject.

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My task here will not be to systematically engage in these critiques of metaphysical accounts of personhood. That is, I proceed on the assumption that we are functioning in a “post-metaphysical” context, as Habermas and other commentators have put it (Habermas 1999, 143; Rawls 1993). We must posit conceptions of the political self that have no necessary pretensions about universality or metaphysical necessity. So we should consider models of selves that will be useful in particular contexts and for particular theoretical and practical purposes, in this case the construction of principles of justice for constitutional democracies in the late modern age.

The intellectual tradition in which this discussion occurs emerged out of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European political philosophies which gave rise to contemporary liberal theories of justice. This tradition was built on the rejection of hierarchical models of political power in which the legitimacy of regimes was thought to rest on natural inherent powers of hereditary title or military prowess. The social contract theories of that earlier age expressed this opposition and constructed theories of political power that rested on popular will, expressing the fundamental rights of persons defined pre-politically (as natural rights).

The contemporary inheritors of that tradition vary in the ways that they interpret the demands of such popular sovereignty. However, all such writers now admit, and in most cases face head-on, the dramatic degree of pluralism found in the populations where such political power is exercised. Differences in identity, embodiment, life histories, cultural associations, language, moral commitment, and so on mark the landscape of contemporary theory, even liberal theory. Opinions differ, of course, about what to do about such differences. But also, theorists of political authority in this tradition have increasingly taken seriously the predominance of violence, domination, and power differentials that shape our history (and in fact track those differences in social identity in many cases).

Moreover, and I will discuss this in chapter 10, the context to which the issues discussed here apply are democracies with their own histories of specifically non-democratic practices. Most discussions of political principles assume a less than ideal setting to which such normative provisions apply – the so-called “circumstances of justice,” for example, which specify such things as limited altruism and relative scarcity of goods. However, I want to make the context more realistic in assuming that the histories and to some extent current practices of such societies include systematic inequalities of power and systematic patterns of violence. Relatedly, I assume that such democracies exist and function in a world that also includes many powerful non-democratic regimes. As we will see,

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the interests and viewpoint of persons represented by principles for such democracies will be different from those in more pristine and less violent settings.

The question that we must face, then, is whether conceptions of the person at work in theories applied to such contexts must radically shift away from traditional models because of these factors. I will suggest that they must to some degree, though not in ways that some commentators have insisted. In particular, I will defend the view that individual autonomy, specified in ways that make essential reference to individual history but not necessarily to particular social connections, will be necessary as a lynchpin of pluralist democratic theory and will also survive critiques from those sensitive to social and historical constituents of identity.

Also, a word about a word: *liberalism*. Most of the discussion in what follows will concern “liberal” political philosophy. And in much of my own past writing, some of which is inherited in revised form here, I took myself to be defending a version of liberalism, or at least some of its central ideas. But I have found that in discussions of these topics, the term “liberalism” has taken on such a volatile and variable set of meanings that I largely avoid it in what follows, especially in statements of my overall aims. I prefer to talk about anti-perfectionist, autonomy-based, democratic theories of justice. These are normative approaches to politics and social life that, like traditional liberalism, assume that conflicts among moral worldviews and value systems are a permanent element of political life, and therefore principles of justice should, as much as possible, avoid resting on any *one* of those controversial views. However, I also think, and this contrasts with much liberal thought, that democratic procedures are *constitutive* of the generation of principles of justice and not merely complimentary to it. Here I have more in common with some self-described non-liberal thinkers who align themselves with (radical) democratic theory.

I cannot defend a broad theory of justice here and won't try. Instead I merely discuss, in some detail, some of the key conceptual elements at work in such a theory. But I want to make as clear as possible what my theoretical commitments are, and by extension the theoretical frame into which those elements are intended to fit, so as to illuminate those broader theories (in ways that, I hope, will be of interest to both their defenders and detractors). In specific instances, however, such as my rejection of perfectionism in the shaping of principles of justice, I will argue for the view in question, but in others I will simply designate the overall framework as I work within it.

Most of these broader reflections are contained in part III of the book (containing only chapter 10). The principal elements of the view developed

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here, however, concern the model of autonomy and the socio-historical self to which such autonomy is meant to attach. I consider these ideas in turn, first discussing the self and then the autonomous self. Let us proceed then with an overview of the topics as they unfold in the chapters below.

## II. SELVES

Talk of “selves” and “the self” carries many connotations and ambiguities. Why, for instance, do we refer to “the self” rather than “the person” or “the human being”? What about “the agent,” or “the subject”? Philosophical literature on this matter has ranged over all of these terms and topics. The concentration on the self in this work is not meant to rest on any deep philosophical claim about what is truly central in talking about the human experience such that reference to “persons” or “humanity” or “agents” is somehow wrongheaded. Rather, reference to selves seems to avoid at least some of the connotations that the other terms have but not, I hope, include others of its own that will confuse matters.

The self, in the current discussion, is simply the set of elements of human persons that are relevant to normative political principles and social theory of the sort being considered. Such terminology avoids the view that such a self is essentially a rational chooser (as the term “agent” might imply) or a metaphysical entity with identity conditions over time, as suggested by the word “person” perhaps. And as I mentioned, it is also important to avoid the assumption that *the* self is somehow a specifiable formation at the core of all personalities and lives, faithfulness to which is the prime directive of self-government. Talk of selves is always talk of model conceptions of the wide variety of embodied capacities, commitments, bodily traits, values, and desires that structure the perspective and ground the interests of the subjects of justice.

In this way, I join others in rejecting the view that there is a true, core self inside us all that our freedom and autonomy expresses, a self that can be specified psychologically or philosophically and which functions across contexts in our lives (see, e.g., Meyers 2005). The particular “selves” that operate in various contexts vary for all of us, and therefore the model of “the” self should also vary according to the purposes of specification of such a model. What this means, though, is that this fictitious entity, the one-true-self, is a vanishing point that is always being represented or modeled but which does not, in a sense, exist. There is no single true self guiding my life; elements of the self that are relevant for practical reasons emerge *as* one acts, speaks, and expresses oneself. Therefore it is implausible to postulate



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a static set of values, interests, capacities, and the like that make up the settled self prior to such actions. I will attempt to sort out these paradoxical-sounding claims – in particular that models of the self represent an entity that cannot be specified independently of that representation.

This may suggest an affinity with the post-modern rejection of any talk of stable selves or settled meanings in discourse about politics or humanity. In a variety of ways, so-called post-modern or post-structuralist thinkers have taken skepticism about foundations generally – of knowledge, morality, politics, and meaning – to extend to conceptions of identity and the self. Not only is there no stable true “self” at the center of our being, they suggest, but all thinking and language utilizes unstable symbolic systems whose “remainder” (elements of meaningfulness not captured sufficiently by those symbols) are operative surreptitiously in reflections about the world and ourselves.

Such positions will be explored, specifically in chapter 3, and I will make a variety of crucial distinctions between terms and claims operative in this post-modern landscape. The conclusion will be that we can accept (or be agnostic about) much of the challenge raised by these thinkers, in particular, their healthy skepticism that selves are fixed and transparent structures that can be accessed through introspection. I want to maintain that “self”-reflection (I’ll avoid the quotes from now on) should still play a role in a person’s representation of themselves in social discourse, even if this representation goes “all the way down,” as it were, without there being an entity or set of functions or beliefs that exists independently of that representation and that provides its ground. Moreover, we should be able to distinguish *adequate* or *valid* reflection from manipulated or distorted reflection without presupposing a stable object of self-understanding of the sort those critics decry.

Also, on the view to be developed here, selves are not entities that can be fully grasped at a single instant. They are diachronically structured in that their elements exist in and over time. We have pasts and futures, life spans which include childhood and, we hope, old age. Our memories and future aspirations are as much a part of us as our current array of capacities and desires. And, in order to emphasize the elements of our selves that have been most neglected in standard models, I will call the view the socio-historical concept of the self.

I will also discuss a version of this approach that views selves and their lives in *narrative* terms. For quite some time now, reference to narrativity has been prominent in certain corners of psychology, social theory, political philosophy, and theories of persons more generally. I will adopt a version of



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the narrative conception of the self, but as I will argue in detail in chapter 4, narrativity in my sense does not refer to a set structure resembling a story or tale but rather more generally a set of experiences, actions, events, and traits that are structured according to standards of coherence provided by the subject/person herself, mediated by socially operative meanings. The historical self is narratively structured only in this broad sense of being diachronically *comprehensible*. But I will argue that rather than seeing that there is a core of such narratives – the self as author – we should look at the ways in which we are always reinterpreting the events, character traits, relations, and memories that make up our lives. In this way we are less *authors* of this narrative than, as it were, its *literary critics*!

The self modeled here is also social, in a deep sense. As most theorists these days accept, the self is socially constituted by virtue of the language we must use to understand and express ourselves, the values and commitments we structure our lives by, our emotions and memories, our bodies, and much else, so much else in fact that it will take a full chapter to sort it out. Chapter 2 includes a discussion of the many ways in which selves can be thought to be socially constituted. I will reject some proposals in this vein, but my major aim is not to settle on a specific social conception but rather to argue that even if we accept the social thesis, the possibility of *individual* self-reflection and self-evaluation central to notions of autonomy (of the sort I develop here) remains a live option, psychologically, metaphysically, and most importantly, politically.

In this way, I attempt to maintain a robust ecumenicalism about conceptions of the self, a stance in keeping with the pluralism in politics that I go on to embrace. However, seeing the self as diachronic, indeed as historical in the sense I suggest, requires that we take a keen look at the capacity we (most of us) have to grasp ourselves over time, and in particular to understand our past. For that reason, I consider the nature and importance of *memory* in understanding the self (chapter 5). Specifically for the purposes of theorizing about agency and active selves in society – the purposes that are engaged in the context of normative social theory – I suggest that memory is important because it both structures and presupposes a temporally extended self-concept which, in turn, is needed to reflect on ourselves in the way (I will argue) autonomy requires.

Therefore, part I tries to establish the conclusion that selves can be plausibly understood as socially constituted and irreducibly diachronic. That is to say, they should be understood as narratively structured but only in a broad sense. As such, the model of the self that will play the most useful role in social theory will have a capacity for autobiographical,

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narrative memory, the function of which will be necessary for the development of that very diachronic self-concept. In the subsequent chapters I interrogate the idea that citizens in democratic societies should be (individually and collectively) self-governing, but the self that does the governing, so to speak, is the socio-historical self described in these chapters.

One last portion of this picture is needed, however, and it is set out for emphasis rather than as a profound discovery. That is, selves should be seen as to a large extent formed by factors not under the control of those reflective agents themselves. Most of the central elements of our existence are things that were not (and in many cases could not be) chosen by us. Our parents and childhood conditions, for example, could not have been chosen by us as adults, yet who our parents are, what they did, and the kind of lives we enjoyed as children have a tremendous impact on what our values, options, and perspectives are now. Moreover, we are *embodied* creatures, and our bodies grow old and are subject to sometimes radical changes, such as from disease, injury, violence, pregnancy and childbirth, growth, and so on. Moreover, many of our social relations and the social context in which we define ourselves were not chosen and in some ways cannot be escaped. We can emigrate (though not always, or only at great personal cost), but we cannot choose to have been born somewhere else. Insofar as we want to define ourselves by our geo-political location and its social inheritance – and many of us do, either positively or negatively – we often have only one such legacy to choose from (albeit one with multiform elements).

I therefore want to take stock of the myriad ways in which selves are not self-created. This will help accomplish two things: to provide grounds for the rejection of models of agency and citizenship that assume Herculean abilities to fashion ourselves out of whole cloth; and to force us to focus more carefully on what powers of self-shaping we therefore are left with. This discussion, carried out in chapter 6, is not about metaphysical or even social determinism, for my observations there will be much more meager (and perhaps less interesting). I will talk in terms of degrees, so that the conclusion that we are not *wholly* self-creating can be established in ways that do not disturb the beasts of the free-will or agency-structure debates.<sup>2</sup> The point must be that the role of the self's control of the self (and the attendant social elements of both "selves") will be circumscribed by the ways in which our lives are shaped *for* us and not *by* us.

<sup>2</sup> For recent discussions of these issues that connect to our current concerns see Appiah 2005, 51–61, Giddens 1991, and Habermas 1999.