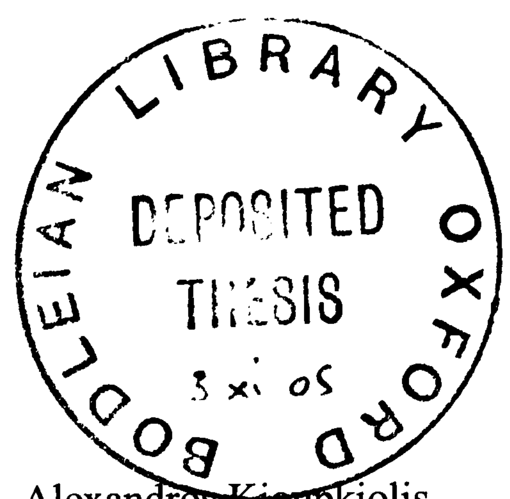

Hilary Term 2005

Alexandros Kioupkiolis,
Department of Politics and International Relations
Oxford University
Somerville College

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of D.Phil. in Politics

Title: **'Freedom and subjectivity in Marx, liberalism and the work of Cornelius Castoriadis'**

ABSTRACT

This D.Phil. dissertation looks into different conceptions of freedom in contemporary and earlier modern philosophy. It concentrates on the accounts of K. Marx, I. Kant, J. S. Mill, I. Berlin and C. Castoriadis, and focuses on their portrait of the agent of freedom. From this standpoint, the thesis singles out three strands of thought: an essentialist paradigm of freedom, traditional liberal alternatives, and a contemporary anti-essentialist school. The main objective is to elaborate and vindicate the anti-essentialist approach as exemplified by the work of C. Castoriadis. The central argument is that contemporary anti-essentialist thought has outlined a compelling idea of freedom, which overcomes the defects of earlier conceptions.

The essentialist paradigm, as represented by K. Marx and I. Kant, imputes specific universal features to the subject of freedom, which fix permanently the chief object, the basic norms or the fundamental conditions of freedom. Individuals are bound thus to definite forms of life, to the effect that choice and autonomy are significantly restricted. Negative liberty and J. S. Mill's notion are less attached to generic models of life, but they fail to provide an adequate corrective to essentialist freedom. Negative liberty does not grapple with the manifold constraints on freedom that operate from within the self, while J. S. Mill's ideal ties the self to the realisation of specific talents and inclinations. The anti-essentialist view challenges the commitment to an abiding essence of the self and brings out the power of individuals to create

themselves and their world in new ways. Freedom is recast as a critical, creative and open-ended process of self-formation through choices which draw on an indefinite range of different possibilities. The thesis examines this construal of freedom in the work of C. Castoriadis, and goes on to explore the anti-essentialist paradigm more widely.

With respect to its method, the dissertation has two key features: it proceeds through a closed reading of specific authors and it delves into epistemological and ontological questions (theories of society and the self) that bear profoundly on the conceptualisation of freedom.

Approximate number of words: 92 750 (Bibliography is not included).

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my parents, the Voudouris Foundation in Athens, and the Department of Politics, Oxford University, for their financial support; to Dr. Lois McNay and Dr Stuart White for their supervisory work; to Ms Abigael Baldoumas for patiently proofreading so many drafts of the thesis and for taking such a good care of their author all these years. The thesis is dedicated to her, to Cornelius Castoriadis, and to six old friends of my family, Kuriakos & Mina Manopoulou, Aggelikh &Yannis Mihalopoulos, Kwstas Mavromatis & Aspasia Papathanasiou, who stood heroically for freedom and justice in difficult times, and had a formative impact on my relationship to politics.

Table of contents

Introduction..pp.1-13.

Chapter 1. 'The conception of freedom in Marx's work'.........................pp.14-52.

Chapter 2. 'Kant, freedom and essentialism'......................................pp.53-84.

Chapter 3. 'An epistemological and normative critique of the essentialist paradigm'..pp.85-119.

Chapter 4. 'The liberal alternative and its discontents: negative liberty, Berlin and Mill'..pp.120-158.

Chapter 5. 'Castoriadis's ontology of the subject'..............................pp.159-191.

Chapter 6. 'Castoriadis and the institution of society'.........................pp.192-225.

Chapter 7. 'Freedom, reflection and creativity in a contingent human world' ....pp.226-274.

Chapter 8. 'A new ethos of freedom'..pp.275-304.

Afterword..pp.305-310.

Bibliography...pp.311-331.

Introduction

a. the background

In recent decades, the idea of a universal human essence has received an intense criticism.[1] Hermeneutical philosophy, anthropology, poststructuralism and multiculturalism are few of the currents which contested with new vigour the notion of a fixed structure of thought and action that defines, as a reality or an ideal, all human beings. Their attacks have prompted a rethinking of questions of truth, justice and subjectivity, and have mobilised a realignment of central political categories, such as democracy and citizenship.

Needless to say, these intellectual developments are not celebrated across the board. They have come under heavy fire on the charges that they lapse into a self-defeating relativism and threaten treasured Enlightenment ideals.[2] Among others, the core value of freedom is apparently jeopardised in a variety of ways. Presumably, its worth cannot be securely established, if values are cultural oddities and lack objective foundations. Emancipation cannot be advanced on the scale of humanity, as socialism and liberalism aspired to do, if it is not possible to define certain universal conditions of freedom. Moreover, anti-essentialists have taken issue with a picture of the human subject, which endows individuals with universal reason and considers them sovereign and independent of society in their constitution. Rather, the rules of reason are conventional and local currencies. Subjectivity is suffused with social contents and is prey to the unconscious and the irrational. Such convictions can throw into doubt the very idea of individual freedom.

Whatever grain of truth these worries may contain, the questioning of essentialism

[1] For the contemporary critique of essentialism, see, among many others, Rorty (1980), Rorty (1989), Laclau & Mouffe (1985), Mouffe (1993), Habermas (1990c), Foucault (1980), Foucault (1982), Foucault (1985), Foucault (1997c), Lukes (2003), Tully (1999).
[2] See e.g. Habermas (1990c), Norris (1997), Barry (2001), Lukes (2003).

carries a powerful emancipatory potential, which is frequently obscured by critics and advocates alike. Anti-essentialist thought spots restrictive qualities in modern constructions of freedom and projects a promising alternative. This is the thrust of the case I want to make and this is what warrants, at least on the level of programmatic intentions, the production of yet another study on a profusely theorised topic.

There is, actually, a burgeoning literature on freedom with a similar focus and frame of analysis.[3] But still missing is a rigorous statement of what is restraining about received notions that inscribe a fixed substance in the agent of freedom; why traditional alternatives do not make good these defects; and how anti-essentialist freedom overcomes the perceived blockages of modern thought. Moreover, present work in this field slips into an unwarranted elision of the planes of epistemology, ontology and ethics in the interrogation of universalist views. And while various inquiries challenge modern thought on the level of its underlying certainties, they may not be equally reflective about their own presuppositions. Their epistemic, normative and ontological affirmations are not adequately thematised and vindicated. Finally, there is a dearth of engagement with analytic thought on freedom. Contemporary analytic philosophy has introduced a more socio-historical notion of the self in its rendering of freedom and has crafted accounts which resonate with poststructuralist and kindred revisitings of freedom in continental theory. Little research has been carried out to think through the differences and affinities between the various responses to an overlapping set of themes.

This array of concerns forms the substratum of my dissertation and explains the way it's organised and its foci of discussion. I begin with an in-depth interrogation of discourses cast around the image of a fixed human self. Then, I put forward a revised

[3] See e.g. Tully (1999), Flathman (2003), Honig and Mapel (2002), Hirschmann (2003), Laclau (1996), Kateb (1992), Unger (2001).

framing of freedom, which works from different ontological premises. The initial scrutiny of essentialist views serves to draw out their limitations and to urge the need for a different approach. Comparison and contrast illuminates the virtues of thought that operates another regime of subjectivity, in which the self is a contingent outgrowth of socialisation and is capable of change. In my critique of essentialism, I seek to avoid the conflation of the epistemological and ontological perspectives. Also, I delve into the alternative assumptions that inform my favoured idea of freedom and I defend my epistemic principles. Finally, the thesis reviews the ties and disjunctions between the proposed reconstruction of freedom and congruent contemporary schemes in English-speaking theory.

A distinctive element of this dissertation is the recourse to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. This provides the mainspring for the activity of critique undertaken here and inspires the reconfiguration of freedom that is staged in response. Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) was a multi-faceted personality of post-war France. Of Greek extraction and education, he spent most of his adult life in France, where he engaged in left-wing activism and social critique, he produced philosophical writings, worked as a professional economist for OECD and practiced psychoanalysis.[4] Together with Claude Lefort, he was among the founders of the leftist group *Socialism ou Barbarie*, which published the homonymous journal (1949-1965) and provided inspiration to the May 1968 revolt in France. The group was broadly Marxist in their theoretical leanings. They advocated workers' self-management and were fierce critics of Soviet socialism, official communist parties and social democracy. Castoriadis and Lefort were among the first voices on the left that employed the language of totalitarianism to denounce the then really-existing communism.

[4] These biographical notes are based on D.A.Curtis's 'Forward' in Curtis (1997).

Castoriadis blazed his own path after the dissolution of the group in the late sixties. His magnum opus *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, which came out in 1975, sets forth the major statement of his critique of Marx, his social philosophy and psychoanalytic understanding of the self. Castoriadis's theory falls within the purview of praxis philosophy. He accords a primary place to human action and creativity in the construction of reality. The human world is eminently historical, contingent, contrived, subject to ongoing change. His work from then on chimes with motifs of French poststructuralism, deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis.[5] But Castoriadis negotiated his own way to the 'critique of Western metaphysics' and had no serious exchanges with cognate trends in continental thought.[6]

There are various reasons for the turn to Castoriadis in the present setting. My overriding goal is to trace out and reflect on a non-essentialist movement of thought on freedom, which has various proponents.[7] A thorough survey of their individual schemes could not be pursued in tandem with other concerns and topics on the research agenda of the thesis. The focus on Castoriadis makes sense on the grounds that his theory has not been adequately researched in terms of its conception of freedom. Moreover, his gloss on freedom has received much less attention than Foucault's ethics or work in English, which could also serve to tackle the tasks ahead. Crucially, Castoriadis's thought is uniquely suited to my problematic. A main thread of his theorising is the polemic against the presence of universal norms that would permanently shape human society and individuality.[8] But as distinct from fellow travellers in the critique of the universal rational subject,[9] he does not develop this questioning into a negation of individual autonomy. And he fleshes out his own

[5] See e.g. Castoriadis (1997a).
[6] Whitebook (1998).
[7] See chapter 8 for an overview.
[8] See e.g. Castoriadis (1989).

ontological and normative commitments, against which he elaborates his vision of freedom. This serves my intention to engage reflectively with the fundamental assumptions that subtend the new articulation of freedom. Last, his formation of the concept displays unique strengths in comparison to germane views, as I will argue in the relevant chapters.

b. outline of the argument

I identify and critically appraise three paradigms of freedom in modern thought: an essentialist strand, negative liberty and anti-essentialist freedom. This is the starting point and the organising axis of the thesis. The distinctions are by no means exhaustive. But they find application to hegemonic discourses and cut across established categorisations, such as the dichotomy between Marxism and liberalism. This triplet captures quite fundamental ideas and affords important insights into the modern perception of freedom.

For present purposes, I take essentialism to be the supposition that there is an unaltering core of values, modes of reasoning and types of conduct that determine human nature actually or ideally and that can be laid down in an objective fashion. This definition is obviously ambiguous. Any portrait of the human subject could be made to fit into its mould, even the premise that human nature is subject to variation as a constant feature of its constitution. The term essentialism as deployed here refers to a type of ontology, *which tends to limit the possibility of change in the forms of human life*. Essentialism imputes to human individuals certain perennial features, which tie human thought and action to definite norms that are not, or should not be, subject to transformation in history. That the axioms of Euclidean geometry are

---

[9] The work of early Foucault, Lacan and Althusser is paradigmatic in this respect.

eternal conditions of human cognition, that the accumulation of wealth is an eternal human drive, and 'free market' capitalism, the natural form of a developed economy, these are examples of essentialism. All anthropologies assign abiding traits to the human self. But to judge whether an anthropology is essentialist in the sense intended here, one should examine the degree to which it attributes fixed patterns to human life, which foreclose the possibility of doing things differently in particular domains of thought and practice.

The first half of the thesis treats particular cases of essentialist freedom and works out in detail the fixed identity that they ascribe to the subject of freedom. This establishes the existence of an essentialist outlook and lays out its defining traits. I explicate how the spectre of an abiding human essence bears on the framing of freedom in specific theories. Human essence fills out the identity of the 'self' in freedom as self-realisation, self-legislation and self-determination. Alternatively, the sense of a durable common nature, with definite capabilities and needs, may fix the limits of freedom by pre-empting the limits of the humanly possible. Human nature can also set the social scope of freedom by laying down the fundamental interests that society should minimally allow or enable individuals to pursue. In short, the idol of a determinate human self prescribes the forms, the objects, the conditions and the frontiers of freedom.

This paradigm is taken to task from a variety of perspectives, which coalesce to throw into question the hypothesis of a definite human self and the corollary figurations of freedom. Among other moves, the thesis doubts whether it is possible to acquire objective knowledge of human nature and to agree on its *definiens*. It is wide open to disbelief that one can formulate incontestable premises for a theory of freedom built upon the demands of a perennial human nature. In a separate turn, the

very existence of such a nature is disputed from the site of alternative affirmations which foreground the historical variability of human conduct, values and reason.

But the centrepiece of my critique is the following. By settling in perpetuity the laws of free thought and action, the doctrines in question contract the space of freedom. They narrow down free choice and activity, as they shackle free individuality to specific pursuits and patterns of conduct to the preclusion of alternate possibilities. They foreclose the expansion of social liberties and the provision of better conditions for freedom. Evoking nature, they negate the freedom of persons and collective assemblies to make their own laws and to revise their present principles.

The second step of the argument turns to mainstream alternatives to essentialist freedom and finds them wanting. Negative liberty and J.S.Mill's views are taken up in the light of the same concern with the constitution of the subject, a sense of the self as socially constructed and the suspicion of essentialist elements. Both negative libertarians and J.S.Mill avoid organising freedom around a substantive universal ideal of the self. But negative liberty does not attend to the inner constitution of the agent and the subjective conditions of freedom. It fails to liberate individuals from internal limitations and the actual closures of life. Millian freedom is clear of such defects but clings to the phantasm of an individual essence of sorts. Freedom is designed to foster a particular composition of personal talents and inclinations.

At its final stage, the thesis builds up the case that a contemporary line of thought, which I unravel by looking at Castoriadis, offers a corrective to both essentialist freedom and its mainstream contenders in English-speaking philosophy. This third way to freedom does not only renounce the belief in a determinate human nature. It constitutes free individuality as the active questioning of this idea. The unlimited interrogation of 'eternal truths' and the wrestling with actual fixtures of being, such as

rigidified impulses and autonomised institutions, are pivotal to freedom. Critical reflection works in alliance with imagination to enable a flexible self-creation through undetermined choices, which can break free from specific ideals and conventions. Free individuality shifts into an incomplete, creative and open process. Freedom bursts beyond the limitations of essentialist closure and negative libertarian unconcern with internal fetters.

In a nutshell, the dissertation sets out to scrutinise modern outlooks on freedom with an emphasis on their ontology of the self, and upholds a contemporary approach as offering the most cogent and empowering ideal.

c. notes on structure, method and frame of analysis

The critique of essentialism proposed a certain mode of inquiry. Thought delves into deeper understandings about the human subject and its world. Doubt is cast on notions which overlook the cultural variation of all things human. Claims to truth come under suspicion with respect to their objective grounds and their positive effects. The thesis deploys this grid of analysis to define and peruse three main ways of conceptualising freedom. The concern with deep-laid ontological and epistemological assumptions is a distinctive mark of the discussion of freedom undertaken in the present thesis.

To avoid tendentious generalisations and show tangibly the presence of an essentialist matrix, I resolved to deal in detail with salient examples. *The first two chapters* are devoted to this purpose. The arguments I mount about the distinctive features and limitations of essentialist freedom are situated in a specific context, which illustrates and substantiates them. From there on I move to wider remarks. The choice of Marx and Kant is rather obvious from this viewpoint. What must be clarified is the way I broached their work.

With both, I go to some lengths to sketch out their notion of the self and the way it imbues their coding of freedom. This close reading is attuned to the programmatic themes of the dissertation. I pin down the settled identity that certain theories write into the human self and I bring out the specific ways in which this identity diminishes the ambit of freedom. My extended analysis is made necessary also by the intricacies of Marx and Kant's thought, as well as by the need to avoid a reductive rendition of their respective theories. The risk of reduction is endemic to readings like mine, which employ a particular analytic frame and entertain a critical posture towards their objects. Last, I wanted to underpin more firmly my interpretation of Marx and Kant, which is often at odds with many other commentaries, by providing ample grounding for it in the original texts.

The third chapter ventures an epistemic and normative critique of essentialist freedom. The epistemological bit justifies my scepticism about the possibility of an objective account of human essence. The different variants of essentialist freedom are intensely contestable insofar as there is no strong warrant for their specific descriptions of human essence. To indicate the availability of many good reasons in support of sceptical reason, I set out at length my misgivings about universal reason and its ability to yield objective justification. (This does not imply, of course, that I have given a full treatment to the immense epistemological questions that are touched upon.)

The stock Habermasian reproach to such sceptical arguments is that they founder on the error of performative self-contradiction.[10] I make much of the plurality of standards and ways of reasoning, but I presuppose the general validity of my arguments and I assume that indefinite others will be able to see their logical force. In

[10] See e.g. Habermas (1990a), pp.76-109.

other words, I take for granted a universal ground of reason at the same time as I dispute the existence of universal reason.

Different moves are available to skirt around the problem of self-contradiction. Most simply, I am ready to allow so much scope for universal reason (and no more): an indefinite number of others is able to make sense of my statements about the limits of universal truth. Second, the Habermasian censure of scepticism relies on the universal validity of its baton stick, the criterion of consistency, which is held to be a necessary rule of rational thought. Contradictions abound in all discourse. They could be sanctioned as locally legitimate, useful and an enabling condition of creative thought. The Habermasian critique stands guilty of a *petitio principii*: it upholds universal reason against sceptics by assuming the existence of universal reason as represented by the standard of full-scale consistency.

Others may also counter that there is a ring of self-contradiction to my normative questioning of essentialist freedom, placed, as it is, right after my expression of qualms about the objectivity of moral standards. But my criticisms are contextualised consistently with the renouncement of strong objectivism. The values they call upon are not held as universal moral truths. The normative challenge is intended to strike a chord with those who happen to be disposed against repression, authoritarianism and unnecessary limitations on thought and action.

Chapter 4 carries further the wider argument by probing whether negative liberty and J.S. Mill's ideas provide liberating antidotes to the schemes that were found defective. *Chapters 5 through 8* set out the alternative conception that addresses the flaws of all the interpretations of freedom I engaged in previous chapters. The argument reaches its culmination in *Chapter 7*, which sums up the case for freedom as agonistic and imaginative self-creation. Here I want to explain the rationale behind

chapters 5,6 and 8, which is not immediately obvious.

Chapters 5 and 6 take up the notions of the self, society and the world that inform the alternative ideal of freedom. These two chapters vindicate the ontological principles of my argument for the proposed reconfiguration of freedom. The very fact of devoting this space to ontology presses a certain point. Ideas about the human self and its world are key ingredients of any substantive conception of freedom. Thus, their searching discussion is central to a reflective reconstruction of freedom, not a mere preamble to it. Fundamental beliefs about the constitution of the person and external reality define our understanding of the capacities, possibilities, drives and limitations of the subject of freedom. And this understanding settles the meaning of freedom. Convictions about significant goods and the likely impediments to their achievement identify the constraints that matter. Presumptions about the activities that are possible or important for human agents lead to the main conditions of freedom and its chief loci of expression. A critical theory should be able to give an accounting for its ontological presumptions and should be reflective about these presumptions.

The preoccupation with subjectivity and ontology is, moreover, on the particular research agenda of the present inquiry and follows, also, from the specific demands of the discussion up until chapter 5. Having discarded a certain sense of the human self, it is necessary to spell out the notion that I put in its place to move on to positive pronouncements about freedom. Having found fault with other pictures of human nature, I should be able to explain why my own script of the self and the human world are any more tenable.

Finally, a theory of freedom inspired from Castoriadis needs more urgently to elucidate and justify its assumptions about the self and the world. I note, among others, the belief in the Freudian unconscious, as well as the suggestion that society

and the self carry a capacity for radically new creation. My argument would be wanting without some amplification of these controversial and unclear tenets, which are pivotal to Castoriadis's recoding of freedom.

Chapter 8, for its part, surveys sketchily other templates, which, like Castoriadis, reconfigure freedom after the critique of essentialism and the autonomous subject. This overview gives substance to one of my central claims, the existence of a broader non-essentialist paradigm, and shows how Castoriadis offers an exemplary expression of it. This demonstration will justify my choice of his work for addressing the larger family of ideas, which is my chief concern. Moreover, by probing an ampler range of representative theories, chapter 8 sheds more light on the new current in its different variants. Finally, from its wider perspective, the chapter grapples with a standard ethical objection to the newly emerging grammar of freedom (the criticism that it is a-moral or plainly egotistical).

It is apposite to end on a note about my particular standpoint. The thesis impugns different de-contestations of the signifier 'freedom' and argues for a specific articulation of its meaning. Do I presuppose that the core of the concept is made up of certain necessary ideas, which can furnish a measuring rod for evaluating different constructions? Are there any objective, universal standards that determine the semantic substance of freedom? If yes, this presumption contradicts head-on the sceptical undertones of my argument and its assault on fixed essences. If no, my critique of different conceptions has no neutral place to stand and I cannot argue that anti-essentialist freedom improves over other conceptual possibilities. If the discrepancies among the three paradigms derive from radically different ideas of freedom, these models are incommensurable alternatives, which are neither better nor worse than one another.

The argument does operate from particular intuitions about freedom, which associate the concept with independence of spirit, self-determination, undetermined choice from an open set of options and unhindered action on preferences. These pre-understandings are anchored in the historical context of modern society. They possess no absolute standing and they lend themselves to a variety of specifications. The validity of these principles may well transcend their historical anchorage, but my reasoning is neither committed to nor dependent on this assumption. The arguments are addressed to those who endorse my conceptual premises.

Moreover, the various formations of freedom that are examined in the following study share enough common ground, which allows me to bring them into dialogue and interrogate them comparatively. My critique is largely an immanent one, starting out from shared insights about freedom that are dispersed across the different models. The alternative paradigm of freedom, which I set out to present and vindicate, is a critical modulation of inherited ideas rather a totally new departure.

On the other hand, certain facets of my polemic against rival interpretations of freedom carry an independent force, that is, they do not hinge on whether the theories I query display enough common elements with the idea of freedom that I endorse. For instance, my epistemic and ontological objections to essentialist freedom take aim at its founding axioms. Alternatives can be more plausible simply on the grounds they are clear of the shaky presumptions that underlie the essentialist paradigm.

CHAPTER 1

The conception of freedom in Marx's work

1. Introduction

The thesis interrogates modern configurations of freedom from the standpoint of their beliefs about the agent of freedom and her world. On this criterion, it is possible to single out three matrices of thought in the modern era. The 'essentialist paradigm' is central among them. Essentialism encodes definite, permanent and universal attributes into the human subject of freedom. The first chapter kicks off the discussion by engaging with Karl Marx, a major figure of this approach. Through his work I will begin unravelling the meaning and the setbacks of essentialist freedom. The thesis deploys various strategies to discredit this outlook in favour of a different conception of freedom that took shape in late modern theory. The method mostly used here is an immanent critique that pits Marx against Marx.

I take issue with Marx from a specific viewpoint. But I have no desire to reduce his contribution to formulaic ideas. Marx offered inspiration and tools of social critique to many emancipatory movements.[1] He afforded acute insights into the constraints that capitalism imposes on freedom. And he helped to set firmly on the political agenda the extension of freedom and democracy to wider areas of the social. Moreover, he injected a stronger sense of historicity and pragmatism into the conceptualisation of freedom, bringing abstract reflection in closer touch with historical reality and material conditions. Last, he gave an inkling of a radical form of freedom, whereby individuals create themselves and their world beyond predefined bounds.

---

[1] See e.g. Sassoon (1997), pp. xx-xxiii, 758, 761-767.

The objective of this chapter is limited. It sketches out the cutting edges of Marxian freedom and shows how they are compromised by other elements of his projections about emancipated humanity. To a considerable extent, Marx collapses freedom into fixed forms. A specific notion of the good, a set type of social relations and determinate modes of thought are embedded into the structure of the free life itself as its basic content or its necessary foundations. These fixtures are in tension with other drives and nuances of Marxian freedom, which foreground a self-forming subject able to transcend pre-established orders. I will distil this second vision from Marx and other modern thinkers in order to argue, ultimately, that contemporary thought redeems their own aspirations to open self-creation by ridding freedom of essentialist elements, which linger on in their accounts.

The first step in the argument establishes that Marx holds on to the imagery of a determinate and universal self. Then, I argue that Marxian freedom is the realisation of this self and I draw out the ensuing effects of closure and repression. The opening sections go to great lengths to demonstrate and explicate Marx's essentialism. His ontology has been subject to much controversy and my exegesis clashes with salient interpretations. Many would dispute that Marx's thought is essentialist in the sense I conferred on this term. Althusser is famous for insisting that, in his mature phase of 'scientific' materialism, subsequent to his humanist work, Marx broke with the belief in an a-temporal human essence.[2] But even some of those who don't take Althusser's point have claimed that Marx strips human essence of any definite, static attributes and resignifies it as a perpetual process of self-transformative 'praxis.'[3] I challenge both positions by tapping into *German Ideology* and later writings, all of which are

[2] Althusser (1977), pp.33, 227.

[3] Eagleton (1997), pp. 17-33, Meszaros (1975), p.43, Elster (1985), pp.83-85, Kolakowski (1978), pp.412-414, Cohen (1988), pp.136-138, 151, 170, 200.

posterior to Marx's 'humanist' period. This immunises my argument against Althusserian objections.

The portrait of Marxian freedom figured out here both overlaps with and diverges from two prevailing strands of interpretation. One cashes out Marx's freedom as the enactment of a settled conception of the self,[4] while the other accentuates the moments of creative praxis and self-transformation.[5] My rendition is consonant with both, as I take in all these different dimensions. But I also deviate from either reading in that I affirm *simultaneously* their discordant understandings and I inscribe, thereby, contending meanings in Marx's schema. This gesture yields a less reductive and more ambiguous picture, which brings out how Marx's residual attachment to fixed forms cuts against his vision of freedom as creative self-making. The moment of fixity in Marx's frame should be tracked down and rooted out for its repressive consequences.

2. Marx on subjectivity

From the *German Ideology* onwards, the changing reality of human history is cast as the conscious point of departure for Marx's thought. From this historical reality he separates out general premises about human individuals.[6] He captures broader developmental trends in human history and delineates its successive epochs of progress. Finally, his analysis of capitalism underpins Marx's forecasts about the imminent post-capitalist future and the pattern of human life that it will propel into being. The crux of his essentialism should be located in the substantive mode of human flourishing that he weds to communism rather than, as many have suggested,[7]

---

[4] Brenkert, (1983), p.86, Lukes (1987), p.78, Meszaros (1975), p.162.
[5] Elster (1985), pp.83-92, Eagleton (1997), pp.17-27, Markus (1978), p.58, Cohen (1988), pp.151, 170, 200.
[6] Marx (1973), p.101, Marx & Engels (1976), p.31.
[7] Markus (1978), p.36, Geras (1983), pp.61-86, Elster (1985), pp.61-92, Ollman (1976), pp.74-75

in the abstract characteristics that he ascribes to human individuals across time or in the general laws of social structure and change until the advent of communism. The trans-historical categories and laws, along with his dissection of capitalist society and its impending downfall, are stepping stones in a certain teleology of human existence that culminates in a determined mould of life, which is projected onto the future. Marx's notion of human nature echoes the Aristotelian idea that human individuals evolve along a specific path, which will usher in a particular, fuller form of being.

I mount this argument in four steps. First, I outline the general attributes of human agents in Marx. Second, I summarise his theory that generic humanity develops in a particular direction. Then, I bring in Marx's belief that this direction, communism, will inaugurate an enhanced form of life, in which the general features of human beings will take on a definite shape. Finally, I flesh out this way of being and I show why it is essentialist on my definition of the term.

The second half of the chapter works out, then, the relationship between the 'optimal' scheme of human life and Marx's view of freedom.

a. the acting, embodied subject

Individuals are natural beings with biological needs.[8] For Marx, the most basic trait of human beings is their activity of labour and need satisfaction. In this context he identifies the characteristic which sets humans apart from animals: the capacity to produce tools and objects of need satisfaction; the ability to transform nature.[9] Human labour consists in acts of objectification by which the mental and physical forces of the working subject modify the material upon which they operate while carrying out a conscious project. Labour is the totality of a purposive activity whereby human

[8] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.31-42.
[9] Marx & Engels (1976), p. 31, Marx (1990), p.286.

faculties are exercised in the production of objects.[10] Human agents bear a capacity for creation, which is not actualised only in the realm of material production, but extends to 'the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness', the production of social relations, of art and science.[11] Material production and creative activity at large, along with the related abilities, needs and products, mark the being of the human subject.[12]

The particular conditions of labour shape the capacities, activities, needs and products of human agents.[13] Thus, the specific form assumed by the active and productive self is not the creation of an autarkic individual. It is, rather, the effect of the interaction of individuals with the objective conditions at hand.[14] However, material production can transfigure existing conditions and alter the identity of the self. 'Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of reproduction...but the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.'[15] Human praxis is a dynamic and creative exchange with the external world, which refashions this world in parallel with the human self.[16]

b. the social subject

'The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.'[17] The various social networks in which individual subjects are positioned assign to them particular social characteristics.[18] Material production and a wide spectrum of other activities unfold within a web of

---

[10] Marx (1973), pp.300, 706, Marx & Engels (1976), p. 42.
[11] Marx & Engels (1976), p.36.
[12] Marx & Engels (1976), p.31.
[13] Marx & Engels (1976), p.87, Markus (1978), pp.8-9.
[14] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.78, 424.
[15] Marx (1973), p.494, Elster (1985), pp.71-74, Markus (1978), p.9.
[16] Marx, (1990), p.283.
[17] Marx (1976a), p.31, p.4, Marx (1973), pp.83-84.
[18] Marx, (1973), p.265.

social relationships, rules and circumstances, which determine the particular forms of individual activity. Work is conditioned by the particular material means that social relations (rights, roles and duties) and circumstances allot to the labouring subject.[19] Social identity proper consists in the role that individuals occupy in a net of social relations and in their modes of association and interaction with others.[20]

The human subject is defined by its activity (needs, abilities, instruments, production) and its social relations. The specific features of the self are a product of society and history: individual activities hinge on the material conditions that have been collectively engendered by past and present generations, while social identity is relative to the particular social relations of different societies.[21]

c. the conscious subject

Consciousness is another distinctive trait of human individuals. Awareness is primarily object-oriented; it is consciousness of something.[22] First and foremost, it is consciousness of human life and action. 'Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life process.'[23] Therefore, consciousness consists primarily in the mental recognition of activity and social relations. Categories of thought, ideas and moral principles are conceptual reflections of actual practices and relations.[24] This explains Marx's tenet that being, that is, social existence and practice, determines consciousness. Marx registered also the purposive character of the will and the projective abilities of the mind. The agent forms mental

[19] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.32-36, 54.
[20] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.32, 82.
[21] Marx (1978), p.113.
[22] Marx & Engels (1976), p.44, Markus (1978), p.26.
[23] Marx & Engels (1976), p.36.
[24] Marx & Engels (1998), p.59, Markus (1978), p.31.

plans about its intended action and works according to these plans, objectifying her conscious purposes in her labour.[25]

Activity, production, the development of needs and faculties, sociality and consciousness are the core characteristics of the human subject in general. But in this abstract cast, the generic features of humanity do not compose any determinate universal pattern of life, as they are realised in the most varied ways depending on the different material circumstances and social relations of different societies. This may nourish the impression that Marx embraces a non-essentialist idea of the self as a variable social construction. I will rebut this thesis by unpacking Marx's assumption that humanity develops along determinate stages and towards a particular end-state, which will assign a specific content to these a-historical abstractions.

3.Marx on historical development

The bedrock of Marx's schema of history is a certain long-term tendency of the productive forces of society (means of production, abilities, knowledge etc.). The productive capacity and the wealth passed on from previous generations tend to expand cumulatively.[26] This contention lurks in the background of the famous 1859 Preface.[27]

In his picture of history, epitomised in the Preface, Marx holds that the forces of production decide the form of relations of production and the entire configuration of society. Relations of production are social relations of control that persons exert over productive forces and/or other persons.[28] Marx takes it that one and only set of production relations befits the use and growth of productive forces at a given phase of

[25] Marx (1990), p.284.
[26] Cohen (1978), pp.22-23, 134-139, 152.
[27] Marx (1991b), pp.173-174.
[28] Marx & Engels (1976), p.32.

their development.[29] Productive forces and relations of production make up the economic structure, which is the foundation of other social structures -including law, politics, social ideologies and moral norms- that constitute the superstructure. The superstructure is determined by the economy insofar as social institutions and relations depend on the existing mode of production, they must compatible with the economic structure and must serve its needs. Legal and political institutions are organised in a way that facilitates the smooth functioning of the economy and the management of social affairs in the interests of the ruling class.[30] Besides, the economy is the keystone of social power, which turns fundamentally on who controls the means of life. The ruling class is the class in ownership of these means.[31] By regulating the distribution of power, the economy has a formative impact on social and political relations across other social spheres.[32] Finally, ideas and principles are shaped by the economic structure inasmuch as they reflect life-processes and social relations, which are either directly related to economic activity or are determined by its form.

When, in the course of their expansion, productive forces have changed to an extent that actual production relations fetter their optimal use and development, economic relations and, thereafter, the corresponding superstructure are transformed to suit the new type of productive forces. Transformational periods see an intensification of social conflict. Social groups, institutions and ideas tied to the old social formation resist the emergent elements of the new social edifice. The clash ends with the consolidation of the new social order.[33] The development of productive forces provides thus the motor of social transformation. Marx assumes that, in the long run,

[29] Marx (1991c), p.630, Cohen (1978), pp.160-161.
[30] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.47, 59, 90, Marx & Engels (1998), p.61, Marx (1991d), Marx (1991e).
[31] Marx & Engels (1976), pp. 46, 52.
[32] Marx & Engels (1976), p.52.
[33] Marx (1991b), pp.173-174.

productive forces display a permanent dynamic of growth, and, second, that this dynamic subsumes the broader social structure to its imperatives and prevails over all countervailing forces in history.[34]

Cashing in on this conception of society and change, Marx identifies different epochs of human history. He singles out four main modes of production (Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois), which follow one another in an ascending order of technological development, and represent progressive stages 'of the self-activity of individuals.'[35] Taken together, the claims that the growth of productive forces is a permanent trend and that each stage of development is matched necessarily by a single social formation imply that humanity's transformations proceed along a largely preordained trajectory.[36] Marx's analysis of capitalism rounds off this view by making the case that capitalism will be almost certainly succeeded by a particular model of society.

The dichotomy wage labourers/capitalists yields the core structure of social relations in capitalism.[37] Dispossessed of means of production, the working population are compelled to hire out their labour power to the owners of capital, who employ wage labour to produce commodities for the market. The moving force of capitalist society is profit making.[38] Capital's relentless drive for technological advances and increased productivity springs from competition and the need to reduce production costs in order to maintain and raise profit. Higher productivity cheapens individual commodities by increasing the industrial output within the same time span of work

[34] This reading sees Marx as a technological determinist. For a different interpretation, see Harvey (1999), pp.98-99.
[35] Marx (1990), pp.172-173.
[36] Marx (1990), pp.100-101, Wright, Levine & Sober (1992), pp.12, 51-53, 57-60, 90-91.
[37] Marx (1991a), p.953.
[38] Marx (1990), pp.293, 976.

(and the same cost of wages).[39] Cheaper commodities are more competitive on the market. But, because of their lower price, more goods must be sold to keep profit at the same levels or to increase it further. This requires the constant growth of the market and the expansion of consumption. Enhanced productivity engenders saturated markets for certain commodities and declining rates of profit. To maintain and increase profit, capital brings to life new commodities and new needs, throws up new branches of production and fosters thereby scientific progress and technological development.[40] Hence the revolutionary character of the capitalist mode of production, which produces an increasingly wider range of commodities, pushes for the globalisation of market exchanges and stimulates an unrelenting growth of human abilities and needs.[41]

Notoriously, Marx argued that the capitalist society is unviable in the long run and will have to give way to communism. Profit is the incentive that keeps the capitalist economy going, but is also its curse, because the rate of profit is bound to fall. This thesis is premised on the labour theory of value, which posits that the value of commodities is determined by the labour time that has gone into their making. Profit derives from surplus value, that is, the value that workers generate in excess of the value of their wages and the value of other means of production. Technological development and the growing automation of production press down the rate of profit, which is equal to surplus value divided by the sum of constant capital (capital turned into means of production) and variable capital (capital laid out on labour power). The reason is that high-tech, capital-intensive production increases gradually the magnitude of the constant capital in the total fraction.[42] Another self-blocking feature

[39] Marx (1991f), p.85, Marx (1990), p.534.
[40] Marx (1973), pp.407-409.
[41] Marx (1973), p.410, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.36-41, Marx (1990), p.1037.
[42] Marx, (1991a), pp.317-375.

of capitalism is its tendency to keep wages down to the minimum in order to cut down production costs and raise profit. By so doing, however, capitalism excludes the masses of the people from consumption. As a result, the market cannot absorb the growing plethora of commodities, and capitalists are impeded from realising profit.[43]

As its inner limits confront capitalism with mounting intensity, the opposition of the wage earners to the capitalist system will grow stiffer and popular. Instead of spreading prosperity to the people, new technologies bring with them lay-offs, an inflation of the socially excluded population, absolute and relative impoverishment, heightened pressure and authoritarianism in the workplace.[44] These material circumstances impel the mass of the proletariat to carry out the task of installing a different mode of production and new social relations, which will put an end to the anarchy of competitive markets and the exclusion of direct producers from the world of wealth they generate.[45] The sustenance and expansion of large-scale industry call for the elimination of private property over the means of production, which lie at the root of the damning irrationalities of capitalism (production for profit, impoverishment of workers, lack of conscious co-ordination among different actors to avoid unintended systemic consequences). Collective control over the production process will permit the rational management of economic activity as a whole and will enable a more egalitarian distribution of wealth across the entire population. With the downfall of capitalism, 'the prehistory of human society' is brought to its close, as Marx declares.[46]

The formation of the post-capitalist society obeys the same logic that lay behind the emergence of past societies. Its particular structure will be determined by the stage of

[43] Marx (1991a), p.615, Marx (1989a), pp.133-140, 156-158, 163-164, Harvey (1999), pp.77, 90.
[44] Marx & Engels (1998), pp.46-48, Marx (1991f), pp.85, 88.
[45] Marx (1990), pp.928-929.
[46] Marx (1991b), p.174.

technological progress and will be required for the further use and advancement of the forces of production.[47] Communism is thus the necessary culmination of successive periods of history, which follow a fixed sequence of progress.

The course of history is not necessary in a strictly deterministic sense. Marx's idea is that development tends to continue and that at each stage of its advance it calls for a specific type of social structure. But development can come to a standstill. Marx allows that class struggle may end with 'the common ruin' of the antagonistic classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, rather than with the victory of the proletarians and the transition to communism.[48]

The history of material development is the history of the metamorphoses of the human subject. The different types of society condition the main modes of activity, the social relations and the ideas of individuals. If this understanding is combined (a) with Marx's 'stagist' view of history and (b) with his thesis that communism will initiate the *real history of humanity*, then his narrative appears as a version of Aristotle's teleological essentialism.[49] The essence of beings comes into its own at the end of a determinate progression of growth, which moves towards a definite direction.[50] The form of humanity realised in communism corresponds to that ultimate level in the process of evolution, at which the characteristics of human beings will actualise themselves more fully. Marx's account of historical progress shares another feature of Aristotle's teleology: they both leave open the possibility that development may be blocked by external factors.

---

[47] Marx (1990), p.91.
[48] Marx & Engels (1998), p.35.
[49] Meikle (1985), pp.8-9, 25, 52, 55, 176-177.
[50] Marcovic (1991), pp. 243-246, Meikle (1985), pp.3, 8,9,168, Cohen (1978), p.13.

Marx's earlier 'humanist' writings, where he indulges in abstract speculations about human essence and delineates an ideal of life, already indicate that post-capitalist humanity represents for him the fuller realisation of human nature.[51] But this claim can be sustained without relying on his humanist phase, as it finds textual support in Marx's middle and late periods. Beside the 1859 Preface, which makes the point that human history will start after capitalism, ample testimony is furnished by various scattered remarks that decry the human alienation caused by capitalism. Alienation carries more than one meaning in Marx. In a central sense, it signifies a state of division in which the human being is cut off from its real self and life. Individuals are deprived of conditions essential for self-fulfilment. As a result, they become disfigured and experience duress and distress.[52] Obviously, this notion of alienation appeals intrinsically to an ideal of human well-being, even if the latter is not made explicit. It deserves notice, therefore, that alienation is not present only in the humanist philosophy of the early Marx. Kindred ideas intersperse the text of the *German Ideology,* the *Grundrisse* and *Capital,* among others, in which capitalism and antecedent social formations are indicted for crippling, degrading and stunting the self-realisation of individuals in their work and social relations.[53] These passages reveal that Marx's implicit ideal is the roundly developing individual of communism that co-operates harmoniously with other members of society.

My argument, however, has yet to establish that Marx's ontology foists any fixed forms on the 'accomplished' human subject. The hallmark of essentialism as defined here is not simply that it vests the human being with particular attributes. All anthropologies do as much. What needs to be shown is that human beings in

---

[51] Marx (1997), pp.108, 110, 112-114, 116, 135, 137, 156, 187.
[52] Meszaros (1975), Ollman (1976), Kolakowski (1978), pp.137-139, Wood (1981), pp.3-4, 8, 50.
[53] Marx (1990), pp. 375-376, 380-381, 485, 799, Marx & Engels (1976), pp.87, 432, Marx (1973), pp.157, 162.

communism display a set of substantive features which compose a settled style of being to the exclusion of other possibilities; that human life and the human good are not plural, revisable, in a state of flux, but possess specific and unchanging contours. As noted earlier, many have claimed that, for Marx, the human essence which will be given free scope in communism is not something determinate, but the very capacity of human agents to create new things and to permanently transfigure themselves and their world.[54]

The next sections will build up this case: the creative capacity for change is indeed written into the communist individual and is central to Marx's view. But it is encased within a determined template of life, which precludes alternative ways of being. The communist self is made up of conflicting threads. Human life will be variable, but this variability is up against predefined boundaries.

4.Marx on communism

a. the acting subject

Once production has stripped off the fetters of its capitalist integument, the working class appropriates collectively the existing forces of production and promotes development by adjusting the labour process to the technical requirements of advanced technology. Development will keep generating new branches of production and will keep transforming the technical and scientific basis of the economy. This 'makes the recognition of the variation of labour and hence the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death...the partially developed individual must be replaced by the totally developed individual.... absolutely available for the different kinds of labour.'[55] The removal of

---

[54] See footnote 5.
[55] Marx (1990), p.618; see also Marx & Engels (1976), p.87.

the barriers that capitalism set to further development, and the rational re-organisation of production enable 'the absolute working-out of [man's] creative potentialities...i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick... Where he...[s]trives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming.'[56] Moreover, under communism workers appropriate the fruits of their labour. The majority of the people will be able thus to satisfy a rich variety of needs, which will continue expanding.

As a result, the type of active self, which communism summons into existence, is an all-round, rich individual that cultivates a manifold of aptitudes forged and transformed through a broad range of activities.[57] The creative subject objectifies itself in a growing mass of different products and gratifies an increasing wealth of needs.[58] All-round individuality encompasses a totality of productive activities, which are not limited to production for material needs. High-tech automated industry allows material growth to go hand in hand with the shortening of the working day. Technological progress under communist relations of production is the foundation for the 'artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.'[59]

In sum, then, the human subject that Marx grafts onto the society of the future features multiple and constantly changing activities, the formation of new skills and the invention of new products and needs. And, at first sight, this seems to belie the contention that the communist individual is caught in a regime of living which is exclusive and fossilised in its broader outlines.

[56] Marx (1973), p.488.
[57] Marx & Engels (1976), p.263, Marx (1973), p.325.
[58] Marx (1973), p.409.
[59] Marx (1973), p.706.

No doubt, the nature of activities, abilities, needs and products that fill out the all-round self are diverse and under constant transformation. But something remains fixed amidst this frenzy of variation: the fact that the self engages in a rich and extending circle of productive activities, that abilities and needs are as broad as possible and expanding. The enactment of an all-round self rules out a life that comprises fewer lines of different undertakings and capacities, and a 'vita contemplativa', which lays more emphasis on thought than on other sorts of activity. Another fixation is the very commitment to an active-productive pattern of life, which precludes a less relentless activism, 'a wise passiveness', a life of self-denial, all the possible mixtures of passivity and activity, creative self-affirmation and self-denial.[60]

Finally, productive activity in the domain of material production is harnessed to definite objectives: the unrelenting expansion of material production and the 'mastery of nature.' The technocratic universe of capitalism prefigures the ultimate horizon of possibilities. Stable or low-growth economies animated by a different attitude to nature are buried in the dustbin of human prehistory.

The point that the Marxian subject of communism is locked in a fixed identity is only strengthened if its social and ideological characteristics are drawn into the picture.

b. the social subject

Sustained growth after capitalism is predicated on a particular structure of relations of production, whose cornerstone is the collective ownership of production means and the planned management of production and distribution.[61] The human subject turns into an associated producer within a centrally regulated economy. Marx takes it that collective ownership will thrust aside asymmetrical power relations in the economy

[60] Eagleton (1997), p.25, Cohen (1988), p.142.
[61] Marx (1990), pp.928-929, Marx (1989a), pp.83, 85.

and will dissolve social differentiation along class lines. It follows, in his doctrine, that inequalities of power and social conflicts will evaporate across the entire spectrum of society: social antagonisms and relations of domination are consequent upon antagonistic class relations in the economic structure, the ground of all other social relations.[62] Another implication of the evanescence of class divisions is that the state, which serves the interests of the ruling class and maintains order in a conflict-ridden society, loses its raison d'etre and withers away.[63] The 'distribution of general functions' in public administration will reduce to 'a routine matter, which entails no domination.'[64] The social structure of communism is shorn of political institutions *in that sense of the political which signifies domination, power struggles and deep disagreements.*[65]

The form of sociality that Marx inscribes in the communist future does not entail the absorption of the individual in the community. It involves, rather, the instauration of harmonious, cooperative and unmediated relations, both inside and outside the sphere of material production.[66] Social relations will become co-operative and *universal.* By producing tightly interconnected national economies and a global market, capitalism breaks up closed communities and pushes for the universal expansion of social intercourse. The conscious social coordination inaugurated by communism will carry forward these trends.[67]

In the economic field, the political structure and other social relations communism sanctions a single matrix of social institutions and norms of interaction. It is hardly

---

[62] Marx (1991b), Marx & Engels (1976), pp.47, 60-61,74,78, Marx (1989b), p.92, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.34-35, 49,58-59, 61-62, 74, Marx (1985), p.14, Marx (1989c), pp.518-521, Marx (1973), pp.831-2.
[63] Marx (1976b), p.212.
[64] Marx (1989c), p.519.
[65] Marx & Engels (1976), pp. 53, 380-381, Marx & Engels (1998), p.61, Marx (1989c), p.519, Miliband (1979), pp.142-150.
[66] Kolakowski (1978), pp.357-363, 417-418, 420, Cohen (1988), p.vii.
[67] Marx (1973), p.162.

necessary to note that fundamental choices about the organisation of the economy- such as the possibility of independent production, market exchanges and mixed economies- are fixed and do not remain up for grabs in the emancipated society to come. But the same holds true of political issues and questions of social ethics. Marx's future society makes little room for democratic procedures of open public struggle and debate around collective policies, in which actual arrangements may be deeply contested. It rules out an ethics of disharmony; norms of interaction that licence dissent and dispute.

c. the conscious subject

On the plane of ideology, Marx envisions the eclipse of religions and 'eternal' moral truths, he anticipates a rational understanding of society and nature and he prophesises the disintegration of national identifications.

Religion reflects the impotence of early human beings in the face of natural forces and expresses the lack of control over social processes.[68] Furthermore, the relative stability of the social world in precapitalist societies did not allow human beings to appreciate the historical variability of social relations. Finally, class societies tend to conceal the origination of moral principles in material conditions and human agents. Social principles are represented as objective truths. To entrench their hegemony, ruling classes need to cloak their class interests as universal values. They need to project their ideas as 'the only rational, universally valid ones.'[69]

The advances of technology and the rational steering of material production will enable the mastery of nature, which will dispel religious illusions. Moreover, capitalism has set in motion a permanent revolutionising of production, which will be

[68] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.36-37, Marx (1990), p.173.
[69] Marx & Engels (1976), p.60; see also Marx & Engels (1976), pp.47, 59-61, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.48, 59.

carried further by communism. Its consequence is that '[a]ll fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away...All that is solid, melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.'[70] Nature is envisaged now as an object of utility and is apprehended in empirical, scientific terms. It becomes apparent, also, that social relations are a historical product of human action.[71] This lucid sense of reality will be only amplified as soon as the conscious management of the economy by associated individuals will rationalise their 'practical relations of everyday life' and will render them readily intelligible to all. Communism will also cause morality to vanish through the elimination of class rule, which functionally requires moral ideas for its legitimation.[72] First in practice and subsequently in consciousness, communism will clear away the opacities and mystifications of previous social structures.[73]

Finally, the heightened global integration that capitalism brought into being has already forged close links between nations and has created a shared world culture, tearing down national frontiers and undercutting national identifications. The globalisation of capitalism confronts the working class with the same material conditions worldwide. The aggregate effect of these developments is the gradual stripping of people 'of every trace of national character.'[74]

Secularism, a transparent understanding of the self and reality, a positivist outlook on the world, the disappearance of moral principles and national cultures, and a universal identification with humanity are the attributes of developed human

[70] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.38-39.
[71] Marx (1973), p.410.
[72] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.56, 61, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.59-60.
[73] Marx (1990), p.173.
[74] Marx & Engels (1998), p.48; see also Marx & Engels (1998) pp.39, 58, Marx & Engels (1976), pp.51-52, 73.

consciousness. They are far from generic, neutral or incontestable elements of all forms of consciousness.

It is now evident that Marx stages an essentialist representation of the human subject. Folded into human individuals are abiding specific characteristics, which by far exceed minimal and formal ideas, and prefigure a determinate scheme of life, which blocks out alternate possibilities. In certain respects, fluidity and change rather than stability and closure are prominent in Marx's picture of future life. There is mobility and variation in the passage from one activity to another, the rise of new capacities and needs, the ongoing progress of technology and science and the consequent transformation of objective conditions and individuals. But variability comes up against the projection of definite forms in the general pattern of active life, the economic, political and other social relations, and the worldview that developed human subjects will instantiate.

5. Taking liberties with Marx

The following sections spell out the bearing of this picture on Marx's rendering of freedom. Marxian freedom shelters multiple senses and nuances, which range from self-development and self-realisation to independence from fixed identities, self-fashioning and collective self-determination. The self in self-realisation etc. is the human subject that Marx consigns to post-capitalist society. As a result, the building blocks of this figure provide the core meaning and the conditions of freedom in Marx. Its contending elements reflect the disparate threads of Marx's conception of the self.

At the heart of Marxian freedom sits the idea of self-realisation. And because the self who is to realise itself is endowed with specific traits, freedom comes down to a determinate way of being (the post-capitalist form of life). Its definite elements circumscribe the freedom of creating oneself and the world. My argument teases out

these restraining blockages, which a more compelling approach should shove aside. But I also highlight the various strengths of Marx's construction, which should be preserved in a cogent statement of freedom. Aside from Marx's emphasis on material conditions, his sense of freedom as a process of self-creation and his cast of social autonomy as the overcoming of social alienation are pivotal to the reframing of freedom by Castoriadis and Foucault (among others), which I will work out in the concluding chapters.

a. the free active subject

The signified that Marx explicitly and recurrently pins to the signifier 'freedom' is the 'the development of human powers.'[75] 'Free activity' is the 'manifestation of life arising from the free development of all abilities.'[76] Freedom in this guise is raised to 'an end in itself'[77] and constitutes the 'true realm of freedom.'[78] Marx fleshes out this idea when he speaks of 'the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared.'[79] The nucleus of freedom is, thus, the enactment of the type of human self that is proper to communism.

However, nested in this general formula is a manifold of more specific notions. Free development as an end in itself means that individuals are not tethered to externally given aims and natural urges.[80] Self-determination and autonomy are thus encoded into Marxian freedom.

[75] Marx (1991a), p.959; see also Marx & Engels (1976), pp.78, 87, 225, Marx (1973), pp.488, 542,706,711, Marx & Engels (1998), p.62.
[76] Marx & Engels (1976), p.225; see also Marx & Engels (1976) pp.78, 87.
[77] Marx (1973), p.488, Marx (1991a), p.959.
[78] Marx (1991), p.959.
[79] Marx (1973), p.325.
[80] Marx (1973), p.611.

A different constellation of meanings revolves around the markers of variation and openness that distinguish life after capitalism. His insistence on transcending the division of labour and his celebration of the ensuing effects bring out clearly these shades of signification. Marx assails the division of labour for the fact that it ties down the self to exclusive spheres of activity.[81] Its abolition will liberate individuals from such confinement. Without a rigid division of labour it will be possible to 'become accomplished in any branch [one] wishes'...'to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon...without ever becoming hunter, fisherman....'[82] Freedom signals limitless movement; action uninhibited by the rigidities of social structure, routinised practices and settled ends.[83] So much is already implicit in the very notion of freedom as all-round activity and development, which entail variation of engagements and perpetual growth without a predefined object.

The conception of freedom as self-creation is also latent in Marx's plea for 'the full development of human powers.' Given that his anthropology acknowledges the creative potencies of the human self, the full expression of human abilities includes inherently 'the absolute working out of...the creative potentialities' of the person.[84] The production of things, ideas, material circumstances and types of activity amounts to the original creation of patterns of life and selfhood. Freedom consists, more specifically, in unleashing the creative potential of the self in a state in which one 'strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming.'[85] Marx puts thus a particular twist on self-creation. It does not reduce to free choice among existing options, but encompasses the generation of new modes of

[81] Marx & Engels (1976) pp.47, 394-395.
[82] Marx & Engels (1976), p.47.
[83] Marx (1973), p.542.
[84] Marx (1973), p.488.
[85] Marx (1973), p.488; see also Marx (1973), p.542.

action, ideas and conditions. Life is not circumscribed by fully predetermined boundaries. Freedom flees the confines of specific activities and the range of possibilities that the present contains. These intuitions are central to late modern constructions of freedom and will be further elaborated in the last chapters. But I want to insist that they were already articulated by Marx. This point should be borne in mind for the broader argument.

The defect that damns Marxian freedom is that all its different nuances are subsumed under the template of all-round development. Self-determination and self-creation move within the bounds of a set pattern of life. This mode of living itself, the urge to pursue the growth of manifold capabilities and to labour in a wide scope of different enterprises, is not up for debate. In this respect, the self does not craft its life independently of ready-made recipes, and remains sealed in its identity as an all-round agent. What is more, Marx does not enshrine into freedom the right to say 'no' to his conception of the good. He does not construe freedom as the *opportunity* to realise this good. On the contrary, freedom is identified straightforwardly with the active achievement of all-round development.[86] When it comes to basic existential options between, say, a life of multiple activities, fewer pursuits or passivism and idleness, choice is pre-empted. This is the sense in which Marxian freedom shrinks to a determined form of being. As the next sections will indicate, the number of settled points, on which free decision and open self-creation are foreclosed, grows much larger when all other dimensions and conditions of Marxian freedom are taken on board.

[86] A different idea is suggested in Marx & Engels (1976), p.47, where freedom is an opportunity concept. This is denied, however, in Marx (1991a), p.959, Marx & Engels (1976), p.225 and Marx (1973), p.611, among others.

It deserves notice that the Marx of the middle and later periods does not provide an adequate normative justification for his ideal of self-realisation. Against competing ideals,[87] he asserts that 'in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill…' the individual 'also needs a normal portion of work' and that under particular conditions, 'labour becomes attractive work, the individual's self-realisation.'[88] A much stronger case must be made to vindicate the imperative of *many-sided* development. Without having established the premise that 'is implies ought', the sheer fact that human agents possess many capabilities could not prescribe this principle nor uphold it against rival views of the good.

On the other hand, such a criticism could be dismissed as misguided on the grounds that Marx explicitly denounced moral philosophy as 'ideology' and proposed a different mode of broaching fundamental predicaments of life: the analysis of history and the historical trends of present-day society.[89] For Marx, the fully rounded self is not primarily an 'ideal', but the sort of human self and life that will spring up from the womb of capitalist society. All-round activity is the shape that human life will take on in an economically developed society that has cast aside various material and social barriers to human action and is subject to collective control.[90] Folded in this view is an acute insight about the appropriate methods of moral and political thought. Conceptions of freedom and the good life that are elaborated on the dizzy heights of abstract philosophy, without attending closely to the actualities and potentialities of historical reality, can make theory, at best, irrelevant and, at worst authoritarian: a desire to foist 'truths' of the philosophical mind on a reality that denies them.

---

[87] Marx (1973), pp.611, 712, Marx & Engels (1976), pp.292, 423-4.
[88] Marx (1973), p.611.
[89] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.23-24, 27-41.
[90] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.49, 292.

But this line of thought takes what perhaps is a wrong turn when Marx further surmises that reality is a monolith that holds in store or dictates a unique set of options. As noted, Marx did not contend that communism is the inevitable destiny of humanity. But he did claim that other alternatives are practically suicidal when the time is ripe for the transition to communism. In Marx's case, the assumption of an essentially closed world that presents us with limited alternatives can be defused through the specific objections that have been marshalled against individual premises of his theory, which underpin his theorem that communism is the sole reasonable possibility for the future. Economists have found fault with the labour theory of value and Marx's 'law' that the rate of profit tends to fall, and will issue the death sentence to capitalism.[91] Marx's stipulation that one and only type of social relations matches a certain stage of technological progress is simply asserted by him, and is likewise contestable.[92] Assuming that sustained growth is desirable, it is an open question whether communism, capitalism or another model of social structure is more conducive to it at the present or in the future. There is no space in this setting to unpack these arguments, which suggest that the communist form of life is one among various possible alternatives and stands, therefore, in need of some other form of justification. From the standpoint of this dissertation, the central objection to Marx's freedom is that it sets arbitrary bounds to freedom, freedom being understood in ways which can be fathomed in Marx's own thought: self-determination, open self-creation, transcendence of given orders of life.

To round out Marxian freedom with regard to the active and productive subject, three further points should be considered. The first is that, as textual evidence from the *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* intimates, Marx dashed his original hopes that

---

[91] Harvey (1999), pp.178-179.
[92] Wright, Levine & Sober (1992), pp.79-82, 91-92, 98.

freedom as all-round self-realisation could be achieved within the workplace.[93] The economy is bound to remain the 'realm of necessity', where human labour is a means to material necessities. 'The realm of freedom', that is, 'artistic, scientific etc.' development as ends in themselves,[94] is located beyond the 'sphere of material production proper.'[95] Marx, however, still entertained the possibility that necessary labour will evolve into a fulfilling form of activity. This transubstantiation of labour is contingent upon a number of changes: material production is collectively managed; technological advances and large-scale industry shore up the power of society over natural forces, they invest work with a scientific character and make workers relate to the production process as 'a watchman and regulator.'[96] These conditions lead to a scientific-experimental understanding of nature and transform labouring individuals into active subjects of material production. Through the planned and co-operative management of the economy, individuals will deliberately direct their production process and will experience their individual labour as a component in a collective activity that consciously regulates 'all the forces of nature.'[97]

This brings us to the second point, which turns on another moment of Marxian freedom: freedom as mastery over nature. This idea is bound up with the permanent growth of human capabilities, as scientific and technological progress will increase human control over nature.[98] The mastery of nature falls also under freedom as self-determination. Given their enhanced ability to impact on natural circumstances, the life of human individuals will be no longer blindly determined by natural laws and

[93] For these hopes, see Marx & Engels (1976), p.88, Marx (1991f), p.73; also Marx (1989b), p.87.
[94] Marx (1973), p.706.
[95] Marx (1991a), pp.958-959, Marx (1973), p.706.
[96] Marx (1973), p.705.
[97] Marx (1973), p.612; also Marx (1973), pp.611, 705, 712, Marx (1991a), p.959.
[98] Marx (1973), pp.410, 488.

conditions, but will be shaped by their own decisions.[99] By consciously governing their interaction with nature, human agents become self-determining subjects in their metabolism with nature.

On a final point, the 'realm of necessity' contains for Marx the fundamental *preconditions* of freedom in its primary sense. Marx is not interested in a fine-grained conceptual analysis of freedom. The thrust of his 'materialist' theory lies primarily in its preoccupation with economic conditions and the acknowledgement of their absolute importance for realising freedom.[100] The necessary prop for the life of free individuality is, first, the provision of all individuals with the basic means for their subsistence and various pursuits, and, second, the reduction of the working day to the minimum allowed by actual circumstances, which will free up the maximum amount of time for activities of one's own choosing.[101] Permanent growth is sine-qua-non for meeting these two conditions, because the realm of human need is not biologically fixed. It is a property of fully developed humanity that its various needs are constantly expanding. Growing needs call for the permanent development of production. Enhanced productivity will prevent a rise in labour time.

Marx does not conflate freedom with its material foundations, but he underscores that the former is a chimera without the latter. With the exception of permanent growth, which is a material exigency only if needs must endlessly increase, the primary goods identified by Marx are arguably indispensable for achieving real freedom in some of the most common senses of the term, such as the possibility of choice and self-determination, and should be given due weight in any adequate formation of freedom.

---

[99] Marx (1991a), p.959, Marx (1973), pp.410, 488, 612, 705.

[100] Marx (1991a), p.959, Marx (1973), p.542, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.60-62, Marx & Engels (1976), pp.87-88, 262-263.

[101] Marx (1990), p.667, Marx (1991a), p.959, Marx (1973), pp.706, 711.

Last, decent and healthy working conditions, along with the minimisation of toil are elements of the limited freedom that can be attained within the world of material production.[102] Marx voices here core demands of the labour movement, which struggled for freedom from drudgery and economic duress.

b. the free social subject

'In the real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association.'[103] The individual rather than any collective entity is the subject of Marxian freedom. And the heart of freedom is the many-sided activity and flourishing of the self, not the fulfilment of the 'social nature' of individuals. It is, however, a hallmark of Marx's doctrine that it ties individual freedom to a particular pattern of association. This embodies a distinctive idea of social freedom and is cast as a precondition for the fully round development of all. Marx accords absolute primacy to the social framework of freedom because of his socio-centric understanding of the individual. Individual life is embedded in a web of social relations and is determined by social circumstances.

Marx's view of social freedom, by which I intend the freedom of individuals as members of an association and freedom within social relations, is rife with the same contradictions I brought out above. In short, I will argue that Marx champions a practice of collective self-determination which in theory admits of no a priori limits and makes social reality an object of deliberate collective design. At the same time, as section 4.b spelt out, he prescribes a unique format of economic, social and political structure, which yields the necessary ground of collective self-management and the natural form of relations among free individuals. This reified model of the free society

---

[102] Marx (1991a), p.959.
[103] Marx & Engels (1976), p.78, Marx & Engels (1998), p.62.

conflicts with social autonomy on Marx's own terms and is not congenial to individual freedom in the mode of flexible self-creation.

At the centre of his conception lies a vision of radical democracy. The emancipated society of communism 'treats all naturally evolved premises as the creations of hitherto existing men...and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals.' The goal of the communist society is to make it 'impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals.'[104] Social freedom is primarily the conscious collective determination of all social relations and circumstances. This is an essential condition for individual self-development, because it permits individuals to construct the most favourable social frame for the pursuits of their choosing. But another meaning of freedom rises to prominence here, namely, freedom as the autonomous legislation of social laws and power over the social context of life.

These ideas are part and parcel of the democratic sense of freedom. But Marx stretched the democratic imagination and expanded the areas of social life that are subject to collective self-management.[105]

Marx insisted that in contemporary and earlier societies, an array of social relations and circumstances are not recognised as the aggregate effect of social activities and escape deliberate control. Historical principles and social relations pass for natural facts and remain autonomous from the will of living individuals. Insofar as social interactions are not jointly co-ordinated by their participants, the outcome of social interaction is not necessarily aligned with the intentions of social agents and confronts them as an alien might.[106] These propositions render the substance of the second

[104] Marx & Engels (1976), p.81; see also Marx & Engels (1976), pp.48, 51, Marx & Engels (1998), p.53.
[105] Draper (1977), pp.282-310.
[106] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.47-48, 51-52, Marx (1990), pp.174-175, 990, 998, Marx (1991a), pp.953-954, Marx (1973), pp.163-164, 832.

meaning of alienation in Marx: a state in which the creator becomes subject to the power of her own creation.

The perception of society as an unintended aggregate result of social activities does not originate with Marx.[107] His is one of the earliest and most potent articulations of an aspiration, which drives the approach I will seek to vindicate in the thesis. A society of self-governing individuals should overcome its alienation from the reality produced by social action. A free society should not only acknowledge that all social relations and circumstances are the 'product of the preceding intercourse of individuals.'[108] In the light of this understanding, society should be actually configured in a manner that opens institutions and social conditions to determination by its members. Instead of yielding to ossified relations and principles, instead of facing existing conditions and other effects of interaction as a doom or a destiny, autonomous individuals bring social reality under their collective control and make society responsive to their own projects and energies.[109]

In past and present-day democracies, it is possible to detect a movement towards the de-naturalisation of existing arrangements, the de-sacralisation of tradition and the reflexive regulation of systemic logics. But this trend is still in its inception. Marx put his finger on critical domains where reification and fatalistic submission to uncontrolled interactions remain very much the case. In his more specific contribution to the democratic tradition, he applied the apparatus of alienation to the economic system,[110] and he made the case for collective self-government in the economy as a

---

[107] Rosen (1996), pp.101-147.
[108] Marx & Engels (1976), p.81.
[109] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.47-48, 51-52, 78, 81.
[110] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.47-48, 51-52, Marx (1990), pp.165, 342-343, 548-550, 988-990, Marx (1973), pp.156-157, 163-164, 452-453, 831.

whole.[111] The related idea of abolishing social classes aims at the equal distribution of power in the economic field.[112]

Marx marshalled various arguments to the effect that collective control over the economy enhances the social autonomy of all on different levels. To begin with the economic field itself, collective management empowers *all* individuals to influence economic conditions and avoid unintended consequences of social activities.[113] When the different economic actors make decisions independently of one another, the aggregate effects of their acts become a matter of chance.[114] This is a centerpoint in Marx's assault on free market capitalism for its freedom-diminishing consequences.[115] The 'freer' production and the market are, the less individual actions are deliberately co-ordinated through common policies and rules to ward off cumulative results that are sub-optimal or disastrous for all. The activities of particular agents of capital are not constrained only by the imperatives of competition and the decisions of other independent producers. Their fortunes are prey to dysfunctional side-effects, such as economic crises of various kinds, which irradiate from their independent motions.[116]

From another perspective, democracy means equal freedom to affect decisions of general concern. It is incompatible with an economic system in which certain citizens have less power to shape, or are simply excluded from, fundamental economic decisions concerning investment, employment, the organisation of production and the allocation of the product, all of which impact heavily on the working conditions and life-chances of the majority.[117] The collective control of material production lays the

[111] Marx (1990), pp.173, 929, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.60-61.
[112] Marx & Engels (1976), pp.52, 77-78, 88, Marx & Engels (1998), pp.61-62, Wright, Levine & Sober, (1992), p.188.
[113] Marx & Engels (1976), p.81.
[114] Marx & Engels (1976), p.48, Marx (1973), pp.157-158.
[115] Marx (1990), p.477.
[116] Marx (1990), p.739, Marx (1991a), pp.359-368.
[117] Marx (1990), pp.531-532, 618, 667.

ground for democratic freedoms within the economy. It enables relations of equal freedom in the workplace and allows for the equal right of employees to participate in decision-making around the conditions, contents and fruit of their work.

Marx, among many others, railed against capitalism from this precise standpoint. Actually existing capitalism denies to the majority of working individuals the freedom to make important decisions about the forms, the contents and the benefits of their work. It grants them a measure of freedom in the choice of employer and the type of employment,[118] but abridges their autonomy in their actual job. Discretionary power is vested in the owners of the means of production. Capitalism is a system of social relations in which production means are privately owned. Given that the majority of the people lack private ownership in their own work, actual capitalism entails effectively that, in the sphere of production, most working individuals are under alien authorities.[119] Capitalism, and any other system that does not secure the equal power of all over their production process, gives rise to relations of dependence and domination within the world of work. Capitalism seems incongruent with a society of universal freedom insofar as it violates cardinal democratic norms and negates equal freedom in the workplace, if nowhere else.

Second, the institution of collective control over material resources is a pillar of democratic self-government through the state, not only because it allows the extension of democratic rule over the economic sphere, but also because it eliminates sources of disproportionate influence on democratic procedures. Marxists and other schools of political science have argued that, in capitalist democracies, democratic governments tend systematically to defer to business interests. This is due to the discretionary

---

[118] Marx (1990), p.1032.
[119] Marx (1990), 381-382, 424, 449-450, 548-550, 769, 776,799, 1054-1055, Marx (1991a), p.510, Marx & Engels (1998), p.55.

power of business over economic development, employment and output decisions, which determine the rate of the tax revenues of the state and impact directly on the life-prospects of the electorate.[120]

The reduction of power differentials in the command of material resources is key to the achievement of equal freedom in the economy, the state and across the entire range of social relations, because of the importance of material means for most activities and social relations.

What vitiates Marx's constitution of social freedom is again its inner tensions, which come into relief if one juxtaposes the animus of his free society –the principle that all social premises should be freely determined by 'the united individuals'- to the degree of social closure in communism. The communist blueprint for a free society comes laden with a host of settled principles and structures. Communism is a society of social harmony, with little or no politics in the form of power struggles and democratic sites of debate with an open agenda and deep disagreements. Fundamental decisions about the organisation of the economy (central planning, consolidated collective property, total ban on markets and private ownership in productive assets) and its objectives (ongoing growth and technological development) do not remain in principle an object of public deliberation.

A larger measure of formalisation and separation between its principles and their realisation could better redeem the emancipatory ambitions of the Marxian project. For example, the objective of collective self-rule in the economic sphere can be pursued in various ways relative to diverse concerns and different understandings of freedom. Conflicts may arise between the pursuit of social planning and the need to make room for innovation and independence, as well as between the democratic

[120] Dunleavy & O' Leary (1987), pp. 245-246, 257, 277, 294.

regulation of the economy, which requires increased centralisation, and freedom from bureaucratic domination as a side-effect of a centralised economy. Different imaginable ways of striking a balance between these various demands translate into different institutional arrangements. Marx's identification of the free society with a specific configuration pre-empts choice on such basic questions, and forecloses the review of particular settlements so as to better approximate the ultimate goals that social institutions are intended to serve.

It also looks as if the specific arrangements that lie on his social agenda are not the most fitting for the promotion of freedom as envisioned by Marx himself. For example, a society familiar with dissonances and receptive to dissent, rather than the conflict-free world that Marx projected, is likely to be more hospitable to diverse individualities that work out their creative powers and develop themselves in various directions.[121] Unless we believe in magic, the undertakings of different individuals, new activities and experiments cannot always harmonise spontaneously, and cannot co-exist side by side without frictions, which call for negotiation. On the same grounds, the protection of freedom requires political processes where differences are aired and new frameworks of co-existence are put in place, rather than a society where institutionalised politics of public struggle and compromise have vanished.

Furthermore, Marx looked forward to a society that would end the submission of individuals to autonomised institutions and reified relations. His free society has, moreover, spread relations of freedom and equality across the entire span of social spaces. Neither objective is effectively advanced in an association that prizes harmonious cohabitation and is divested of democratic forums, where disagreement is given public outlet. Social contestation preserves institutions from coagulation. The

[121] Lukes (1987), p.96, Brenkert (1983), p.229.

politics of confrontation that thrive in democratic polities have allowed social groups and movements to challenge oppressive relations and to extend equal freedom to new social spheres. The agonistic politics of democracy provides the means for further inroads into old and new oppressive relations.[122] To renounce contestatory democracy, as Marx does, is to subscribe to the mythical and perilous belief that there is a way of stamping out, once and for, all considerable power differentials across all social spheres.

Marx did consider class division the ultimate origin of all social conflict and domination, and drew the conclusion that the abolition of the classes is not only necessary, but also sufficient for achieving universal freedom in society. The (inevitable) presence of dubious beliefs in a theory of freedom is not a fatal defect in and of itself. What is more damaging is Marx's failure to build self-corrective mechanisms into his model of free society. He should have distinguished more sharply between principles and institutional embodiment and should have made allowances for the amendment of practical arrangements in order to adjust them to new insights about the best way of enacting the principles.

c. freedom of consciousness

Marx's freedom in the domain of thought, ideas and identities proposes yet another variant on the theme of contending impulses that play off against one another. Free thought and consciousness have eluded the narrow confines of national identifications and have released themselves from the sway of religious dogmatisms, 'eternal truths' and rigid concepts.[123] Freedom means a flight from settled identities, emancipation from fixed ideas, overcoming of alienation to products of the human mind misrecognised as eternal truths; affirmation of the sovereignty of the subject over its

[122] Mouffe (2000), pp.32-34.
[123] Marx and Engels (1976), pp.36, 51.

mental creations. But Marx liberates individuals from entrapment within particular conceptions and identifications only to lock them up in the cage of other products of history: secularism, a positivist outlook on reality, a global culture in the place of national ones.

It is, indeed, impossible to become detached as such. But this does not mean that it is impossible to gain freedom from dogmatisms and congealed identities. It means, rather, that such freedom can be achieved by entertaining a critical disposition towards any particular contents. To reject certain forms of consciousness and attach ourselves to specific others does not emancipate us from ideological and other mental fixations. Nor does the utopian belief that, in a certain state of life, the human mind will rid itself of all unconscious influences and will grasp the structure of the world in full lucidity. This presumption is bound to foment complacency and reduce alertness to unconscious distortions and other prejudices.

6. Concluding remarks

Marx's framing of freedom makes a seminal attempt to extract the liberating implications of modernity: the erosion of sacred authorities, the destabilisation of traditions and an accelerated tempo of social change. These features underpin an appreciation of human life as the outcome of human making and reveal individuals as creative subjects who produce their world and can generate new realities. Human agents can escape the limitations of particular social structures and can fashion their contexts in line with their intentions and projects. Human freedom is not merely an undisturbed movement within a world organised in advance.[124] Being free is being

[124] See e.g. Marx (1975).

able to exert the human capacities for creative agency and to make up one's life in an independent and potentially original manner.

But while Marx recognises the weakening of stable foundations and the dissolution of closed schemes of life, he makes a rearguard move that reinstalls a solid foundation, one that is secular and located in the future, but which likewise grounds a fixed conception of the good. The workings of history will assign definite contours to the social and personal world of future humanity. Freedom will not consist simply in an '*absolute* movement of becoming' and self-creation will not be without any predetermined yardsticks: some of the most crucial aspects of human life are not preserved as a legitimate object of open determination and creation by the subject of freedom. And this is precisely what is passed over in the various glosses on Marx's freedom which present it as an apotheosis of creative praxis without limits.[125]

His is an essentialist construction that invests the subject of freedom with a group of substantive and static features, which yield the content and the basic underpinnings of freedom. Marx's free individuals pursue the fully round development of their powers, they are associated producers in a centrally administered economy, they constitute a depoliticised, harmonious society and they are stripped of religious beliefs, moral principles and national identity. Personal freedom is, primarily, the particular form of life of all-round self-development. Spiritual freedom collapses into the ideological traits of communist humanity. Collective self-determination fuses with the mode of production peculiar to communism.

Beyond the criticisms that can be levelled at the specific implications of Marxian freedom, essentialist interpretations of freedom have solicited broader objections. The standard one is spelt out in the influential critique that I. Berlin marshalled against

---

[125] See e.g. Elster (1985), pp.83-92, Eagleton (1997), pp.17-27, Markus (1978), p.58. cf. Lefort (1986), p.288.

'positive freedom.' When the 'self' is vested with definite essential traits, freedom in the guise of self-realisation can authorise despotism. The state can forcibly impose a regime of life that fulfils the ideal self and can justify authoritarianism as the promotion of 'real freedom.'[126] The following chapters will expand on this argument and its limitations. From my viewpoint, the crucial flaw of the essentialist tack is that it nurtures attachment to closed identities; it contracts the area of discretion by settling freedom into fixed grooves of thinking and acting, and undercuts autonomy by subjugating individuals to laws laid down once and for all. The fault line between freedom and necessity, subjugation and constraint is blurred to an alarming degree.

This argument presupposes, of course, freedom set in terms of unfettered choice and openness. And one cannot simply evoke this idea of freedom to discredit a different understanding of the concept. It is necessary to establish the authority of the meaning that furnishes the criterion of appraisal. In Marx's work, however, my critique can take an immanent form by pitting threads of Marxian freedom –mainly, autonomous self-creation without a priori restraints- against the reduction of freedom to a definite mode of being. This confinement can be castigated from Marx's own perspective, as it prevents free agents from remaining in 'the absolute movement of becoming' and entails the type of enslaving alienation which he urges a free society to combat: 'the consolidation of what we ourselves [political movements, human history, the philosopher's mind] produce into a.... power over us.'

The virtues of Marxian freedom that should be sustained in any cogent schema are the idea of plastic self-creation and the goal of overcoming social alienation to instituted society. These open up an alternative to essentialism and its vicissitudes. A further strength of his work is that he imbued thought on freedom with a sense of

[126] Berlin (1969), p.152, Kolakowski (1978), p.418.

pragmatism and a preoccupation with real-life conditions. He called attention to the material prerequisites of actual freedom and grappled with the types of unfreedom that attend capitalism. This kind of pragmatism and enhanced sensitivity to social circumstances are sometimes rare commodities in late modern theory, for all its conceptual advances in other respects.[127]

---

[127] See e.g. the critique of Foucault in Rochlitz (1992), p.255, O'Farrell (1989), pp.128-129.

CHAPTER 2

Kant, freedom and essentialism

1. Introduction

In what is a telling indication of its salience, essentialist freedom cuts across the conventional divides between mainstreams of modern thought. Far from confining itself to Marx and his disciples, the essentialist paradigm shelters also key strands of Marxism's principal antagonist in modern history, i.e. liberalism. The present chapter substantiates this claim and carries forward the survey of essentialist freedom by engaging with its Kantian liberal variant.

Recent decades have witnessed an imperious resurgence of Kantian thought on freedom, which has conferred on Kant the status of a prophet or, at minimum, the canonical reference on the subject of freedom and autonomy.[1] This is an alarming development on various counts. Kant's ethics of freedom is fraught with numerous, well-rehearsed difficulties, which range from its a-historical formalism and mind-boggling dualisms to its hostility to feelings and desires.[2] But among the several causes for concern, one should single out the suspicion that Kant advocates a rigid and narrow idea of reason, which poses various threats to freedom in its different senses.

The present chapter sets out to recast and augment the argument that Kant's construal of freedom impairs critical reason, absolutises contingent restrictions and confers legitimacy on the autocratic use of state power.[3] Typically, the repressive element of Kant's doctrine has been associated with the intent to place desire under the yoke of a rigid type of universal reason. The present critique does not proceed from such a hedonistic viewpoint, but from a different sense of reflective autonomy

[1] See e.g. Paul, Miller & Paul (2003), Habermas (1997), Rawls (1980), Rawls (1999), Korsgaard (1996), O'Neill (1989).
[2] Allison (1990), pp.180-198, Williams (1993), Connolly (1999), O'Neill (1989), pp.145-162, Irwin (1984), Berlin (1969), pp.136-140, Schott (1997).
[3] See Berlin (1969), pp.152-154, Geuss (2002), pp.325-329, Foucault (1997c).

and critical reason, which has been championed by M. Foucault, C. Castoriadis and R. Unger, among others, and can be traced in Kant's own thought.[4] On this view, critical reason is disposed to contest *any* received truth, and autonomy, labouring under this idea of reason, signifies a process of open self-formation that is potentially inventive.

The main objections to Kant's gloss on freedom are two. His conception is highly controversial, as it is predicated on an intensely contentious notion of the rational self, which is dogmatically asserted. Second, and most significant, a commitment to freedom should lead one to dismiss Kant's schema. Kant reduces autonomy, the fullest realisation of freedom, to a voluntary obedience to predetermined laws, which lie beyond questioning and revision. Hence, on the fundamental level of their regulative norms, Kant's autonomous agents are not sovereign legislators. They are not at liberty to choose, to reexamine and to alter the principles of their autonomous thought and action. The constraints that Kant foists on freedom are arbitrary and dispensable inasmuch as they are premised on gratuitous assumptions about reason.

My criticisms are unravelled gradually through an inquiry into the two central senses of freedom in Kant, transcendental freedom and autonomy. The focus is set firmly on autonomy and Kant's essentialism, which inflects his formation of the concept, equating autonomy with conformity to immutable precepts. I flesh out and question this idea of freedom in its own right, bracketing other issues with Kant's ethics. Such an undertaking is both legitimate and important. Kant's model of autonomy as specified above is notionally independent of his transcendental metaphysics and other components of his doctrine, and cannot be redeemed by addressing the difficulties on which contemporary Kantians have concentrated their efforts -mainly, Kant's

[4] See chapters 7 and 8.

metaphysics and the question of empty formalism.[5] Moreover, Kantian autonomy has effectively taken on a life of its own and has captivated the imagination of later theorists as a self-standing conception. Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is exemplary in this respect.[6]

Many of the arguments put forward here have already been made in the critical literature on Kant.[7] But this chapter seeks to piece these arguments together in a unified perspective of critique and to draw them out more fully, on the basis of a more accurate rendition of Kant's views. The chapter tries, moreover, to do justice to valuable insights of Kant's thought, injecting shades of immanent critique into the discussion and allowing a more nuanced interpretation of Kant's construction. This will ultimately back up the thesis that a particular recast of freedom in contemporary thought rescues and enhances Kantian intuitions by doing away with Kant's invariable self.

I start out from the keystone of Kant's frame, his essentialist ontology of the rational self. The same ontological subtext and the resulting entrapment of freedom within fixed bounds are common to Kant and Marx and warrant their accommodation under the same essentialist umbrella. The specific difference of Kant lies in the prominence that he gives to freedom in the mode of self-legislation.

2. The essence of the Kantian self

The crux of Kant's essentialism is the presumption that human agents are equipped with a unitary reason, which issues invariant universal laws invested with overriding validity.

---

[5] See e.g. Habermas (1990), Guyer (2003), O'Neill (1989), Rawls (1999), pp.221-227, Rawls (1980).
[6] See Rawls (1999), pp.221-227, 450-456.
[7] See e.g. Berlin (1969), pp.152-154, Geuss (2002), pp.325-329, Foucault (1997c).

Kant's individuals possess a faculty of rational volition, which encompasses a capacity for choice and decision-making on the basis of principles ('Willkur'), and a legislative faculty ('Wille' or practical reason) that sets the principles of self-determination.[8] Kant distinguishes these principles into subjective rules, the variable norms that individuals actually enact, and objective rules, which hold good for all rational agents.[9] Objective principles are subdivided into 'rules of skill' or 'counsels of prudence' and objective laws proper.[10] The first two categories refer to rules of instrumental reason, which the agent need not follow once she has given up on the ends they serve. But Kant postulates also the existence of rational laws, which are universal in the stronger sense that they 'must hold always and necessarily'[11] irrespective of personal preferences and conditions. These unconditional laws are determinate, eternally fixed and known a priori through *pure reason*, the notions and processes of rational thought that do not depend on the input of the senses.[12] The unconditional laws of practical reason are the principles of ethics. Moral action, Kant claims, is action from duty, and the concept of duty refers intrinsically to practical principles that obligate us always and absolutely.

The fundamental law of reason a la Kant, is, of course, the Categorical Imperative: 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will

---

[8] Kant (1998), pp.24, 36, 52, 63, Kant (1997), p.29, Kant (1996), pp.11-13, 18, Allison (1990), pp.130, 132, Carnois (1987), pp.83, 86, Beck (1963), p.202, Kant (1997), p.100.

[9] Kant (1998), p. 31 (footnote).

[10] Kant (1998), pp.25-27, Kant (1997), pp.17-18, Kant (1960), p.19.

[11] Kant (1997), p.33.

[12] This assumption is stated in the most straightforward terms in Kant (1958), A807/B835: ' I assume that there really are pure moral laws which determine completely a priori (without regard to empirical motives, that is, to happiness) what is and is not to be done, that is, which determine the employment of the freedom of a rational being in general; these laws command in an *absolute* manner (not merely hypothetically, on the supposition of other empirical ends), and are therefore in every respect necessary. I am justified in making this assumption, in that I can appeal not only to the proofs employed by the most enlightened moralists, but to the moral judgment of every man, in so far as he makes the effort to thinks such a law clearly.' See also Kant (1998), pp. 2-3, 20-23.

that it become a universal law.'[13] This ground-norm of practical reason and morality requires plainly that our personal maxims conform to objective, unconditional laws of reason.[14] Thus, the C. I. is not the sole unconditional order of practical reason. In the *Groundwork*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and, mainly, in his political writings and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant puts forth a series of substantive principles, which he presents as eternal, objective laws prescribed by practical reason.[15]

Beyond the various specific laws that he lays down, Kant expresses clearly his confidence that through the proper use of their rational faculty, all individuals would light upon the same objective imperatives in the different domains of their life.[16] The formula of the C. I. spells out the criteria that would serve to identify the universal commands of reason.[17] And Kant claims explicitly that the test of the C. I. yields determinate results, allowing all rational agents to recognise the same, inflexible orders of practical reason. '[C]ommon human reason, with this compass in hand, knows very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty…'.[18]

The C. I. and the other unconditional axioms of pure reason are the 'essence' of the Kantian self. They are generic and enduring components of personal identity,[19] and they represent the most valuable dimension of human existence. Although we are both rational and desirous beings with bodily needs, it is pure reason, reason free from sensuous influences, that sets us apart from animals.[20] And 'the pure moral law

[13] Kant (1998), p.31.
[14] Kant (1997), p.88; see also ibid., p.29.
[15] See e.g. Kant (1996), pp.54-55, 58-59, 62.
[16] Kant (1998), pp.15-17, 31-33, Kant (1997), pp.25, 27, 32-33, Kant (1996), pp.4, 10, Kant (1991), p.115.
[17] Kant (1998), pp.31-33.
[18] Kant (1998), p.16.
[19] O'Neill (1989), pp.54, 64.
[20] Kant (1960), pp.22, 44, Kant (1997), p.74.

itself...lets us discover the sublimity or our own supersensible existence and subjectively effects respect for their *higher vocation* in human beings.'[21]

Kant's critics may be right that the Categorical Imperative cannot deliver definite and universally accepted principles. But Kant presumes that it does. Thus, in *his* picture of humanity, the practical identity of the human subject is held to be determined on a fundamental level: the regulative norms of thought and action are objectively fixed in perpetuity. No doubt, Kant acknowledges that individuals may chase a plurality of variable ends.[22] He also allows that certain practical imperatives are laws of wide duty, which 'can prescribe only the maxim of actions, not actions themselves [;] this is a sign that [the law] leaves a playroom (*latitude)* for free choice... that is, that the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act....'[23] However, neither of these qualifications changes the fact that Kant's individual is eternally bound to definite normative principles, which exclude other principles and the different ends they may licence.

Few would dispute that human agents are rational and capable of rational self-direction. Kant, however, operates with a peculiar regime of reason, which is far from commonsensical or universally embraced.[24] And the problem is that, at the end of the day, Kant simply asserts some of his most controversial speculations in this context: the contention that the Categorical Imperative is the fundamental law of practical reason; the belief that reason lays down a broader range of timeless universal laws; and his confidence that universally valid laws can be discovered with certainty through the free exercise of pure reason. In his practical philosophy, the final 'argument' for the C.I. is that the C.I. is a 'fact of reason', built into the very structure

---

[21] Kant (1997), p.75, my emphasis.
[22] See e.g. Kant (1997), p.23, Kant (1991), pp.73-74, 224.
[23] Kant (1996), p.153.
[24] See e.g. Connolly (1999), Allison (1990), pp.180-198, Williams (1993).

of rationality.[25] To this claim, adherents of relativist and contextualist moralities, or even universalists which propose other formulations of the fundamental law can reply simply by evoking different 'facts of reason': irreducible plurality, relativity and so on. Against sceptics, cultural relativists and various rationalists who doubt that the C.I. can produce definite principles, Kant opposes a couple of examples and his assertion that reason is able to uncover through the C.I. a system of universal laws.

The following sections show how this dubious idea of the rational self engenders a particular figuration of freedom, which imposes manifold, arguably arbitrary, fetters on self-determination.

3. Transcendental freedom

Transcendental freedom is one of the two core constituents of Kantian freedom.[26] Agents possess a power of choice, that is, an ability to decide the norms, the ends and the means of their action.[27] Transcendental freedom is a property of choice. In a wide sense, it signifies freedom from the law of objective causality in nature, under which a preceding event *a* causes with necessity event *b* at present time.[28] Transcendentally free choice is choice that is not coerced by antecedent causes, regardless of whether these are external *or internal* to the self.[29] For human beings, transcendental freedom is expressed in two crucial ways: human conduct is affected, but not necessitated by personal desires and needs, and human choice is not tethered to fixed objects.[30] The power to decide to act or not on any particular inclination, the power to select among different objects of desire, and the power to revise one's current ends fall under

---

[25] Kant (1997), pp.28-29, 32, 41, Kant (1998), p.62, Kant (1960), p.31.
[26] Kant (1998), p.52, PR, 30, Kant (1996), pp.13, 18, Allison (1990), p.135; on the two main conceptions of freedom in Kant, see Allison (1996), pp.129-130.
[27] See Kant (1998), pp.24, 52, Kant (1997), p. 29, Kant (1996), pp.11-13, 18.
[28] Kant (1997), pp.26, 80.
[29] Kant (1997), pp.80-82.
[30] Kant (1996), p.13, Kant (1997), pp.26-27, 30, 81, 98, Kant (1991), pp.223-224.

transcendental freedom.[31] Less obviously, transcendental freedom encapsulates also, for Kant, the presumed ability to stand above any private inclination and to 'act on principle' against *all* sensible incentives that happen to be present in us.[32]

Irrespective of the reality of this idea, it is evident that Kant's transcendental freedom projects an exalted notion of human freedom. In this scheme of things, human agency is not predetermined by the laws of the natural world or by ends and norms that nature has implanted in our constitution. Moreover, Kant's view builds into human freedom the possibility of making new beginnings. Individuals can disrupt established routines and anticipated forms of behaviour that follow suit from past events -external circumstances or prior acts and habits of the self. We can originate a new series of events. Hence, we can free ourselves from ourselves, from our present ends and routines of conduct, by thinking and acting differently. In other words, human agents are vested with the power to transcend nature, their social contexts and themselves.

The catch is that these radical edges of Kant's theory are blunted by the 'necessary supplement' to transcendental freedom that he introduces. Since their choice is not regulated by instinctual or other objective mechanisms, free agents need to make up their mind for themselves. Kant argues that free individuals should govern their decision-making on the basis of laws, because lawless choice is 'an absurdity.'[33] The next step of his reasoning specifies two conditions that laws should meet to qualify as laws of freedom.[34] First, the law must be autonomous, that is, a law we make for ourselves. This reconciles law and free choice. Second, the autonomous law should not hinge on any particular ends and sensible impulses. Only such a law expresses and

[31] Kant (1997), pp.27, 30,82-83, Kant (1991), pp.73-74, 80, 223-224, Kant (1998), p.26, Kant (1960), p.19, Allison (1990), pp.207-208, Allison (1996), p.152.
[32] Kant (1997), pp.27, 30, 63, 81, 98, Kant (1991), p.224.
[33] Kant (1998), p.52.
[34] See Kant (1998), pp.52-53, 62, Kant (1997), pp.26-27.

preserves our transcendental independence from empirical determinations. Kant reaches thereby the conclusion that the laws of a free will are the objective laws of reason. These laws are autonomous because they are framed by our own legislative faculty, and they establish our transcendental freedom from determination by desires because they enjoin us to observe them by virtue of their universal validity alone, irrespective of any personal wants. '[H]ence a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.'[35]

It is fallacious to think that the fusion of freedom with the universal laws of reason follows simply from the conjunction of transcendental freedom with autonomy. The essential underpinning of this merger is Kant's construction of the rational self, which both inscribes universal principles into the legislative faculty of the agent *and* elevates these principles to the most valuable trait of the person.

For one thing, the categorical imperative and all other objective laws qualify as 'autonomous' only if they are indeed inherent in the lawmaking power of any rational subject and they are not simply external impositions, the private dogmas of Kant and like-minded rationalists. For another, Kant is well aware that individuals can give themselves principles other than the 'objective laws' of reason.[36] The thesis that 'freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other'[37] is premised on transcendental freedom construed narrowly as 'independence from *everything* empirical.'[38] The unconditional laws of reason meet the stringent requirement of disengagement from *all* sensible desires. A pertinent question to ask, then, is what carries the burden of justification in this argument: is it autonomy and the pursuit of *independence* from desires or the pursuit of independence from *desires*?

---

[35] Kant (1998), p.53.
[36] Kant (1998), pp.17-18, 48-51, Kant (1991), pp.103, 248-249, Kant (1997), pp.19, 64, Kant (1960), pp.31-32, 40.
[37] Kant (1998), p.26.
[38] Kant (1997), p.81, my emphasis.

Kant acknowledges that when a transcendentally free agent acts driven by her wants rather than by universal laws, her choice is not causally predetermined. The individualX has freely decided to indulge her fancies.[39] So, following one's impulses is compatible with transcendental freedom in the sense of spontaneous choice.[40] Moreover, desire-based choice does not diminish or eliminate the self's freedom from particular ends, given that competent agents are able to revise their preferences. Could it be that the imperative to detach oneself from *all* private longings follows from an urge to maximise independence? Not really, because the reciprocity thesis actually attaches the self to a particular set of determinations: the a priori laws of universal reason. So, the requirement of complete disengagement from the impulses of desire cannot be justified by evoking a general drive for independence. And given Kant's recognition that human individuals are both desirous and rational beings, what could account for the will to exclude only the influences of desire and to do so in favour of other constituents of the person? Nothing else than a value judgement which privileges the laws of reason over and against the callings of desire.[41]

It is under the spell of his image of the rational agent that Kant elides freedom with obedience to the 'immutable laws' of reason.[42] And the constraining effect of this equation, which is the hallmark of Kantian freedom, is that it represses our reflective autonomy from individual principles. Instead of upholding the freedom to question any given norms, Kantian freedom is accomplished ideally through an abiding adherence to a specific group of unchanging laws.

Here we touch on the internal tension that runs through Kant's theory. Kantian freedom pushes to the extreme the pursuit of independence from certain

[39] Kant (1960), pp.17, 19.
[40] Kant (1960), p.19.
[41] See e.g. Kant (1997), pp.74-75.
[42] Kant (1998), p.52.

determinations- particular feelings, impulses and ends- at the same time as it stifles to the vanishing point our independence from other determinations- the unconditional laws of reason. Kantian freedom can be challenged, thus, immanently, by evoking Kant's own idea of transcendental freedom. Kant's counsel to submit to fixed laws represses transcendental freedom as the freedom to break with the past and any settled norms of the person; the freedom to begin something new by embracing different principles.

Kant and his later disciples have made an effort to win people over to Kantian freedom by presenting us with a forced choice between this scheme of freedom or anarchy, chaos, irrationality and so on.[43] This is, of course, a false dilemma, because freedom from fixed laws is not a byword for lawlessness or chaos. Self-regulation and a measure of consistency are compatible with the freedom to review and change particular norms every now and then. This is amply demonstrated by democratic regimes, which combine the rule of law with the freedom of the people to revise the law. The latter freedom is paramount, because, *inter alia*, it is key to another freedom that is highly prized by Kantian liberals, the independence of the person from particular ends and the liberty to alter life-projects and explore different pursuits.[44] The entrenchment of regulative laws confines our choice of ends within the bounds of the specific prescriptions, proscriptions and unintended consequences that ensue from any given principles.

To give fuller scope to transcendental freedom and eschew the closing effects of Kantian freedom it is not necessary to break completely with Kant. What is mainly required is to do away with Kant's mirage of a rational self who comes laden with a

---

[43] Kant (1991), 102-103, 248-249, O'Neill (1989), 26, 58, 76.
[44] See e.g. Kant (1991), pp. 73-74, 224, Rawls (1999), pp.131-132, 160.

priori laws. This amendment is all the more justified to the extent that Kant's account of reason rests on unvindicated stipulations.

The next section is focussed on the centrepiece of Kant's theory of freedom: autonomy. My aim is to trace out the conflicting impulses of this conception, to amplify my main critique of Kant, which I have just outlined, and to engage possible objections to the argument.

4. Autonomy

a. Kant's argument

Kant's emphasis on autonomy and certain insights that he drew out in this context are, no doubt, a lasting contribution of his theorisation of freedom. Kant's arguments help to explain why free choice should be autonomous, that is, why agents should determine themselves to act on the basis of self-imposed principles, if they want to achieve a fuller realisation of freedom. Lawless choice is an *Unding* (an 'absurdity' or nonentity)[45] both empirically and ideally, both because persons tend to always deploy certain criteria to decide their ends, and because wanton choice, to the extent that it occurs, bears detrimental implications for human agency. Undisciplined thought and action cannot attain much, and they are liable to self-subversion on account of the pursuit of contradictory ends, the use of unsuitable means etc.[46] On a social level, anarchy jeopardises freedom and individual activity, because a lawless society is prone to chaos, engenders insecurity, and permits or even invites the rule of force.[47] If lawless choice is an *Unding*, the lack of active and reflective self-legislation entails inevitably a state of diminished freedom: thought and action will be determined by

---

[45] Kant (1998), p.52.
[46] Kant (1991), pp.247-249, Kant (1998), pp.31-33.
[47] Kant (1997), pp.25-26, Kant (1991), pp.102-103, 249.

chance circumstances along with internal and external laws, which have not been chosen by the agents themselves.[48]

Reflective self-legislation results, by contrast, in a substantial expansion of choice. Autonomy extends the reach of self-determination to a fundamental level of agency. Autonomous agents define not only their different ends and courses of action, but also the very principles, which regulate their choice of ends and means. Furthermore, autonomy broadens freedom of choice in all other respects. Every principle proscribes or prescribes certain moves to the exclusion of other possibilities. By allowing the selection of different principles, autonomy widens the range of eligible options.

Central elements of Kant's construal of autonomy speak critically to present-day debates. On contemporary English interpretations, autonomy signifies basically a willing identification of the agent with the desires and principles from which she acts.[49] But on this understanding, the choice of particular ends and maxims may be dictated at a deeper level by unchosen determinants and may remain, therefore, fundamentally heteronomous and constrained. Kant's conceptualisation of autonomy brings this issue into relief and focuses attention on the higher-order principles that govern individual choices. To be effectively in charge of themselves, autonomous agents must form reflectively the fundamental principles that direct their thought and action. Otherwise, they will remain under the sway of random causes or externally imposed laws.[50]

Kant put two further twists on autonomy, which gesture towards a high-minded ideal of human emancipation. First, in autonomous self-legislation, individuals should strive to rise above any passive influences. Autonomous subjects should frame their principles released from the guidance of ready-made laws, unexamined dogmas,

[48] Kant (1991), pp.54, 248, Kant (1997), pp.26-27, 30, Kant (1998), pp.40-41, 47-51.
[49] Dworkin (1988), Frankfurt (1971).
[50] Kant (1998), pp.47-51, Kant (1991), pp.247-249, Kant (1997), pp.30, 38-39.

impulses and any influences, which have not been actively constituted or reflectively endorsed by the subjects themselves. Kant's thinking expresses an aspiration to *full* self-legislation. Moreover, under passive influences Kant also ranges the self's own nature, more specifically, features of one's own person, which have not been actively produced by oneself. Autonomy is animated thus by the drive to liberate individuals from unchosen layers of their self and to make their person an object of active constitution. These radical moments of Kantian autonomy come out clearly in his rejection of principles that are grounded in pregiven ends:

> 'Wherever an object of the will has to be laid down as the basis for prescribing the rule that determines the will, there the rule is none other than heteronomy....the will [determines itself] by means of an incentive that the anticipated effect of the action has upon the will...[B]ecause the impulse that the representation of an object...is to exert on the will of the subject in accordance with his natural constitution belongs to the nature of the subject...the will would not give itself the law but a foreign impulse would give the law to it by means of the subject's nature, which is attuned to be receptive to it.'[51]

The impulse belongs to the nature of the self, but it counts as 'foreign' from the standpoint of autonomy, because the impulse is given prior to the will as a capacity for active self-legislation. The self's own nature is a heteronomous authority, when it has been formed independently of reflective self-determination.

The problem is that Kant goes on to identify autonomy with self-determination 'in accordance with immutable laws...of a special kind'[52], that is, in accordance with the

[51] Kant (1998), p.50.
[52] Kant (1998), p.52.

Categorical Imperative and the other universal laws of practical reason.[53] And this move contradicts head-on the ideal of self-definition free of pregiven impositions. The Categorical Imperative and all other objective laws of morality are eternal commands of universal reason, whose definition is not at the discretion of the rational agent.

The notion that autonomy lies in adhering to the given laws of our rational nature flies also in the face of Kant's idea that autonomy involves a critical distancing from laws preinscribed in our nature. It violates, furthermore, the spirit of Kant's pronouncements on autonomous thought and critical reason in his "Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment.' In this essay, Kant urges individuals to exit their state of immaturity and exercise autonomously their reason by emancipating themselves from '[d]ogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use...the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity.'[54] Self-reliant thought follows the injunction '*[a]rgue about as much as you like and about whatever you like...!*'[55] But when autonomy stands for an unwavering conformity to the C. I. and other 'objective' laws of reason, autonomous agents are held captive to particular formulas. Besides, the C. I. along with the substantive laws that it sanctions become entrenched as objective truths of reason, and are thereby placed beyond the reach of critical inquiry into their validity, their meaning and their implications for free agency.

As noted above, Kant furnishes arguments to the effect that free agents should govern themselves with *laws* they have defined for themselves. But these arguments do not establish that the laws in question should be *immutable precepts of universal reason.* Two main lines of reasoning could be read off from Kant's theory in support of this specific thesis.[56] The first one turns crucially on the nature of the lawmaking

---

[53] Kant (1998), pp.39-41, 47, 52-53, 63.
[54] Kant (1991), pp.54-55.
[55] Kant (1991), p.59.
[56] In Kant's text in Kant (1998), p.52, this thesis seems to follow also from the notion of causality from

power that enables human individuals to issue their own laws instead of obeying the laws of nature and instinctual regulation. Our legislative power is, of course, reason, and the 'essential constitution of a rational cause' is 'the condition of universal validity of a maxim as a law.'[57] If they act on this condition, the agents of autonomy will end up endorsing an identical set of timeless, universal laws, given Kant's further assumption that all rational individuals are bound to settle on the same laws when they apply the test of the C.I.. In short, one way to explain why autonomy lies in observing the perennial laws of reason is by arguing that our lawmaking power is designed to produce these particular laws. So, if agents want to rule themselves through laws of their own making rather than through laws decreed by nature or other authorities, they will enact the CI and the other unconditional laws of reason.

This first argument remains, however incomplete, because Kant is very much alive to the fact that human lawgivers can effectively make the law in different ways, by forming maxims that are tailored to their particular conditions and inclinations.[58] So, it does not suffice to appeal to the workings of our lawmaking faculty. Kant's reasoning is premised on a further condition: '[a]utonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself *(independently of any property of the objects of volition)*',[59] that is, independently of the attractions of particular ends. As argued earlier on, Kant holds that reason legislates universal laws. Any other laws that individuals make are produced under the impact of their subjective inclinations.[60] So, by driving out their private impulses, agents set their reason free to issue its universal principles.

---

which Kant operates. But Kant offers no argument to show why such a conception is pertinent for the causality of the will.

[57] Kant (1998), p.62.

[58] Kant (1998), pp.17-18, 48-51, Kant (1991), pp.103, 248-249, Kant (1997), pp.19, 64, Kant (1960), pp.31-32, 40.

[59] Kant (1998), p.47, my emphasis.

[60] Kant (1998), pp.23-24, 31, 34, 47-50, Kant (1991), pp.18-19, Kant (1960), p.31.

Kant's full thesis is, then, that autonomous agents should embrace and enact only a specific set of laws from the entire range of norms they can potentially form: the laws that they have conceived disengaged from their personal longings. His explicit argument for this instruction is that if the agent allowed his impulses to guide him in his lawmaking, the law would be dictated by passive influences.[61] And, in the final analysis, the law would be taken over ready-made by 'nature'-the independent mechanisms that have begotten one's drives. Desire-based principles are essentially heteronomous, even if they are self-imposed, because they derive from sources other than the agent's own legislative faculty.[62]

If, however, we probe deeper into this argument, it becomes obvious that what does the justificatory work here cannot be an aspiration to full autonomy -to a mode of self-legislation that would be completely free of prefixed constraints and through which the agent would originate her own law independently of pregiven determinations. In the view of autonomy that Kant advocates, agents are bound by predetermined laws, the a priori laws of reason, and enact predefined decrees that are not of their original making. It is the constitution of reason that dictates the C.I. and leads rational individuals to adopt the same universal laws. And Kant's individuals do not choose or produce the structure of their reason any more than they select or author the impulses that happen to arise in themselves.

Consequently, Kant's rationale for his notion of autonomy cannot simply be that individuals must realise this conception if they want to be authors of their laws -since they can make the law in other ways- or that they should follow his injunctions if they are after 'full autonomy' -since his ideal does not promote an unconstrained and original lawmaking in the abstract. Kant's argument needs a third axiom of his

[61] Kant (1998), pp.47-51, Kant (1997), pp.20-21, 23, 30, 38-39.
[62] Kant (1998), pp.50, 30.

practical philosophy: from all the laws that agents could form and impose on themselves, they should hold on to the unconditional laws of their reason *because of the supreme authority of these norms*. Otherwise put, autonomous individuals should identify with pure universal reason, *because this is their 'higher vocation'*, and they should frame their laws from this standpoint. Kant is not interested in the pursuit of independent and original self-legislation as such. His aim, rather, is the full autonomy of 'universal reason', the full autonomy of his regulative ideal of the self.

The case for Kantian autonomy I have just presented fuses three different strands of ideas, which include the notion of self-legislation, assumptions about the structure of reason and normative claims about the self. Kant's premise that individuals should identify with universal reason explains why he singles out desires as burdens on autonomy,[63] although individuals could also make their laws without heeding the universal commands of reason and could regard these commands too as external constraints on free lawgiving.

The force of Kantian autonomy hinges thus essentially on the validity of Kant's presumptions about the constitution of practical reason and the supreme authority of its presumed objective laws. From my earlier remarks about Kant's account of reason, it follows that Kantian autonomy is a highly questionable figure.

b. The thralls of Kantian autonomy

But the crucial defect of Kantian autonomy is not the contestability of its foundations, but its practical implications, which are all the more difficult to accept in light of their tendentious justification.

Kant's doctrine sponsors an unduly restrictive interpretation of autonomy, because it calls on autonomous agents to act always from an unalterable set of laws, which are

---

[63] Kant (1998), p.59, Kant (1997), p.98.

predetermined by universal reason. So long as they want to achieve autonomy, individuals are not allowed to adopt different laws, and they are not entitled to question and reform the prefixed imperatives of reason. This view negates autonomy in the form of an unrestrained, open choice of personal norms and eliminates autonomy as sovereignty over one's laws, which extends naturally to the freedom to revise any laws. Of course, Kantian autonomy places also substantial constraints on the choice of ends and the freedom to experiment with the new. Perennially fixed laws mean a perennial ban on the pursuit of possibilities beyond those licensed by the established laws. Now, the various limitations that attend Kantian autonomy appear all the more unnecessary and unjustified to the extent that they are grounded in contentious and unvindicated premises.

The rejection of Kant's construal of autonomy does not entail a dismissal of Kant's project as a whole, and does not presuppose a radically different standpoint. The critique I sketched out could proceed by disentangling Kantian ideas on autonomy from Kant's brand of rationalism, and by deploying the former ideas to challenge the dogmas of Kantian reason. In other words, one could pit against Kantian autonomy an ideal of active self-legislation through critical reason, which may challenge any preestablished truths. And this ideal is near to the heart of Kant's own thought.

My polemic against Kantian autonomy can elicit two different kinds of objections. Some critics may try to defuse the claim that Kantian autonomy enthrals the free self to unchanging and pregiven laws. Kant's ethics does not foist on us a closed list of laws, because it is organised around the Categorical Imperative, which can be always deployed to criticise and revise particular laws. Using the critical standard of universalisability, Kantian agents may always reform any substantive laws and adapt them to new circumstances or understandings. As such, the C.I. does not bind us to

any specific laws, because it simply enjoins us to give to ourselves laws that could be enacted by every agent. Different individuals may endorse different laws in keeping with this criterion and may change their mind at a later stage. From Hegel onwards, the stock criticism of Kant's ethics is precisely that the C.I. cannot single out any definite set of practical laws. If one is not convinced that reason comes equipped with a priori universal principles, there is no ground for fearing that a commitment to the criterion of universalisability would bind us to preestablished laws of reason -simply because there are no such laws.

My rejoinder is, first, that the Categorical Imperative is itself a predefined law, which is not subject to revision, and is not harmlessly formal and empty, no matter how beset with indeterminacy it is. All personal actions should follow from principles, which are possible to will as universally enacted. This puts in place a stringent filter of admissibility that contracts the range of eligible options, even if it does not sanction a unique canon of laws. For all its pertinence on the level of fundamental social and inter-social relations, it is far from obvious that the C.I. should regulate all personal life decisions or sexual and cultural practices. For instance, the C. I. would arguably proscribe homosexuality and sexual practices that do not serve reproduction, because one cannot logically will a world in which non-reproductive sex is practiced by all: this would put human life in jeopardy.[64] It looks as if the C.I. can constrict thought and action beyond a necessary and unavoidable minimum. And this means that it may impose *unwarranted* limitations on freedom, if the C.I. is not an essential condition of reason that is objectively valid in all areas of action.

---

[64] Cf. Kant's own pronouncements on sexual ethics in Kant (1996), p.62. In defence of Kant's theory, it could be countered that it is not inconsistent to will a world in which all homosexuals are allowed to act on their sexual preferences, presuming that not all human individuals are homosexuals. But I doubt that such a 'law' could survive the standard of universality prescribed by the C.I., because it is essentially relative to subjective conditions whereas the C.I., and all objective practical laws in Kant's sense, are supposed to be 'unconditional', that is, independent of personal circumstances and inclinations.

Let us put now the Categorical Imperative to one side. Kantian autonomy entails a self-incurred captivity to fixed norms *on account of its very definition of autonomy.* Kant construes autonomy as self-determination in accord with immutable principles.[65] This promotes a rigid attachment to particular norms, which is effectively supported by Kantian reason, a form of reason that cultivates a dogmatic and inflexible cast of mind. Kant stipulates that universal reason institutes objective laws, which can be grasped securely by any rational individual who applies the test of the C.I..[66] Consequently, once they have hit upon principles that pass this test, individuals who subscribe to Kant's tenets have every reason to believe that they have discovered laws with absolute validity and no reason to be exercised by the agonies of fallibility and indeterminacy. They will be certain that they are right, and they will feel, therefore, compelled to abide permanently by the particular laws they have discovered.

It should be emphasised that Kantian reason can shackle the self to predefined laws irrespective of the existence or not of any a priori laws of reason. At least some of the established social norms could survive the trial of universalisability or could be strained to fit into its mould. The dogma of an objective, a priori reason may serve thus to absolutise historical conventions. Social prejudices that can be formulated as general principles will be given the honorific title of 'objective precepts of universal reason', since, on Kant's assumptions, a maxim that fulfils the criteria of the C.I. is an objective, a priori law of reason. By adorning them with the halo of objectivity and absolute validity, Kantian reason can immunise cultural prejudices against critique and change. To illustrate with an example from his own writings, Kant presses the following points about sexual ethics: sexual organs are 'naturally' used only with members of the other sex; 'unnatural uses' are transgressions of laws that 'do wrong

[65] Kant (1998), p.52.
[66] See here above, p.57 and footnotes 16, 17, 18.

to humanity in our own person'; the 'natural use' is allowed only in the frame of marriage. And all this is *'necessary in accordance with pure reason's laws of right.'*[67] Its ability to falsify local customs into pure universal truth means that Kantian autonomy can effectively stifle the freedom of critical reason to interrogate received notions. This potential is intrinsic to the idea of universal reason which inspires Kantian autonomy, and does not depend on the reality of this idol.

A second line of response to my criticisms may attack the alternative ideal of autonomy that drives them. What it is wrong with following consistently a set of laws that individuals have autonomously given to themselves? Why is autonomy wedded to the freedom to question and change the law? This connection seems to stem from a vain desire to maximise autonomy and independence through the permanent practice of self-legislation and the ongoing reinvention of one's norms.[68] Besides, to oppose the instruction that autonomous choice should conform to universal laws is to surrender autonomy to arbitrariness, anarchy and egotism.[69]

The freedom to reform the law is an opportunity concept. It is at the discretion of the individual agent to decide whether, and how frequently, she will exercise this right. The proposed alternative to Kantian autonomy simply *preserves* the freedom to revise decisions. It is not committed to the goal of permanent revolution. There are various reasons for wanting to keep alive the possibility of radical revision. One of them lies in the will to uphold the freedom of self-legislation over the course of one's life. This does not necessarily express an empty desire for freedom as an end-in-itself. The preservation of autonomy fosters agency and life. It enables individuals to pursue more effectively their ends and to improve or expand their activities through

---

[67] Kant (1996), p.62, my emphasis.
[68] Such an argument can be reconstructed from points made by contemporary Kantians, see Rawls (1996), pp.400-408, O'Neill (1989), p.76, Korsgaard (1996), p.232.
[69] See O'Neill (1989), pp.70-77.

readjustments in their fundamental ideas, their habits and external conditions. The changing circumstances of life may render imperative the need to respond creatively to new conditions in order to sustain one's favoured activities or ends. Furthermore, the freedom to refashion one's regulative principles broadens freedom of choice and action because it permits individuals to embrace different ends and to explore different forms of life; different principles open up the possibility of different goals and ways of living.

On the final point, to resist the subjection of autonomy to invariable universal laws is not to plead for anarchy. Anti-Kantian autonomy is not at war with the law. Its aim, rather, is to ensure is that any definition of society or humanity's laws remains subject to review. There is a reasonable need for universal regulation and laws, but not for any *specific* set of laws.

In conclusion, Kant's configuration of autonomy limits and endangers a broad range of liberties: the freedom of self-legislation, the freedom of choice, the freedom of critical reason, the freedom to transcend one's world and oneself through radical reforms. Kant fails to justify his conception on the basis of freedom alone. He relies essentially on a particular vision of the rational self. And since Kant's main axioms about the rational self are not firmly established, Kant's work does not contain a successful vindication of Kantian autonomy. Hence, the constraints that Kantian autonomy places on freedom are unjustified and arbitrary *tout court*.

5. The politics of Kantian autonomy

This penultimate section adds the final touch to the critique of Kant's model of autonomy. Kant's conception is taken up now from a political standpoint, which is firmly anchored in a historically effective idea of autonomy. I. Berlin's famous

assault on Kant's theory was likewise couched in political terms.[70] But Kant's regime can damage the cause of emancipation in various ways, which go beyond the ability to legitimate despotism, the main charge that Berlin levelled at Kant's approach. Moreover, in fairness to Kant, the connections between his doctrine and authoritarian politics should be worked out in a more discriminating fashion. On Kant's view, coercion and personal autonomy are totally incompatible, because a person counts as autonomous only if she observes the laws of reason of her own accord and out of respect for the law alone.[71] Kant's ideal of autonomy is not directly political and cannot be coercibly enforced, as it involves processes of inner deliberation and motivation. It is Kant's construction of external freedom (freedom of action) and political autonomy, the power of the citizens as legislators of the state, which licences the autocratic use of state force and grinds down political freedom.

Equal external freedom is the fundamental value of Kant's *Rechtsstaat*.[72] To give effect to this principle, the liberal state should enact the 'laws of right', a subset of the moral laws of reason that regard only external actions, social relations, and, generally, issues amenable to public legislation and enforcement.[73] The Kantian argument for this thesis is that the universal laws of reason permit any action that could be consistently performed by all individuals. As a result, they establish a society in which individuals enjoy the maximum degree of intrapersonally compatible freedom.[74] Moreover, the public institution of the laws of right is an enactment of political autonomy. In the *Rechtsstaat*, the laws of the land are the laws that every autonomous person would choose for the regulation of her social relations, because the rules of

[70] Berlin (1969), pp.152-154.
[71] Kant (1998), pp.14-15, 47, 68-69, Kant (1996), pp.13-14, 21.
[72] Kant (1996), p.112, Kant (1991), pp.74, 99-100,112,117, 123, 187.
[73] Kant (1996), pp.14, 17, 45, 112, Kant (1991), pp.73-74, 118, 123, 187.
[74] Kant (1996), pp.24-25, 30, 146, Kant (1991), pp.73-75, 80, 112-113, O'Neill (1989), pp.94-104, 132-140, Mulholland (1990), p.351, Kersting (1992), p.345, Guyer (2003), pp.75, 83, 89.

right are principles legislated by the universal reason that inheres in all rational agents.[75]

The worst defect of Kant's free republic is that it denies its citizens the rights of democratic autonomy. Democracy vests individuals with the freedom to debate over their social laws and to make and remake their social arrangements at regular intervals. In democracy, the authorship of social rules is an ongoing project, whose reach extends to the constitution of the polity and the basic structure of society. By contrast, the subjects of Kant's *Rechsstaat* are not free to amend their constitutional laws and the basic terms of their society: their constitution is made up of unchanging laws, which are laid down by Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.[76] The ensuing constraints on political autonomy would be rather innocuous, if the rules that Kant places beyond the reach of reform were limited to the principles of freedom and equality. Unfortunately, the 'laws of right', which compose the constitution, form an entire canon of rules that regulate equal freedom in society and translate its demands in the various domains of life.

Kant's institutionalisation of freedom does not constrain political autonomy only by entrenching certain specific laws, but also by means of the very regulative end that it sponsors, and the conception of reason from which it operates. The ideal of a society administered by unaltering laws opposes a practice of civic autonomy that enables citizens to question and renegotiate their arrangements all the way down.[77] Kantian reason impairs further the freedom to review established norms by virtue of the attitudes and preconceptions that it foments. Universal reason prescribes principles that are valid for all and can be fixed objectively by any rational individual. As

[75] Kant (1996), pp.4, 10, 17, 51, 91-93, Kant (1991), pp.79-86, 123.
[76] Kant (1996), pp. 23, 45, 90, 92, Kant (1991), pp.118, 123. For examples of specific laws of right legislated by Kant, see Kant (1996), pp.54-55, 58-59, 62.
[77] Kant champions the notion of an unchanging constitution as regulative ideal in its own right. See Kant (1960), pp.90-93

explained earlier on, these articles of faith can serve to depoliticise historical laws and immunise them from contestation by draping them with the sanctifying cloak of 'objectivity.'

Political autonomy is a paramount liberty in itself, but it is also instrumental to the expansion of individual freedom in social relations and personal activities. The power to question and remake society without a priori limits enables societies to redress perceived injustices and oppressive effects radiated by any system of liberties. By deprecating the freedom to change institutions or by consolidating the authority of traditional norms, Kantian politics can block the promotion of equal freedom through social reforms.

Any institutional embodiment of universal freedom could harbour its own inequalities of freedom and exclusions (minimally, of competing interpretations of the principle). And changing historical circumstances may always call for revisions and the enshrinement of new rights. Kant's immovable constitution should be rejected, thus, even as an empty regulative norm. The inalienable right to challenge and remake any social structure is vital for the sustenance and continuous expansion of justice, freedom and practical progress.

Only on one condition would Kant's republic constitute a pertinent model of the free society. If, as Kant presupposes, it were true that the laws of equal freedom bear an exclusive and transhistorical content, which is objectively definable, a free society should indeed be ruled by an unchanging constitution: the legislation that establishes the ideal state of co-possible freedom. But it suffices to spell out this condition to see its implausibility.

The question of which social laws and settlements can best secure the equal freedom of individuals turns on complex, substantive questions of feasibility and desirability.

The variability of social circumstances; the historicity of the particular order of values and beliefs, which govern our conception of practicable and acceptable forms of co-existence; the various ways in which it may be possible to balance tensions between different liberties (e.g. the freedom to own property and the free circulation of ideas in a society where media are under corporate private ownership) and between liberties and other values (equality, justice, material prosperity); the possibility of different rankings of values and liberties: all these considerations suggest that the laws of equal freedom can be determined in an indefinite variety of ways. The fallibility of human knowledge; the prejudicial character of human thought, which always operates against the background of unjustified beliefs; the empirical underdetermination of theory, which allows for different conceptual arrangements of the same evidence: all these clues indicate that the laws of freedom could not be defined in an incontestable, neutral way.

Finally, the same Kantian presupposition cuts the umbilical cord that unites political autonomy with democracy, and opens the door to authoritarian policies under the banners of freedom –the best-known flaw of Kant's doctrine.

If the 'laws of freedom' that would be approved by autonomous citizens possess an objective and permanent content, which is permeable to the reason of all, it is not necessary to call democratic assemblies in order to register or form the collective will. The collective will on matters of public legislation is fixed independently of any real-time process of interactive deliberation.[78] Thus, democratic politics is not required to bring the rules of the polity in agreement with the autonomous preferences of society or its majority. Enlightened monarchy can be as good to this end.[79]

[78] Kant (1991), pp.79-86, 123, 187, Kant (1996), pp.9-10, 17, 45, Mulholland (1990), pp.289-293, 346-347, Yack (1993), p.227, Kersting (1992), p.355.
[79] Kant (1991), p.187; see also ibid., pp.79, 184.

Moreover, when the legislator frames his laws so that 'they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation', he institutes the laws of equal freedom and respects the political autonomy of all *'even if the people is at present in such a position or attitude of mind that it would probably refuse its consent if it were consulted.'*[80] That is, the forcible imposition of state policies is warranted in the name of freedom and political autonomy even when the state violates the actual will of the popular majority. For one thing, the laws of universal external freedom, which would be autonomously legislated by all citizens, are independent of fluctuating preferences. State authorities can establish these laws objectively through their exercise of universal reason and the procedure of the categorical imperative.[81] For another, in Kant's theory of legitimate violence in a free polity,[82] the use of coercive power by the state is fully justified when coercion accords with the objective laws of freedom and serves to enforce these laws, protecting thereby the equal freedom of all. So, state violence is allowed even against the will of the majority, when violence is sanctioned by the laws of right, which authorities can settle independently of the will of the people.

The bite of this critique against the Kantian republic can be felt even by objectivists who hold that it may be possible, by means of rational argument or otherwise, to define certain generally valid rights and conditions of freedom. An objectivist may believe in this possibility and yet doubt that state authorities are necessarily the best judges of what lies in the interests of universal freedom. He or she may also think that people could reasonably disagree over the proper laws of equal freedom and public debate should be allowed and fostered, so as to reduce error on the way to truth. The catch is that Kant's dogmas enable the state to bypass such scepticism and to

---

[80] (My emphasis) Kant (1991), p.79; see also Kant (1991), pp.77, 79-86,123, 187, Kant (1996), p.51.
[81] See e.g. Kant (1991), p.80.
[82] Kant (1996), pp.24-26.

legitimately trump the will of its citizens. Kant does not argue that the judgement of the state is authoritative, but he does stipulate that there are eternal, objective principles of reason and that any individual of mature rational powers can interpret them correctly. This alone entitles agents of the state, in their capacity as rational individuals, to speak in the name of the objective laws of freedom, which lend legitimacy to acts of coercion.

6. Concluding remarks

The repressive tone in Kant's theory has been typically traced down to the ideal of self-mastery under the rule of reason, which tyrannises desire and individual particularity. But Kant's thought holds out a valid lesson against hedonistic conceptions of freedom that bind free choice to the given preferences of the person or look forward to the liberation of repressed desires. Freedom is not unequivocally on the side of desire, and is allied to reason understood broadly as reflective deliberation and critical engagement with desire. The very activity of inner choice coincides with rational deliberation broadly construed. And agents who act compulsively or wantonly on their current wishes diminish their freedom in two ways. They subdue their free choice to the promptings of passive impulses, and they confine themselves within the limited range of objects that correspond to their actual wants. Contemporary thought is also aware that personal inclinations are likely to be effects of socialisation, which tie down individuals to the given forms of their society, with all the structures of domination and injustice this society may harbour.

The mainspring of illiberal effects should be located, rather, in Kant's essentialist image of the self, which inscribes into human individuals a reason composed of invariant universal precepts, and raises this form of rationality to the touchstone of

value. In their practice of self-legislation, through the free and competent exercise of universal reason, all individuals would spontaneously settle on the same, immutable principles. It is this construal of autonomy that engenders undue restrictions and carries the peril of state oppression. Autonomy is accomplished by cleaving to eternally valid laws, an idea that cuts against critical reason as the permanent freedom to call any preestablished norm into question. Autonomous individuals forgo the freedom to alter their basic norms and the freedom to pursue desires and options beyond those sanctioned by laws fixed once and for all. Kant's theory imprisons us in limited possibilities. Kantian autonomy curbs both the freedom to transcend the present limits of personality and the civic right to challenge one's state and society in the interests of universal freedom. The bounds of the legitimate exercise of freedom can be legislated by the state in an inflexible and 'objective' manner.

Arguably, Kant's doctrine would still stage a valid account of autonomy, if Kant were right in his assumptions about the structure of reason and the absolute worth of the universal laws of reason. This chapter insisted that Kant's claims about reason are highly contentious, and are not convincingly vindicated in his practical philosophy. The following chapter will sharpen and expand on these points from a wider perspective. But here it should be stressed that the case against Kantian autonomy does not amount simply to the protest that Kant's conception variously limits and jeopardises freedom. The case rests also on the argument that the constraints and dangers at issue are not adequately justified on any grounds. In other words, Kantian autonomy is dismissed because it imposes *arbitrary* fetters on freedom. This critique has two sources that reinforce one another: a strong valorisation of freedom, which disposes us against theories that restrict free choice, and reasonable doubts about the general validity of a particular theory with restraining effects. Finally, I suggested that

Kant's ideal of conformity to the unconditional laws of reason is not a pertinent construction of autonomy because, in reality, it is not about free self-legislation. It's about the realisation of a perfectionist model of the self.

However, contemporary thought and practice should avoid both an essential replication of Kant's schema and an outright rejection of his theory of freedom. One should work rather towards a critical modulation of this theory, because it contains valuable intuitions about freedom. In addition to the critical lessons mentioned above, Kant provides another important teaching, and a radical message. The teaching is that freedom should be conjoined to self-legislation. On the one hand, without autonomy agents remain in effect under the dominion of unchosen *nomoi*. On the other, personal self-discipline and regulation serve to avoid contradictions that frustrate elected ends, and are indispensable for accomplishing complex endeavours. Societal self-regulation is equally required to protect the freedom of all and to carry out collective projects. The visionary message of Kant is twofold. He projects an ability to surpass one's past self and prior circumstances by initiating something new, and he calls for the exercise of active self-legislation on the level of fundamentals: freedom is substantially enlarged when agents do not only make choices within a preestablished frame, but also shape the frame itself.

Autonomy should imply then the freedom of individuals to form their laws unbound by permanently fixed principles, the right to regularly contest and alter *any* given law, and the liberty to constitute the general contours of life in an original, creative way. Such a configuration of the concept follows from a strong investment of freedom, because it enhances liberty from constraints and freedom of choice, and is also truer to the ideals of transcendental freedom and full self-legislation, which found a seminal expression in Kant's work. The revised notion of autonomy requires a reformed idea

of reason, which has not abandoned the aspiration to universal truth and the unconditional, but has genuinely outgrown the naïve confidence that truth can be known with certainty. This reason searches for truth, but treats every premise as provisional and all validity claims as subject to question. The adoption of hypothetical attitudes towards any belief is the mark of a form of reason that has reached intellectual maturity under the weight of historical experience, and duly acknowledges its fallibility, historicity, deep-laid prejudice and far-reaching diversity. The eagerness of this reason to challenge any given principle is a force of liberation, because it helps to thrust aside arbitrary constraints on freedom and serves to enlarge our effective scope of discretion by de-sanctifying established norms. Reason recast along these lines is critical reason in a rigorous sense, because it may always reactivate its powers of critique and is disposed to apply them universally, exempting no odd principle from interrogation.

The process of reconfiguring Kantian autonomy that I have just outlined captures in essence moves made over the last thirty years by thinkers such as C. Castoriadis and M. Foucault. Their attempts will be explored in the second half of the thesis.

CHAPTER 3

An epistemological and normative critique of the essentialist paradigm

1. Introductory thoughts

The case against essentialist freedom is a stepping stone in the argument for the competing idea of freedom that formed gradually in contemporary theory and is set forth in the concluding chapters. My polemic against essentialism draws sustenance from various considerations and spreads over the entire thesis. In addition to points pressed in previous chapters, the thesis launches a more general attack. From an epistemological perspective, I turn attention to problems of justification that beset the organising pictures of essentialist schemes. In a separate move, subsequent chapters canvass an ontological argument, which takes aim at the very notion that there exists a universal human nature with unaltering substantive features. Finally, the essentialist template is put to question from a normative slant. The epistemological and the normative critique are the subject of the present chapter.

The review of Kant's doctrine of autonomy and Marx's self-realisation has traced out how essentialist scripts of freedom work from a particular ontology, which imputes general and timeless attributes to the person. These traits fill out the identity of the subject of self-legislation and self-determination or furnish the object of self-realisation. More generally, under the rubric of essentialist conceptions I subsume all views which couch freedom in terms of self-direction by a self with permanent generic features; frames that cast freedom as the unhindered realisation of a settled sense of the person; and theories which draw the limits of freedom relative to the presumed perennial needs and values of human beings.[1]

Beyond the postulate of an abiding human essence, these modes of conceptualising freedom proceed also from the epistemic axiom that human nature can be pinned

[1] The different variants of essentialist freedom are set out in chapters 1,2 and 4, pp.138-140, 147-148.

down with certainty. It is easy to imagine a view that professes belief in the existence of an unchanging human subject, but concedes also the fallibility of every description and does not bind freedom to any single portrait. Such a conception could embrace the practice of revisiting present self-understandings in order to keep up with new insights about human nature. By contrast, the discourses that I consigned to the essentialist genre of freedom evince confidence about their ability to capture human essence in valid accounts. This is evident by the very fact that they commit freedom to a particular apprehension of the human agent, as the analysis of Kant and Marx has made clear. Therefore, one way to contest essentialist freedom is by sapping belief in its presumption to know the essence of the human self. This is what the epistemological challenge aspires to do.

Unlike other diatribes against essentialism encountered in contemporary theory,[2] I want to avoid the conflation of the ontological and the epistemological level. The epistemological problematic unravelled in this chapter does not and could not throw doubt on the reality of a determined human essence. Difficulties in acquiring objective knowledge of x do not affect the reality of x itself. At stake is only the reliability of the different representations of human nature. The argument does not delve into the details of individual pictures, but is pitched on a higher level of abstraction. My focus is on the lack of objective warrants that could establish the exclusive verity of any particular rendition of the human subject.

Epistemic scepticism is a hardly original posture. But the discussion here goes to some lengths in order to bring out my distinctive take on scepticism and provide a sufficient vindication. The difficulties in justifying objectively any odd image of a universal self are key to my censure of essentialist freedom. I want to offer more than dogmatic assertions or sketchy points for this centrepiece of my argument.

---

[2] See e.g. Rorty (1989), Laclau & Mouffe (1987), Trigg (1999), pp.182-187.

Objectivism has staunch defenders in contemporary thought, who typically level facile charges of confusionism or obtuseness against so-called 'postmodern scepticism'.[3]

The nub of the case I shall put is that there are no incontestable criteria to authenticate any exclusive depiction of human essence. The considerations adduced range from the unknowability of the future to the empirical underdetermination of theory and the difficulties in adjudicating between different moral outlooks. No doubt, *all* framings of human freedom are shot through with assumptions about the human agent. And sceptical qualms about the objectivity of knowledge and value judgements can destabilise any ontological picture rather than essentialism alone. But I claim that the problem of justification acquires a special poignancy for essentialist conceptions, because they rely on definite ideas of the self more heavily than other discourses of freedom, which will be explored in following chapters. Specific visions of the human self are lodged right at the heart of the doctrines that form the essentialist school, and govern their construal of freedom in the different ways set out above.

To give an example for the aporias that follow from epistemic uncertainty, I note the existence of different perceptions of the human self and the fact that the various essentialist theories of freedom do not subscribe to the same model. As R.Trigg has asked in his *Ideas of Human Nature*, '[w]hen faced with so many differing views about the nature of human beings, how can we decide which is right and which is wrong?'[4] Let us grant that freedom should be geared towards the fulfilment of human essence; the trouble is that there are no sufficient yardsticks that would allow us to settle on *the* right version of the self.

---

[3] For examples of such objectivist positions in contemporary philosophy, see Habermas (1990a), Barry (2001), Norris (1997).
[4] Trigg (1999), p.183.

The normative critique, in the second part, encircles the illiberal side effects of essentialist freedom. Its various instances can confer legitimacy on paternalist and authoritarian practices and engender various restraints. By naturalising particular moulds of human subjectivity and by shackling freedom to the pursuit or the absolute respect of these forms, essentialist schemes ensnare agents within fossilised practices; the freedom to refashion elements of self-identity and life tends to eclipse from view.

2. General epistemological considerations

The epistemological argument casts doubt on the chances of objective justification in knowledge and morals. This is done from a series of standpoints which are taken up in turn in the following sections. To feel the bite of this challenge, one should have in mind not abstract characteristics of the human being, but theories and interpretations, which flesh out the meaning of these features, draw out their implications for human life, imbue them with value judgements and adjoin them to other traits. Differences among the various figurations of human nature show up precisely at these junctures, which mark the transition from empty signifiers (such as 'reason') to meaningful ideas. It is an all-too-easy riposte to the ensuing remarks to point out that, no matter how uncertain knowledge claims can be, few can reasonably dismiss Kant's assertion that 'reason' belongs to our ontological equipment or Marx's premise that all individuals possess a variety of potentialities and productive faculties. Let us concede the point about 'reason.' What have we agreed to? To name but two possibilities, reason may designate a faculty for open-ended questioning without intangible a prioris or Kant's a priori laws. To acknowledge the manifold capacities of human agents is a rather uncontroversial gesture, but what about the thesis Marx sets up on this foundation, i.e. that a fulfilling human life requires the exercise of a wide array of personal powers? The following points speak, thus, to substantive propositions and

elaborated accounts of the human self. They bear also on ideals of the self and related value-judgements.

a. the constitutive inadequacy of empirical evidence

The openness of the future

When grounded in empirical evidence, the knowledge of human regularities can have only a precarious standing. I start off with a 'naïve' empiricism, which elevates experience to the main source of cognition and the touchstone of justification.

Sensory evidence is from the past and the present. Since the future has yet to appear to the senses, it is never certain on empirical grounds that perceived regularities will continue to hold.[5] Experience cannot guarantee the universal *permanence* of any characteristic of the human subject, because it is temporally bounded. Moreover, empirical knowledge is relative to the actual level of progress in gathering and processing information. Further research may unsettle any currently accepted uniformity.[6]

When it comes to human agents, the argument from empirical facts to the difficulty of fixing regularities can take another turn. The available evidence indicates, actually, the variability of the human subject. The place of the sceptic who proclaims uncertainty about the future is taken by the 'reasonable' person, who extrapolates from past experiences probabilistic conclusions about the future. Ample evidence attests to the fluctuation of human traits such as patterns of thought and action. Human action has altered human life in ways that broke radically with tradition. Such ruptures occurred, for instance, through the emergence of new value orientations (consider democracy). Experience teaches that human subjects are capable of

---

[5] Popper (1972), pp.42, 54-56. An original version of the argument is found in Hume (1978), pp.86-94, 130-142; also Hume (1999), pp.108-118.

[6] For more on this argument and 'Hume's problem of induction' see Rosenberg (2000), pp.63-65, 110, Musgrave (1992), p.158, Chalmers (1999), p.25, Couvalis (1997), pp.1-2.

profound self-alterations.[7] The present, moreover, harbours the further possibility of genetic interventions and modifications in the biological endowment of the species.

Underdetermination in the present

In the above argument, I referred to sensory observation as an unproblematic given that grounds empirical knowledge. One can complicate this picture by pushing on the claim that 'perception without conception is *blind* (totally inoperative).'[8] The input of the senses can be spoken about only by means of symbolization. Statements about empirical observations outstrip the mute sensory influx. Observation statements deploy concepts that identify objects and object-relations. Insofar as their function is to categorize received perceptions into kinds and classes, concepts do not come with perception itself. Different perceptible similarities could serve to isolate different entities and classes. It is the activity of conceptualisation that does the categorizing by partitioning, highlighting and putting together sense data. Moreover, concepts graft an order on the sensory input by asserting *unobservable* relations between its elements (think of causal connections). Modern scientific discourse abounds with unperceived constructs, such as posited entities and highly abstract models, which are key to the scientific explanation of natural facts.[9]

The point that description transcends experience strikes at the ability of evidence to finalise any particular conceptualisation of the self to the exclusion of other possibilities. Experience does not hold within itself the schemata that structure empirical cognition. For the same empirical input, it may be possible to apply more than one conceptual system, which parcel it out in different ways and bring into play other types of correlation. If different discourses provide comprehensive, simple and

---

[7] Fuller (1998), p.14; see also, among others, Rorty (1980), pp.350-352, Moser &Carson (2001), Parts 1-2, Feyerabend (1987), p.27 and footnote 11.
[8] Goodman (1978), p.6.
[9] Quine (1960), p.2, Chalmers (1999), pp.11-12, 49, Rorty (1989), pp.5-6,
Musgrave (1992), pp.55-56, 265-266, Popper (1972), pp.46-7, Goodman (1978), p.11, Kirk (1999), pp.26-28.

internally consistent articulations of the same data, the data alone cannot mark out any one of them as the most accurate account. Their discrepancies would derive from the conceptual form, not the empirical content.[10]

The inability of observation to sanction a singular presentation of the given is due to the empirical slack of all descriptions. This poses a real problem when there actually is a plurality of adequate schematisations of certain observations.[11] But, as a result of the empirical lag, the possibility of different accounts can be never ruled out in principle, even if, as yet, there is no cogent alternative to a present theory. '[W]e have no reason to suppose that man's surface irritations even unto eternity admit of any one systematization that is scientifically better or simpler than all possible others.'[12] A certain description could be unique and authoritative by empirical criteria, if it were already inscribed in the evidence itself. If this is not the case, we cannot decide whether any rendering of particular observations is the only conceivable pattern that meets standards of consistency and comprehensiveness. To ascertain that a specific picture is the best one it would be necessary to test all pertinent conceptualisations that the human mind can come up with. And this is an endless task, due to the open number of conceptual arrangements that imagination could summon into existence.

This shows the inherent limits of empirical evidence as an assurance that a particular description is uniquely true to the facts. There is an always-present possibility of alternative accounts displaying an adequate fit with the data.[13]

A stronger case for the insufficiency of empirical observation can be made in respect of propositions that are situated at a remove from singular, time- and space-

[10] Longino (1990), pp.77-81.
[11] Longino (1990), p.26; for an example of two mutually inconsistent theories supported by the same date, drawn from human evolution studies, see Longino (1990), pp.108-110.
[12] Quine (1960), p.23.
[13] Quine (1960), Chapters 1, 2, mainly pp.22-23, 78-79.

specific observations.[14] Such propositions involve unobservable notions and are caught up within a wider network of intersecting assumptions and statements. Law-like generalizations fall under this category.[15] Proceeding 'as they do from statements about *some* to statements about *all* events of a particular kind', generalisations go beyond the finite amount of available evidence from which they are inferred.[16] Essentialist portraits are made largely of such generalisations, which posit persisting attributes of the human being. Consequently, the underdetermination of statements, which are not simple observation reports, is particularly relevant to present concerns.

Suppose that a knowledge claim confronts experience in the company of other propositions. The ancillary propositions make it possible to deduce from the knowledge claim an observational statement that can be checked against factual evidence. Then, a negative empirical test can be attributed to one of the accompanying hypotheses. And any specific claim could be rescued from disconfirmation through alterations and adjustments at other junctures in the web of statements. In this case, empirical data may not be able to disqualify different pronouncements on human nature. Different statements could be reconciled with falsifying evidence by effecting changes elsewhere in the conceptual network in which they are positioned.[17]

In a broader perspective, accounts, which rest on empirical observations but exceed the deliverances of the senses, are related to evidence via rules of inference and background beliefs, such as judgements about the reliability of particular sensory evidence. The connecting rules and the background beliefs allow observers to hold a state of affairs x as evidence for a state of affairs y, which goes beyond any individual

---

[14] Quine (1960), p.64.

[15] Longino (1990), pp.58-59; see also Chalmers (1999), p.44, Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), pp.109-110.

[16] Chalmers (1999), pp.44-45.

[17] For this form of underdetermination, see Rosenberg (2000), pp.129-132, Chalmers (1999), p.89.

observation;[18] they bridge the gap between empirical data and propositions that explain them or derive conclusions from them. For instance, stories that establish causal connections carry expressions of causality that do not obtain in the observational statements.[19] Now, the same observations can form the basis of different narratives, when other background assumptions serve to link the evidence with the different stories. This has actually happened in various domains of inquiry.[20] In such cases, experience itself could arbitrate among alternatives if it were possible to test *empirically* their background notions. The odds are that this path is closed, because background beliefs (rules of logic, theoretical models and posits, hypotheses guiding inquiry) tend to be in excess of observational input, and what is evidential support for them is often so in the light of further background beliefs. It seems unlikely that a point can be reached at which empirical facts alone and not other background beliefs will stand as the ultimate foundation.[21]

Limitations on accessing empirical reality 'as such'

The previous thoughts can be pulled and stretched to buttress a somewhat stronger contention. If knowledge comes always conceptualised, empirical reality *'as such'* is a non-starter for evaluating the truth of different schemes: there is no independent and neutral access to reality that is not mediated by some conceptualisation.[22] Experience can confirm or falsify individual statements only against the backdrop of prior categorizations and criteria.[23]

Various arguments have been adduced in defence of this general thesis. Kuhn's claims about the paradigm-guided operations of science and the incommensurability of the different paradigms turn on a related idea. To investigate a domain of

---

[18] Longino (1990), pp.44-46; also Rosenberg (2000), pp.148-149, Chalmers (1999), p.118.
[19] Longino (1990), pp.58-59.
[20] Longino (1990), pp.26, 108-110.
[21] Longino (1990), pp.52, 58-59, 61.
[22] Rorty (1989), p.5.
[23] Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), p.67, BonJour (2000), p.269.

phenomena we put to work various 'standards of significance.' The stream of sensory stimulation cannot be comprehended in a systematic fashion without a prior identification of the significant questions and the empirical features which are crucial for answering these questions.[24] These prejudgments are implicit in all scientific models and practices. Although sensory evidence may set constraints and comprise salient features, the standards of significance are not dictated by empirical observation itself. The diversity of standards, which, sometimes, different scientific approaches carry to the same field of inquiry is further proof that the criteria structuring knowledge are not embedded in experience.[25]

The idea has been sponsored that it is misleading even to talk of a single set of facts which are differently laid out in various models. The language used in observation statements already yields a certain carving up of sensory impressions under particular concepts or other schemata that piece them together in a particular fashion.[26] The observation language is also permeated by various beliefs that affect the processing of information, such as presumptions about the reliability of different cognitive sources.[27] The world does not 'split itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called "facts".'[28] The 'facts' are always minimally structured through a framework that consists of interrelated beliefs, classifications and data. This is the most radical version of the doctrine that the subject of knowledge lacks a direct access to the real. There is no 'empirical evidence' delivered from the senses alone. As a result, it may be impossible to test different theorisations of some evidence according to how adequately they match 'the data.' Within a certain domain of inquiry,

---

[24] Taylor (1985), pp.61-63; Kuhn (1996), pp.103, 123, 148, 184.
[25] Kuhn (1996), p.199.
[26] Kirk (1999), pp. 26-27, 52, Rosenberg (2000), pp.167-171, Kuhn (1996), pp.123, 126-129, 141,148-149, 200-201.
[27] Feyerabend (1975), p.66.
[28] Rorty (1989), p.5.

divergent generalizations may be equally supported by their 'data', if the evidence is organised in ways that facilitate a good fit.

Such ideas, however, need to be hedged in with many qualifications. What impinges on the senses is not fully up to the observer and may ill accord with expectations that flow from given presumptions, concepts and rules.[29] A categorical scheme can fail on its own terms to match experience or to arrange it coherently. Factual evidence can serve to appraise different conceptualisations without recourse to an unverbalised matter. The theories can be judged on criteria of empirical reference and appropriate representation that are internal to the individual theories themselves. Relevant indices include also the consistency of a certain conceptual arrangement and the extent to which it accounts for empirical data however conceptualised.[30] Experience can suffice to discredit schemes that are fragmented, inconsistent or rely on scant evidence.[31] Therefore, an unqualified assertion of the sort 'there is no theory-independent access to reality, hence reality as such is irrelevant in judging knowledge claims' cannot stand examination. Consequently, the argument from the underdetermination of theory by evidence poses the most compelling challenge to the ability of experience to authorise an exclusive portrait of the human subject.

b. disputing the universality of reason

If logic and the various structures of thought composed an invariant universal system, they would enable an objective evaluation of knowledge claims through the scrutiny of the reasoning that underlies them. Universal reason could serve to assign different truth-values to the various configurations of human nature. The importance of reason is not limited to this auxiliary function. On some views of human subjectivity, reason

---

[29] Kirk (1999), pp.169, 172.
[30] Feyerabend (1975), p.284.
[31] Lynch (2001), p.150, Kuhn (1996), p.206, Kuhn (1993).

itself as a toolkit of eternal rules and concepts figures among the essential components of self. Such an idea of selfhood is dominant in the thought of I. Kant, among others, and falls under the essentialist paradigm.

From the present perspective, which investigates the possibility of secure knowledge, the primary question is not whether universal reason really exists, but if and how it can be pinned down with certitude. The need to vindicate any system of reason assumes a new urgency when alternatives are on hand and call for a choice. Although it has been historically hegemonic, the *idée fixe* that the rules of reason are universally the same has lost much ground. The number of sustainable conceptual schemes is actually in the plural.[32] New scientific theories have given up categories that used to be seen as indispensable a prioris (for instance, the Euclidean conception of space, which underlies Newtonian physics has been displaced by Riemannian space in Einstein's theory).[33] Diverse models of deductive logic have been devised, while more substantive styles of reasoning, which incorporate beliefs about the world, diverge widely across the different bodies of knowledge.[34] The signified of reason itself has been variously construed. Rationality may reside in the different styles of thinking peculiar to the particular social, scientific and other contexts, in the capacity for open-ended questioning, and so on.[35]

The classic sceptical fix, which denies to any system of reason the possibility of objective justification, is infinite regress.[36] Individual beliefs and principles can be certified by citing other beliefs and principles, which in turn stand in need of warrant, which can be provided against the foil of other assumptions and rules, and so on ad

[32] Hollis & Lukes (1982), p.7, Hacking (1982), pp.44-45, Meiland & Krausz (1982), pp.7-8, Kuhn (1996), pp.123, 149.
[33] Musgrave (1992), p. 235, Kuhn (1996), p.149.
[34] Hacking (1982), pp.48-66, Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), p.179.
[35] Hacking (1982), pp.44-45, see also Couvalis (1997), pp. 58-59, O'Neill (1992).
[36] Musgrave (1992), pp.11-14.

infinitum. Infinite regress could entail the absence of warranted beliefs, as justification is endlessly postponed.

There are three main ways out of an infinite backward movement in the train of premises that await vindication. One can break off arbitrarily the chain of deduction, appeal to self-evidence, or view justification as a function of the internal coherence of a system.[37] The last method seems unable to vouch for the superiority of any doctrine, as it is equally possible for different systems to display coherence relative to their own precepts and rules. Turning to the other methods, rationalists have often taken refuge to the claim that certain axioms and categories are self-evident or 'indubitable to the light of reason'. But intuition is an unlikely bedrock of objectivity if what is held to be self-evident can shift across time, place and persons, as has actually been the case in human history.[38] And appeal to self-evidence can hardly adjudicate between contending principles, when, for instance, principle x appears self-evident to person X and principle y to person Y.[39]

In short, a certain constellation of rational axioms and concepts could lay claim to being the inescapable kernel of rationality only if other possibilities had not come into existence. However, even if no alternatives for any particular rules and categories are in place, or if a subset of rules and categories is shared among alternatives, it is still uncertain whether this substantive residue of universal reason will remain identical

---

[37] Habermas (1990a), p.79, BonJour (2000), p.262. The possibility of circular justification is not considered among these alternatives, as it is questionable whether it can be accepted as a form of justification. At any rate, it is arguable that almost every premise or belief can be justified circularly. Another possibility, elaborated recently by K.O. Apel and J. Habermas, lies in justifying rational principles by showing that they are inescapable pragmatic presuppositions of any form of reasoning. They are not grounded in any other principle; their authoritative status derives rather from the fact that they are necessarily assumed when one engages in any mode of rational thought. But as Habermas himself grants, even if it were true that such inescapable presuppositions exist, any reconstruction of them remains fallible and contestable (Habermas (1990a), p.32).
[38] Musgrave (1992), pp.191, 235, Kuhn (1996), p.149.
[39] Musgrave (1992), p.191, Sinnot-Armstrong & Timmons (1996), p.10.

across time and space. 'It is in principle an open question whether the subjects of cognition will change their way of thinking about the world at some point or not.'[40]

c. the problem of the criteria and the diversity of cognitive sources

The argument from endless regress applies to all criteria of knowledge and any grounds of epistemic justification: they could be held dogmatically, without further scrutiny and warrant, or they could be ascertained by invoking other standards, which would then require vindication and so on ad infinitum.[41] If the guarantors of valid knowledge cannot be justified themselves, neither can the statements they certify. And without a way of appraising epistemic standards, we cannot make comparative judgements of significance when faced with a proliferation of epistemic criteria.[42] As a result, there is no deciding the issue between divergent depictions of the self, which are sanctioned by other yardsticks of truth (e.g. the voice of reason in Kant, the tribunal of history in Marx).

Cognitive sources, in particular, cast the question of epistemic justification in more radical terms, as they drag it down to a fundamental level. Beyond the difficulties that show up when a particular means of knowledge, such as experience or reason, is already granted a foundational status, beyond the various grounds for querying the ability of either sensory experience or rationality to underwrite a unique account of reality, there is a more fundamental issue, which bears on the validity of these cognitive sources themselves.[43] This twist of the epistemic quandary exposes the limits of justification, and is pregnant with consequences, given the actual multiplicity of cognitive sources and the concern with their relative reliability. Different sources

[40] G. Schonrich quoted in Habermas (1990a), p.96.
[41] Moser (2000), pp.557- 558, Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), pp.152-153, 170-171.
[42] Couvalis (1997), pp.111-112, Rorty (1999), p.180, Kuhn (1996), pp.103, 147-148, 199, Moser (2000), p.568.
[43] Fumerton (2000), pp.409-410, Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), p.156.

are available, which frequently deliver contending perceptions of the real (think of religion and science).

If knowledge is acquired always by means of a cognitive source, it is impossible to step outside any such medium and grasp the real itself in order to measure the truth conduciveness of the different sources. '[W]e cannot assume a position independent of our cognitive sources to deliver a test of their reliability...This, for better or worse, is the human cognitive predicament, and no one has yet shown how we can escape it.'[44] From this exudes an ineradicable uncertainty that cuts against the credibility of all forms of cognition and the truth-value of any knowledge claim.

Such radical doubts need not be seriously considered in everyday life. But they resurface sharply when the contestation of knowledge claims runs deep and assails their foundations. They are relevant to the choice among contrasting religious and empirical conceptions, or any other accounts of the human subject, which draw their content and validation from different vehicles of knowledge -perception, revelation, reason, tradition, intuition.[45]

Any medium of cognition admits, of course, of a circular justification. It can be argued, to wit, that experience and empirical knowledge have turned out historically - that is, empirically- to be more reliable than revelation and its alleged truths. But at the end of the day, the unavailability of independent testing means that reliance on any cognitive source and acceptance of the knowledge it yields rest on an act of faith. This is the most deep-cutting argument in support of the contestability thesis. Any view of the human self is radically contestable and may be impossible to vindicate against alternatives.

[44] Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), p.156.
[45] Moser, Mulder & Trout (1998), p.156.

3. Moral knowledge and objectivity

The diverse portrayals of the human subject are coloured with value judgments. One's notion of the person is typically shot through with judgments of importance that attach different weights to the various attributes of the self. Evaluations govern our selection from the manifold of empirical features and serve to pick out the traits of the human person qua human, the markers of the 'normal' or the ideal. On occasion, such judgments are explicitly articulated. Kant, for instance, singles out two major dimensions of the self, the desirous and the rational, and bestows the highest value on the universal rational part.[46] But values and principles enter subjectivity in a different and more straightforward way when they themselves figure among the components of the self in their capacity as values and norms of human action. To contest the objectivity of value judgments and moral principles is thus to reinforce the argument that no specific interpretation of the human self can be established as the unique truth. If the values that sanction or give substance to the different visions of the universal self are not objectively warranted, neither are these visions themselves.

a. the stronger challenge of moral diversity

The pervasive phenomenon of difference in ethical outlook has often been taken as evidence for a lack: the lack of a unitary, objective grid of moral appraisal. This is, presumably, the best way of accounting for the widespread and seemingly irresolvable disagreements over moral issues. Such an explanation seems more credible than the main alternative, i.e. that disagreement is due to the misapprehension of universal truth.[47] Truth can be salvaged, but only at the cost of being relativised to particular moral codes.

---

[46] See here above, chapter 2, p.57.

[47] Mackie (1977), pp. 36-37, Moser & Carson (2001), pp. 4, 16, Wong (1993), pp.444-445.

The world is inhabited by different moral doctrines, which come with different standards of evaluation. No neutral criterion, common to or independent of the various conceptions, is on hand. Accordingly, universal truth is a chimera.[48] This line of reasoning grinds sharper edges in the context of moral epistemology, because moral diversity is all-pervasive and moral disagreement is deep and persistent.[49]

Equally well known are the counterarguments. The mere fact of disagreement over the correct answer to a question does not prove that there is no single correct answer. Disagreement may be due to ignorance. Long-standing disputes in other domains of inquiry have eventually been resolved and a unique answer has been established.[50] Moreover, to deny the existence of universal moral truth seems to leave unexplained another salient fact: moral dissent and criticism. If every morality is valid by its own standards and there are no independent criteria, critique and argument across moralities have no place to stand.[51]

The actual variability of moral systems cannot prove the impossibility of universal truth, but it does carry implications. For any attempt to identify a single set of generally valid principles, the existence of wide-ranging diversity renders the need of justification more evident and pressing. Granting, for the sake of argument, the possibility of a correct answer to moral quandaries, the question is how to select among the various available candidates and how to defend this choice. All the arguments that show the limits of justification in general epistemology retain their force in the setting of moral epistemology.

---

[48] Rachels (2001), p.55.
[49] Williams (1993), pp.48-49, 52, 69-75, 153, 156-173, Sumner (2001), pp.69-79, Benedict (2001), pp.80-90, Wong (1993), pp.3-5.
[50] Wellman (1988), pp.271-272.
[51] Moser (2001), p.12, Wellman (1988), pp.274-275.

Rational intuition, revelation, coherence and experience are among the main methods of knowledge and justification in morals.[52] Rational intuition, to recall, is the nonsensuous apprehension of practical premises through the use of reason. The private business of intuition can hardly face up to the task of arbitrating between conflicting claims. What if certain individuals do not 'see' with their reason the authority of the principles that others recognize as self-evident and obligating?

For many moral outlooks, the main source of cognition and justification is revelation. This medium provides a powerful ground of assurance, since the Word of God cannot possibly be mistaken or unreliable, given God's benevolence and/or His superior knowledge of truth. However, different religions are available on the global market, and different prophets of God contend that God has disclosed moral truth to them, but are at odds with one another. In and of itself, revelation seems unlikely to sustain a single set of moral beliefs.[53]

Another path to the systematisation and vindication of moral knowledge proceeds through the pursuit of 'reflective equilibrium', the striving to achieve consistency between particular moral judgments and underlying general principles. However, the various moral beliefs could be organized into different systems that cohere around different foundational principles. Different systematisations can be all self-consistent by their own lights, their rules of inference, their ultimate morals standards, and so on.[54] The benchmark of coherence is not strong enough to filter out from the manifold of ethical beliefs a unique system of morals.[55]

---

[52] Wellman (1988), pp. 270-293, Sinnot-Armstrong & Timmons (1996), pp. 9-41, Timmons (1999), pp.226-246.
[53] Wellman (1988), pp.279-281, cf. Quinn (2000), pp.53-74.
[54] Sinnot-Armstrong & Timmons (1996), p.13.
[55] Jamieson (1993), p.482.

b. Moral facts: not 'factual' enough, variable or queer

Moral facts, that is, convictions about what is right, good, ideal and the opposite, are unlike the facts reported in observational statements. The latter entertain a closer relationship to empirical evidence and tend to command a higher degree of intersubjective agreement. That X was murdered may be unanimously acknowledged as a fact by the same people who dispute over the wrongness of murder and of X's murder in particular. Latent in factual beliefs of the kind rendered by observational statements is the assumption that we interact with a world of objects that exist outside and independently of ourselves. Sensory observation of this independent world can supply evidence that confirms some statements and discounts others. Ethics, by contrast, seems devoid of anything equivalent to sensory data received through the perception of independent objects.

Moral principles and judgments apply to empirical states of affairs and are instantiated in human practice. But they are not empirical observations in themselves, and lack their kind and measure of objective facticity. As a result, moral questions cannot be resolved through recourse to an external world that is more or less similarly perceived by most human individuals. By implication, assessments of objective validity become even more thorny and controversial when it comes to value judgments.[56]

On a particular view of moral facts, the facts are the *actual* moral codes that human beings enact in different societies and historical periods. It is doubtful that these moral facts can yield unambiguous evidence for any universal principle or moral code at large. The underdetermination thesis holds good here as well.[57] Moreover, *these* facts testify to the existence of wide-ranging and irreconcilable moral differences.

[56] Williams (1993), pp.132-155.
[57] MacIntyre (1988), pp.332-333.

Anthropologists, sociologists and moral theorists have often argued that no generally shared norms can be extrapolated from the diverse moral practices and principles that have been historically formulated and/or acted upon (of course, this reading of the evidence is open to question; the opposite thesis will be discussed below).[58]

Objectivist strands in moral theory sought to soar above the plurality of the actually observed and affirmed the presence of universally binding precepts: objective moral facts exist. But given their difference from other matters of fact, which are perceptible via the senses, a nonsensuous mental faculty, such as rational intuition, is required for the cognition of moral facts. Through reason or some other source of moral perception, agents recognize and comprehend objective moral premises, which are self-supporting and intrinsically prescriptive.[59] Grasping these premises and feeling motivated to follow them occur simultaneously in the same act of apprehension.

In view of the difficulties that plague intuitionist knowledge and justification, it is this recourse to intuitionism that in effect amplifies sceptical doubts. The root cause should be traced to the nature of intuition, which is an inherently private process unamenable to public, intersubjective scrutiny. Should mutually incompatible ideas appear obvious to the moral perception of different agents, intuition would authorise moral beliefs that contradict one another. Moreover, agents come to hold certain ideas as self-evident truths under the impact of prejudice, socialization, indoctrination or unconscious desires. To sanction intuitive knowledge can be tantamount to entrenching prejudice instead of recognising moral truth.[60]

---

[58] Sumner (2001), pp.69-79, Benedict (2001), pp.80-90, Wong (1993), pp.3-5.
[59] Mackie (1977), pp. 38-42, Sinnot-Armstrong & Timmons (1996), pp. 9-10, McMahan (2000).
[60] Arrington (1989), pp. 7,39, Sinnot-Armstrong & Timmons (1996), p.10.

c. rationality as a warrant of objectivity

A different sense of moral objectivity rotates around reflection, argumentation and the structure of rationality rather than the twists and decoys of intuition. Objective moral facts are premises supported by arguments that all rational subjects would find compelling. Many modern rationalists have taken this tack as an alternative to intuitionism. Values and norms possess universal validity when they constitute the focus of consensus among rational subjects who acknowledge the existence of good reasons in defence of these values and norms. Things are good or right inasmuch as it is rational to choose them. Rational agents can reach a minimal agreement over what is rational to do, because certain canons of reasoning are generic and definitive of rational thought as such.[61]

This take on ethics is vulnerable to a number of objections, starting with its cardinal presumption. It presupposes a universal core of rational categories or modes of thinking, which are necessary for all rational subjects qua rational and are bound to land them in the same conclusions on certain matters. This assumption is highly contentious given the existence of different methods of logic and contending lines of reasoning.[62]

But even if the existence of a universal logic is conceded, uncertainty and contestability can be transferred from the idea of such a logic to its particular renderings. As one of its partisans, J. Habermas, has put it, all particular reconstructions of the hypothesized universal reason are fallible to the extent that 'there is always the possibility that they rest on a false choice of examples, that they are obscuring and distorting correct intuitions, or, even more frequently, that they are

[61] For a discussion of how reason can function as a source of morality and the idea that moral facts consist in justificatory reasons for belief and action see Larmore (1996), pp.46-51, 96, Moser & Carson (2001), pp.287-302, MacIntyre (1988), p.6, Habermas (1990b), Smith (1993), pp.399-400, Lukes (2003), p.6.
[62] See here above 'Disputing the universality of reason', pp.95-98, MacIntyre (1988), pp. 329, 340, Larmore (1996), pp.50, 157, Moser & Carson (2001), pp.288-302.

overgeneralising individual cases.'[63] Reflection and interpretation proceed against the backdrop of implicit beliefs and norms of inference. These are enabling conditions of thought, but, at the same time, they orient reflection towards specific avenues to the exclusion of other possibilities. The reflexive apprehension of the rules of reason itself does not escape this prejudicial character of thought, although it is possible to reduce bias through debate, comparison, self-critical examination.

From a different standpoint, consider basic canons of reasoning, like the rule of non-contradiction, which are indeed widely used in argumentation. The problem with such rules is that they are too thin to secure consensus on particular principles and systems. Different moral views can agree with the same formal rules of logical entailment or the principle of non-contradiction. This is the standard objection to Kantian ethics. Arguably, the formal requirement of universalizability can be met by various incompatible maxims.[64] If we turn to more substantive forms of reasoning, we encounter a plurality of principles and styles of arguing and a lack of neutral ground to adjudicate among them.[65]

That rationality itself is not a monolithic concept with fixed contours is a further impediment to the unambiguous identification of what is rational for all agents. Practical rationality has been endowed with a diversity of meanings. In some doctrines, the ideas of fairness and impartiality loom large among the meaning-components of reason. The same notions are deflated in the rational egoism of rational choice approaches to decision-making. If the meaning of practical reason is itself fragmented and disputed, and different conceptions of rationality (maximization of utility, universalism, reflective equilibrium, and so on) warrant different norms,

---

[63] Habermas (1990a), p.32.

[64] MacIntyre (1988), pp.334-335, Larmore (1996), pp.49-51, Wiggins (1998), pp.154-155, Habermas (1990b), p.327.

[65] MacIntyre (1988), pp. 329, 340, MacIntyre (1981), pp. 268-9, Larmore (1996), p.157.

'reason' may not clear the way for the discovery of a unitary morality.[66] It is also worth noting that on, some interpretations of it, rationality can arguably authorise non-moral behaviour. If rationality is the maximising of expected utility, agents may act rationally when they only pretend to be cooperative, while 'being ready, when time is ripe, to take advantage of those who do wish to cooperate.'[67]

A final consideration turns on the authority of reason itself and how binding it is. What, if not something like Kant's evocation of an inner voice, grounds the prescriptivity of reason and its superiority over other sources of motivation and legislation for action, such as feelings, tradition, divine command? For agents who may be rational, but are not *merely* rational, it remains an open question why they should conform to the imperatives of reason alone or as a matter of priority. On many views of what rational thought and action consist in, being occasionally irrational does not put survival or well-being in jeopardy.[68]

It should be acknowledged that the debate over the force of reason and the possibility of a global moral consensus is ongoing and unfinished. It is doubtful that anyone can prejudge the outcome of continuing dialogue around these issues. That would require an a priori argument demonstrating the conceptual or empirical impossibility of rational agreement in the future. An apodictic proof of this sort presupposes what is lacking- empirical knowledge of the future or foresight into how all possible arguments and strands of thought would terminate. Therefore, the previous reflections mark only several sceptical points which foment suspicion about the likelihood of a universal moral convergence anchored in reason. They could not establish the impossibility of such convergence.

---

[66] Moser & Carson (2001), pp.288-290.
[67] Larmore (1996), p.50; see also Arrington (1989), p.87.
[68] Moser & Carson (2001), pp.289-290, 299-301.

d. universals are contestable and, usually, too thin

The thesis that wide and deep-going disagreement is endemic to ethics is often phrased in empirical terms. In this guise, it calls upon a particular reading of the relevant data, which include the facts of cultural diversity, intrasocietal moral conflict, and so on.

The empirical argument against universalism has been challenged through appeals to countervailing evidence or attacks on its scientific credentials, the reliability of the methodology employed and the amount and variety of observations that had been taken on board.[69] A frequent objection points to the actual existence of norms that hold good for all societies. Social life cannot be sustained without a general ban on the unnecessary killing of other human beings in the same society, without care for the young of the social group or without a presumption in favour of truthfulness, which is fundamental to human communication.[70]

Despite its prima facie plausibility, this counter suffers from at least two defects. Suppose it is possible to uncover with certainty a number of universal moral demands that are in force in past and present societies. Why should moral agents sanctify a collection of habits, traditions and prejudices that societies have accumulated over the course of their history? This gesture would preclude moral advances achieved through the shake-up of established convictions. Attention to historical contingency can help to draw out the ethical sting of rejecting conservatism. Various principles and attitudes that used to apply universally or near-universally at past stages of human history are no longer accepted (think of respect for established social authorities or the limited value bestowed on human life as such, and individual freedom).

---

[69] Moody-Adams (2001), pp.93-106.
[70] Rachels (2001), pp.60-61.

Furthermore, many apparent universals are not substantively universal in the specific ways in which they are enacted. Despite the fact that the unnecessary killing of other members of society is universally prohibited, it is subject to numerous exceptions and qualifications that fluctuate across social context relative to religious, traditional and other conditions. In large measure, dissensus occurs precisely over these exceptions and their justifiability (abortion comes easily to mind). It is open to disbelief that the general rule itself can act as a court of appeal for resolving such differences, when the rule in its generality displays this variation and/or makes room for dispute over its range of application.

Another version of the empirical argument in defence of universalism makes much of the objective conditions that are indispensable for all forms of human life and flourishing. The idea is that certain social needs constitute objective values, which should be given due weight in all moral codes. A telling example is the regulation of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict, which is regarded as the pragmatic function of moral codes. Moral figures can be evaluated from a neutral standpoint according to how well they perform in their capacity as conflict-regulators.[71]

This point falters on the difficulty that the posited cross-cultural needs (ranging from affection to cooperation and hope) can be fulfilled in various ways and can be ranked differently in order of priority. For instance, different moral codes have adequately carried out the function of controlling conflict, while their effectiveness can be determined by factors (such as inculcation of respect for authority, conservative mentality, manipulation and indoctrination), which are not morally neutral. 'Cooperation' is required for human flourishing, but what qualifies as cooperation? In the absence of univocal criteria, various forms of human intercourse could be all given the same name.

---

[71] Meiland & Krausz (1982), pp.152-166, Wong (1993), p.446, MacIntyre (1988), p.346.

Taking stock of the previous discussion, I have argued that any figuration of the universal human self is susceptible of challenge due to the unavailability of an objective foundation which could guarantee its exclusive validity. The grounds are epistemological and extend to reasons that concern the objectivity of value judgments. This argument holds in store obvious implications for essentialist freedom. It throws into crisis the idea that freedom consists in realising our humanity or in limiting our actions in line with a definite scenario: which one should we go for, if any specific view is contestable? What assures agents that they are indeed free in the sense of achieving their human self rather than remaining caught in the thralls of error, false consciousness, ingrained prejudices, unjustified dogmatism?

Even if the value of freedom derives from its import for attaining the authentic human life, qualms arise about the prudence of committing oneself to a set model of life, as essentialist schemes want us to do. The uncertainty surrounding the correctness of any particular choice assigns new importance to the freedom to revise decisions. Equally, if no existential option can stand out as *the* true archetype of humanity, the opportunity to choose among various alternatives gains new salience.

These sceptical misgivings could be directed, of course, against any formation of freedom, since ontological assumptions are latent in all. It is impossible to do without an understanding of the potentialities and the needs of human agents, if we want, for instance, to specify what counts as meaningful constraint on possible thought and action and what kind of activities merit institutional protection in a society of free individuals. If the suggestion is that all notions of the self are shorn of objective foundations, then it is unfair to single out the essentialist paradigm for criticism. And it is possible to counter that, from the standpoint of their contestable stipulations about the self, all the different framings of freedom stand on an equal footing, no matter

whether their ontology is essentialist or not. The present thesis insists, however, that the epistemic challenge carries more force against essentialist freedom. The reasons relate both to its particular ontology and to its construal of freedom.

In the first place, as I noted in the relevant sections of this chapter, some of the previous points are more pertinent to the ontology of essentialism in specific. For instance, uncertainty about the future poses more of a threat for ideas of the self which assume *eternal* regularities of the human. Moreover, even if any perception of the human subject is vulnerable to contest, my cast of scepticism allows evaluative judgements about the epistemic qualities of different accounts. Chapter 6 will indicate that, as opposed to the essentialist theories under discussion, ontological figures staged in contemporary thought display an awareness of the fragility that weakens their foundations, and come equipped with internal mechanisms of critical reflexivity and revision. Finally, it is worth recalling that what marks out the essentialist paradigm is the degree of its dependence on a single and specific picture of the person, which either fixes the very content of freedom, or serves to define once and for all the constitutional rights, frontiers and conditions of freedom in society. This intensity of attachment is not a conceptual necessity. The chapters to follow will bring out how, in contrast, other approaches prioritise the open choice or creation of the self and wed freedom to radical reflection on all particular values and ontological presumptions.

4. Essentialist freedom and its vicissitudes

Freedom in the mould of self-determination and self-realisation has typically solicited the criticism that it is liable to paternalistic uses and can ramify into totalitarian

excesses or lend legitimacy to them.[72] An eye to the ontological subtext can clarify and qualify this critique. Not all notions of self-determination or self-realisation are equally susceptible to abuse. Their liability is relative to their organising model of the self. What can licence paternalism and authoritarianism is the conjunction of self-realisation and self-determination with essentialist forms of subjectivity. Essentialism can authorise encroachments on autonomy because, by imputing determined and universal traits to the subject of freedom, it enables relations of substitution.

The enforcement of a particular course of action can be made out to be compatible with individual freedom on the assumption that the imposed choice agrees with the agent's own considered preferences or interests. Individuals are induced to behave in the way they themselves would choose if certain blockages were not at work. Relevant obstacles may range from external influences, such as constraining social structures, brainwashing, misinformation, to inner mental weaknesses, such as compulsion, defective faculties of deliberation, secondary desires that interfere with primary goals, ignorance of one's good. Such factors supposedly impinge on the will of the individual and derail it from the course of action it would otherwise take on its own.[73] Under these circumstances, coercion fosters freedom if only because it counteracts forces that impede the self from pursuing its interests and needs.

The crux of my amendment is this. It is the *fixity* of the self that licences the use of force in the name of freedom, because fixity is the condition of possibility for a certain substitution. People can claim that a choice they inflict on other individuals represents what the latter would choose to do given their own identity (interests, values etc.), insofar as the principal contents of this identity are definite and can be

---

[72] See e.g. Berlin (1969), pp.131-134, Gaus (2000), pp. 86-87, Gray (1995), pp. 22-23, Gray (1990), p. 77, Pettit (2001), pp.134-140.

[73] Berlin (1969), pp.132-134, 148-150, Berlin (2002a), pp. 46-7, Gray (1990), p. 77, Blokland (1997), pp.143-185, particularly pp.159-167.

known with certainty to third parties.[74] If the values and needs of the self are seen as indeterminate, second-guessing is far less plausible.[75] The notions of self-mastery and self-actualisation do not suffice in themselves to legitimate coercion as a means to freedom.[76]

The putative universality of the human self further facilitates the relation of substitution and the violence it sanctions. When the core of individual identity is filled in with universal traits, its contents are obvious. To figure out the fundamental preferences or interests of the free agent, it is not necessary to consult with the person herself. Moreover, universality widens the scope of possible violence. It can set the stage for a totalitarian politics that foists on the entire society a unitary matrix of thought and action.[77] If all human agents have the same essential needs or ideal of life and freedom lies in attaining this identical object, a totalitarian state can enforce, under the banners of freedom, general conformity to the demands of the posited identity.

To expand on these well-known charges against essentialist freedom, let us start by noting how the ontology of essentialism tends in and of itself to nourish totalising dispositions. Adorning a certain way of living with the halo of naturalness, normality or supreme value prompts readily the conclusion that the active advancement of this particular 'common good' to the exclusion of others is in the interests of everyone. Furthermore, all exclusive notions of normality and the good set up clear distinctions between what is normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural, healthy and

---

[74] See e.g. Pettit (2001), pp. 134-140; Berlin (1969), pp.131-134, Berlin (2002a), pp.46-7.

[75] Taylor (2001), p.207.

[76] Cf. Berlin (1969), pp. 132-134, where the emphasis is on the idea of the split self and the notions of true/higher self, self-realisation and self-mastery. His argument is that authoritarian implications follow from these concepts. There is not a clear stress on determinacy as a necessary condition for these consequences. But, as such, the ideas of a 'real', 'true', 'higher' self cannot justify coercion in the name of freedom. By 'real', 'true' etc. self one could mean, for instance, the individual as an independent agent of choice between alternatives. In that case, freedom would be intrinsically relative to the individual chooser; nobody else other than the individual agent herself could settle what she would do under conditions of freedom.

[77] Lefort (1986), pp. 78-80, 285, Bauman (1997), p.12.

pathological, good and evil. Deviations fall under such dichotomies. The perception of deviants is spontaneously coloured with the value judgements that the foregoing binaries contain and mobilise. Essentialist plots of identity do not construe different possibilities as legitimate alternatives. Differences are forms of lower standing that are unworthy of equal respect in that they clash with the universal good or model of normality. Differences can be branded with the stigma of pathology or evil that has to be eradicated, especially if they are presumed to stand in the way of the common good. Deviants should be eliminated or re-educated to comply with the general script of the natural, the good and the healthy. This will enable their own real fulfilment or avert disaster of various sorts. When *an entire community* is actually patterned around an exclusive orthodoxy, full membership is automatically granted only to those who abide with the norm. Others are likely to be denied recognition and their share in the benefits of social co-operation. The stigmatisation of heterogeneity with the sign of the abnormal or the evil can fuel social practices of discrimination and persecution against its carriers.[78]

This gloomy picture illustrate effects that can spring from freedom itself, when freedom merges with an essentialist ontology, that is, when freedom actualises a set figure of being or when the limits of freedom are drawn in line with such a figure. A society geared towards essentialist freedom would have no reason to forebear conduct that is not attuned to its archetype of being or that transgresses the limits decreed by its favoured norms. The freedom to stray from dominant styles and the freedom to contest arrangements consistent with the norm may shrink to the vanishing point. Essentialist freedom warrants a legitimate suppression of individuality, conflict and differences when they exceed the specific project of life, which is held to be

[78] Connolly (1995), pp. xxi, 26-7, 90, 194, 196, Connolly (1991), pp. 65-6, 83, 148, 151, 158, 177, 179, Stavrakakis (1999), pp. 103-105, Aron (1968), pp. 44-45, 49-50, 178-204, Lefort (1986), pp.78-80, 285-291, Simons (1995), p.119, Foucault (1989), Foucault (1979).

interchangeable with freedom itself. The degree and scope of oppression may surpass the measure of violence that a regime hospitable to plurality and change would still require in order to maintain peaceful coexistence. But the excess of repression will go unrecognised as unnecessary violence and will be immunised from legitimate challenge. The likelihood that they will spawn coercion and repression beyond an unavoidable minimum should lead us to dismiss essentialist constructions of freedom, if forcible restriction and freedom are in tension with one another.

Essentialist presumptions can cross and tangle with freedom along various tracks, and carry diverse implications. It is worth insisting, among others, that essentialism can sanction authoritarian practices in the interests of freedom even with those conceptions of self-determination or self-realisation, which do assume an invariant universal self, but do not regard as genuine freedom anything short of a *voluntary* conformity with the prescribed model. Kant's doctrine is a case in point. It bars coercion as a means for achieving full personal autonomy because external enforcement runs counter to the requirement of a fully wilful adherence to the law of reason. However, Kant's theory does authorise force in the interests of freedom when the object is to protect the external freedom of all agents.[79]

To draw out this point, freedom is practiced in a social milieu, and the goals of different agents may collide with each other. There is a need to adjudicate conflict and prevent the obstruction of personal freedom by others. In modern societies, the medium of law is key to these functions. Various doctrines evoke ideas of a definite human essence when they lay down the laws of freedom, which enshrine the free pursuit of activities and interests by different social actors. In Kant, human essence resides in the eternal laws of reason, which should be used to regulate social co-

---

[79] See here above, chapter 2, pp.75-81.

existence in a free society.[80] For other liberal authors, including advocates of negative liberty and the early Rawls, it is a cluster of primary needs and fundamental interests, which deserve urgent legal protection. These interests serve to draw up the system of private liberties by identifying the fields of human endeavour that should be safeguarded from unsolicited interferences.[81] Thus, the social enforcement of determined laws 'of universal freedom' and the protection by the state of settled interests, through recourse to police measures if necessary, are in the service of individual liberty. In this manner, essentialist freedom can countenance coercion without claiming that coercion realises freedom in a direct way.[82]

I want to conclude the normative critique of the essentialist paradigm by pressing a number of points, which cash in on the epistemological considerations of the previous section. Essentialist schemes are not only intrinsically restraining in various ways; the specific restraints that they entail are likely to be arbitrary and dispensable.[83]

If freedom is the unhindered execution of a certain scenario of life or action based on rigid laws, freedom is limited to the enactment of predefined forms. What is negated or hidden from view is the freedom to determine for oneself the undertakings and laws of the person; the liberty to select among different ways of living. More broadly, when subjects are constituted to conduct themselves in particular manners, which are held to be unchanging, normal or ideal, freedom contracts, even if it is not directly identified with the perceived nature of the self. In degrees relative to the range of elements that are naturalised or absolutised, individuals are less free to fashion their mode of being without taking particular logics or practices for granted. They hold a certain script of life to be the sole possibility and stop short, therefore, from

[80] See here above, chapter 2, pp.75-81.
[81] See Kymlicka (2002), pp.138-148, Berlin (1969), pp.122-131, 164-166; see also here above, chapter 2, pp.75-81, Chapter 4, pp. 138-139.
[82] See also chapter 2, pp.75-81, Chapter 4, pp. 138-139.
[83] This argument draws partly on Foucault (1997c), Tully (1999), p.117.

considering alternatives. Essentialist conceptions instil thus conformist drives that engulf the self within closed frames of being.[84] People tend to develop the motivation to abide by what they see as the paradigm of normality, morality or well-being. Divergence from this model is likely to produce feelings of guilt and can be seen as undermining welfare. Now, this manifold 'spontaneous' confinement to specific norms of living may constitute an unnecessary restriction of freedom, simply because the necessity of any idea of the self is not securely established.

Likewise, given the contestability of their beliefs, the doctrines that design the boundaries of social freedom in line with absolute laws or essential needs may thereby entrench conventional arrangements. Their presumptions may misrepresent particular institutions as eternal moral truths or safeguards of fundamental human interests. Casting contingent laws as unalterable or inviolable de-legitimates any attempt to remove the specific restrictions that they place on freedom. These constraints may exceed an inevitable minimum, but cannot be legitimately challenged and removed. Moreover, by reifying particular legal interpretations of freedom, the conceptions in question forestall moves to reframe the law in order to rectify inequalities in freedom embedded in the existing system of liberties. To invest social laws with the aura of the natural, the inescapable or the categorically imperative, is to consolidate any structures of oppression enshrined in present legislation. By contrast, the refusal to naturalise or idealise enables social criticism and allows social actors to challenge oppressive laws and restrictive customs.[85] Finally, false naturalisation or sacralisation work against the political autonomy of democratic assemblies; the freedom of citizens to generate new policies and institutions that break with established norms.[86]

---

[84] Foucault (1979), p.123, Foucault (1982), pp.208-226, Foucault (1991a), pp.352-372, Dreufys & Rabinow (1982), pp.151, 170-183.
[85] Mouffe (2000), pp.5, 22, 32-4, 76-7.
[86] See, among others, Barber (1996), pp.352-357.

In sum, the various specific restrictions and disablements that flow from the different versions of essentialist freedom are unnecessary and removable if the idol of the self, which they deem typical of human nature or the *summum bonum*, is not definitely so, and human agents could think and act differently. Even if an invariable human nature and universal values are a piece of reality, their content cannot be laid down in a certain way. A risk therefore plagues all essentialist discourses: the possibility that what *they* hold to be *the* true idea of human nature, is mistaken for such. When freedom is at stake, this risk is too high to take because of the various dispensable constraints and injustices that may enshrine themselves through an allegiance to congealed norms.

This objection need not commit itself to the ontological conviction that there is no persisting human subject and no values that are valid across time and space. The epistemological perspective is sufficient. It may be that the freedom which matters is the freedom to realise the universal standard of normality or perfection, which conduces to the most fulfilling way of life; or that the essence of the human self, our natural needs and fundamental interests should govern the legislation of rights and liberties. But under conditions of epistemic uncertainty, the particular limits instituted by such interpretations of freedom are not objectively warranted. This consideration should lead us to renounce essentialist freedom.

The sceptical notes on justification that preceded this ultimate section may have nurtured the suspicion that the normative critique has no place to stand. But my criticisms here do not presuppose universally agreed values or an objective idea of freedom. They are intended to resonate with those who are self-committed to the value of freedom and would be thus disposed to dismiss doctrines with potential authoritarian and restraining effects. More specifically, my judgments call upon a particular sense of freedom, which associates it with independence, open choice and

unrestrained reflection and action. Pertinently, however, these ideas are also near to the heart of proponents of the essentialist paradigm like Marx and Kant, as I argued in the previous chapter. In the case of Marx and Kant, to fall back on these intuitions about freedom is to operate from a shared standpoint, which allows for an immanent critique.

CHAPTER 4

The liberal alternative and its discontents: negative liberty, Berlin and Mill

1. Introduction

If essentialism should be denounced, are there any readily available alternatives that offer a more enticing construction of freedom? J.S. Mill's calls for original self-development and the various conceptions of negative liberty drift away from the fixation on a uniform human nature and the attendant elision of freedom with a preestablished pattern of being. These formations strike thus at the root cause of authoritarian menaces and the repression that freedom suffers when it is held captive to an abiding 'essence' or ideal. Negative liberty and Millian freedom harbour, however, their own limitations. They fail to safeguard and foster freedom in an effective manner. Negative liberty does not attend to the constitution of the free subject, leaving thus in place a wide array of restraints which take effect from within the self. Mill's ideal of original life-experiments and self-development is not vitiated by the same weaknesses. However, Mill evokes the spectre of a definite individual nature that persons are urged to uncover and bring to fruition. This signals a certain regression to essentialism and its vicissitudes.

The present chapter comes to grips with mainstream liberal alternatives to essentialist freedom and is out to show why they are not liberating enough and do not afford a compelling rejoinder; hence the need for a conceptual renewal of freedom and the turn, in subsequent chapters, to a promising current of thought that is emerging in contemporary theory. The argument takes issue with Mill's thinking of freedom and attacks the notion of negative liberty, which is broached mainly through the work of I. Berlin. Berlin laid out the staple meaning of this concept and held it up against essentialist doctrines (which he impugned under the heading of positive

liberty). Moreover, he articulated an enhanced version of negative liberty, which is immune to much-repeated criticisms against this brand of freedom.

2. Negative liberty and Berlin

a. Negative liberty and the lack of care for the self

The conceptual core of negative liberty is the 'absence of...impediments to action'[1] and the prerogative of 'doing as one wishes'[2] in a private haven of liberty, which is shielded from external intrusions. '[T]o be free-negatively- is simply not to be prevented by other persons from doing whatever one wishes.'[3] Freedom enjoins action on private wants and consists not necessarily in action, but primarily in the *opportunity* to act relative to one's wishes.[4] This relativity undercuts any conflation of freedom with a universal being or ideal of the self that could warrant paternalistic relations of substitution. Freedom does not crystallise around a singular good or common essence. It becomes, therefore, impossible to impose conformity to posited universals under the banners of freedom. In contrast, negative freedom is intrinsically wedded to the actual preferences of the self. It takes agents as they actually are, not as they should be or as they are supposed to be.

The standard polemics against negative liberty find fault with its lack of concern for the inner being of the self and the fetters that restrain the will.[5] The formation and the content of personal preferences, the way in which individuals make up their mind about how to conduct themselves, the strains of internal or internalised impediments remain beneath notice: for agents to be negatively free, it suffices that they do not run

---

[1] Hobbes (1840), p.273.
[2] Berlin (1969), pp. xxxviii,139.
[3] Berlin (1969), p. xxxviii; see also pp.122-131.
[4] Berlin (1969),,p.xlii, also pp.122, 129-131.
[5] See, among others, Gaus (2000), pp.83, 96-97, Connolly (1993), p.169, Gray (1990), pp.65, 68, Blokland (1997), pp.146-147, Flathman (1987), pp.28-33, 224, Gray (1993), p.60.

up against outer hindrances in advancing their present longings, that their actions are unobstructed.[6]

The mere absence of external impediments is an inadequate indicator of voluntary acts. First, agents must also possess the aptitude to understand, intend and endorse what they are doing.[7] Options are not actually up for grabs unless they are also subjectively available, and this hinges on one's state of mind and the ability to conceive alternatives, to make sense of different possibilities and to decide among them. Moreover, freedom of choice is drastically limited if individual behaviour is compelled by antecedent inner causes, such as spontaneously emerging desires, various other psychological conditions (irrational fears, neuroses etc.), and modes of conduct taken over from the social environs of the person. When such causes direct choice in a manner that resists control or simply lacks the endorsement of the self, agency is in thralls even if no external obstacles preclude a particular course of action: individuals are in the grasp of independent factors and do not determine for themselves what they want to do. As a result, they may be barred from choosing to do as they would otherwise do.[8]

A rallying point of these well-rehearsed criticisms is that negative liberty does not integrate in the purview of freedom the inner freedom of autonomy: the voluntary acceptance of the *nomoi* that govern decision-making, the engagement in second-order reflection on individual preferences and the ability to revise ideas instead of being tethered to rigid dogmas and ends.[9] Once it is acknowledged that autonomy as second-order reflection and deliberation is pivotal to free agency, the centrality of the

---

[6] Gaus (2000), pp.77-80.

[7] Gaus (2000), pp.96-97, Gray (1984), pp.338-339, Blokland (1997), pp.68, 72, Gray (1990), p.38.

[8] Taylor (2001), pp. 215-217.

[9] Benn (1975-6), pp.124-129, Dworkin (1988), pp.15-20.

inner self becomes evident, since autonomy is premised on subjective capacities and conditions.

Relative to the particular causes that exert their hold on the self, the heteronomy that is licensed by negative liberty abridges freedom of choice in varying ways and degrees.[10] The grip of tradition and the force of habituation, a crucial category of heteronomous causes, narrow down the scope of what agents may choose and pursue by foreclosing alternative paths or by circumscribing restrictively the range of eligible options. Consider traditional religious societies in which individuals are schooled into a specific worldview and enact a certain ethics as the sole conceivable or permissible possibility.

Furthermore, particular patterns of conduct, assumptions and desires that socialisation has inflicted on the self may serve relations of subordination. Think of inculcated norms that prescribe the role of women and the division of labour in patriarchal societies. Persons are actually entrapped even as they act unhindered on their desires, if their ideas and preferences are generated under asymmetrical relations and lead to voluntary servitude.[11]

Because it centres on external impediments to *actual* preferences, negative liberty is insensitive to questions surrounding the creation and the content of preferences. Therefore, it remains blind itself, and can help to blind others, to the powerful social mechanisms through which individuals can be controlled from outside through the manipulation of their inclinations.[12] Negative liberty offers no critical purchase on the different forms of internalised and 'voluntary' subjection.

Psychological conditions, such as compulsive behaviour, psychoses and various other mental operations and addictions, compose another family of heteronomous

---

[10] Gaus (2000), pp.96-97, Connolly (1993), pp.148, 169-170, Gray (1990), pp.38, 65-68.

constraints: uncontrolled thoughts and desires impact forcefully on choice and coerce individuals into specific types of conduct.[13] Inasmuch as negative liberty slides over the subjective dimension of free agency, psychic fetters escape recognition and are not offered any remedy.

On a final note, aside heteronomy and the different varieties of inner restraints, negative liberty fails to promote freedom on account of its very unconcern with the constitution of selfhood. Different modes of subjectivity correspond to different theoretical and practical attitudes in life that may widen out or contract the field of options that open up for the self. Agents who permanently act on entrenched beliefs, norms and habits are tied down to a solidified mould of life. By contrast, a person, who has after-thoughts about her dispositions and considers alternate possibilities, pushes up against the frontiers of her actual being. She emancipates herself from rigidified personality structures and the repetition of the same, extending her freedom to the determination of her person. By unhitching freedom and its ambit from subjective conditions, negative liberty does not capture the different implications that different ways of being carry for freedom, and fails to advance freedom through liberal and liberating styles of existence.

In sum, negative liberty takes agents as they are and leaves them untouched. As a consequence, it does not deal with all the various internal impairments of choice and fails to fathom and counter subtler conditions of social unfreedom. So long as nothing stands in the way of her desires, an agent qualifies as free, no matter whether she acts under the compulsion of psychological forces, her inclinations are conditioned and subdue her to other agents or she remains blind to alternative possibilities. Therefore, negative freedom cannot supply an adequate corrective to essentialist patterns. If

---

[11] Brenkert (1991), p.69, Connolly (1993), p.148.

essentialism enslaves us by harnessing the self to exclusive norms that are held to be natural or ideal, negative liberty may sustain a similar captivity to specific norms by failing to wrestle with actual attachments to habits and ideas.

The following sections take up Berlin's account, both because he offers negative liberty at its critical strongest and because his theory illustrates tellingly the numerous flaws of negative libertarianism. Berlin embeds his coding of negative liberty in a broader theoretical frame, which is anchored in the affirmation of value pluralism. And he has taken on board the criticisms levelled at the staple variant of negative liberty. However, in spite of granting the importance of inner constraints, his recast of the concept founders again on its typical neglect of the self. On these grounds, as well as because it postulates absolute rights/limits and does not address adequately the social conditions of freedom, Berlin's conception discloses fully the defects of negative libertarianism.

b. Berlin's negative liberty

Berlin makes much of the plurality of values and the possibility of conflict among them. As a matter of empirical fact, the human world is replete with diverse values and ends, which are ultimate and cannot be subsumed under an overarching principle. His emphasis on the multiplicity of ends is qualified by the claim that their number is finite.[14] Plurality is bounded, and this enables cross-cultural understanding and communication across people committed to different values. All legitimate ends belong to the same family of universal human values. Therefore, they are generally recognizable and comprehensible. The 'concept of man' is not too indeterminate.[15]

---

[12] Blokland (1997), pp.146-147, 153; also Gray (1990), p.68.
[13] Berlin (2002b), pp.260-262, Gaus (2000), p.83.
[14] Berlin (1991), pp.8-11, 79, Berlin (2001), p.12, Berlin (1969), pp.xxxi-xxxii, lii-liii.
[15] Berlin (1969), pp.xxxi-xxxii, lxii, 99,103, Berlin (2001), pp.8,12.

There is no a priori guarantee that the various values and goals will mesh harmoniously with each other.[16] Human agents are confronted with a diversity of ultimate ends that partly clash with one another. We cannot have them all. We will always need to take a choice among the plurality of values, as it is necessary to decide among competing claims or to strike a balance among them.[17] Choice without any overarching principle- single ultimate end- to guide decisions, this is the predicament of human life. The freedom to choose must be socially enshrined in order to enable us to cope with the human condition- the multiplicity of ultimate, potentially rival ends.[18]

Negative liberty grounded in value pluralism poses as an antidote to essentialist scripts that collapse freedom into the fulfilment of a generic nature or ideal of the person.[19] Once the lack of an overriding good is acknowledged, the idea that freedom lies in chasing 'the' universal end falls to the ground.[20] Belief in the existence of a universal good detracts from the value of the freedom to decide ends; it leaves no room for different choices among ultimate ends. By contrast, such choice is not only valuable, it is imperative, if we realise that there is an ineradicable plurality of potentially conflicting goods.[21] Value pluralism de-legitimates any attempt at imposing a singular good on the pretext that this good represents what is best for all and everyone would go for it under ideal conditions of deliberation.

The multiplicity of ends and the ensuing necessity of choice result in an anti-essentialist thesis: the recognition that humans lack a fixed nature that would be attached to a specific universal object.[22] On the contrary, human agents are, 'self-

---

[16] Berlin (1991), pp.8, 80, Berlin (1997), pp.68-78, see also Gray (1995), p.1.
[17] Berlin (1991), pp.13, 235, Berlin (2001), pp.22-23, Berlin (1969), pp.li,169.
[18] Berlin (1969), pp. lx, 169, Berlin (1997), p.69, Gray (1995), p.143.
[19] Berlin (1997), pp. 78,158, Jahanbegloo (2000), p.143, Berlin (2002a), pp. 26, 47, Berlin (1969), pp. 152-154, 169-171.
[20] Berlin (1969), pp.167-172, Gray (1995), pp.143-144.
[21] Gray (1995), pp.21-23.
[22] Berlin (1991), pp.20-24, 68, Berlin (1969), p.li.

transforming beings' in that they are 'able to choose freely between incompatible ends.'[23]

In sum, value pluralism eliminates the authoritarian edges of essentialist freedom and upholds an open-ended freedom of choice.[24] The freedom at stake is 'opportunity for action, rather than action itself'[25] as agents should be at liberty to avoid action if they so desire.

Berlin sponsors negative liberty as a fundamental form of freedom in general,[26] but he theorises it in the course of a discussion of freedom in social and political settings. Freedom of choice is a vulnerable good in society, because the choices of different individuals are likely to collide.[27] To make room for negative freedom it is necessary to carve out a space secure from external incursions by others and public authority. This enclave of privacy is co-extensive with (political and social) negative liberty. It demarcates the field of what is at the discretion of individuals, the opportunities for action available to the person. No doubt, the region of unregulated action cannot be unlimited. An anarchistic libertarianism of this sort could plunge social life into chaos and would thwart the fulfilment of other needs such as security and justice. But individual freedom cannot be sustained without an area shielded from external interventions.[28]

The boundaries that mark out this region of unobstructed choice can be variously drawn. Berlin speaks for an intellectual tradition, in which the fences-guarantees of freedom must safeguard the 'essential core' of human existence and are set up in

[23] Berlin (1991), pp.68, see also Berlin (1969), p.171, Gray (1995), pp.9-10, 15, 23.
[24] Berlin (1991), p.15, Berlin (1997), p.78, Gray (1995), p.144.
[25] Berlin (1969), pp. xlii; see also ibid., p.xxxix.
[26] Berlin (1969), pp. xxxix, lvi, 161, Berlin (2002a), pp.103-104.
[27] Berlin (1969),pp. xliii-xliv.
[28] Berlin (1969), pp. xlv, 122-124.

accord with standards of 'normality'.[29] Individuals should be safe from coercion that denies them the satisfaction of basic needs and forces them to behave in ways contrary to normal human conduct and moral convictions. A free society must stick to the principle that 'there are frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable, these frontiers being defined in terms of rules so long and widely accepted that their observance has entered into the very conception of what it is to be a normal human being, and, therefore, also of what it is to act inhumanly or insanely.'[30]

Where Berlin parts company with the staple version of negative liberty is in his recognition that a conception relative to actual wants is wanting.[31] If freedom reduces to the absence of frustration, one could achieve freedom by wiping out his desires instead of seeking to gratify them –a reductio ad absurdum of negative liberty[32]- or by adjusting desires to fit the circumstances at hand. This idea would do away with the need to remove actual obstacles. Moreover, social relations of domination would pass muster as a state of freedom, if the subdued were conditioned to desire them. Negative liberty in its classical mould can condone illiberal conditions and would not necessarily ensure an ample field of choice. Therefore, freedom should be recast to entail 'the absence of obstacles to *possible* choices and activities...to my potential choices, to my acting in this or that way if I choose to do so.'[33] The obstacles at issue are external and originate in the conduct of other agents. They are the 'result,

[29] Berlin (1969), pp.126-127, 164-166.
[30] Berlin (1969), p.165.
[31] Berlin (1969), pp. xxxviii-xxxix, 139-140, Berlin (2001), p.15.
[32] Berlin (1969), pp. xxxviii-xxxix, Berlin (2001), p.15.
[33] Berlin (1969), pp. xxxix-xl (my emphasis).

intended or unintended, of alterable human practices, of the operation of human agencies.'[34]

This amendment prevents negative liberty from being compatible with a dearth of opportunities and preserves it from sanctioning relations of servitude that are willed by the dominated. Freedom is not relativised to actual wants but takes on an independent, objective content. Its extent becomes a function of the 'range of objectively open possibilities, whether these are desired or not.'[35] Even on a negative understanding of freedom, contented slaves do not qualify as free.

In conclusion, Berlin's negative liberty signifies the absence of obstacles to *possible* choices, obstacles planted by other agents,[36] and is indissociably linked with a sphere of activity placed beyond external interferences, which rescues the possibility of choice in a social context. Furthermore, unlike other varieties of negative liberty, Berlin's notion is alert to the constraints that may impair the self's capacity for choice. This transpires already from his move towards uncoupling liberty from actual preferences. He also reckons explicitly that 'fears, complexes, ignorance, error, prejudice, illusions, fantasies, compulsions...' make up an important class of impediments.[37] Finally, he subscribes to the thesis that determinism is irreconcilable with freedom. Free choice could not be causally predetermined.[38] And, for Berlin, determinism encapsulates the idea of a personality that is fixed by nature, habit and culture.[39] So, choice lacks freedom if it is coerced by independent causal antecedents,

---

[34] Berlin (1969), pp. xxxix-xl; see also Berlin (2002b), p.273, Gray, (1995), p.15, Galipeau (1994), pp.72, 89-91.
[35] Berlin (2002b), p. 273.
[36] Berlin (1969), pp. xl, xli, xliii-xliv, xlviii, lxi; lvi, Berlin (2002b), p.271, Berlin (2001), p.15.
[37] Berlin (2002b), p. 270; see also ibid., pp. 270-271, Berlin (1969), p.158, Berlin (2001), p.196.
[38] Berlin (1969), pp.xvii, xxxv, 69-117, Berlin (2002b), pp.259-262, 270-271.
[39] Berlin (2002b), pp.259-262, 264, 270.

including antecedents that are intrinsic to the self ('character, habits, "compulsive" motives').[40]

The problem is that, despite all these concessions and improvements, Berlin inconsistently insists on divorcing (negative) freedom from the inner conditions of decision-making -a separation definitive of the received notion of negative liberty.[41] His own rendition of the concept is not responsible for this twist in his argument. 'Limits to possible choices' may obviously derive from the internal constitution of the chooser and her faculty of choice. And even exogenous restraints, which stem from social practices, may take effect directly on and through the inner self. (This is the case with desires, beliefs and norms that take hold on the person through conditioning and socialisation).[42] Indeed, the incorporation of psychological and other inner constraints would seem to follow from Berlin's awareness of internal fetters and his rejection of compatibilism (the claim that inner predetermination is compatible with freedom).[43] Nevertheless, his pronouncements on personal freedom gloss over the interdependencies that traffic between freedom of choice and the inner structure of the person.[44]

> '[T]the measure of the liberty of a man or a group is, to a large degree, determined by the range of choosable possibilities...If I am ignorant of my rights, or too neurotic(or too poor) to benefit by them, that makes them useless to me; but it does not make them non-existent...To destroy or lack a condition of freedom is not to destroy that freedom itself; for its essence does not lie in its accessibility...'[45] 'The extent of negative liberty depends on the degree to which...I am free to go down this or that path without being

[40] Berlin (1969), p.65 (footnote).
[41] On this see issue also Smith (2002), p.243.
[42] Berlin (2002b), pp.270-271, Gray (1995), pp.15-16.
[43] Berlin seems to acknowledge this point in Berlin (1969), p.128.
[44] Berlin (1969), p.xxxix, Blokland (1997), pp.39-40.

> prevented from doing so by man-made institutions or disciplines, or by activities of specific human beings.'[46]

The links between negative liberty and the making of the self are severed on different levels and in various ways in Berlin's theory. Negative freedom is cast as opposing the commitment to any model of subjectivity and any practice of labour on the self (critique, imagination, creation of something new, experimentation) that would help to grapple with inner fetters.[47] Moreover, in Berlin's restatement of the concept, the *decisive* limits, in whose absence freedom consists, are still extrinsic and generated by other agents, whereas the lifting of internal barriers belongs with the *conditions* of freedom that determine its value, the ability to take effective advantage of freedom.[48] As long as external, objective social circumstances do not bar the pursuit of personal goals and a space of privacy is preserved, individuals are free, regardless of any constraints on their will.[49] So, Berlin's negative freedom is dominated by the spatial image of an external domain, in which the individual can act unobstructed. The inner state of the self recedes to the background.[50]

This indifference for the person, when it comes to freedom itself, cannot be condoned on the grounds that Berlin treats the topic of social or political freedom rather than 'freedom of choice' at large,[51] and social conditions are of prime relevance here. In the first place, although the accent is firmly set on freedom in society, Berlin presents negative liberty as a fundamental meaning of freedom, and

---

[45] Berlin (2002b), p.272.
[46] Berlin (2001), p.15.
[47] Berlin (1969), p.128.
[48] Berlin (1969), pp. liii-lvi,123-124, Berlin (2002b), p. 272, Berlin (2002a), p.5, Berlin (2001), pp.111-114.
[49] Berlin (2002b), pp. 272-273, Berlin (1969), p.liii.
[50] Berlin (1969), pp.lx-lxi, 111-114, 124, 126, 144, 163-165.
[51] Berlin (1969), pp.121-122.

his discussion often slides from civil or political freedom into personal freedom without qualification.[52]

But let us concede that Berlin's negative liberty is primarily tailored to politics and society.[53] Even in this frame of reference, his divorce of the political and the social from the personal is intensely contentious, if this needs any emphasis today.[54] Social institutions and influences go into the very identity of the self, who imbibes social norms, beliefs and wants. It is sociological common sense that *social* limitations on freedom are not exclusively or unequivocally 'out there.' The very fact that thought is ruled by ingrained social norms entails a social manipulation and limitation of personal choice. The social construction of the self smothers freedom more damagingly when inculcated norms are particularly restrictive in their specific content or sustain relations of subordination. The undoing of social constraints will thus require revisions of self-identity to widen the array of conceivable options and to dismantle internalised stances that feed into social subjugation.[55] To enhance freedom from social thralls, it may also be necessary to wrestle with affective dimensions of the self. Complex psychic dynamics get entangled with social structures and produce individuals who are emotionally attached to social practices or desire their subjection to others.[56] Without an engagement with the psyche, the destruction of repressive institutions 'will falter on the barrier of deeply entrenched, retrograde and conformist feelings and ideas.'[57]

---

[52] Berlin (1969), pp.xxxix, lvi, 161.
[53] Berlin (1969), p.122, Berlin (2001), p.15.
[54] For this separation, see, among others, Berlin (2002b), p. 272.
[55] Frosh (1999), pp.241, 244, 247-248, 272 .
[56] For more on the emotional underpinnings of socialisation, see chapter 5, pp.175-176.
[57] Frosh (1999), p.244.

By giving pride of place to 'outer' impediments,[58] Berlin's set-up of social freedom neglects the importance of work on the self, which is necessary in order to assail the inner underpinnings of social limitations and to keep agents on guard against subtle, subterranean circuits of social discipline. In an adequate rendering of freedom, whether it is specifically social freedom or not, reference to the constitution of the person and inner freedom must retain a centrality that could not be by-passed.

That Berlin does not take great care of the self itself seems to be partly due to the purported function of negative liberty as a counter to positive freedom, which would forestall the risks of authoritarianism. To recall, this danger stems from the fact that various designs of positive liberty as self-determination or self-realisation identify the self in question with an ideal or essential nature of the person. Freedom comes to mean the enactment of a prewritten script of life. As a result, the forcible imposition of the proclaimed ideal can be dressed up as a promotion of freedom.[59] By shunning adherence to specific models of the self, negative liberty poses as a salutary alternative that keeps prescriptive universalism at bay.

However, the possibility of misusing freedom to justify authoritarianism hangs crucially on the particular content of one's vision of the person. If the favoured view of free individuality features a critical and imaginative chooser, who advances goals of her own choosing rather than any predefined universal values, it is not clear how encoding this type of selfhood into freedom can serve paternalistic or totalitarian policies. Even if, historically speaking, the affiliation of freedom with specific ideals opened the way to authoritarianism,[60] the latter does not follow with necessity from this affiliation as such. To bracket off issues of subjectivity in the construction of freedom is not the only way to pre-empt paternalistic abuses. Caught up in this false

---

[58] Berlin (1969), p. lvi.

dilemma-independence from ideas of the person or proneness to authoritarianism-Berlin ends up with an impoverished understanding of freedom, which does not sustain alertness to internal social (or other) restraints and does not emancipate the self from its operative limitations.

c. The limits of the absence of limits

Negative liberty is, to recap, a shorthand expression for the absence of obstacles to gratifying actual or possible cravings. A further problem with such an apprehension of freedom is that it is not sufficiently geared to the conditions of agency. Agency is rule-governed. It proceeds against a background of norms of thought and habits of action, and finds its way within a tangle of social laws and relationships. All these structures are simultaneously enabling and constraining. They allow the pursuit of certain activities by regulating or coordinating action, but they also delimit the scope of choice since they entail specific modes of thinking and doing things. If agency is always structured to some extent, it is always constrained in parts. Consequently, freedom as 'absence of constraints' is either beyond reach or self-defeating.[61]

No doubt, particular kinds of structural restraint can be kicked aside or curbed. It is possible to lift certain social and political restrictions, which lie at the centre of attention in negative liberty, and the ambit of unimpeded choice can spread out beyond given boundaries. Still, if a limiting dimension is built into all social rules and forms,[62] individuals can enjoy a *lack* of external social restraints only to the extent that they withdraw from society. By the standards of negative liberty taken to heart, individual freedom would be close to non-existent in an organised complex society.

---

[59] Berlin (1969), pp. 131-134, Berlin (2002a), pp.46-47.
[60] Berlin (1969), pp. xliv, 132-134.
[61] Flathman (1987), pp.144-145, 147-148.
[62] Berlin (1969), p. xlix.

Negative freedom is utopian or irrelevant for the large part of modern life that is carried out within social settings.[63]

The effort, now, to *expand* freedom in the guise of an unregulated libertarianism would bring along an increasing dislocation of social structure, which would tend towards chaos. Among other effects, this would gradually undermine security, which is indispensable for freedom, and would impede provisions for collective goods and individual empowerment through (enforceable) social policies.[64] Similar paralysing effects would follow suit from an endeavour to eliminate internal norms-controls of thought and action, which, unlike various social rules, cannot be thrust aside without destroying agency itself. It is obvious, *inter alia*, that an undisciplined, wanton conduct would thwart most complicated undertakings and could bear self-defeating results through the mutual annihilation of contradictory preferences. Anarchic liberty cuts against the freedom to pursue individual and collective ends.

More crucially, perhaps, the equation of freedom with the absence of constraints results in an indiscriminate juxtaposition of freedom to limitations.[65] Negative liberty does not distinguish between different types of social rules-limitations, which can be more or less restrictive, and cannot capture nuances that matter in the different modalities of relating to social restrictions. It does not differentiate, for instance, between self-imposed limitations and coercively enforced rules that do not command the free assent of persons subject to them. Consequently, negative liberty is not much of a help in the effort to uncover and enlarge the possibilities of freedom *within* its

---

[63] Brenkert (1991), p.82, Flathman (1987), pp.145, 148.
[64] Brenkert (1991), p.82, Laclau (1996), p.19; Berlin displays awareness of this problem in Jahanbegloo (2000), pp.149-151.
[65] See, among others, Berlin (1969), p.xlix, Jahanbegloo (2000), pp.149-151.

limits and *in relation to* them. It does not serve the advancement of freedom under social constraints.[66]

This holds equally true in respect of internal determinations, such as conceptual frameworks, norms and habits, which both enable and hold agency in check. As it is not attuned to the structured nature of agency, negative liberty fails to discriminate between more or less liberating stances towards the inner disciplines of the self. In terms of the scope available to freedom, there are notable differences between behaviour that is guided by self-legislated rules subject to reappraisal and behaviour in the grip of nonconscious or mindlessly followed rules.

No doubt, Berlin grants the importance of self-determination on both the individual and the collective level.[67] But he consigns this kind of freedom to the camp of positive liberty, he then contrasts the 'positive freedom' of self-determination to negative liberty, and he presents self-determination as independent of the freedom to choose. Thereby, he sets up a false dichotomy and represses the solidarity between the two.[68] Freedom of choice runs deeper and expands if it encompasses not only the possibility of picking from different options but also the determination of the very criteria and rules of choice (both in society and within the self). Otherwise, social and personal choice can be settled in advance by regimented rules that determine the eligibility of alternatives and the decision among them. Also, without autonomy, personal choice is vulnerable to external manipulation through the control of personal standards.

Holding freedom analytically apart from its presuppositions- the rule-governed nature of agency, in this case- has a point. It brings into relief the constraining edges of these presuppositions and sharpens awareness of ensuing losses. But a formation of

---

[66] Siedentop (1979), pp.168-169.

freedom, which is unadjusted to the pragmatics of agency, will be self-defeating, either because it will be of no practical relevance or because it will not foster freedom under the actual circumstances of its exercise.[69]

On a related note, negative liberty fails to advance not only the cause of individual emancipation, but also other projects, like democracy, which bear selective affinities with personal freedom. If the cornerstone of democratic regimes is their dual commitment to the principles of freedom and equality, classical negative liberty corrodes this allegiance and the regime that lives on it. Negative liberty clashes with equality because the desires of different agents may collide with one another, and capacities are not equally distributed. The freedom of the self to put its plans into effect is likely to stumble on the like freedom of others; the negative freedom of the strong and more talented may crush the equal liberties of others. Equality in the sense of equal liberty is then in tension with maximising the liberty to do as one wishes.[70] If the conflict between freedom and equality is inevitable and dominant in the relationship between the two, there are intractable limits to how far a polity can go in promoting both principles simultaneously, enhancing democracy and combating domination. In political terms, the apparent conflict between freedom and equality plays in the hands of parties opposed to the further democratisation of society and the fight against oppression: it allows freedom to confer legitimacy on the persistence of asymmetrical power relations under the pretext that it is impossible to square freedom with equality in a seamless way.[71]

---

[67] Berlin (1969), pp.xlvii, lvi-lvii, lx-lxi.
[68] Berlin (1969), pp. 121, 129-131.
[69] For the argument that an absolute distinction between freedom and its conditions is problematic, see Blokland (1997), p.42.
[70] Berlin (2001), p.22, Berlin (1969), pp.124-125, 167.
[71] Cf. Dworkin (2001), p.75.

From the standpoint of freedom, the social and political implications of negative liberty do not suffice to debunk this conception, if it stages an otherwise compelling interpretation of freedom. But if freedom itself would be better served by a different construal that is also easier to accommodate with equality, then its inegalitarian consequences add to the case against negative liberty.[72]

d. The return of (the repressed) absolutism

Negative liberty does not offer a good remedy to the essentialist paradigm to the extent that it reinstalls elements of absolutism, a basic flaw of essentialist freedom. This regress is evident in the way in which certain advocates of negative liberty have drawn the limits to social interference, a way which is certainly not a necessary corollary of negative liberty, but is common in its historical construction.[73] So, a number of negative libertarians have defined the frontiers that demarcate the realm of free choice in terms of absolute and fixed laws, which are not up for questioning and reform. These laws safeguard the unrestrained pursuit of individual plans relative to vital interests that are defined through reference to theories of human nature or natural law or rationality, theories which, like essentialist doctrines, stipulate the existence of an abiding human essence. To absolutise individual rights- the legal form in which modern societies lay down the limits to social intervention- is to enshrine the domain of personal discretion with a watertight fence. But, by the same token, absolute rights predefine the boundaries of freedom's space in a substantial restriction of self-determination.[74]

The entrenchment of freedom's bounds denies to citizens the freedom to institute the principles that regulate lawful freedom in society. When the inventory of primary

---

[72] For an extensive discussion, see Dworkin (2001), pp.83-90.

rights is a closed list settled once and for all, individuals forfeit their sovereignty as lawmakers, the freedom to revise their rights through struggle and collective deliberation. This signals a straightforward abridgement of self-legislation and exudes a paternalism of sorts: the fields and aspects of activity that merit social protection and the forms of this protection are fixed *for* the individuals ahead of any acts of will-formation on their part.[75]

Moreover, when the subjects of rights are not at the same time their sovereign legislators, an array of consequences ensues. Autonomy is diminished on a level vital for the freedom to carry out particular life-projects. The laws that are given to citizens as unalterable decrees settle the legitimate scope of their private liberty. Any given bill of rights may fail to protect the free pursuit of certain plans and values, if it does not cater adequately to their specific needs. Unrevisable rights would make sufficient guarantors of freedom only if basic values and goods were atemporal universals. Regimented constitutions cannot provide for newly articulated demands and newly emerging needs through the revision of basic rights. And the stirrings of the new will be always subject to social exclusion and repression if they clash with pre-established privileges.[76]

Through the particular kinds of social activity on which it bestows legitimacy and protection, any bill of rights may contain biases against social sectors and may foment or engender structures of unequal freedom. The debate over the rights to private property and their social ramifications illustrates these possibilities. To place the constitution of today beyond the pale of challenge is to reify the prevailing configuration of power relations and to banish movements that unsettle the current

---

[73] Berlin (1969), pp. 126-127, 164-165.
[74] Dumm (1996), pp.55-56, 60-61.
[75] For a critique of the wedge that liberals drive between private rights and political autonomy see Habermas (1997), pp.384,388-427, 472-477.

balance of power towards greater equality and freedom. When officially sanctioned liberties are laid down in perpetuity, it becomes more difficult to take constitutional and other political steps against subsisting forms of oppression or disablement.

The residual absolutism, which inflects Berlin's liberalism, spans over a wider area. Value-pluralism denotes the plurality of human values and the absence of any assurance that they fully cohere with one another. But the diversity of values is limited. Human goals are presumed to be many, but not infinite. Although the content of these ends is not fully specified and the possibility of alterations is not precluded unambiguously, Berlin's thought evinces a lingering attachment to the notion that values are fixed: they are definite, limited and knowable from past and present experience.[77] The turn away from monism or essentialism, the metaphysics that professes faith in an overarching universal good, is not carried far enough. In Berlin's universe of value-pluralism, freedom is not tethered to a singular end, but it is still restricted to a perhaps unnecessary extent. Berlin's negative liberty shrinks to a selection from a circumscribed plurality of ends, which are given in advance. This obscures from view the freedom to will a new object into existence and represses the freedom to become something radically new.[78] Choice is still determined in a certain sense: the inventory of eligible options is prearranged and closed. (No doubt, bounded pluralism and limited freedom may represent a fact of life, which can be lamented but is not at our discretion. Chapter 5 and 6 will question the 'factual' basis of Berlin's pluralism).

With few exceptions, the goals and values that fall under the legitimate range of human ends are not substantively defined by Berlin. So, arguably, his restriction of

---

[76] See also Macfarlane (1966), p.79.
[77] This assumption seems to me in plain conflict with Berlin's statement that 'There is no fixed, unalterable 'core' common to all men at all times' (Berlin (2001), p.65).
[78] Berlin (1991), pp.11, 68, 79, 84.

freedom to a choice among indefinite possibilities seems rather innocuous. Still, this bend of Berlinian liberty nourishes a disposition to equate freedom with the process of picking among preestablished options. It covers over the possibility of generating new forms.[79] The upshot is a static conception that can serve to preserve the status quo or to narrow down alternatives to a predefined set. Another effect of Berlin's pluralism is that by tutoring individuals in the conviction that legitimate goals are pregiven and bounded, it nurtures attitudes that forestall the social recognition of newly expressed values. In this manner, it sets up an exclusionary community that is plural, but not pluralizing and responsive to the as yet unacknowledged and the non-integrated. Berlinian pluralism augurs ominously a society that is unwilling to expand freedom by making room for the enactment of more possibilities and new values.[80]

The delimitation of eligible options and the ensuing contraction of freedom are not an effect of Berlin's negative liberty alone. In general, negative liberty suggests that individuals are free as long as they can take a choice from different options without interferences. The accent falls on the availability of multiple choices and the importance of security against external intrusions, while the content and the diversification of options receive no or less attention. Negative liberty offers no critical purchase on the modalities of social control which operate by adjusting the variety of available alternatives. Negative liberty can serve thus to cloak a circumstance of constrained possibilities as a regime of real freedom, as long as individuals are presented with opportunities for choice from different options. Moreover, the suggestion that choice among actual possibilities is the epitome of freedom fudges over how the expansion of freedom is often premised on the creation

[79] This conservative disposition is reflected in Raz's work on freedom, which is influenced by Berlin's value pluralism and his notion of negative liberty. See chapter 8, pp.
[80] On the limits of pluralism and a plea for pluralisation, see Connolly (1995).

of new forms. This may be an urgent need when none of the available routes of action permits the fulfilment of a particular project, or when society offers a selection of different roles and norms, but these are embedded in relations of subordination and limitation.

Having dismissed negative liberty as an antidote to essentialism, I turn now to another pre-eminent figure of mainstream liberalism, J.S. Mill, to see whether his framing of liberty opens a more promising avenue.

3. Mill's liberty and individualistic essentialism

a. The Liberty Principle- beyond the negative conception

Mill's *On Liberty* sets forth the Liberty Principle, which serves to draw the boundaries of warranted social interference with individual behaviour and separates a niche of individual freedom within social relations.[81] The jurisdiction of society should be limited to those thoughts and actions of the person that affect injuriously the interests of others, whereas the individual should be sovereign over everything that bears on itself alone. '[T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.'[82] Harm to others is the necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition of legitimate coercion, which can take the form of legal punishments or social pressure of other kinds.[83] The Liberty Principle formulates in essence a law of negative liberty, which clears a play space of unimpeded action for the self.

But Mill's vision stretches beyond negative liberty and outlines a distinctive sense of individual freedom *within* the domain of personal independence that the Liberty

---

[81] Mill (1991a), pp.5, 9, see also Rees (2002), p.169.
[82] Mill (1991a), p.14; see also pp.16, 83, 104; Rees (2002), pp.169-189.
[83] Mill (1991a), pp.9,14, Ryan (2002), p.163.

Principle circumscribes.[84] Freedom does not lie primarily in the absence of limits. It encapsulates a positive ideal that connotes action: 'the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way.'[85]

His swerve from negative freedom can be gleaned from the attention that Mill calls to conformist trends as posing major threats to liberty. Although he speaks occasionally of liberty in terms 'of doing as we like',[86] his view of freedom is not simply relative to actual longings as in the conventional variant of negative liberty. If this were the case, Mill could not chastise conformism as a state of diminished freedom, because agents would be free as long as they act on their present preferences, regardless of whether they succumb to public pressures.[87]

A fuller survey of the complex meaning that Mill assigns to freedom reveals the extent to which he transcends negative liberty. To begin with, Mill's freedom integrates elements of autonomy through the proviso that the free individual should agree with the desires which propel its action. What is more, Mill valorises individual difference and the flourishing of the human potentialities that are latent in each different self. These ideas contain a transgressive impulse that drives individuals to break loose from the hold of their present wants and social norms. They evoke the inherence in the self of an original 'something' that agents should bring forth and allow to flourish. By so doing, the individual may soar above its actual habits and social conformism.

In short, Mill's doctrine contrasts sharply with negative liberty in that his vision of freedom is informed by a deep preoccupation with the self. He sketches out a certain

[84] Smith (2002), pp.239-255.
[85] Mill (1991a), p.17; see also Freeden (1996), pp.146-147.
[86] Mill (1991a), p.17.
[87] Smith (2002), pp.241-242.

life-form or ideal of the person that is designed to amplify freedom by tearing the self loose from the grip of tradition, the crust of convention and the inertia of habit.

Mill forges strong links between freedom and autonomy by foregrounding the deliberate formation of personal wants, norms and pursuits.[88] For an agent to qualify as free, it does not suffice that she can give effect to her desires without stumbling over social obstructions. The free self makes its own choice of rules and ends instead of simply adapting to social preferences.[89] Free agents have power over their personality and are responsible for fashioning themselves. 'A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them, knows that he could resist.'[90] Freedom as autonomy includes the ability to effect changes in one's person in line with one's wishes.[91] '[T]his feeling, of our being able to modify our own character *if we wish,* is itself the feeling of moral freedom.'[92]

But Millian autonomy is enwrapped in a wider practice of freedom. The content of autonomous choice is not left totally indeterminate. In an emphatic sense, freedom is about the 'free development of individuality.'[93] This involves the self-actualisation of personal capabilities and inclinations, which are manifestations of generic human faculties but are expressed differently across individuals.[94] Mill subscribes to von Humboldt's creed that 'the end of man...is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole.'[95]

---

[88] Mill (1991a), pp.14-15, 17, 63, 65-67, Smith (2002), pp.246-247.
[89] Mill (1991a), p.63; see also Gray (1996), p.78, Gray (2002), pp.194-199, Smith (2002), p.247.
[90] Mill (1963a), p.841.
[91] Mill (1963a), pp.840-841, also Mill (1963b), p.466, Smith (2002), pp.248-250.
[92] Mill (1963a), p.841.
[93] Mill (1991a), p.63.
[94] Mill (1991a), pp. 64-65, 68-71, 75-76, Mill (1963a), pp.856-859, Gray (1991a), pp.xiii-xiv, Gray (2002), p.200, Gray (1996), pp.73, 80, 86, Donner (1991), pp.120-122, Berger (1984), p.278.
[95] Mill (1991a), p.64.

Mill's picture of human nature gives prominence to the 'higher faculties' of individuals, that is, the intellectual, moral and aesthetic capabilities, which are considered as defining traits of the human.[96] But each individual carries a specific endowment of potentialities that manifest these higher powers and dispositions. The point of freedom is 'to give fair play to the nature of each',[97] which amounts to the fulfilment of one's distinctive desires and dispositions, because 'nature' stands here for the inclinations and potentialities proper to each individual:[98] 'A person whose desires and impulses are his own –are the expression of his own nature as it has been developed and modified by his own nature- is said to have a character.'[99] The particular character of the person consists of her 'mental predispositions or susceptibilities',[100] and derives from 'differences in education and outward circumstances.... the remainder may be in great part accounted for by the physical differences in the sensations produced in different in different individuals by the same external or internal cause.'[101]

The aim is to bring one's nature to fruition by cultivating native tendencies. Freedom mobilises thus a permanent activity of growth.[102] From this viewpoint, Millian freedom stages a positive exercise-concept, which implies *doing* something (more or less) specific: the fulfilment of the latent potencies and distinctive inclinations of the self. In Mill's qualitative hedonism, this type of self-realisation is a byword for happiness: competent judges can testify that, in terms of the quality of

---

[96] Mill (1991a), pp.75-76, 138, Donner (1991), pp.137-139.
[97] Mill (1991a), p.70; see also 66, 75.
[98] Mill (1991a), pp.64-71, 75-76; see also Mill (1991c), pp.543-545, 572, Mill (1963a), pp.856-859, Berger (1984), pp.12, 18, Gray (1996), pp.45, 73.
[99] Mill (1991a), p.67.
[100] Mill (1963a), p.857.
[101] Mill (1963a), pp.859.
[102] Mill (1991a), pp.68,71, Donner (1991), p.165, Berger (1984), p.200, Gaus (1983), pp.33, 165-166, 174. On the view advanced here, self-development and self-realisation coincide in Mill's doctrine. For a different interpretation, see Freeden (1996), pp.147-148.

enjoyment, no other satisfactions can match the pleasures that are derived from the exertion of higher faculties.[103]

So, autonomous choice is bound to advance a specific personal good. The agent engages in pursuits that are tailored to one's potential and idiosyncrasy, and allow them to blossom. The conduct of original experiments in living is intended as a way of uncovering and realising one's unique capacities. By trying out a diverse array of possibilities, individuals can track and craft the life-project that best suits their idiosyncrasies.[104] Moreover, choice is a means to attaining balance and integrity in self-development. The various engagements and objectives of the person can be made to cohere with one another through choices that both nourish the capacities of the self and are in mutual harmony.[105] But choice making bears also a more intimate, non-instrumental relationship to self-achievement: deliberation and decision-making work out the intellectual faculties of the self. 'The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice.'[106] Because choice fosters the mental powers of the self, it is a key ingredient of freedom construed as enhancement of personal capacities.[107]

The objective of realising the *unprecedented* elements of the self narrows further the meaning of autonomous choice, its methods and its criteria. Choice making should be critical and display a penchant for originality. We should privilege experimentation over conformity and explore new avenues in thought and action that outstrip actual practices. When individuals are confined to a closed repertoire of preestablished options, they cannot give fair play to their singular features and

[103] Mill (1991a), pp.63-64, 137-139, Gray (1991), pp. xiii-xv, Gray (2002), pp.190-192.
[104] Mill, (1991a), pp.17, 63-65, 75, 489, 499, 578; Gray (1991), pp. xv-xvii, Gray (2002), pp.199-201, Donner (1991), pp.120-122, 125, Gaus (1983), pp.33, 165-166, 174.
[105] Gray (2002), p.202, 207, Gray (1996), pp.82, 86.
[106] Mill (1991a), p.65.
[107] Gray (2002), pp.190-192.

original potencies. To this end, one may need to embark on new activities and transform the norms of the present.[108]

b. A freedom-enhancing essentialism?

As indicated earlier on, Mill subscribes to an idea of *universal* human essence, which is punctuated with elements of teleology and qualitative hedonism. Our common humanity features generic powers, and more specifically, higher powers (intellectual, aesthetic, moral, emotional and social) which are peculiar to the species. Moreover, all human beings aspire to a particular good: happiness. This object is attainable through a mode of living that exercises and advances the 'higher' faculties of the individual, yielding thereby a qualitatively higher form of well-being.[109] Finally, Mill posits the existence of universal laws that preside over character formation and determine how any given set of circumstances generates a particular type of personality.[110] But this image of human nature is largely abstract and formal. It does not outline any substantive universal traits, but only universal laws that regulate the formation of diverse individualities. And on Mill's conception, our generic human faculties find expression and thrive in a wide array of different engagements. 'Human beings are not like sheep.'[111]

But, as we have seen, more central to Mill's picture of humanity is the spectre of an individual essence of sorts, a definite particularity of the self, which is partly an offshoot of genes and partly the effect of external circumstances and personal history,

[108] Mill (1991a) pp.70-71, 75-76.
[109] Mill (1991b), pp.137-9, 158, 168, 172, Donner (1991), pp.1-3, 9, 41, 119, Berger (1984), pp.43, 282, 288.
[110] Mill (1963a), pp.844-874.
[111] Mill (1991a), p.75.

which interact with genetic endowments.[112] The essence of the self is its individual 'nature', the unique specimen of generic faculties which is borne by each person. It is composed of one's particular talents, inclinations and idiosyncratic desires.[113] The abstract idea of self-fulfilment through the exertion of higher capacities is realised in a plethora of life-forms that enable agents to achieve their 'nature' by giving free scope to their peculiar talents, by catering to their own inclinations, by acting out differentiated conceptions of well-being, which are geared to their idiosyncrasy.[114]

Unlike *universal* essentialist doctrines that imagine a determinate essence inherent in all humans, Mill's essentialism has an individualistic bent. For him, the 'nature of each' that we are called upon to fulfil is not something uniform, but is, rather, the exact opposite of uniformity- it is the person's difference from others. This salutary reversal immunises Millian freedom against authoritarian perversions despite the fact that, like other essentialist conceptions, it weaves a determinate self-identity into the texture of freedom. Because Mill's freedom does not consist in achieving a common nature or a 'thick' universal good, but is wedded to individual particularity, it precludes the tyranny of a general ideal that would be championed under the sign of freedom. In effect, the ties forged between well-being, freedom and the peculiar endowment of the self can help to cast the case against paternalism in more compelling terms. Individuals have privileged cognitive access to themselves on account of the medium of introspection that the self alone can use, and possess overall the best knowledge of individual biography. The self is, therefore, uniquely placed to understand its nature and the good that suits it. This twist de-legitimates paternalist

[112] See here above, pp.145-146 and footnotes. On the shaping of personal identity and related problems in Mill's philosophy, see also Wilson (1998), pp.215-218, 225, 231, 233, 234-235 and Ryan (1998), pp.87-100, 112, 118, 126-130, 229.
[113] See here above, pp.145-146 and footnotes.
[114] Mill (1991a), pp. 66, 70, 75; also Gray (2002), pp.190-193, 201, 204-205, 207.

violence that coerces 'ignorant' agents into conduct which allegedly promotes the objective good.[115]

Mill's construal of self-actualisation has a further trait that wards off the perils of authoritarianism and paternalism: self-fulfilment is bound up with the practice of making decisions for oneself. As a result, freedom cannot be 'devolved' to other agents. Choice making is a meaning-component of freedom itself, which also allows individuals to mould their personality into a harmonious totality and to pin down the plan that best achieves their endowment.

Millian freedom, however, is not first and foremost a defensive idea, equipped well to fend off paternalistic and other abuses. Mill's vision carries an emancipatory thrust that goes well beyond negative liberty. While negative liberty treats the present constitution of the self as something given and fails thus to deliver individuals from the limited horizons of their actual life, Mill's ideal permanently contests the bounds placed on freedom by society or personal identity. Mill projects a life of constant growth that celebrates the expansion of capabilities and the striving for a higher degree of sophistication and achievement. For this reason, and because it stimulates the desire to venture into new possibilities that will uncover unknown potencies of the self, his formation of freedom impedes a self-complacent contentment with current achievements, settled habits and convictions. Moreover, he highlights the debilitating effects of adherence to social conventions. Conformism enslaves the self to uniform recipes and established institutions. It prevents individuals from initiating life-projects that actualise their original possibilities. These anti-conformist impulses and the impetus to change find their staging ground in Mill's investment of an individual 'essence'. The personal singularities which the free agent is urged to bring out in his

---

[115] Mill (1991a), pp.84-85.

project of life are an inner force of alterity that places the self at a critical remove from society, and hold up a private ideal against which to appraise one's actual life. The redemption and enlargement of their individuality can prompt agents to challenge widely held norms, and can interrupt the process of regimentation to which life is routinely prone.

c. Why is Mill's liberty not liberating enough?

But the private essence of the self is not unequivocally uplifting; it also works as a gravitational force. True, it can enhance freedom by inciting us to throw off the shackles of habituation and to carry further our self-differentiation. But on the other hand, the effort to redeem the 'quiddity' of the self channels individuals towards a restricted variety of objects that cohere with their presumed particularities and allow them to grow and thrive. A set constellation of individual talents and inclinations operates as a compass that governs choice making and conduct. Moreover, the rhetoric of an individual nature and of its flowering as the supreme good cut away at the liberties of self-determination. Mill's language consecrates certain layers of personality, namely, the different features that will be held to compose the precious core of individuality. Although his variant of essentialist freedom is free of many of the risks that are endemic to theories of the kind, the fundamental idea is the same and the chief limitation of essentialism remains in place. Agents are vested with a settled identity and freedom means unimpeded action in accord with this identity. Freedom is confined to thinking and doing a certain repertoire of things to the exclusion of possibilities outside the presumed essence of the self.

First of all, Mill's suggestion that freedom lies in unleashing the distinctive potencies of the self invites the standard objection to freedom as self-realisation. Self-realisation is just one eligible end among others. Freedom should make room for

choosing not to realise one's powers and to undertake activities that do not necessarily cultivate the talents or other peculiarities of the person. Otherwise freedom is confused with self-realisation and the ambit of choice shrinks accordingly.

Furthermore, like other essentialist discourses, Mill's rhetoric harbours the peril of a false naturalisation, which conceals the contingency of identity traits. Recall that Millian freedom values experimentation and security from social interventions that will allow individuality to come out of the closet. The language Mill employs, stylising what will thus flourish as the 'nature' of the person,[116] suggests that we are dealing with innate dispositions. Moreover, their higher intimacy, since they emanate from within, bestows on them a special standing. The inflated value of certain personal features works in tandem with their presumed innateness to insulate them from revision, chipping away at the freedom to think and act differently.

This note may sound insensitive to the point that, for Mill, the 'nature' of the self is not an offshoot of nature alone, and the essence of the self is not traced back to genes or laws of human nature in a way that would disable the transformation of identity. Individuality is rather the aggregate result of multiple influences, including the social environment and personal biography, which issue in a singular assemblage of capacities and features. The upshot remains, however, an unwarranted naturalisation of cultural and personal traits. Mill represents given personal differences as the kernel of the person that should be protected and nourished.[117] This alone naturalises personal identity into an object beyond the pale of challenge. And Millian liberty is aimed at giving free reign to the said core of the person, our given particularities. This commitment fuels attachment to fixed forms as it induces individuals to organise their life around the goal of attending to distinctive features of their person.

[116] Mill (1991a), p.70, Mill (1991c), p.543.

Entrenching identity traits can ramify into the reproduction of restraining bonds (to objects, persons or social relations) and the regimentation of alterable inclinations, ideas and practices. Individuals become enclosed in settled modes of being. Moreover, although Mill's freedom gives a high ranking to originality and a critical posture towards social customs, it locates the wherewithal of innovation and critique in preexisting individual differences that should be given fuller scope. Mill misses the extent to which idiosyncratic features, even as they distinguish the self from prevailing social trends, may arise from society and sustain more insidious forms of social regulation. Contemporary capitalism is rife with 'alternative' styles of consumption which preserve capitalist consumerism as the universal backcloth of life and economic activity.

Mill's cast of freedom valorises choice and the discretionary power of the self over the terms of its life. These moments are evidently in tension with Mill's inducement to bring out a given essence of the self that is not the outcome of choice in the first place and that individuals are urged to realise rather than shape at will. That is, two contrasting senses of freedom can be read off his work. On the one hand, Millian freedom sponsors autonomy, giving one's law to oneself through self-mastery and acts of self-constitution. Choice expands to the determination of personal preferences and experiments with original forms. On the other hand, freedom is conceptually tied to the object of calling forth a pre-existing nature-a law thrust upon the self by genetic coding, culture and happenstance. Choice is yoked to the imperative of endorsing undertakings that allow the flourishing of a pre-given self. On the first conception, freedom lives off the active and creative fashioning of identity, on the latter, the stress is on realising a pre-formed identity.

---

[117] Mill (1991a), pp.67-68, 70.

Two other troubling issues with Mill's liberty pertain to the wider net of philosophical convictions which frame his rendering of the concept. They both represent facets of Mill's commitment to a universal essentialist ontology in that they bind individuals to eternal and universal truths. And both can be injurious to freedom.

The first point turns on Mill's residual belief in the existence of final and determinate truths, which are in principle discoverable through rational inquiry. This article of faith rises to the surface at certain moments of his argument for the Liberty Principle. Freedom of thought, expression and open debate are seen there as instrumental to the emergence of truth, on the grounds that humans are fallible and truth is many-sided.[118] A ban on heretical views presupposes absolute knowledge on the part of the guardians of orthodoxy and may suppress the truth or parts of the truth that are folded in the silenced views. By contrast, the unconstrained give-and-take of arguments permits the demonstration of falsehood and the reduction of error on the way to truth. This line of reasoning in support of free thought and speech makes sense only on the assumption of unchanging, objective truths which can be approximated through rational discussion, even if absolute certainty about particular beliefs is never warranted. But Mill mitigates even this fallibilistic position when he goes on to assert that:

> 'As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase: and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths that have reached the point of being uncontested. The cessation, on one question after another, of serious controversy, is one of the necessary incidents of the consolidation of opinion; a consolidation as salutary in the case of true opinions, as it is dangerous

[118] Mill (1991a), pp. 21-25, 38, 52-59; Berlin (1969), pp.180, 185-186.

> and noxious when the opinions are erroneous...*this gradual narrowing of the bounds of diversity of opinion is necessary in both senses of the term, being at once inevitable and indispensable.*'[119]

This incremental approach to true knowledge and the reinstatement of objectivism are not central to Mill's philosophy, but can be sensed in certain turns of his thinking and they hit home. Settling on unique truths nourishes the derogation and exclusion of other perspectives, which are then seen as false rather than alternate possibilities. Mill disputes this obvious conclusion by pointing out that allowing for a plurality of beliefs, including erroneous ones, is 'an aid to the intelligent and living apprehension of truth' because of 'the necessity of explaining it to, or defending it against, opponents.'[120] However, the consolidation of objective truths is very likely to sap commitment to other views and will rob them of legitimacy. When truth has become known, the tolerance of different convictions for didactic purposes, as Mill suggests, is a hopelessly tenuous basis for pluralism. In various cases, to perpetuate error will be condemned as counterproductive or pernicious.[121]

Mill reaffirms in the domain of action his allegiance to final truth, and he puts forward a similar, instrumental justification for the freedom to live differently, the freedom of a diversity of life-forms.[122] This is valuable 'while mankind are imperfect',[123] because by trial and error, as they carry out different experiments in living, individuals make tests, improve on actual modes of life and finally arrive at practical truths.[124] Again, the differentiation of forms is set to shrink over time. Bounded pluralism diminishes free choice and action by reducing the scope of eligible alternatives. Even when no legal prohibitions are in place, overweening social

[119] Mill (1991a), pp.49-50 (my emphasis).
[120] Mill (1991a), p.50; see also pp.25, 39-48.
[121] Berlin (1969), pp.187, 189.
[122] Mill (1991a), pp.62-63, 71, 78-79.
[123] Mill (1991a), p.63.

pressures and the devaluation of failed experiments are at least equally effective.[125] Undoubtedly, the whole line of argument that confers conditional value on different life experiments does not set the tone in Mill's thought. But it can be fathomed in his work and licences conclusions that jeopardise the liberty of individuals to pursue life-plans of their own choosing and making.

The second setback that smacks of essentialism and follows on from his wider philosophy is, of course, Mill's utilitarian allegiances. '[H]uman nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness.'[126] Utilitarianism raises aggregate well-being to the universal and ultimate *telos* of human action. The different forms and maxims of conduct must be weighed on the scales of utility.[127] Inasmuch as Mill's liberty is ensconced in a utilitarian worldview that prioritises welfare and has happiness bestow value on freedom,[128] this is a major liability of his approach. Utilitarianism gives pride of place to the demands of happiness. In any axiological system where freedom is not foundational, freedom will have to be sacrificed in the event of conflict with the primary value(s). Freedom will be less fully enshrined and extensive than in liberal moralities. The precedence given to general welfare will warrant encroachments on personal liberties and will permit relations of oppression, whenever these happen to increase the total sum of happiness in society. Appointed as the final court of appeal, the principle of utility is liable to trump individual rights to freedom.[129]

---

[124] Mill (1991a), pp.62-63, 71, 78-79.
[125] Mill (1991a), pp.89-90.
[126] Mill (1991b), p.172.
[127] Mill (1963a), pp.943-952, Mill (1991b), pp. 131-201, Ryan (1998), pp.190-193, 203, 214-215, Gray (1996), pp.19-21.
[128] For the relationship between freedom and utility in J.S.Mill's thought, see Mill (1991a), pp.15, 63-64, 75-76, Mill (1991b), p.145, 195-196, Mill (1991c), p.578.
[129] On the possible clash between the commitment to freedom and utilitarianism, see Ryan (1998), pp.228-230, Rawls (1999), pp.19-30, Berlin (1969), pp.191-192, Gray (1996), pp.5-9.

It is not the place here to probe the depths and strengths of J.S. Mill's commitment to utilitarianism, the ways in which he welds together freedom and utility and whether he succeeds in canvassing a sophisticated species of utilitarianism,[130] which grants special privileges to the claims of freedom. Suffice it to register Mill's explicit endorsement of utilitarian ethics and that utilitarianism exposes freedom to incursions on behalf of aggregate welfare.[131]

4. Conclusion

By way of knitting together the main threads of the chapter, I have built up the case that negative liberty and Mill's conception do not offer a cogent corrective to essentialist freedom. While both avoid squeezing freedom into a set mode of being, they are beset by different shortcomings of their own and fail to radically break with essentialism and its implications. Negative liberty slides over the subjective dimension of agency and freedom. As a result, it fails to tackle the abundance of social and psychic inhibitions that possess roots within the self. Negative liberty is not sensitive to problems that surround the construction of selfhood. It ignores the circuits through which external social restraints, which negative liberty prioritises, interlock with and draw sustenance from subjective conditions. Accordingly, negative liberty fails to enshrine freedom in its own terms, which equate the concept with the prevention of unsolicited external intrusions. At the same time, negative libertarians capitulate to the ontology of essentialism on various fronts, but mainly in the way they institute the boundaries of individual freedom, a way which takes the content of

[130] On J.S. Mill's qualified and sophisticated utilitarianism see Mill (1963a), pp.949-952, Mill (1991a), pp.75-76, Mill (1991b), pp.131-201. Also, Ryan (2002), pp.162-168, Ryan (1998), pp.192-193, 214-222, Gray (1991), pp.ix-x, xvi, Gray (1996), pp.11, 16, 19-38, 58-65, Berger (1984), pp.83-84.
[131] On the question whether Mill's utilitarian allegiances compromise individual liberty, see Mill (1991a), pp.62-63, 70-71, 75-76. Also, Gray (1991), pp. xvi-xvii, Gray (1996), pp.15-16, 70-73, 116, 138, Ryan (1998), pp.228, 253-254, Berger (1984), pp.50, 200-234.

basic liberties off the democratic agenda and banishes the citizens' freedom of self-legislation.

The first crack in the edifice of negative liberty, its unconcern with the formation of subjectivity, ramifies into and amplifies the second, the residual entrapment in essentialism and its discontents. Internal constraints such as the grip of habituation, dogmatisms and deep-laid attachments are a feature of ordinary life, which ordinarily tie the self down to specific, repeated modes of conduct. By refusing to grapple with inner fetters, negative liberty leaves the self ensnared in frozen patterns of life and thought, which drive out alternative possibilities. Closure of being is the main defect of essentialism. Negative libertarians not only fail to address this restriction, but actually contribute to its reproduction on account of their lack of care for the self.

The work of J.S. Mill indicates various ways out of the deadlocks that blight both essentialist freedom and negative liberty. Mill attends to questions of subjectivity, brings inner deliberation to the foreground, and embeds into freedom a critical, creative mode of individuality, which shakes up the burdens of fixed identity. However, his thinking and the brand of freedom that he promotes remain caught up in the metaphysics and ethics of essentialism. Mill envisions a definite individual nature of sorts and binds freedom to its realisation. Moreover, he professes belief in the possibility of universal truths about human life and projects thus an ultimate horizon of limited choices. The universal truths include utilitarianism as the definitive frame of human morality, an allegiance which puts freedom in jeopardy to the benefit of aggregate welfare.

The ruminations of this chapter take the argument two steps forward. They explain why the renouncement of essentialist freedom should not land us in the arms of its mainstream liberal competitors, but should put us on the lookout for alternative

formations; and they adumbrate the directions along which a compelling restatement of freedom should move. It should come to grips with issues surrounding the making of the subject and should design into freedom arts of critical reflection and self-fashioning, which unhook agency from psychic and social fixations, both within and without. Moreover, a promising alternative would have thought through its ontological underpinnings and would articulate a conscious anti-essentialist frame. It would set individuals free from the dogmatisms of unique truths and the enclosures of entrenched norms, projecting a world of self and other that can be figured otherwise and in unforeseen ways.

Chapter 5

Castoriadis's ontology of the subject

1. Introduction

The remainder of the thesis stakes out an extended argument, which takes its cues from Cornelius Castoriadis to recast freedom along lines that break through the enclosures of essentialism and the limitations of negative liberty. The self and the world are mutable realities that allow individuals to fashion their lives in indefinitely different ways. Practices of reflection and critique help to loosen the hold of psychic determinations and social conventions. Agents carry also a capacity for original creation through which they can transcend themselves and their context.

This and the next chapter set out to elucidate and vindicate the ontological premises of the argument. This enterprise will facilitate understanding and will give an accounting for contentious assumptions, which could not be taken up in the course of the reframing of freedom in chapter 7. But let me repeat this point of clarification. The ontology that organises a certain construal of freedom is a key meaning-component of this conception. Our sense of human possibilities and constraints guides our rendition of freedom, the specification of the conditions, practices, forms of expression and scope of possibilities that give substance to the signifier 'freedom'. Hence, the discussion of the underlying ontology is not only a preliminary, stage-setting operation; it is a substantial moment in a reflective construction of freedom. To explicate and defend the ontological frame of a theory of freedom is to explicate and defend core structures of this theory.

The present chapter engages the notion of the self that informs Castoriadis's freedom. My analysis revolves around three central axes: the social individual, the body-psyche and the capabilities of the agent, chiefly, the radical imaginary. The first

tier grapples with the polarity psyche-society and spells out key elements of the context within which freedom is to be thought -crucial conditions and constraints of the human subject. The second part probes the competences that enable freedom and centres on the radical imaginary, the ability to stray away from fossilised identity by engendering new possibilities.

The discussion follows a certain pattern in which each of the three axes undergoes first an independent exploration, which has the same aims in view: I lay out and defend the way Castoriadis construes every different component of subjectivity; I show how each component feeds into a non-essentialist view of selfhood; and I draw out the value of his account for grasping the obstacles and possibilities of freedom. The scrutiny of the different parts is followed by a dialectical restoration of their unity. The first half of the chapter ends on an argument to the conclusion that Castoriadis offers a fuller sense of subjectivity and its inhibitions by weaving together a socio-historical with a psychoanalytic thread. The second half closes by pulling all the various elements together. It sketches out the broader scope of free agency and explains how Castoriadis traces the lineaments of a pertinent model for thinking about freedom today.

Contemporary controversies over subjectivity and freedom take place in the aftermath of the 'critique of the subject' and are faced with its challenges. The critique, conducted from many different quarters, pressed the point that individuals are more of a product or a plaything of objective forces, such as unconscious impulses and social structures, rather than sovereign and original actors.[1] Castoriadis has taken on board the lessons of these debates. The tenability of his portrait owes a lot to the way he eschews naive voluntarist ideas and reckons the limitations of agents who are

[1] See, among others, Benhabib (1992), pp.207-218, McCarthy (1990), Mouffe (1993), Honneth (1998), pp.197-198, Williams (2002), pp.23-25.

embodied, passionate and socially constructed. At the same time, he rescues freedom from the worst excesses of the critique, which dismiss any notion of independent agency. Individuals are equipped with capacities for undetermined thought and action, and, arguably, their endless restrictions can be displaced to an indefinite degree. The salutary upshot is a figure of agency that navigates its course beyond both determinism and strong voluntarism, which is not only implausible, but also pernicious, as it obscures manifold constraints that require treatment.

A broader aporia hovers in the background of the ensuing excursus on ontology, which branches off into the next chapter. To what extent can my stress on uncertainty in epistemological matters go along with affirmative formulations about how the agent and society 'are'? This difficulty will be tackled in the next chapter, in a concluding section of this entire inquiry.

2. The psyche and society

a. the social self

Individuals are products of their particular society. Quite obviously, personal conduct is conditioned by social opportunities, rights, constraints, the social relations of the self and one's position in the social division of labour. But society penetrates into the inner fabric of individuality, its cognition and motivation, its senses and its movements. Language alone, through its concepts and the way it divides up the world, exerts a pervasive influence on thought.[2] Moreover, the self internalises social pre-understandings and operative rules that enable social interaction. These principles congeal gradually into unreflective quasi-automatisms that make individuals find 'naturally' their way in a particular context. The self comes to incorporate exogenous

[2] Castoriadis (1987), pp. 259, 308, 333-335, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.7, 261-262, 283, 293.

structures.[3] The socially configured individual overlaps with the conscious or semi-conscious agent (Freud's Ego). But insofar as cultural meanings and modes of conduct build up a tacit background of agency that cannot be surveyed *in toto*, they also form a different type of individual 'unconscious.'[4]

The internalisation of laws, the discursive regulation of thought, the social training of movement and the placement in social structures make mature individuals a historical, social fabrication, which varies relative to the differentiation of institutions.[5]

This image of the self reposes on ample empirical and theoretical arguments in the social sciences and philosophy.[6] Its most interesting bit, the claim that social norms are embodied in the self, is exemplified by religious doctrines and ethical beliefs. The cultural diversification of religious convictions and ethics is a salient fact of the human world, which indicates that individuals take over their particular assumptions, values and attitudes from their particular milieu.

The notion that the self is socially constructed speaks against the metaphysics of an enduring and universal nature of humanity. Human beings may share generic powers, but these are realised in variable social forms. Language, among others, is a universal capacity, but its structure and substance evince a large measure of socio-historical divergence. All humans have the same basic biological needs, but these are fulfilled in diverse social manners. And on top of biological necessities, human needs include cultural ones, which differ widely across various contexts.

Social construction is not incompatible with the presence of certain universals. Yet, essentialism is radically unsettled if the forms of human life are substantially specified

[3] Castoriadis (1987), pp.25, 334, 358-359, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.6-7.
[4] Castoriadis (1987), pp.104-107.
[5] Castoriadis (1987), p.247.
[6] See e.g. Bourdieu (1992), Giddens (1984), Benedict (1961), Taylor (1985).

by the different characteristics of different societies, while universals are limited and too abstract to determine many of the particular norms of life. The actual scope and importance of cross-cultural uniformities is the subject of much controversy.[7] But, as such, the conception of the self as socially produced carries strong implications for these debates and essentialism. Once it is acknowledged that various human norms are social contingencies and human individuals are not fully determined by innate regularities, all presumed universals appear in a different light. Just like other norms, they may be historical and alterable. Their universality may be an accident of history until today, which may eclipse in future societies.

The social being of the self places a distinct set of issues on the agenda of freedom, leading to a particular figuration of the concept. If individuals develop socially, attention must turn, beyond negative liberties, to the social conditions that shape the capacities of the self and, more particularly, our powers of autonomous conduct. More weight must be also given to relational freedom, i.e. the norms and distribution of power that will amplify individual freedom in social relations.

Crucially, constructionism urges the need for reflection as a vehicle of freedom. A socially manufactured self is ruled by the internalised law of society. To achieve some independence from society, individuals need to take a sceptical glance at social norms made personal. Moreover, certain social principles which colonise the will generate phenomena of voluntary servitude and willing conformity to unnecessary restrictions. Against what negative libertarians imagine, the removal of external social constraints requires work on the self to undo their inner groundings.

From another angle, the social contingency of norms throws up great possibilities for freedom. Individuals are not inevitably bound to specific moulds of understanding

---

[7] See e.g. here above, Chapter 3, pp.108-109.

and particular modes of living. They can make themselves along other tracks. Social constructionism bolsters the idea that individuals should be freed to fashion themselves in an open range of different ways. And it breeds suspicion against essentialist models, which may misconstrue social conventions as eternal truths, repressing thereby our freedom to think and act differently.

b. the psyche: the imaginary and the unconscious

Castoriadis does not advocate a flat sociological idea, which would level us down to cultural inscriptions, obliterating the corporeal, affective and other private dimensions of subjectivity. The psyche is the second major pole of his construction, and it is described in terms of a 'radical imaginary.' All the various modalities of mental content fall under this head, but foremost are 'images' -perceptions, memories, dreams, fancies- along with affects, intentions and desires.[8] What surges up on the inner screen is an irregular and largely spontaneous interweaving of images, affects and desires, a 'magmatic flux.'[9]

The imaginary draws its bearings from Freud's description of the unconscious.[10] Besides, the Freudian unconscious is made itself into a chief dimension of Castoriadis's 'radical imaginary.' Located in the recesses of the psyche is a vast domain of desire, representation and affect, which is partly severed from mature logic and thought in social language. This field stands close to the body and its drives. It is

[8] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.146, 257-8, 264, 269-272, Castoriadis (1994a), pp.326-7, Castoriadis (1987), pp.239, 246-247, 329, 336-337.

[9] Castoriadis (1987), pp.247, 301, 321, 323-324, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.150-151, 263, 354, Castoriadis (1996), pp.352-354, 357.

[10] Freud saw the unconscious as a basic territory of the mind which consists of diverse, complex and fluid desire and affect [Freud (1915a), pp.186-187, 201-202] and *'thinks in pictures'* [Freud (1923), pp.440, 445-448;see also Ricoeur (1970), pp.398-399]. Desire maintains essential ties with representation as its vehicle of mental presence -more so than with language. The pictorial expression of desire in dreams and phantasies attests to this intimate connection, which can be further corroborated by various considerations.

the first point of contact between bodily urges and the mind. The nucleus of the unconscious is made up mainly of sexual and other somatic impulses.[11]

Freud's unconscious houses unnoticed mental processes, ideas and motivations, which fill in the gaps of intelligibility in phenomena such as dreams, neurotic symptoms and obscure individual acts.[12] Freud's major contribution is not the uncovering of non-conscious thinking processes, but the theory of repression and the idea of affective barriers to self-awareness.[13] The Freudian unconscious does not encompass only mental stuff that simply lies beneath awareness, but also contents that are *repressed and resisted* (the dynamic sense of the unconscious).[14] All contents are descriptively 'unconscious' in the first place, since persons are not reflectively aware of emergent ideas and impulses straight away. Many processes and ideas, which are not mentally resisted, are lodged in a 'pre-conscious' region, from where they can be readily retrieved by conscious thought.[15] But pieces that are ruled out by logic and morality, or feature traumatic events, are fenced off and locked in the unconscious in its capacity as the repository of repressed material. Repression protects the self from traumatic experiences.[16]

Proscribed longings, which are frequently associated with bodily urges,[17] may live on inside the self, but outside the control of reflection. The suppressed impulse can seek discharge through parapraxes, dreams and various substitutes, as it displays considerable flexibility with respect to the concrete objects that are able to gratify it.[18] For instance, it may pursue satisfaction by way of neurotic symptoms that are

---

[11] Freud (1920), p.242, Freud (1915a), pp.186, 194.
[12] Freud (1926), pp.19-20, Freud (1915a), pp.166-7.
[13] Freud (1914a), pp.15-17, Elliott (1999), p.14, Frosh (1999), p.22.
[14] See Freud (1915a), pp.166-167, 171-173, Freud (1923), p.444.
[15] See Freud (1915a), p.173.
[16] Freud (1926), pp.23-24, Freud (1933a), pp.494-498.
[17] Freud (1900), pp.11-12, Freud (1900-1901), p.553, Freud (1926), pp.27-30.
[18] This is characteristically true of sexual impulses. '[A] disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct' [Freud (1905), p.365]. See also Freud (1915b), pp.202, 205, Freud (1923), p.466.

disguised derivatives of the forbidden desire or by connecting up with legitimate objects that bear affinities with the original one. Unacknowledged desires and fantasies colour personal feelings towards others, skew the perception of things through projections, and may motivate the choice of particular goals, activities, partners and so on.[19]

Freudian psychoanalysis and its account of the unconscious psyche have come under heavy fire on various counts.[20] In the following, I want to press the case that the unconscious and other psychoanalytic themes are valuable for thought on subjectivity and freedom. Therefore, we should affirm Castoriadis's gesture and critically endorse certain psychoanalytic notions in the construction of the self.

First, the Freudian unconscious contributes towards a more acute and complete sense of subjectivity, particularly of its bodily, affective and desirous undersides. Resonating with the depths of inner experience, the unconscious captures the opacity of the self, affective resistances to 'traumatic' truths and the power of illicit sexual impulses. Psychoanalytic theory can help thus to gauge the effects of passions and the body on the politics of autonomy, even more so because it is attuned to the complexity of the drives, as will be shown later on.[21]

More to the point, psychoanalytic thought works to offset the idealist and rationalist biases of western thought. The inherited ideal of freedom as rational *mastery* over desires is fraught with many problems. Cravings that clash with moral prescriptions or pragmatic considerations can be neither prevented from arising altogether nor made to yield smoothly to the verdicts of reason. Driven out by reason, they can stay active in

---

[19] Freud (1926), p.24, Freud (1933b), p.419, Freud (1916-1917), pp.547-550, Freud (1900), p.288.
[20] See e.g. Frosh (1999), pp.33, 311, 313, Elliott (1999), pp.183-199, Whitebook (1996), pp.176-180, Giddens (1984), pp.5, 59, Grunbaum (1993), Gellner (1993), Crews (1999). Critics have questioned the empirical or philosophical plausibility of psychoanalytic theory and have taken issue with particular assumptions of psychoanalysis. For specific criticisms, see here p.170, footnote 33, p.173, footnote 48, and footnote 66, p. 177.
[21] Freud (1905), p.310, Whitebook (1996), pp.56, 186-187.

the unconscious and may radiate manifold effects. Furthermore, the task of coping with illicit or impossible passions should not be entrusted to the mechanics of repression, which responds to a rigorist and inflexible reason. The affective efforts that go into keeping suppressed desires out of bounds drain the self of its energies, and issue in reduced lucidity, emotional blockages and a rigid cast of mind. Repressed impulses may maintain their hold on conduct while escaping grasp and influence from the side of consciousness.[22] Therefore, psychoanalysis calls out for another mode of self-government that would pursue a more integrated and flexible relationship between reason and desire rather than the domination of one over the other.[23] Thanks to the mobility of desire, it is possible to deal with drives in a creative way that eschews repression.[24] An open-minded, non-imperious reason is vital to this end. (These hints will be drawn out in chapter 7 on autonomy.)

But the main thrust of Freud's unconscious lies elsewhere.[25] By putting the self on guard against unconscious forces, the Freudian theorem can help to deliver thought and action from the clutches of hidden motivation. The unconscious can be entertained as a potentiality that should not be excluded a priori. It does not require commitment to the *inevitable* existence of unconscious dimensions within oneself nor to the details of Freud's story. Alertness to the possibility of unconscious elements installs a source of permanent doubt and disquiet about the self. The contents of self-identity may surpass by far what lies open to view. Concealed drives and fantasies may overdetermine our conscious understandings and purposes. The suspicion of heteronomous conditioning energises an activity of self-reflection and affective

[22] Freud (1926), pp.25, 71, Whitebook (1996), p.116.
[23] Freud (1926), p.71, Freud (1937), pp.225, 250, Whitebook (1996), pp.87-89, 116-118, Castoriadis (1987), p.104.
[24] Freud (1905), p.307.
[25] Ricoeur (1970), pp.424-426, Whitebook (1996), pp.82, 131-132, Cavell (1993), pp.94-95.

struggle with psychic fixations.[26] Without such practices, the odds are that the agent will not take note of repressed ideas, which will continue, then, to reign unchecked. Psychoanalysis offers no moral prescriptions about the appropriate response to the unconscious ideas it may disclose.[27] The aim is mainly to shore up freedom by bringing previously unnoticed contents within the purview of what is available to deliberation and choice.

Freudian psychoanalysis is a latecomer to a long-established legacy that spans from Socrates and his interrogation of inherited axioms to the radical doubt of Descartes. But Freud transfigured this Socratic ethos of spiritual freedom through critical self-scrutiny. First, in opposition to Plato's Socrates and Descartes, there is no final resting point that reflection could hold on to after dispossessing itself of its initial certainties. Freud's unconscious spawns a thoroughly radical doubt. The possibility of unconscious deception holds good, in an endless regress, of any specific discovery about the self and any other truth.[28] Second, Freud insisted that the grounds of self-delusion and opacity are not solely cognitive, but may also be affective. The reconstruction of unconscious contents may come up against affective resistances that call for sustained emotional struggle.[29] The bite of Freudian psychoanalysis is the point that self-reflection may need to work through emotional distortions and oppositions.

Drawing on Freud and Castoriadis, it is time now to show how the unconscious does not make of freedom an illusion, but leads, rather, to a distinct, 'agonic' conception of freedom. This path clears a plausible way around determinism, without relapsing into the fantasy of a fully sovereign self.

---

[26] For an elaboration of this argument, see Ricoeur (1970), pp.421-427, Whitebook (1996), p.131.
[27] Freud (1923), p.471.
[28] This point is developed in Whitebook (1996), pp.12-13, 132.
[29] Whitebook (1996), p.82, Ricoeur (1970), pp.408-418.

The Freudian unconscious implies the always-present possibility of manipulation by unacknowledged wishes. But it does not open the floodgates of universal determinism. Freud affirms that lucid thought can get clear on unconscious urges and take over as the locus of decision. Indeed, this pragmatic tenet is the backbone of psychoanalysis: it is presupposed in the very practice and the object of analytic sessions (the enlargement of reflective autonomy).[30] In theoretical terms, the stipulation that individuals are merely the pawn of unconscious forces is nothing but a wild guess. Instances of unconscious motivation suggest the likelihood of such overdetermination in other cases, but the possibility of something does not entail its reality.[31]

On the other hand, lucidity and conscious self-management do not attain completion. Unconscious conditioning is an ineradicable possibility; and the unconscious is an inexhaustible source of fantasies and wants. The self can turn reflectively upon itself and defeat its passivity and opacity to an indefinite degree, but without totally eliminating them.

So, the unconscious eats into self-transparency and autonomy, yet it can be acted upon and does not preclude an expansion of effective freedom.[32] Here lies a middle path through determinism and perfect sovereignty, which helps to jostle the agent in her assurances and to arouse critical suspicion about psychic fetters. Effective autonomy is not ruled out, but is critically made into an object that needs to be endlessly striven for.

c. the unconscious imaginary

I will close the discussion of the unconscious by noting how Castoriadis drew out the power of original imagination that inheres in the Freudian unconscious, but tended to

[30] Freud (1926), pp.25-26, Freud (1923), p.476, Freud (1940), p.160, Whitebook (1996), p.131.
[31] Whitebook (1996), p.132.
[32] Castoriadis (1987), pp.102-105, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.127, 132.

be occluded in Freud's thought.[33] The creativity of the soul matters a lot, because it helps to counter an essentialism of bodily instincts and undermines, more generally, the presumption that human behaviour is regulated by fixed generic ends and norms. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic conception of corporeal imagination contains a particular theory of bodily drives. This theory proposes, again, a balanced idea of human agency, which goes beyond both a crude form of determinism and an idealist voluntarism that disregards bodily urges.

Castoriadis noted how the phantasies, neurotic symptoms and dreams, which lay at the centre of Freud's work, bear witness to the workings of a creative faculty of imagination that eludes deliberate guidance. Psychic imagination impinges on the very conduct of the self though its influence on the formation of the drives.[34] According to Freud's well-known thesis, somatic impulses communicate their demands to the mind by way of representations that portray their state of fulfilment.[35] This process presupposes a psychic power that recalls or conjures up images in response to bodily urges- a power of imagination. The images deployed are not limited to memories nor are they genetically preordained across the species. Through its original forms, human sexuality illustrates the lack of a generic bond between a particular somatic excitation and a 'canonical' representation of satisfaction. Lodged in the individual unconscious is, thus, a capacity for arbitrary choice and original invention, which figures the objects of somatic drives.[36]

---

[33] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.247-255, Castoriadis (1987), p.285, Elliot (1999), pp. 4, 22-25, 44, 125. Freud dissolved unconscious fantasies into repressed memories and came up with mythical explanations that consigned some of these memories to phylogenetic heritage, that is, memories of real events in the past history of humanity. See Freud (1918), pp.57-58, 97, Freud (1926), p.35, Freud (1916-1917), p.551, Freud (1940), p.167, Freud (1939), p.132.

[34] See Freud (1911), p.515, Freud (1990), p.288, Castoriadis (1987), pp.286-7.

[35] Freud (1915a), p.177, Freud (1915b), p.202.

[36] Castoriadis (1987), p.283, Castoriadis (1997a), p.254, Castoriadis (1999), p.240. Freud provides further evidence in support of this assumption in his discussion of early memories of sexual seduction and primary scenes. In individual psychoanalyses, he came across reported memories of sexual seduction at an early age and reconstructed scenes from childhood with decisive ramifications for the

The unconscious imaginary supports the case that the human subject does not shrink to an instinctually fixed animal or a rational machine.[37] The creative competences of the psyche can assign variable and unforeseen objects to animal needs. And the fantasies of psychic imagination can link up with conscious conceptions, infuse them with their phantasmatic projections, and skew them in the direction of their own ends. Body and reason are intertwined with creative imagination and are transformed under its impact. The self is larger than any biological and rational fixity.

The unconscious imaginary discloses, also, how biology *is* crucial, but it is not destiny. In its unconscious depths, the soul is strenuously affected by bodily urges, which reduce its spontaneity. Yet, instincts are not fully programmed in advance. By playing a part in shaping the drives, imagination injects contingency and malleability into the realm of necessity. Of course, the scope of biological under-determination stretches far beyond the indefiniteness of the drives. The ends and forms of human life largely overflow its instinctual ground.[38] But even on the level of their corporeal determination, human motivation and conduct defy uniformities. The body engenders multiple constraints, but allows for creativity and flexibility, both within its bounds and beyond.

d. the psyche and the society: knots and disjunctions

The strengths of Castoriadis's portrait are not to be found only in its individual features taken separately, but also, crucially, in their synthesis.

---

later sexual life of the individual. But he reckoned that many of these memories and scenes were fantasies, as empirical considerations suggested the unlikelihood of their actual occurrence [Freud (1933b), p.419, Freud (1916-1917), pp.547-550, Freud (1900), p.288]. However, they were equated in memory with real events, they gave rise to psychic disturbances exactly as if they had actually taken place and had an impact on the individual's affective relationships. Imagined 'primal scenes' channelled the sexual life of the individual by means of a certain scheme of things that they set up as a privileged source of pleasure [Freud (1918), pp. 7-122, Freud (1908), pp.159-163].

[37] Castoriadis (1987), pp.116-117, 149-150.

[38] See Castoriadis (1987), pp.133-136, 170-171.

The psyche and the social self are pieced together in a story about the formation of the social individual, which starts from a hypothesised original narcissism of the psyche. In the primary state of the infant, no differentiation is made between self and other, a feel of total satisfaction is experienced through hallucinatory wish fulfilment and the fantasy of omnipotence prevails.[39] The subject opens out to the world after the bubble of hallucinatory self-enclosure has been blown. This development takes place at two major stages,[40] the last of which is Oedipus. Here, the infant stumbles over a bedrock of objectivity that simply does not lend itself to manipulation.[41] In the relationship between the desiring self, the caring other and third persons (e.g. the father), the self is confronted with social laws that cannot be disposed over at will by any of the involved parties.[42]

The resolution of the Oedipus complex is the first act of socialisation proper and brings to light the psychic operations, which interlock with the social production of the self: identification with social norms, the establishment of the bar of repression and the sublimation of the forbidden desire. Identification, sublimation and repression are psychic mechanisms and undersides of socialisation.[43] Allegiance to social meanings may be reinforced by unconscious identifications and sublimations, or repressed cravings, which obtain oblique expression through social pursuits.[44]

In short, Castoriadis portrays an individual split into the conscious (or semi-conscious) social agent and the unconscious psyche, which shelters the primal monad, later repressions and a faculty for original figuration. The different steps in the social

---

[39] This idea builds on Freud's primary narcissism [Freud (1914b), pp.73-75, 100, Freud (1940), pp.149-150, 188, Freud (1911), pp.510, 513, 515; see also Castoriadis (1999), pp.184, 248-249). Castoriadis reconstructs this hypothetical state against the backdrop of various phenomena of adult life [Castoriadis (1987), pp.294-295, 298-299].
[40] Castoriadis (1987), pp.303-311.
[41] Castoriadis (1987), p.309.
[42] Castoriadis (1987), pp.309-311; cf. Freud (1923), pp.453-461.
[43] For further discussion see Freud (1924), pp.395-398, Freud (1923), pp.453-461.
[44] Frosh (1999), pp.11-12, 36-38, 62, 241, 244, 272, 312, Elliott (1999), pp.38-45.

integration of the self run parallel to different series of repressions, sublimations and identifications, which play a part in configuring social identity and charge it affectively.[45]

This image features highly contentious elements, such as the idea of a primal self-enclosed monad.[46] But it carries important advantages for the purposes of freedom, which begin with the very fact of proposing an alliance of sociology with psychoanalysis in the apprehension of the self.

The first benefit from this coalition is that freedom can capitalise on psychoanalytic insights while eschewing the perils of psychobiological essentialism, which haunt Freud's psychoanalysis. In some of his moods, Freud imparts the impression of a uniform humanity determined by certain perennial drives. Freud misreckons the historicity of social structures at the centre of psychic development, and derives social forms from biological impulses and mental processes of individuals.[47] By contrast, in Castoriadis, the historical institutions of society are registered as a self-standing order in the constitution of the person. The self imbibes social norms and adjusts to social forms, which are proper creations of society and resist deduction from biological drives.[48] Society cannot arise out of the cooperative venture of non-socialised individuals who are not already acquainted with certain norms of interaction and have not learnt any particular language.[49] As a result, Castoriadis's selfhood incorporates pertinent psychoanalytic notions in a significantly rectified cast. The historical

---

[45] Castoriadis (1987), pp.297-298, 302.

[46] In their well-known critiques of Castoriadis on this score, Habermas and Whitebook targeted the subjectivism of the monadic state and the difficulties of exiting from this condition [Habermas (1990b), pp.333-334, Whitebook (1996), pp.176-178, 200].

[47] See e.g. Freud (1905), p.372, Freud (2001), pp.178-179. A typical example is his theory of the Oedipus complex, which takes the western family and its effects on subject formation for a universal topos. Even present-day psychoanalytic thought does not fare necessarily much better, despite its acknowledgement of social interaction as key to the constitution of the person. For example, the salient approach of object-relations theory fastens on dyadic, mother-child relations at the expense of wider intersubjective networks and institutions [Frosh (1999), pp.116, 313].

[48] Castoriadis (1987), pp.316-317.

[49] Castoriadis (1987), p.178, Castoriadis (1994a), p.332.

sociality of individuals is given sufficient weight, while attention is duly called to the properly social constraints and conditions of freedom.

At the same time, the accent placed on the unconscious and the inner flux of the imaginary offsets lopsided socio-centred views, which reduce the self to social structures, bypassing private, affective and opaque layers of individuality.[50] The injection of psychoanalytic insights into a socio-constructionist image of the self presses the need to heed the inner life of individuals and highlights the psychic conditions and fetters on freedom, with a pertinent focus on unconscious dimensions.

The psychoanalytic streak serves, moreover, the case against sociological determinism and upholds the partial autonomy of the person. The individual is not merely a placeholder of structures or a bundle of cultural inscriptions. The psyche is an inner flow of visions and urges, which is not created *as such* by society. Social demands and meanings are subjectively processed through the stream of experiences, wants, feelings and representations. Identical social conditions can trigger different position-takings by the subject -individual divergences over preferences, affective responses, personality structures and practices.[51] The individual displays traces of uniqueness and independence even on the plane of its properly social properties.

More deeply, through the unconscious, its power of imagination and its wild desires, psychoanalytic thought minds the chasms between the subject and the object (society). Independent and creative agency taps into the unconscious as a force of alterity, drawing inspiration from the non-conformist and inventive energies of the self that seethe beneath its social sedimentations.[52] Dreaming, madness and art furnish ample testimony. The psyche's generative imagination feeds into the singularity and

---

[50] Examples of flat socio-centric accounts, which reduce the individual to a result of different positionings in social structures and a construct of cultural norms, are Durkheim (1984), Parsons (1977), Bourdieu (1992), Bourdieu (2000).
[51] Freud (1905), pp.370-373, Freud (1933c), p.178 Castoriadis (1987), p.320, Castoriadis (1991b), p.48.
[52] Castoriadis (1991a), p.152, Elliott (1999), pp.43-44, Frosh (1999), p.165.

activeness of the subject. Although socialisation brings about a certain domestication, one can always dream and nourish unconscious thoughts that are out of joint with social encrustations and fuel acts of transcendence.

Another gain from the blending of psychoanalysis with sociology is the new light that is shed on social shackles. The concepts of identification and sublimation afford insights into the unconscious substratum of social compliance. Identification with significant others is one of the key conduits through which social meanings are taken up into the self and are installed as one's 'automatic' ways of thinking and acting. The ego of the social individual, Freud argued, is built up of characteristics absorbed through identification with one's parents and later objects of desire.[53] The resolution of the Oedipus complex entails the relinquishment of paternal figures as objects of sexual desire. Parents are then rescued as objects of investment by providing the ideals of the ego and Superego. These identifications, the most deep-seated and enduring, thrust into the self the norms of its parents along with the entire social tradition they embody.[54]

Sublimation implies a desexualisation of drives through a conversion of their original aim so that corporeal urges can be discharged in cultural and other social activities.[55] As Castoriadis puts it, by means of sublimation the psyche replaces ''its 'own' or 'private objects' of cathexis (including its own 'image' for itself) by objects which exist and which have worth in and through their social institution.' Out of these social objects, the psyche creates for itself ' 'causes', 'means' or 'supports' of

[53] On identification, see Freud (1940), pp.150-151, 193, Freud (1915a), pp.187-188, Freud (1917), pp.249-250, Freud (1924), pp.395-398, Freud (1923), pp.453-461, 469.
[54] For an account of the intricacies of identification in the Oedipus complex, see Freud (1923), pp.453-461.
[55] Freud (1915b), p.205, Freud (1905), pp.304-305, 319-320, 371-372, Freud (1924), p.398, Freud (1923), p.467.

pleasure.''[56] The desiring subject searches for ways to quench illicit impulses through socially legitimate media.[57] Sublimation yields thus one of the key props of social conformity. Social norms and goods are motivationally efficacious inasmuch as they are invested as a source of value or 'pleasure.'[58]

These concepts add to psychoanalysis's political thrust as an instrument of emancipation. Unlike hermeneutic and constructionist schemes where the self is mainly a receptacle of social meanings,[59] psychoanalysis serves notice that social norms may receive a passionate inflection and makes a plea for engaging the psychic underpinnings of social orders.[60] To heighten awareness of the libidinal foundations of conformism, to work through these foundations in analysis and to deflect passions in other directions may be necessary steps towards releasing the self from engulfment in social conventions. Otherwise, an effort to dismantle relations and customs of unfreedom will come to grief for as long as individuals maintain affective ties to them.

The final psychoanalytic theme with an edge for freedom is the repressiveness of society. The sexual fantasies or the violent impulses of the self are not spontaneously harmonised with social life. Faced with laws that cannot be circumvented, the self is forced to submerge its socially proscribed wishes, starting with the primary state of narcissistic self-contentment.[61] The violence of society -the imposition of social norms and the suppression of personal fantasies- plagues the social self, which continues to rebel against society in dreams or with real acts of transgression.[62]

---

[56] Castoriadis (1987), p.312.
[57] See also here above, p.165 and footnote 18.
[58] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.148-149, Castoriadis (1999), pp.254-255.
[59] See e.g. Taylor (1992), MacIntyre (1981), Gadamer (1989).
[60] Frosh (1999), pp.11-12, 241, 244, 247, 312, Elliott (1999), pp.38-45, 212.
[61] Castoriadis (1987), pp.305-311.
[62] Castoriadis (1991a), p.152.

Psychoanalysis poses the question of how we could go about mitigating the violence of society in order to give freer play to desire and imagination.[63]

To conclude, Castoriadis's formation of the self is not only generally sustainable but also particularly powerful in the way it eschews both psychological and sociological reductionism and does justice to social, sexual, unconscious and other psychic dimensions, bringing into view a wide array of constraints and conditions of freedom. To be sure, his theory is not beyond challenge, its psychoanalytic allegiances being the most controversial feature. However, he appropriates only an abstract core of psychoanalytic insights, which are entertained as ambiguous philosophical constructions that problematise rather than fix the meaning of human 'existentials' like Eros and Ananke.[64] Besides, the psychoanalytic premises are submitted to a critical elaboration, which rids them of commonly stressed defects of Freudianism.[65] And, finally, as I argued, a conception that caters to emancipatory goals should tentatively take in the dynamic unconscious, sublimation and identification, their contestability notwithstanding.

Castoriadis's figure can redress the failings of negative liberty as it calls attention to a manifold of subjective restrictions and underscores thereby the importance of reflective engagement with the self itself. At the same time, the conventionality of norms, coupled with the indefiniteness of drives, challenge the dogma of an unaltering humanity. The self is brought around to seeing the contingency of its present patterns

---

[63] See, among various others, Frosh (1999), pp.60-61.
[64] Castoriadis (1991b), p.67.
[65] These include the understanding of instincts as determinants of conduct, the reduction of social phenomena to bodily drives of individuals, the myths of the collective unconscious and phylogenesis, sexism and a false elevation of Western institutions (the patriarchal family) to cross-cultural universals. See e.g. Freud (1924), pp.455-460, Freud (1933c), pp.178-179, Freud (1939), p.132. For these critiques of Freud, see Frosh (1999), pp.33, 311, 313, Elliott (1999), pp.183-199. Castoriadis affirms the historical variability of social institutions and offers a formal analysis of the socialising functions of Oedipus, which need not be necessarily performed by the western patriarchal family [see Castoriadis (1987), pp.308-311, Castoriadis (1997a), p.176, Castoriadis (1991b), pp.100-101; see also Castoriadis (1991b), pp.144-145, where Castoriadis renounces Freud's and Lacan's pronouncements on femininity.]

and is set free to change them. The further equipment of the self with a power of original invention widens the possibilities of choice beyond any preestablished alternatives.

3. The active and creative self

The following sections elaborate on the capacities for choice, self-direction and the transcendence of prior limits, which enable freedom within the frame of selfhood I have just outlined. My main focus is on creativity, which goes right into the heart of Castoriadis's vision of individuality and freedom. At the end, I show how a tenable idea of agency emerges, which registers both the limits and the limitlessness of the human self.

a. choice, the social agent and critical subjectivity

Investing with a faculty of reason the very individual that is socially fabricated and prey to unconscious determination, Castoriadis does not leave agents at the mercy of social and psychic forces. The self is able to evaluate information, to ponder and to make deliberate decisions.[66] And rational thought is not reducible to calculations in line with standard rules and given ends.[67] Human reason encompasses an ability to deliberate in the absence of concrete guidelines, to make rationally underdetermined choices and to act in an exploratory fashion, without certitude about the foundations of knowledge and the consequences of action. The advance of scientific knowledge, the practice of philosophy and artistic creation furnish telling examples.[68] In a related sense, social individuals are able to apply intelligently their social principles in the

[66] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.139-140, Castoriadis (1987), pp.73-74, 76-77.
[67] Castoriadis (1987), pp.72-73.
[68] Castoriadis (1987), pp.72-74, 76-77, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.168-169, 265-266.

fluctuating contexts of day-to-day life. They can gear rules to variable circumstances and can improve innovatively over standard procedures.[69]

These capacities are ordinary marks of human agency. By contrast, 'second-order' reflection and deliberation, which boost autonomy from psychic impulses and social institutions, express a potential that is given effect to variable degrees in different societies.[70] Reflective subjectivity turns thought back on itself, penetrating its tacit structures and putting oneself and others into question; reflective individuals scrutinise their norms, revise their ends and bring the outcomes of their reflective choice to bear on their conduct.[71]

Finally, the creative capabilities of the agent figure prominently among her various aptitudes. A nodal point of Castoriadis's story is that our productive faculties include a power to create not only by rearranging present materials or by picking among available options, but by generating new possibilities. This idea is tackled in the following section, while its implications for freedom are expanded upon in chapter 7.

All these convictions about the agentic capabilities of the self are accorded a historical and factual, non-transcendental status.[72] Various empirical hunches and theoretical considerations can be adduced to lend them credence. But a firm epistemic grounding is out of question.[73] Castoriadis's premises are part and parcel of a particular, modern horizon of understanding. Especially the capacities for self-questioning and self-creation, the hub of autonomous agency in Castoriadis, are embedded in democratic politics and other contingent social practices.[74] They are presupposed in all activities, from philosophy to democratic deliberation and

[69] Castoriadis (1987), pp.16, 44, Castoriadis (1957), p.54, Castoriadis (1964), pp.121, 129.
[70] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.143, 159, 165, 268.
[71] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.140, 160, 165, 168, 265, Castoriadis (1987), pp.104-105.
[72] Castoriadis (1987), pp.4-5, Castoriadis (1989), pp.366, 368-369, 389, 391, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.139-140.
[73] Castoriadis (1987), pp.4-5, 99-101, Castoriadis (1989), pp.391-392.
[74] Castoriadis (1994a), p.337, Castoriadis (1989), p.370, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.20-32.

psychoanalysis, that instantiate 'the project of autonomy.'[75] There is no absolute point of view from which to guarantee the objective validity of the assumptions under these activities.[76]

This is not, however, the most notable of the revisions to which Castoriadis subjects the traditional perception of the autonomous rational self. A concluding section will bring out how far he is from embracing naively the ideology of the sovereign individual, which contemporary critique has thrown into crisis.[77] He modulates the inherited views to put together a more plausible and fruitful conception of reflective agency.

b. the self as a creator

In addition to the stream of representations, emotions and intents, under the name of the 'radical imaginary' travels also the creative faculty which manifests itself initially in and through this flux. Leading views of imagination present it usually as an essentially mimetic or unreal function. The imaginary is a faint copy or a simple rearrangement of perceptions. And its products are consigned to the sphere of the less than real -the deceptive or the playful.[78] By contrast, Castoriadis fastens on two dimensions that are usually downplayed or inadequately thematised: imagination also *constitutes* reality and brings into being representations, types of things, styles of reasoning and institutions which do not replicate preexisting models. Human creations make use of given materials and are organised by prior natural laws and social norms. However, inventions such as democracy, the piano, conceptual modern art are

---

[75] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.139-140, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.20-32.
[76] Castoriadis (1987), pp.99-101.
[77] See here below, pp.186-190.
[78] Castoriadis (1996), pp.356-7, Castoriadis (1987), pp. 3,198, Castoriadis (1997a), 175, 213-216, 247, Kearney (1994), pp.16-17, 107-119, 129, Warnock (1976), pp.15-17, Engell (1981), pp.15, 18, Furlong (2002) pp.24-25. Another way of downplaying the powers of imagination is by relegating imagination to a secondary and dependent status, subservient to reason and sensation. Kant's framework of knowledge offers a relevant example [see John Rundell (1994), pp.94-95, Warnock (1976), pp.31-32].

unprecedented forms in that the particular *arrangement* of their elements and some of their constitutive norms were not already there. They cannot be fully traced back to prior elements, laws and structures. The imaginary carries a capacity for radically new creation.[79] I will put the case that imputing this world-making ability to human individuals is a generally tenable gesture, but Castoriadis's interpretation has certain troublesome aspects, which need to be reworked.

Imagination is constitutive of reality because it is implicated in the cognitive and practical construction of the real. Empirical evidence is schematised through notions that individuate objects and track their connections.[80] The variability of these schematisations is evidence that they are original fabrications of the mind, if the presence of innate ideas is not to be conceded. The participation of imagination in the discursive knowledge of reality can be clearly gleaned from the episodic moments when scientific hypotheses are being conceived and new ideas crystallise.[81] But the imaginary forges reality itself by generating what drives and regulates human activity: projects, desires, the institution of social rules and procedures.[82] The conceptual figuration of the real and the creation of different institutions are, of course, collective processes and predicaments, but they presuppose the inventive powers of various different individuals. The formative aptitudes of *homo faber* permit both objectification and subjectivation, the fashioning of oneself through choices, acts and the creation of life-projects or 'conceptions of the good.'

Ample indications warrant the investment of ordinary people with an ability to give rise to the new. Psychoanalysis testifies to the presence of a creative power in the

---

[79] Castoriadis (1987), pp.197-199, 264, Castoriadis (1983a), p.269, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.245, 367, 370, 373, Castoriadis (1989), p.382, Castoriadis (1994a), p.321. The notion that invention consists in the making of new structures out of old material is also found in Furlong (2002), p.83.
[80] See here above chapter 3, pp.90-95.
[81] Castoriadis (1999), pp.102-103, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.269-271, 293, 373, Castoriadis (1987), pp.3-5, 337, Novitz (1987), pp.30-32, 35.
[82] Castoriadis (1987), p.264, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.367, 370, 373.

recesses of the self, from which fantasies and idiosyncratic desires spring up. Assuming an individual capacity for innovation explicates how personal forms of conduct can exhibit variations on social patterns and how individuals can effect changes in their social roles. It explains, moreover, how agents can respond creatively to new and unanticipated circumstances, in which traditional solutions are not forthcoming.[83] A whole spectrum of more exceptional phenomena that signal a departure from established forms disclose an aptitude for inventing the new: avant-garde art, groundbreaking work in the sciences, technology and philosophy.[84] Compelling evidence is also provided by revolutionary social transformation, the rise of new regimes and institutions such as the Athenian democracy, modern capitalism, the French Revolution. Even if the relays between social transformation and the initiatives of particular agents are complex and radiate unintended consequences, at the end of the day, social change hinges on the creative praxis of individuals.

Castoriadis's idea of original creativity is plausible, as it does not fantasize that human inventors can create matter or beget something out of whole cloth.[85] He notes that new artefacts have endless natural and historical preconditions and are composed of many prior elements and laws. What is originally fabricated is a particular synthesis or structure, which is new in the sense that it is without precedent in its specific form. The wheel was a radically new invention because the particular set-up in which its constituents are arranged did not preexist in nature, although the materials themselves and the laws that govern its motion were already there.

Castoriadis, however, tried to pin down more narrowly the idea of creating the new by defining it as 'the position of a form neither producible nor deducible from other

---

[83] Castoriadis (1987), pp.16, 44, Castoriadis (1957), p.54, Castoriadis (1964), pp.121, 129, McNay (2000), pp.142-143, 151.
[84] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.158, 168-169, 264, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.146, 152.
[85] Castoriadis (1994a), pp.320, 333-334, Castoriadis (1989), pp.369-370.

forms….by a set of determinate transformations ('laws').'[86] This formula is problematic in light of the vagueness that besets the idea of 'determinate transformations' through which something is 'deduced' from other entities. For instance, it looks as if it is often possible to trace out the specific steps of transformation through which an invention is derived from previous conditions. To illustrate, the emergence of democracy in Ancient Greece, which Castoriadis presents as a new creation,[87] can be 'produced from previous forms' through a definite 'law of transformation': the expansion of participation in political power.

Other formulations hint that Castoriadis has in mind a more specific notion of 'production' or 'deduction': the causation of a new object by prior conditions according to prefixed laws and, more broadly, the analysability of a particular creation into a different arrangement of preexisting elements following preestablished rules.[88] Causal predetermination negates head-on the claim that human agents have created something original, because, quite simply, the objective mechanisms of the universe or of society or of the human mind are the real authors. In the second case, the object is only apparently new, because it represents an as yet non-actualised possibility (or necessity) of a given system of laws and elements.

In this wider respect, Castoriadis juxtaposes the creation of the new with the picture of a fully sutured world that would be made up of unchanging elements, which can be combined in a finite number of ways.[89] In such a universe, everything is the realisation of limited, predefined possibilities. Nothing new can arise that is not already in the inventory of possible forms. Full knowledge of the definite elements and laws of the system would allow the prediction of all types of being that can come

[86] Castoriadis (1997a), p.392.
[87] Castoriadis (1983a).
[88] Castoriadis (1997a), p.393, Castoriadis (1987), pp.170-185.
[89] Castoriadis (1997b), p.102, Castoriadis (1987), pp.170-185.

into existence. By contrast, a genuinely new creation could not be predicted from a given set of entities and known rules.[90]

Through this contrast between novelty, on the one side, determinism and ontological closure, on the other, Castoriadis gives voice to a pretheoretical intuition about human creativity. Activities like poetry, the composing of music and scientific invention resist mechanisation and prediction. It sounds implausible to argue that an algorithm could codify the activities of inspiration, synthesis and invention in a program that could produce every possible work of art or science. One way to account for this conviction is precisely by assuming that individuals generate radically new creations, which contain certain elements that were not already present and could not be predicted through pre-established procedures.

But the plausibility of Castoriadis's pronouncements on new creation could not establish their reality and the falsehood of determinism, reductionism or any other possibility which negates human agency as an origin of true novelty. In some of his fallacious arguments, Castoriadis infers the reality of individuals as original creators from the unlikelihood of particular species of determinism and reductionism.[91] Nothing precludes in theory the final victory of determinist arguments or the successful outcome of an attempt to define all the laws, elements and possibilities of the world. But even if all such arguments and scientific projects come to nothing, the truth of Castoriadis's position will not be therefore vindicated. The real does not depend necessarily on what human beings know or argue about it.

My suggestion is simply that the potential of the self for originating new forms should be phrased and entertained as a reasonable hypothesis, which is supported by

---

[90] Castoriadis (1997b) 103-104, Castoriadis (1987), pp.170-185, 195, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.392-393, 183. Novitz has come close to this idea by arguing that the defining characteristic of original imagination is the combination of entities in a way that does not follow any standard procedures [Novitz (1987), p.10].

[91] Castoriadis (1997b), p.102, Castoriadis (1987), pp.170-185.

abundant empirical indications and would be difficult to refute scientifically or philosophically. A determinist dissolution of subjective creativity into objective factors-genes, social structures and so on- would require an enormous amount of information and major advances in scientific knowledge (including the identification of all relevant causal mechanisms in nature, the mind and society). More generally, any theory that claims to have deciphered all the secrets and possibilities of the world is highly contentious insofar as it lays a pretension to omniscience about past, present *and future*.

Cast in moderated terms, original creativity still preserves the liberating edges that Castoriadis traced and valued in this idea.[92] Human agents are not necessarily bound to select from a limited repertoire of options laid down in advance in past history or any given doctrine. One can try to bring new possibilities into existence. On a tenable view, creating the new is something that human agents have accomplished in the past and continue to do to date. The contrary thesis that 'there is only one way' or that we have to decide among *these* alternatives is a questionable assertion, not a firmly established and universally accepted truth, which should deter us from experimenting with the new.

This visionary power strips individuals of an immutable essence because it allows them to propel into existence new things, ideas, norms and institutions. The self can claim the freedom to alter itself and fashion openly its life-context. If the imaginary is originally inventive, individuals can soar above the prior bounds of society, nature and themselves.

De novo creation inflects the idea of indeterminacy that marks anti-essentialism and its construction of freedom. A variety of different thinkers take the lack of permanent

[92] Castoriadis (1987), p.198, Castoriadis (2001), pp.88-89.

forms to be symptomatic of human affairs, but they tend to associate this lack with the availability of different alternatives and the open nature of the choice or the contest among them.[93] This trend is exemplified by Berlin's work, which also asserts that the plurality of values is bounded: individuals create their lives through their own ordering of preestablished options.[94] Here, we are still in the confines of a closed world that limits persons to a repetition of things given or a tinkering with preexisting realities. By contrast, original imagination releases individuals from prior forms.[95] As I will argue in chapter 7, this possibility acquires a very practical urgency when actual alternatives are all restraining or unpalatable and the promotion of freedom passes through the constitution of new personal and social realities.

c. between limits and limitlessness

If one pieces together the various elements of the puzzle of subjectivity in Castoriadis, it transpires that his view is not voluntarist in a problematic way, but does not lapse into fatalism, either.

The last sections may have nourished the impression that Castoriadis ends up reoccupying one of the untenable extremes of contemporary thought: the phantasm of a sovereign conscious chooser and the implausible voluntarism of an Absolute Ego/God that can make an absolutely new beginning.[96] This illusion is dispelled as soon as all the other dimensions of Castoriadis's self are drawn back into the picture. Conscious and deliberate self-rule can only be partial, since subterranean drives and fantasies are ever-present to an unfathomable degree.[97] Generic regularities and bodily

---

[93] See e.g. Berlin's theory in Chapter 4, pp.125, 140-141, Laclau (1996), pp.92-93.
[94] See Chapter 4, pp.125, 140-141.
[95] Castoriadis (1997a), p.160; see also Arendt (1978), pp. 30, 32, 183, 207-208.
[96] Habermas (1990c), pp.332-333, Simopoulos (2001), 576-606.
[97] Castoriadis (1987), pp.103-104, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.127, 190.

urges weigh on the sovereignty of the self.[98] Castoriadis concedes also the objectivity of an independent world that exerts itself on the subject's knowledge and thought. Certain conceptualisations of the real may fail to make sense or cannot be put to effect.[99] The contents of knowledge and reflection are not the products of the subject alone, but 'the produced and productive union' of the self and the world.[100] Finally, that the subject is traversed through and through by the other -social pre-understandings, values and attachments- means that the self is largely built up of materials which are not of its own making.[101] Active and reflective subjects are bound to display an inextricable blend of passivity-activity, singularity-commonality, lucidity and opacity.[102] On the side of the object, the causal regularities and possibilities of nature, together with the social circumstances of individuals, place significant external limitations on agency.[103]

It follows that Castoriadis's imaginary is not a revival of the omnipotent imagination that was conjured up by Romanticism. Unlike, for instance, the imagination of Coleridge and Schelling, the radical imaginary of individuals is not continuous with cosmic energy and does not dissolve into the wider power of God that propelled the universe into being.[104] Castoriadis's creative faculty makes for transcendence, but its flights are episodic and incomplete.[105] Even when it brings new things into existence, the imaginary does not begin everything, but is mainly a moment: that which resists formalisation and reduction in an activity which

---

[98] Castoriadis (1987), pp.25,134-5, 146, 233-234, 289-290, Castoriadis (1994a), pp.323, 327, Castoriadis (1997a), p.263.
[99] Castoriadis (1997a), p.369.
[100] Castoriadis (1987), p.105; see also Castoriadis (1997a), pp.344-345.
[101] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.111, 264, Castoriadis (1987), pp.104-108, 146, 264, 315.
[102] Castoriadis (1987), p.105, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.166-168.
[103] Castoriadis (1987), pp.43, 108-109, 135, 385-386, Castoriadis (1989), p.370, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.342-373.
[104] Kearney (1994), pp.178, 180-185, Warnock (1976) pp.66, 70, Engell (1984), pp. 7, 304-306, 320, 333-342.
[105] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.168, 111, 104-105.

reconfigures a pre-existing matter under historical and natural conditions.[106] At issue is the agent's potential for doing *something* different.

However, the main asset of this figure is that it blazes its trails beyond both voluntarism *and* determinism. Castoriadis's scheme acknowledges the ineliminable presence of barriers, but allows also for the dual presupposition of free agency: a partly active and self-determining subject along with a partly indeterminate and malleable object (nature and society).

This is the result of the recognition of various agentic competences combined with the way in which Castoriadis works out the dimension of constraint: the bounds of agency are ever-present, without being all-determining. Limits are contingent and can be displaced to an indefinite extent, or they permit variable open choices.

Previous sections mapped out the interplay of freedom and limitation on the planes of the unconscious and the body. Things are quite similar in respect of nature. Agency is neither fully determined by natural laws nor totally free towards them.[107] Human existence rests upon natural facts and universalities, which dictate facets of life and condition or resist certain undertakings. But nature is also receptive to variable schemes of understanding. Moreover, its givens and universalities are amenable to cultural elaboration and differentiation along indefinitely many tracks -hence the emergence of diverse cultures on the same natural substrate.[108] The partial indeterminateness of nature together with its constancy permit the realisation of different projects and forms of living, while the outer limits of the naturally possible

---

[106] Castoriadis (1994a), pp.320, 333-334, Castoriadis (1989), pp.369-370.
[107] Castoriadis (1987), pp.353-355, Castoriadis (1997a), p.10.
[108] Castoriadis (1987), pp.43, 202-205, 229-237, 262-263, 343, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.344-345, 364, 369, 388-389, Castoriadis (1989), pp.375, 396; see also here below, Chapter 6, pp.200-205, 213-214.

are not fully known in advance.[109] Nature is at once rigid and pliable, restraining and enabling the disclosure of new realities.

For their part, particular social meanings and structures preclude certain actions for certain people (or for entire societies). Yet, they are contingent formations that lend themselves to change and collective regulation.[110] The range of free play available to the creative self turns on the specific institution of the social,[111] which may allow and empower the expression of individual potentialities.[112]

In sum, Castoriadis's script of selfhood is 'critical of both the denial of freedom and the equation of freedom with sovereignty.'[113] He jettisons the fantasy of an all-powerful will and offers a sustainable idea of agency, which is attuned to the modern 'critique of the subject.' Freedom is thereby rescued from arguments that deny any measure of autonomy and undetermined action by attacking an easy target: the fiction of a fully rational, sovereign subject.[114] But, on the other hand, the limits of the self are not overemphasised to the point of excluding any possibility for independent action. In this way, Castoriadis's scenario safeguards freedom both from naïve views of limitlessness and from determinist exaggerations.

Voluntarist ideas are not only untenable. They are potentially harmful, as they conceal the urgency of wrestling with restraining conditions in order to achieve a greater measure of effective freedom. Castoriadis's picture incorporates the idea of always-present, yet indefinitely displaceable and reducible barriers. Freedom becomes thus an always incomplete accomplishment, which calls for sustained struggle against

---

[109] Castoriadis (1989), p.369, Castoriadis (1997a), p.148, Castoriadis (1987), pp.145-146, 202-203, 262-263, 354-355.
[110] Castoriadis (1989), pp.112, 320.
[111] Castoriadis (1997a), p.264, Castoriadis (1991a), p.146.
[112] Castoriadis (1987), pp.264, 315, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.146, 152.
[113] Zerilli (2002), pp. 542-543.
[114] O'Neill (1999), pp.7-8, Williams (1999), pp.106, 109-111, 116, Honneth (1988), 197, Kalyvas (1998), pp.161-182.

manifold limitations, but can ever expand to an unknown extent. There is no way back to the innocence of a naturally free agent. The question of the appropriate subjective attitudes and institutions through which agents will grapple with constraints in themselves and their context is placed at the centre of freedom. This issue forms the topic of Chapter 7.

4. Concluding remarks

I argued that Castoriadis stages a cogent representation of individuality. The different pieces of his portrait are plausible in themselves and offer collectively a fuller account of selfhood and a balanced view of agency. Castoriadis does justice to both the psychic and the social dimensions of the self. He gives due weight to our capacities for independent deliberation and action, at the same time as he acknowledges the constraints of the human agent.

For my particular concerns in this thesis, the value of his ontology of the self lies, first, in that it delivers a tenable basis for the construction of personal freedom. Second, his theory sustains a non-essentialist sense of the human self. Castoriadis insists that norms of thought and action are variable products of history to the effect that individuals are free to alter themselves to an indefinite degree. His conception cuts also against the presumption of a substantial biological predetermination that would enforce universal patterns of behaviour. Personal and cultural imaginaries shape the objects of human needs. The self's power for original creation adds fuel to the conviction that personal identity need not be permanently settled, but can be metamorphosed in unforeseen ways.

Third, Castoriadis's schema serves freedom by calling attention to a wide range of subjective limits, from the unconscious to the effects of social construction, which go

often unrecognised in other theories of freedom. An empowering practice of freedom must both engage with these multiple constraints and take advantage of the possibilities that Castoriadis's vision projects for thought and action beyond a priori bounds. The self is an open process that can soar above its present routines and contexts through different choices and new inventions. But this requires ongoing transformation and struggle, both within the self and without.

Chapter 6

Castoriadis and the institution of society

1. Introduction

Castoriadis's theory of society can be headed as an attempt to 'salvage the revolution with an ontology.'[1] It looks forward to an 'autonomous society', in which social agents are free to call any social law into question and are empowered to reconstruct social relations in new directions.[2] This project draws sustenance from a particular view of the social, which divests society of immutable laws and envisages it as a contingent, historical product of human action.[3] Hence, the different formations of social order are susceptible of contest and change beyond predefined limits.[4] Castoriadis's ontology of the social is a species of Marxist philosophy of praxis.[5] He espouses the principle of Marx and Young Hegelians that social reality is produced by human action, but he dismisses the Marxist confinement of creative praxis within a determined teleology.[6]

This chapter defends the premises of an anti-essentialist vision of social autonomy. I will work out the argument that societies are non-necessary inventions of different human groups. This insight militates against the naturalisation of social forms, which smothers the freedom to unmake and remake society along different lines. The argument is canvassed through my reading of Castoriadis and bears two folds. The first is a negative labour of critique that is pitted against determinist and objectivist strands of social theory.[7] The other puts in place affirmative formulations that make out society to be a variable outcome of agency. Both tiers vouch for the notion that, in

[1] Honneth (1995), pp.168-169, 174; see also Kalyvas (1998), p.167.
[2] Castoriadis (1987), pp.3, 78, Castoriadis (1997a), p.17, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.37-38.
[3] Castoriadis (1987), pp. 43, 88-89, 172, 181, 184-185, Castoriadis (1994a), p.331.
[4] Castoriadis (1987), pp.136, 139-141, 143, 145-147, 154-155, 362, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.7, 313.
[5] Castoriadis (1987), pp.57, 62, Callinicos (1990), pp.70-72, Joas (1993), p.158, Honneth (1995), p.171.
[6] Castoriadis (1987), pp.56-57, 62, 64-65, 68, 70, Honneth (1995), p.171.
[7] Castoriadis (1987), pp.170-172.

principle, no social forms are immune to challenge and transfiguration, while agents can fashion their collective lives along new paths. Together, they warrant the suggestion that social autonomy can expand into an unlimited questioning and open creation of the social.

This discussion rounds off the argument that started in the preceding chapter and set out to vindicate the ontological picture that inspires Castoriadis's recoding of freedom. The present chapter comes to grips with his anti-essentialism from a socio-historical perspective. Among other questions, I take up the problem of voluntarism that surrounds constructionist views and I address Castoriadis's potential slippage towards idealism. Either defect would damage the plausibility of his thesis that society is a mutable product of human agency.

As my engagement with anti-essentialist ontology draws to its close, it is opportune to tackle here the quandary that haunts this inquiry from the outset. The sceptical argument I have put forward about the chances of objective justification need not place all interpretations of the self and the world on a footing of equal truth or suspended validity. This claim is made good in a concluding section, which takes its lead from Stephen White's work on 'weak ontology.'

2. Contesting the ontology of determinacy

a. The theoretical critique

Castoriadis's assault on essentialism will be figured out here in some detail. On a first level, it clears the way for the core tenet of his sociology (that society is an arbitrary creation subject to change). More broadly, his polemic joins hands with the epistemic and normative challenge (in chapter 3) to further discredit the constitution of freedom drawn up by Marx, Kant and others, who inscribed fixed norms into the agent of

freedom. Castoriadis impugns the belief in intractable social laws, both empirical and normative. Thereby, he holds out the prospect of unlimited autonomous action upon social forms.

What has been dubbed 'essentialism' so far is broached by Castoriadis under the formula 'ontology of determinacy.' This ontology presumes that the chief ingredients and laws of the social world are universal and unchanging to the effect that the gamut of possible social forms is limited. Castoriadis's conviction is that society eludes grasp in such terms; it resists full dilution into a set of determinations that could be defined once and for all.[8] This thesis is worked out through a critical confrontation with (a) functionalism, (b) structuralism and (c) Marxism. The tag of 'determinacy' rather than 'determinism' is more fitting to describe these theoretical postures. Unlike 'determinism', the idea of 'determinacy' does not demand that every single occurrence is causally predetermined and could not be otherwise. It implies mainly a fixed range of available possibilities. Which particular option will be realised can be a matter of chance or open-ended decision.

The variability of social orders is, in Castoriadis's view, an ultimate fact.[9] Diversity cannot be traced back without remainder to a host of stable needs. Therefore, a troubling leftover of irreducible difference lingers in any functionalist analysis of society that revolves around universal functions which meet identical generic needs. To be sure, social formations answer to universal requirements of material and sexual reproduction. But they do so in indefinitely many ways.[10] This diversity could not be explained away on rational-instrumental considerations or by evoking the variation of natural circumstances. To illustrate, the ancient Greek civilisation possessed the

---

[8] Castoriadis (1987), pp.29, 168, 176-178, 181, 220, 228, Castoriadis (1994a), p.321, Castoriadis (1996), p.351, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.4, 387, Castoriadis (1997b), p.102, Thompson (1984), p.21.
[9] Castoriadis (1987), p.24.
[10] Castoriadis (1987), p.117.

scientific knowledge to raise its technologies of production to a higher level of development, but prevailing attitudes towards nature, labour and knowledge stood in the way of such advances.[11]

More decisively, social orders are not structured uniformly around stable universal needs, because in all societies there exist variable cultural needs, which exceed common biological functions. Think of martial glory, the accumulation of wealth or religious salvation, which are meaningless objects in certain communities and fundamental values in others. Cultural needs are pursued through different social practices, which result in different patterns of social life. Accordingly, diverse cultural needs lead to different and mutable conformations of social order.[12]

Turning, now, to classic structuralism (C.-L. Strauss sets the tone here), its program was to disaggregate social orders into a finite repertoire of constituent elements and rules of combination.[13] This analytic frame leaves us in the dark on such questions as: where do these elements come from and why are they assembled in variable fashions across societies?[14] Epistemological reflection prompts another, deep-cutting objection.[15] The self's perspective on society is historically conditioned. A partial overcoming of prejudice is within human competence, and so are critically informed views. But the human observer is denied access to a transcendental site from which to survey the full array of historical possibilities. So, it cannot be warrantedly asserted that the inventory of possible social arrangements is perennially fixed and nothing new could appear under the sun.[16]

---

[11] Castoriadis (1987), p.19.
[12] Castoriadis (1987), pp.136, 170, Honneth (1995), p.174.
[13] Castoriadis (1987), p.171, Castoriadis (1997b), p.102.
[14] Castoriadis (1987), p.171, Castoriadis (1991b), p.251.
[15] See also here, chapter…
[16] Castoriadis (1987), pp.33, 40. See also here, Chapter 3, pp.89-95.

The latter criticism can be also levelled at Hegel and Marx, although their pictures reflect the fluctuations of history and inject a sense of dynamics that is lacking in structuralism. In Hegel and Marx, history unfolds along a single path that is laid down in advance in line with definite laws. This presupposes that the determinants and the drifts of social development are accessible to a priori reasoning.[17] Hence, Hegel and Marx miss the openness of the present and the future.[18] The same social conditions may allow for diverse routes of social development.

A closer look at Castoriadis's quarrel with Marxism is instructive, because layers of his argument retain their sting against other determinist and objectivist lines of thought. Social objectivism encompasses determinism, but it connotes more broadly all strains of theory that visualise society as a field governed fundamentally by objective forces and laws rather than by subjective intentions and the activity of individuals.[19]

At the heart of Castoriadis's case lies an emphasis on the determining role of the action and the motivation of social agents, which should loom large in the explanation of social patterns.[20] G.A. Cohen's account of historical materialism has captured so much: the Marxist thesis that technological development drives historical transformation and fixes social structure presupposes that social agents possess the corresponding interests in material progress.[21] Every society must secure its material reproduction, but this commonplace cannot establish that social relations are harnessed to the imperative of *further developing* the forces of production. There is scope for priority setting. The hegemony of this materialist orientation and the attendant centrality of the economic hinge, among other factors, on intentions and

---

[17] Castoriadis (1987), pp.29, 41, 55.
[18] Castoriadis (1987), pp.29-33, 40-42, 70.
[19] Castoriadis (1987), pp.25-27.
[20] Castoriadis (1987), pp.25-27.
[21] Cohen (1978), pp.150-160, Laclau (1990), pp.12-13.

dispositions towards nature that are peculiar to contemporary culture. Capitalism handles nature as an object of mastery and exploitation. Other values may override the impetus towards technological advance or spawn different forms of development.[22]

The moral is that Marxism and analogous determinist sociologies can claim only a local, conditional validity, because societal trends and structures interlock with the practical intentions of agents, which are mutable and culturally diversified.[23] If large-scale causal correlations are interdependent with human practice, then action, institutional change and a radical shift of values can upset any 'objective' laws of the social system.[24]

Castoriadis's critique of objectivist doctrines includes a censure of normative foundationalism, which assigns absolute validity to specific ideals, rules and patterns.[25] Moral objectivism may proceed from a transcendental or an empirical standpoint. Having situated himself within secular modernity, Castoriadis has little patience with transcendental foundations such as revelation or Platonic reason that intuits the realm of eternal ideas. From an empirical perspective, his argument rehearses the much-iterated points about the plurality of cultural norms and the difficulties in sifting any 'thick' universals out of the actual manifold.[26] Conjoined, the negation of transcendentalism and the fact of cultural diversity unmoor values and norms from any 'objective' ground; 'objective' in the sense that it constitutes a reality or necessity beyond contingent social practices. The same points foreshadow

---

[22] Castoriadis (1987), pp.25, 27-28, Castoriadis (1991b), p.290, Thompson (1984), p.18.
[23] To complete the outline of Castoriadis's critique of Marxism, one should also mention the argument which relies on historical and anthropological evidence to suggest that variable articulations of social and political relations have existed on the same level of technological development. This is formulated as a head-on empirical refutation of historical materialism, whose main tenet is that a single type of social relations corresponds to and is determined by a certain stage of technological advancement [Castoriadis (1987), p.20].
[24] Castoriadis (1987), pp.44, 143, 154, 161.
[25] Castoriadis (1987), p.168.
[26] For an elaboration of these ideas, see here above, chapter 3, pp.100-109, and Castoriadis (1989), pp.374-375.

Castoriadis's thesis that norms and values are historical creations of the groups in which they were initiated.[27] Social norms surfaced at a specific time and place. In the absence of a pre-established order of ideas, their instatement is not the actualisation of pre-constituted objects, but an act of creation in and through the practices and allegiances of different societies.

A further argument against the objectivity of norms goes along these lines. The quest for a *rational* foundation of values runs up against the unlikelihood of a proof which would not fall back on some taken-for-granteds, minimally the rules of rational justification itself. These rules do not admit of non-circular vindication, and the same goes for the very answerability to reason and the demands of rational vindication. They could not be rationally established without begging themselves. On the other hand, to anchor the authority of reason in sources external to reason cannot yield a justification that is rational to its end. Therefore, an allegiance to reason that remains 'within the bounds of reason alone' involves an act of *arbitrary* self-commitment.[28]

Finally, Castoriadis dismisses the possibility of strong objective justification by evoking, also, the infinite regress in the series of justifications. All demonstrations operate from background notions whose truth they simply assume.[29]

In conclusion, this section took issue with various outlooks which proclaim that social laws are necessary and independent of the action of social agents. Essentialism and, more broadly, objectivism preclude the possibility or desirability of action beyond settled limits. To question this view of society is to bolster the conviction that social groups can act on their actual structures and transform them in tune with new visions. The orientations and forms of collective life are neither fully fixed by alien

[27] Castoriadis (1997b), pp.383-4, Castoriadis (1989), pp.385-387, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.31-32.
[28] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.391-393.
[29] See here above, Chapter 3, pp.96-97, Castoriadis (1989), pp.391-393, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.87, 126, 132, 136, 172.

forces, nor to be decided objectively in the name of absolute norms. Rather, they constitute an open question that social actors can answer in different ways without being bound by sacred axioms.

b. The political challenge

The ethico-political critique castigates the 'ontology of determinacy' for its repressive effects (rather than for its implausibility). The ontology of determinacy is an expression and a prop of social heteronomy: social agents stand towards structures – practices, norms, relationships, social conditions- as something unamenable to deliberate regulation and reformation.[30] Objective determinations of society may be actual or ideal: a telos to which history is geared, an archetype that societies should instantiate.[31] Either way, the laws of social structure are always/already given. They are not changeable conditions that turn on day-to-day practice.

Such static pictures of society can stifle autonomous agency or become downright oppressive as they dismiss and forestall action that exceeds their specific vision. Transgressions oppose a structure of reality that is defined irrespective of the whims of the human will. Therefore, acts of transcendence are doomed to failure and conducive to disaster, or they are normatively objectionable.[32] When this cast of mind serves to guide political practice, it subdues action to theory. Conceptions of society as a closed system envisage actors as essentially passive vehicles set to realise their doctrinaire stipulations.[33] Herein lies, for Castoriadis, the failure of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis. The aspiration to break with Hegelian idealism and to overcome the alienation of practice to mental speculations foundered on the ultimate replication

[30] Castoriadis (1987), pp.372-373, Castoriadis (1997a), p.86.
[31] Castoriadis (1987), pp.66, 167-168, Castoriadis (1991a), p.23.
[32] Castoriadis (1987), pp.59, 68-69.
[33] Castoriadis (1987), p.69.

of Hegelian system-building, which laid down on paper the trajectory of future history ahead of social decision and action.[34]

Castoriadis was among the first voices on the Left to trace out the threads that link up this mode of social thinking with oligarchic rule and totalitarianism. If the order of society is dictated by determinate laws or ideal norms, which can be securely grasped by reason, then enlightened politics should be governed by the understanding of social objectivity and those who have mastered it. An *independent* political mobilisation is useless or pernicious.[35]

To dissipate the phantasm of social determinacy is to ward off all such repressive implications of theory and to enable the idea that history is *to be made* by the activity of groups and individuals, who need not go down a predefined path nor observe preconceived principles. Social orders are not anchored in the necessities of nature, reason or God.[36]

3. The imaginary institution of society

a. The general idea

Castoriadis took the step beyond negation and articulated his anti-essentialism in positive theses. Societies are contingent formations that grow out of creative action. The original inventiveness of the social imaginary (collective action as the creator of social forms) gives the lie to essentialism: society withstands reduction to a closed ensemble of elements, laws and possible social arrangements because its different instances are original events of history. A final closure cannot be implemented because societies remain essentially open to the unforeseeable new. These statements need to be amplified, vindicated and hedged in with qualifications, a task I take up in

[34] Castoriadis (1987), pp.65, 70.
[35] Castoriadis (1987), pp.59, 67.
[36] Castoriadis (1987), pp.66-69, 72-73.

the main body of the chapter. The crux of the matter is that human collectives are capable of generative action, and this action assigns to different societies particular patterns. Hence, social groups can configure actively their social arrangements and can initiate unprecedented types of social life.

Societies are particular assemblages of activities and relations.[37] More specifically, they consist of different complexes of institutions such as 'norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things....'.[38] Social relations, rules and practices are always 'institutions' in that they are posited as 'universal, symbolised and sanctioned ways of doing things.'[39] This positing need not be legal nor, more generally, explicit.

Castoriadis insists that social structures depend for their production and reproduction on social doing.[40] Social rules and relationships are enacted and sustained by individuals in social interactions. The wider organisation of social systems hangs on social practices, while objective constraints and systemic phenomena (such as economic crises in capitalism) are aggregate consequences of human activity. These theorems are, actually, the common currency of contemporary action theories such as Giddens's and Bourdieu's.[41] The distinctive force of Castoriadis's doctrine is the light it sheds on the creativity of human societies. Institutions are social inventions. Collective agency could give birth to unprecedented formations of society. These emphases highlight the productive, as distinct from the reproductive, abilities of social agents and foreshadow a type of social autonomy in

[37] Castoriadis (1987), p.24.
[38] Castoriadis (1997a), p.6.
[39] Castoriadis (1987), p.124; see also ibid., pp. 132, 144, 268.
[40] Castoriadis (1987), pp.25-28, 65-66, 82, Castoriadis (1974), 17-18, 23, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.31-32, 36, 60, 145.
[41] Giddens (1984), Bourdieu (1992a).

which individuals shape more freely their society by being able to challenge present institutions and to experiment with radically new possibilities.

The point that the participation of social actors is indispensable for the recursive occurrence of social practices and broader social phenomena holds equally true of human and animal societies. The 'imaginary institution of society' conveys further the idea that the web of institutions, which hold society together, is a genuine invention of human collectives.[42] This sets human societies apart from animal groups, which replicate generic uniformities grounded in the instinctual regulation of animal behaviour. Human society is constituted through agency not only because activity is instrumental to the maintenance of society, but also because social practices are original products of collective making.

The 'imaginary institution' unravels, more specifically, into the institution of 'social imaginary significations [SIS].'[43] SIS refer to the social roles, the patterns of social relations, the things and the norms, which ascribe to each society its particular contours. All these different types of social structure are 'significations' in the sense that they are never perceived in themselves and do not coincide with any actual instantiation: they are reproducible patterns and generative rules that can give rise to indefinitely various products.[44] Under the term 'SIS' fall all the various principles of social order –modes of articulation of relations, norms of thought and action, orientations, common representations, values and general kinds of affects- which serve to constitute and differentiate social fields.[45] To illustrate, the capitalist

[42] Castoriadis (1987), pp.127, 133, 135, 145, 180-1.
[43] Castoriadis (1987), pp.146, 154, 235, 237-238, 356, 358-359, 369, Castoriadis (1997a), p.7, Castoriadis (1991a), p.85.
[44] Castoriadis (1987), pp.142, 180, 199, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.101, 337, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.36, 84.
[45] Castoriadis (1987), pp.46, 139-141, 143, 145-146, 154, 361-2, 364-365, 368, 370, Castoriadis (1982), pp.261-262, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.5, 130, 293, 313, 323-324, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.41-43.

enterprise is a SIS. It is a distinct, replicable complex of relationships, practices and technologies, with particular overarching intents (the maximisation of profit).[46]

Castoriadis gives pride of place to the SIS which denote social needs and orientations and furnish the specific 'point' of activities and institutions.[47] 'Signification constitutes the world and organises social life in a correlative fashion; it does so by enslaving the latter in each particular instance to specific ''ends'': to live as our ancestors did and to honour them, to adore God and carry out its commandments...to accumulate the forces of production, to build socialism.'[48] Paramount for the organisation of society are also the SIS that refer to the vision of things which is immanent in a particular relation, the shared pre-understandings that enable coordination, and the recursive procedures that constitute social practices. Slavery, for instance, 'marks the emergence of a new imaginary signification, a new way for society to live, to see itself and to conduct itself', which involves the perception of particular individuals, the slaves, as quasi-objects.[49]

Now, society is the product of an 'imaginary institution', that is, of arbitrary social invention, insofar as its specific form is crucially shaped by SIS -particular modes of conduct, schemes of perception, values, and patterns of relations- which are original creations of human imagination, because they are neither perceived in nature nor imposed by universal reason.[50] This claim draws support from the following considerations.

---

[46] Castoriadis (1999), p.125.
[47] Castoriadis (1987), pp.131, 133-136, 145, 160, 272, 361, Castoriadis (1980), p.240, Castoriadis (1997a), p.15, Castoriadis (1991a), p.184. This idea brings Castoriadis in close proximity to communitarian theorists like A. McIntyre and C. Taylor, who see communities as complexes of social practices and analyse these practices in terms of particular common goods [see e.g. McIntyre (1981), pp.175, 178, 240, Taylor (1985), pp.38-39].
[48] Castoriadis (1997a), p.313; see also Castoriadis (1999), p.173.
[49] Castoriadis (1987), p.154.
[50] Castoriadis (1987), pp.247, 265.

Social routines, meanings, forms of relation are instantiated and reproduced through the activities of social individuals. But they were also engendered by social activity in the first place, through the turbulent history of struggles, settlements, developments, adjustments and admixtures of various groups. They are not foisted on society by nature because they exceed instinctual regularities, basic biological needs and prior natural circumstances. Likewise, they are not dictated by an invariant human rationality.[51] First, instrumental-functional reason displays standard features, but it works in the service of social goals and needs, which are eminently historical and variable.[52] Even material production yields the means for activities such as religion and art, which outstrip by far the demands of self-preservation.[53]

> 'No system of instrumental, functional determinations, exhausting themselves in their reference to "reality" and to "rationality" can be self-sufficient...[Real existence] is impossible and inconceivable, as existence of a *society,* without the positing of *ends* for individual and social life, of *norms* and *values* regulating and orienting this life, of the *identity* of the society considered, of the *why* and *wherefore* of its existence...and none of all that allows itself to be deduced from "reality" or "rationality"...'[54]

Second, the ends and principles of practical reason, which specify the functions instrumental reason is due to serve, surged up at particular phases of human history. Dominant values (to serve God, to gain glory in battle, to expand the forces of production) diverge across societies and do not make up a single, preestablished world. Experience challenges also the contention that certain norms are rational

---

[51] Castoriadis (1987), pp.44, 136, 138-141, 143, 145-146, 149, 152, 170-171, 180-181, 195, 200, 232-234, Castoriadis (1989), pp.373-374, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.6, 8, 15, 324, 392-393, Castoriadis (1991a), p.34.
[52] Castoriadis (1987), pp.136, 138-141, 143, 145-146, 149, 154, 161, 247, Castoriadis (1997a), p.8.
[53] Castoriadis (1999), p.110.
[54] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.323-324.

exigencies for the preservation of human communities. Societies have survived on different normative structures, and even apparently universal laws (prohibition of murder and incest) exhibit various degrees of differentiation in their concrete realisation.[55] Practical reason -the rules and orientations that give shape to society- is not a pregiven universal objectivity, but a diversified product of history.

To become convinced that the various figures of society are 'radically new' inventions, examine also this point. In different social orders, the practices, the prevailing orientations and assumptions, and the articulation of social sectors harbour elements that cannot be spotted in pre-existing circumstances and were not causally compelled by previous conditions.[56] Consider the rise of democratic regimes in Ancient Greece, the emergence of capitalist societies, the Soviet Union.[57] They were facilitated by previous conditions and responded, partly, to the demands that particular states of affairs pressed on different communities. But these orders introduced new elements, whose occurrence was not predetermined: historical situations could have allowed different solutions. Moreover, the causal chain that binds a cause with an effect in a *regular* manner cannot be securely established for their novel traits. The second member of the causal relation -the new elements that were launched- did not even exist prior to its historical initiation.[58] The reduction of social innovation to antecedent conditions is even less plausible when the *event* does not procure a new practical response to a given situation, but stages an invention unmotivated by historical and natural circumstances: 'Why, of all the pastoral tribes that in the second millennium BC wandered in the desert between Thebes and Babylonia, did only one

[55] See here above, Chapter 3, pp.108-109.
[56] Castoriadis (1994a), pp.332-333.
[57] Castoriadis (1987), pp.112, 185, Castoriadis (1997a), p.15.
[58] Castoriadis (1987), p.172.

choose to dispatch to Heaven an unspeakable, strict and vindictive God, to make him the one and only creator and founder of the Law...?'[59]

The creative moment of society can be clearly gleaned in the singular configuration of social orders and their contingent beginnings amidst fights, compromises and the possibility of different solutions. The creativity of social action rises, also, to plain view at times of revolutionary upheaval and in new projects and reforms that are pursued by governments or social groups.

Rival views may discount the idea that society is an original author of itself by explaining new social developments as the actualisation of pre-existing potentialities or the decree of a transcendental ground like God.[60] The first explanation is bound to remain a vacuous assertion if one cannot draw up a closed inventory of a-temporal possibilities, which various societies come to instantiate. Such inventories project a preordained order (the Platonic realm of Ideas is a leading example), and presuppose thus omniscience (about past, present *and future*), or dogmatic belief, on the part of their proponent.[61] The second position is from the outset a matter of faith. To envisage historical change as the outcome of social activity becomes possible once a secular perspective has gained ground at the expense of faith in God(s) as the ultimate Maker of everything.

b. working out the importance of the social imaginary, and essential clarifications

Castoriadis's theory is not the sole or the most sophisticated praxis philosophy on the market. But compared to more elaborate models, Castoriadis is stronger on tackling objectivism, which obscures the possibility of autonomous action on society. This is due precisely to his accent on the 'imaginary' and on how collective agency originates structures instead of merely perpetuating them.

---

[59] Castoriadis (1987), p.129; see also ibid., pp.116, 152.
[60] Castoriadis (1997b), p.102.
[61] Castoriadis (1987), p.133, Castoriadis (1997a), p.94.

The nub of Giddens's structuration theory is the intuition that social structures and conditions are the medium *and* the result of social activity.[62] For instance, linguistic structures (rules and resources) are a means and a precondition for communication. But they are also realised and reproduced through verbal interaction. The blind spot of Giddens's scheme is that it renders both production and reproduction without discrimination. Thus, it does not bring out how social structures are creations of human doing in the first place. Although Giddens acknowledges the contingency and agentic roots of the social order,[63] he fails to give full force to the creative genesis of society as distinct from its reproduction. The work of P. Bourdieu also centres on practice to explain social forms, but conceives the activeness of agents mainly through the 'habitus', the socially ingrained dispositions that flow from external structures as they are adjusted to them. The habitus contains the generative principles that give rise to various thoughts, acts and things within the flexible, fuzzy confines of deep-seated inclinations. And the habitus reproduces the objective conditions from which it emanates, in a manner that is energetic and open.[64] Bourdieu, too, registers the historicity of society and the contingent constitution of social fields.[65] But it is not clear how broaching agency through a 'relatively irreversible' habitus tailored to pre-existing circumstances,[66] can make sense of the generation of new areas of action and new conditions.

Insofar as the model of agency in both Giddens and Bourdieu is indistinguishably or essentially a scheme of social reproduction in which agency is regulated by prior social structures, neither can effectively implode objectivism, which reduces historical

---

[62] See e.g. Giddens (1984), pp.25, 178, 242, Giddens (1993), pp.20, 127, 129, 161, 165.
[63] Giddens (1984), pp. xxviii, 27, 242, 244, 251, 264, 285, 347, 362, Giddens (1993), pp.161-162.
[64] Bourdieu (1992a), pp.41, 54-55, 57-58, 95.
[65] Bourdieu (1992a), pp.57, 69, Bourdieu (1992b), pp.89, 91, 97-104, 109, 139, 189, Bourdieu (2000), pp. 9, 93-94.
[66] Bourdieu (1992b), p.133.

agents to the role of 'supports' of the structure. This is the value of casting society in the mode of the 'imaginary institution': it brings forward the idea that social individuals are not simply conduits and placeholders, but also inventors of social forms.

The 'imaginary institution' prefigures an exalted notion of freedom to craft new social patterns beyond preestablished alternatives. Less excitingly, the conviction that the principles structuring society are products of social history encourages efforts to shape autonomously our social orders. Seeing social structures as 'imaginary significations' denaturalises the established order. Because they are 'arbitrary' artefacts rather than natural laws, eternal rational imperatives or divine commands, the forms of society are radically susceptible of questioning and change. Society opens up to transformative action by its members.[67] Such a bearing towards society enhances also personal autonomy vis-à-vis the social components of identity-internalised values and conceptions. Traditional norms are historical accidents, which lack absolute authority and could be otherwise.

To proceed further in the critical appraisal of this social theory, three opening notes are in order. The previous chapter wrestled with the 'radically new' in Castoriadis's work, and bestowed on it the standing of a reasonable, yet contestable wager.[68] This qualification should likewise apply to the 'radically new' creation of social forms, which cannot be dogmatically asserted. Although it is obvious, for instance, that capitalism is a unique socio-economic configuration, it takes historical and other argument to show that this or any other system cannot be exhaustively analysed into a re-alignment of previous elements, which follows universal laws and necessary, objective causes.

---

[67] Castoriadis (1991a), p.38.

[68] See here above, chapter 5, pp.184-185.

Second, to argue that society flows from creative collective action is not the same as saying that social orders are being made and remade from the ground up on a daily basis, or that they can be conjured out of thin air. Except for periods of revolutionary mutations, the pace of social change varies and proceeds against sedimented institutions which hold it in check -although change is never-ending and always liable to accelerate. Society is actually the site of a union and a tension between the 'instituted and the instituting society... history made and history in the making',[69] between stubborn ossifications of past creation and the transformative effects of present-day activity.

Last, what strengthens Castoriadis's social construction is that it does not tumble into the negative obverse of objectivism: the notion that society is formed through a convention of self-sufficient individuals, who contract to build society from scratch. The 'imaginary institution of society' is, largely, an anonymous and unintended aggregate result of various initiatives and activities of socialised individuals. This is illustrated paradigmatically in the formation and change of languages or social mores. The imaginary institution is not, ordinarily, the planned outcome of deliberate agreement. And it is *never* carried out by subjects who stand on top of social-historical preconditions and are shorn of cultural determinations such as language, values and grids of understanding.[70] Castoriadis's conception renders social self-creation in more cogent terms than leading constructionist theories, which veer towards subjectivism.[71]

Berger and Luckmann are exemplary in this respect. They locate the origin of social structures in face-to-face interaction and 'agreements' between individuals. They fail

---

[69] Castoriadis (1987), p.108; see also ibid., pp.219, 372.
[70] Castoriadis (1987), pp.144-145, 178, Castoriadis (1994a), p.332, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.57-58, 70, 144.
[71] Giddens (1984), pp. xx-xxi, 26, Giddens (1993), p.37.

to spell out that these individuals are already bearers of social properties and operate within social-historical contexts, which exceed the specific time and space of interaction.[72] Castoriadis's view, by contrast, underscores that the macro effects of any identifiable act of initiation stretch beyond the control of any particular actor, and so do the historical presuppositions that enable a new scheme of thought and conduct to take root.[73] The consolidation of the new is predicated on many, far-flung social conditions (traditional understandings, shared norms, material constraints).[74]

The upcoming sections come to grips with two other dimensions of Castoriadis's perception of society, which furnish equal sources of possible disquiet: the (absent or not) limits of arbitrary social self-institution and the potential idealism of his doctrine. I take up these points, because they are stock objections to his social constructionism, which can be used against autonomy as the freedom to challenge any social form and to produce new ones.

c. indeterminate society and its bounds

An off-hand way to dismiss the claim that society stages an 'arbitrary' invention is by chastening the unlikely voluntarism of this idea: are we asked to grant that anything is possible in human history and that there no necessary constraints on social formations? An incautious belief in an all-powerful social will detracts from the credibility of anti-essentialism, in Castoriadis's mould, and showers doubt on the vision of freedom it projects. Such fanciful thinking is injurious to the cause of social emancipation also because it glosses over the multiple constraints and conditions that we must wrestle with in every effort to expand the autonomous self-making of society. I answer these qualms by showing how Castoriadis opens up vistas of freedom beyond determinate bounds without slipping into an implausible voluntarism.

---

[72] Berger & Luckmann (1991), pp.30, 43, 47-8, 52, 74-77, 102, 122.
[73] Castoriadis (1987), pp.144-145, 264, Castoriadis (1997a), p.111.
[74] Castoriadis (1987), pp. 77, 144-145, 264, 309.

Society outstrips the ontology of determinacy and its logic of identity. The latter operates by positing clearly distinct objects that carry stable attributes and entertain definite relationships to one another. Identity logic encompasses the rules of ordinary logic and arithmetic: the basic principles of identity, non-contradiction, the excluded middle and so on. This is the logic of determinacy. Being is being determined insofar as it is self-same or changes according to definite rules of transformation.[75] Society eludes this logic on two counts.

Its organising principles are not a constellation of determinate elements tied together by univocal relationships of causality, logical implication and so on.[76] Individually and as a whole, they compose a 'magma.'[77] Because of their practical nature, SIS of all kinds –linguistic meanings, rules of thought and action, types of structure- admit of indefinitely many interpretations. SIS are contingent upon use and alter in and through the variation of day-to-day speech and activity.[78] Their particular realisations and what can be thought, said and done on their basis is open-ended.[79] Moreover, they are not stable entities separable from one another and connected in well-determined manners. Their being depends on a tangle of interrelations.[80] A capitalist economy is bound up with particular forms of state organisation, educational system, the motives and worldview of social agents, which hang together in a knot of mutual presupposition.[81]

But the major rupture of society with identity and determinacy does not occur in the vagueness and relative plasticity of social structures. Rather, it comes about through

---

[75] For Castoriadis's account of the logic of determinacy, see Castoriadis (1987), pp.175-177, 220-227, 237-238, Castoriadis (1983b), pp.293-296, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.4, 256, 386-387.
[76] Castoriadis (1987), pp.178-180, 243, Castoriadis (1983b), p.291.
[77] Castoriadis (1987), p.343, Castoriadis (1983b), pp.297-298.
[78] Castoriadis (1987), pp.243-244, 364, 372.
[79] Castoriadis (1987), pp.243-244, 355-356.
[80] Castoriadis (1987), pp.356-357.
[81] Castoriadis (1987), p.358.

the rise of *other* social patterns, things, norms and objectives.[82] Different social formations set up (some) new elements and laws that cannot be produced or deduced from the past. The emergence of the new reveals that society is not totally reducible to an identity of unchanging determinations.[83] Social indeterminacy is evident in the alterity of cultures, the deep transformation of socio-political orders, the eruption of irregular events in history, like the French Revolution and Soviet communism - occurrences that disrupt social continuity and resist explanation through predefined laws of necessary development, which unify history.[84] History is not predetermined, because historical possibilities cannot be fully laid down in advance; the unforeseeable new can always break through.[85]

Now, Castoriadis contains this sense of social indeterminacy through the compulsions of identity, reason and nature. His anti-essentialist impulses do not stray into voluntarist excesses as they deny that everything is readily pliable and that anything can happen. Castoriadis makes a subtler point that invites one to see the dimension of contingency and artificiality in social being, without fantasising that everything is possible at all times.[86] The contingent and the necessary coalesce in most things social and, particularly, in the structuring principles (SIS) of different societies.

Thought, representation and communication cannot proceed without positing univocal terms that possess a constant form and well-defined relations (of sameness, difference, separation etc.).[87] Material reproduction and instrumental activity rely on

---

[82] Castoriadis (1987), pp.195, 199.
[83] Castoriadis (1987), pp.44-45, 171-172.
[84] See characteristically Castoriadis (1987), pp.56, 89, 112, 219.
[85] This idea has been explored in H. Arendt, who traces it also in the thought of D. Scotus and H. Bergson. Contingency is limited when choice is restricted to *given* options, and it is radical when new options can come into being, because in this case, the field of the possible itself has no necessary bounds [see Arendt (1978), pp.32-33, 132, 207-208].
[86] Castoriadis (1989), p.370.
[87] Castoriadis (1987), pp.175-177, 217, 220-226, 231, 238-239, 242, 244, 249-250, 256, 259.

arithmetic as well as elementary rational categories and schemata, such as the principle of identity (a is a), non-contradiction, causality and finality.[88] Social speech and action are traversed with elements of determinacy and identity logic. Castoriadis's rider is that these moments do not exhaust the totality of the social. Social objects and words are only *partially* and *precariously* fixed. Definite, stable signifiers latch onto meanings and norms, which are hazy and open-ended.[89] The concepts and styles of reasoning that are current in the different cultures outstrip ordinary logic. Instrumental reason advances ends that are not given once and for all. New forms are created and proliferate.[90]

Society and change encounter in nature another piece of reality that is not 'socially constructed.'[91] Society is 'leaning' on a nature governed by constant universal laws. In their natural habitat, as well as in the needs and regularities of the human body, societies are faced with a host of constraints and raw facts under which they have to labour.[92] On behalf of contingency and malleability, however, nature 'under-determines' society.[93] An intermingling of the necessary and the contingent takes place, whereby natural facts, like the binary male/female, undergo cultural elaboration that historicizes their meaning, that is, the specific way of being man and woman in a certain context.[94] Culture lends specificity to natural abstractions. But it also begets elements -norms, things, ideas, forms of individuality- of which non-human nature knows nothing. On the universal body of nature thrives a kaleidoscope of cultures that are in excess of non-human nature and generic biology. The laws of physics do not

---

[88] Castoriadis (1987), pp.227, 260-264.
[89] Castoriadis (1987), pp.228-229, 243.
[90] Castoriadis (1987), pp.264-265, 272, 360-361.
[91] Castoriadis (1994a), p.333.
[92] Castoriadis (1987), pp.19, 43, 131.
[93] Castoriadis (1987), pp.233-235.
[94] Castoriadis (1987), pp.202-203, 229.

predetermine all, and brute facts lend themselves to transfiguration in varied ways, whose possible range is not known in advance.

Finally, to the constraints set by nature and reason, Castoriadis adds prior social-historical circumstances, individual psychology and requirements of coherence, which exert themselves on the initiatives of social actors and affect their chances.[95]

In sum, the argument is not that everything is socially contrived, that social forms are conjured up in a vacuum, or that they are in a total state of flux without fixtures. The point is qualified. In different societies, there is a certain surplus of spontaneous invention that goes over identity logic and nature, as norms, relations and works do not simply replicate ready-made patterns of nature nor are they plain and like instances of a standard logic. The imaginary is an independent force in history.[96] But social constructions display universal elements of logical organisation, they crop up within a natural universe with its own, inviolable laws, and possess natural-material preconditions.[97] The imaginary is intertwined with the infrastructures of the rational and the natural; the contingent and the new are interwoven with the necessary and enduring. Moreover, historical societies cannot create a blank slate out of their past, and social structures evince a measure of stability and objective obduracy.[98] So, the chances of new social projects are historically conditioned, albeit not predetermined.

Social agents are vested with the freedom to transform nature and social objectivities along indefinitely different and unpredictable paths, but they are not encouraged to dream that any wish can come true at any time. Seeing things social as a knot of contingency/fluidity and necessity/ determinacy suffices to foster the freedom to think and act differently, because it allows for constraints and conditions

[95] Castoriadis (1987), pp.144-146, Castoriadis (1994a), pp.334-335.
[96] Castoriadis (1987), pp.128-129.
[97] Castoriadis (1987), pp.131-132, 135, 143-146, Castoriadis (1994a), pp.321-322, 333-336, Castoriadis (1989), p.370.
[98] Castoriadis (1987), pp.108-110, 114, 146, 372.

without fully pre-empting the directions of vision and change.[99] The fantasy that everything is socially fabricated and readily pliable is not only redundant, but can harm the ends of emancipation. Bringing the dimension of necessity and objectivity back in serves notice that the strictures of reason and nature, and the different socio-historical conditions, must be carefully considered. Reason, natural needs and prior circumstances will not dictate our action, but will set multiple terms that impede or facilitate different projects.

d. On Castoriadis's idealism

By laying out the formation of society as the institution of 'imaginary significations', Castoriadis has naturally solicited charges of idealism. His thinking has been said to offer a skewed perspective that levels down society to ideas and ignores the functional-material substrate of social life, power relationships and structural burdens on social action.[100] The problem branches out into two extensions that touch on present concerns. To begin with, if (a) the principle that society is a contingent, constructed order is premised on (b) the proposition that the form of society is determined by ideas and norms (which are the products of the collective imaginary), the implausibility of (b) reflects back on (a). The problematic idealism of its foundations would disqualify the belief that society is a historical creation, which agents can design autonomously in different ways. Second, an idealist sociology is a bad aid to projects of emancipation and democratisation, as it shoves aside structural, economic and power constraints on political action and freedom. My answer is that the detection of idealism in Castoriadis is on to something, but does not vitiate the core of his theory.

---

[99] Castoriadis (2000), p.288.

[100] Poltier (1989), pp.432, 438, Thompson (1984), pp.37-38, Fotopoulos (2001), pp.27-76.

In rhetorical accents and turns of his argument, Castoriadis tends indeed to confine SIS, the ordering axes of society, to 'meanings, affects and intentions'[101] or even more restrictively to motivating ideals and cultural orientations.[102] For instance, the chief SIS of capitalist modernity are autonomy and the object of constant economic growth.[103] Social formations are explained then through their dominant ideals,[104] a standpoint distinctive of sociological idealism.[105] The same propensity is evident in his thesis that '[b]eneath the monopoly of legitimate violence lies the monopoly of the legitimate word, and this is, in turn, ruled by the monopoly of the valid signification.'[106] The main props of social order are internalised social understandings rather than domination, control of resources and other economic and natural circumstances.[107]

However, these twists cannot outweigh the basic premises of his sociology and are compensated by a myriad of other elements. SIS denote also patterns of social organisation and relational nexuses.[108] The imaginary institution of society does not reduce to the invention of representations and norms, but refers equally to the production of social relations and practices (interlocking with meanings). Moreover, social life is seen as subject to natural limitations, material constraints and requirements of instrumental rationality.[109] Castoriadis is also alert to the 'systemic' moments of the social, that is, regular correlations of causes and effects across

---

[101] Castoriadis (1991a), p.35; see also Castoriadis (1991a), pp.41, 65, Castoriadis (1994a), p.336.
[102] See e.g. Castoriadis (1980), p.240, Castoriadis (1997a), p.313.
[103] See e.g. Castoriadis (1991a), p.184, Castoriadis (1980), p.240, Castoriadis (1994a), p.337, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.15-17.
[104] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.85, 180-196, 220-223, Castoriadis (1997a), p.84.
[105] Giddens (1984), p.2, Giddens (1993), pp.59, 163, Habermas (1989), pp.110-111, 213.
[106] Castoriadis (1991a), p.155.
[107] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.149, 155-156, Castoriadis (1980), p.241, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.6, 86, 313, Castoriadis (1999), p.173.
[108] Castoriadis (1987), pp.140, 145-146, 356-357, 363, 365, Castoriadis (1997b), p.103, Castoriadis (1997a), p.8.
[109] See here above, pp.212-214.

different social contexts, and objective trends in the economy and society at large.[110] Furthermore, he started an explicit engagement with power, which highlighted the necessity of an instance of authority that takes decisions on collective matters and sustains order.[111] Finally, his insistence that the various norms, relations and sectors of society (the totality of SIS) fuse into a 'magma' of interdependencies works against an overconcentration on ideals. Social change hinges on the parallel transformation of concepts, practices and a diversity of domains, from the economy to education and politics.[112] The conversion of social meanings alone, if possible, cannot achieve this feat. Castoriadis's own proposals for the institution of an autonomous society live up to this understanding, as they call for wide-ranging reforms across the economy, politics, power relationships and norms in all social spheres.[113]

To stick against Castoriadis, the charge of idealism would have to show that what is missing is a robust theorisation rather than any sense of non-normative social circumstances, systemic dimensions and structures of domination. And this indeed is the case.

His account of SIS does not bring out the potentially different impact of structural constraints compared to values or intersubjective understandings. The SIS refer indistinguishably to social relationships, conceptions and values. And the centrepiece of the theory is that all types of SIS are collectively involved in the production of recurrent social patterns.[114] This view cannot go very far in capturing and analysing the occasional prominence of structural dimensions over meaning. According to a

---

[110] See e.g. Castoriadis (1987), pp.43-44, 82-83, Castoriadis (1974), p.23, Castoriadis (1997a), p.14.
[111] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.150-155, Castoriadis (1997a), p.85. In his more specific historical inquiries, Castoriadis captured the impact of class struggle on social developments in capitalist modernity and brought out how class struggle had influenced the selection of industrial technologies and the orientations of technological progress [Castoriadis (1987), p.20].
[112] Castoriadis (1987), pp.86-88.
[113] Castoriadis (1987), pp.84-85, Castoriadis (1955), Castoriadis (1957), Castoriadis (1991a), pp.172-3.
[114] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.313, Castoriadis (1987), pp.20, 46, 180, 358, Castoriadis, (1974), pp.31-32.

well-known Marxist argument, it is primarily the form of property relationships in capitalism that accrues power to the capitalist class by securing its grip over material resources, more so than a general consensus on the values and the worldview of the system. This claim is up for discussion, but it indicates that a question is posed as to the variable strengths of the different factors in various contexts.

Furthermore, Castoriadis's sociology seems at loose ends when it comes to systemic phenomena, that is, macro-developments triggered off unintentionally by multiple actions and factors, regularised circuits of causal influences, and anonymous processes that harmonize the aggregate effects of different acts.[115] Beyond hints and acts of recognition, Castoriadis offers little by way of conceptual tools to flesh out these dimensions. SIS seem inept to render systemic processes and social conditions like social exclusion or labour market constraints. Castoriadis consigns systemic phenomena to the 'identitary' fold of the social, which he broaches through set theory.[116] Set theory may be helpful in dissecting the fundamental structure of systemic interconnections (by figuring out, for instance, that the latter involve relationships of causality among well-defined terms), but cannot make more tangible contributions to social explanation.

Last, even if the conception of SIS is well equipped to pick out power relationships, it does not bring them into focus with the same poignancy as other schemes. In Giddens's theory, for example, power figures prominently in the very definition of social structures, which are categorised into structures of signification, legitimation

---

[115] Giddens (1984), pp.177-178, Giddens (1979), pp.76-79, Habermas (1989), pp.115-117, 150-152, 201-202, 232-233. Market mechanisms exemplify anonymous processes that regulate social co-operation by 'functionally intermeshing action consequences' [Habermas (1989), pp.2, 150], while the 'poverty cycle' -material deprivation entails poor education that leads to low-level employment and reproduces deprivation- illustrates the workings of recursive circuits (Giddens (1979), p.79].

[116] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.43, 66-67, Castoriadis (1997a), p.14. On Castoriadis's conception of set theory, see Castoriadis (1983b).

and domination, and are jointly implicated in acts of interaction.[117] Castoriadis fails also to emphasise power in the mode of differential control over resources and other agents. These forms of power can be paramount in resolving which meanings count in reality and which competing projects for the institution of society will win out. My point is not that theory should stipulate a priori the standing of power in the constitution of society, but that it should bring into play force and meaning alike, and should put in place conceptual sensors of asymmetrical relationships.

Now, these failings are of consequence, but none upsets in any significant way the burden of Castoriadis's argument. A fuller working out of systemic aspects, structural compulsions and power is necessary, but the case that society is the offshoot of collective creation would fall asunder only if the foregoing dimensions subdued society to non-contingent objective determinations. Power struggles themselves throw in an element of agentic contingency, whereas unintended systemic phenomena are arguably the aggregate result of individual acts and meaningful social practices. So much has been suggested by Castoriadis and has been elaborated more fully by other social action theories.[118]

4. Castoriadis's weak ontology

Having unpacked Castoriadis's vision of society and the self, it is time to dissipate the long shadow of doubt cast by the epistemic scepticism that imbues my thesis. Is my qualified endorsement of certain ontological affirmations compatible with my insistence (in chapter 3) that any description of the real is contestable? Second, in light of this 'contestability thesis', is it possible to argue that Castoriadis's ontology, and the notion of freedom it foments, is somehow superior to essentialist descriptions

[117] Giddens (1984), pp.28-33, 186, 258-262, Giddens (1993), pp.110-116, 125, 129-130.
[118] See e.g. Giddens (1984), pp. xxviii, 27, 242, 244, 251, 264, 285, 347, 362, Castoriadis (1993), pp.161-162.

of the human world and their scripts of freedom? Chapter 3 has already suggested the lineaments of an answer, which this section draws out further in certain directions.

My take on scepticism does not radiate any paralysing effects for the adoption of particular ontologies. The thesis that our capacity for objective knowledge is limited does not dictate any particular practical response. And, obviously, the absence of universal normative foundations cannot prescribe with necessity particular normative evaluations and attitudes such as equal respect, detachment or indifference towards the various interpretations of the human world. Furthermore, the lack of neutral standards to adjudicate between contending descriptions does not affect local and contextual arguments, which make no presumptive claims to validity across the board and appeal to those who happen to share their premises. In conclusion, my doubts about pretensions to objective truth need not disable ontological commitment. Nor could they, in effect. Pre-understandings about the world and our selves are part and parcel of human practice. This is what renders ontological reflection integral to critical theory. Shunning ontological discussion simply results in the enshrinement of unexamined presumptions.[119]

All in all, the contestability thesis need not and cannot disbar affirmation. But it does have a bearing on the way of affirming. Stephen White has spelt out this implication.[120] Once the limits of warranted assertibility have been acknowledged, it is no longer tenable to enunciate and entertain beliefs in a doctrinaire mode of overweening confidence. A sceptical epistemology can furnish yardsticks to gauge the plausibility of different ontological narratives according to how they fare on this score: do they hide their controversial credentials from view? Or do they acknowledge the insecure standing of all outlooks and incorporate a sense of their own

---

[119] I have elaborated on this point in the Introduction, p.11, and Chapter 5, p.159.
[120] White (2000), pp.7-11, 108, 151.

contestability and precariousness? Are they, in other words, critically responsive to the lack of strong warrants, of truth in the singular?

I would argue that elements key to Castoriadis's presentation of being signal the uncertain validity of his ontology. Most importantly, his model puts itself up for contestation and revision. From a sceptical standpoint, these features plead for the superiority of Castoriadis over essentialist stories that evince a dogmatism of belief in their truth.[121] Hence, my scepticism can sit easily with Castoriadis's account of the self and society. And the weak affirmativeness of Castoriadis makes his ontology a pertinent frame through which to think freedom in our day, when trust in universal objectivity has been corroded. Furthermore, his view of being fosters autonomy as it nurtures reflective detachment from any fixed point of truth, including its own tenets.

Castoriadis's understanding of reality reveals its fragile grounds in ways that pertain both to the subject and the object of understanding. On the side of the subject, he insists that human thought, including his own theory, is conditioned by the unconscious and the social-historical situation of consciousness.[122] Castoriadis argues that it is always possible to distinguish among the various figures of theory and appraise them by standards such as internal coherence and empirical adequacy.[123] But we lack access to a locus of pure thought or a transcendental site beyond the vagaries of human history, from which to contemplate truth *sub specie aeternitatis.* Thought is informed by language and its historically embedded categories. It is not possible to hammer out a categorical framework through which to fully apprehend the human self

[121] See here above, Chapter 3, pp. 86, 111.
[122] Castoriadis (1987), pp.3, 5, 33, 40, 69-70, Castoriadis (1991b), pp.17-18, 69- 73, Castoriadis (1989), p.395.
[123] Castoriadis (1987), pp.4-5, 40.

and society independently of time and space.[124] Moreover, we ignore what the future holds in store for human societies.[125]

Another safeguard of his philosophy against tendencies towards dogmatic closure is the assumption that creative imagination is immanent to scientific and philosophical knowledge.[126] Chapter 5 has made the point that scientific and philosophical theories are, in variable measure, artefacts of the imaginary, which operates in these domains under the constraints of minimal logic and empirical evidence.[127] By entering the imaginary as constitutive, Castoriadis disinvests science and philosophy of rock-solid bases.[128] Castoriadis's ontological theses are themselves theoretical constructs: they are attuned to evidence and rational argumentation, but carry also an imaginary component that makes them arbitrary, particular and mutable.

Parte objecti, the opacity and incompleteness of being expose the limits to any stabilisation of definite categories.[129] The remainders of inaccessibility in the psyche's private flux and the unconscious find their counterpart in the 'magma' of social structures, whose being can be only partially arrested in specific interpretations (as the magma lends itself to indefinitely many schematisations). Moreover, both the singular self and the collective entity in which the self is nested are open to the emergence of the unforeseeable new. Hence, no particular conceptualisation can lay claim to finality.

The very objective ground on which Castoriadis wagers his sense of reality is made out to be artificial and challengeable itself. This basis is ancient and contemporary democracy, secular modernity and the various social movements of the working class,

---

[124] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.7, 343, 372-373, Castoriadis (1987), p.33.
[125] Castoriadis (1987), p.24.
[126] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.258-260, 264, 269-271, 370, 373, Castoriadis (1983b), p.308, Castoriadis (1989), p.396.
[127] See Chapter 5, p.181, 187.
[128] See e.g. Castoriadis (1994a), p.321.
[129] Castoriadis (1987), pp.55-56, 59, 69-70, 76-77, 111-112,181, 184, 219.

feminists and ecologists. Castoriadis's social theory forwards a specific articulation of their pre-understandings.[130] In democracies and the different struggles of civil society, social conceptions, relationships and laws are submitted to questioning and regulation. That is, institutions are not seen as sacred and immutable objects, but are handled as secular practices liable to change through intentional interventions.[131] The 'imaginary institution of society' transfers to the level of sociological knowledge notions, which subtend democratic life and modernity. Now, democracy and modernity are themselves a universe of SIS with no transcendental or other guarantors. The institutions of autonomy are not natural or rational necessities, and their implicit interpretations of the world lack absolute warrants.[132]

In sum, Castoriadis's theorems about society and the self are interpretations of a contingent world and its imaginary meanings, hence twice contestable and revisable. This is how his ontology foments a reflexive bearing towards its categories and breeds an ethos of autonomy as 'the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations...',[133] the law of society and the 'law' of Castoriadis's doctrine.

On a final note, the imaginary institution of society and the radical imaginary bring off their own interrogation in an oblique way, which passes through the ethics of critique and experimentation that they activate. '[I]n accordance with the very content of what we are saying, it is not a matter of establishing once and for all a new theory- yet one more!- but of formulating a conception that can inspire an indefinite *development* and, in particular, give rise to and clarify an effective activity –which, in the long run, will be the test of this conception.'[134] When seen as precarious

[130] Castoriadis (1987), pp.3, 98-101, Castoriadis (1983a), pp.267-288, 414.
[131] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.86-87.
[132] Castoriadis (1987), pp.133, 141, 146, 154, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.315, 341, Castoriadis (1983b), 316.
[133] Castoriadis (1991a), p.164.
[134] Castoriadis (1987), p.64.

outgrowths of human making, actual beliefs, values and institutions become available to limitless interrogation and ventures of transformation. There is nothing absolutely valid or natural to them: should we think and act otherwise, could we improve over the present, why not try out something new?

This way of grasping human things spawns questioning and transformative attempts whose results cannot be pre-empted. Historical beliefs could prove to possess a validity unyielding to persistent challenge; particular modes of action and social patterns may withstand attempts to transfigure them and may come out as natural, rational or other necessities. The fundamental intimations of Castoriadis's theory energise thus an activity, which inevitably bounces back on the theory and puts to the test its master hypothesis that humanity is inventive to the effect that human ideas, values and structures are contingent upshots of creative agency. Contrast this reflexive circuit built into Castoriadis's ontology with the closing effects of essentialist frames, which immunise them to challenge. By anointing a specific form of existence with the title of the natural or the ideal, they insulate this form from challenge and forestall the practical testing of their fundamental assumptions.

5. Concluding remarks

This chapter sought to bestow some plausibility on the root idea of Castoriadis's sociology, which weaves into the fabric of society a logic of contingency derived from the originary creativity of human groups. Denaturalising and desacralising impulses are set in motion, with all social relations and principles liquidating into (partly) conventional products of action, which are shorn of objective groundings in nature, universal reason, God or systemic necessities. This works into an argument for radical social autonomy: agents gain mental independence from ready-made patterns

and social truths. They envision an unlimited freedom to question society and change social identities. The emphasis on collective agency as originator of society projects the vision of communities that have turned themselves into conscious agents of societal self-creation. And the potential scope of freedom bursts beyond a priori limits as creative praxis can propel new possibilities into being.

I have argued that the suspicion of voluntarism and idealism that hangs over these elements of social ontology cannot knock them down. Also, that ontological affirmation squares with my sceptical dispositions when affirmation is bent by an appreciation of its questionable and inconclusive status. The self-reflexive nature of Castoriadis's theorising has the further advantage of fostering autonomy along two tracks: his notion of society and the self generates an independent cast of mind in the face of actual social reality and social identity, but his ontology nourishes also a critical distancing from its very tenets by launching them as ultimately groundless constructs of the imaginary.

Chapter 7

Freedom, reflection and creativity in a contingent human world

1.Introduction

This chapter cashes in on the previous sketch of human being to work out a critical view of freedom and answer the guiding problematic of the thesis. I take my lead from Castoriadis's restatement of freedom in the light of the creeds about individuality and society that I defended in the last two chapters. The conception put forward here modulates received notions in a way that speaks to the weaknesses of essentialist freedom and negative liberty. This reconstruction redeems the ideas of autonomy, open choice and self-creation, which were prized by Marx, Kant, Berlin and J.S.Mill, but were compromised by their residual essentialism or their lack of care for the self.

The new script overcomes these two limits to set forth a more empowering vision of freedom. In view of the contingency of life forms, individuals can make up their life through open choices from various alternatives, which may include new options willed into being by the agents themselves. In principle, we are free to question, alter and invent the norms of our being beyond any preconceived bounds. Specific dispositions, practices and arrangements are required to enhance self-determination, to widen the scope of discretion and to energise imaginative self-making. Freedom calls for an ongoing process of reflective resistance against social and psychic inhibitions.

The first half of the chapter grapples with personal autonomy, while the second half takes up individual freedom in social relations, and the social conditions of freedom. Personal autonomy encompasses the moments of reflection, deliberation and the release of imagination. I start off with a general argument for this idea, which I elaborate further in the registers of the social self and the psyche as laid out in chapter

5. Then, I draw out the ways in which the new formation of freedom improves over essentialist schemes and negative liberty.

The second tier of the chapter mounts the case that the social freedom of individuals demands social forms, which make possible the autonomous shaping of social relations through reflection, deliberation and creative action. Castoriadis's sense of society is the premise that guides the proposed settlements. The second part rounds out the main argument by advancing a model of social freedom that makes good the defects of essentialism and negative liberty in the relevant respects.

2. The autonomous subject

a. the general matrix of personal autonomy

Castoriadis registers various facets and conditions of individual freedom, which, put together, compose a more adequate conception of freedom. Inner self-determination is a centrepiece of this conceptual assemblage. And the nucleus of inner autonomy is the building up of *another relation, another attitude* towards the self.[1] This other relation consists in (a) the liberation of individual imagination and (b) critical self-reflection and deliberative will-formation.

Reflection captures here a movement whereby individuals step back from what they think and do, make it an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its validity and its desirability. Elements of self-identity become thereby responsive to evaluation and transformation. In this regulative ideal, self-interrogation does not halt at individual views and acts, but delves into their fundamental presuppositions and motivations. Moreover, reflection exempts nothing from appraisal, it renounces belief in absolute principles, and makes revisable decisions about the self's principles and

[1] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.143, 165-166, 329-330, Castoriadis (1991a), p.165, Castoriadis (1987), pp.104-106, Castoriadis (1983b), p.308.

desires.[2]

Deliberation consists in reflective decision-making and the attempt to make the results of reflection 'enter into the relays that condition [the agent's] acts.'[3]

The autonomous subject has, finally, an open intercourse with the imaginary of the psyche and deploys its creative capacities in the process of forming and reinventing one's life. Imagination sustains autonomy as self-creation that may break through pre-established alternatives.

Self-constitution through these modes of reflection, deliberation and imagination shores up freedom in a variety of ways. Most basically, choice extends its reach to the foundations of thought and action. Free individuals are not only at liberty to act on their preferences. They also get to choose their guiding principles and ends. (This answers to the lexicon's definition of autonomy. Individuals give their law to themselves in the sense that they come to exert control over the determining grounds of their conduct).[4] When we are passively determined by desires, internalised norms or standard habits, we are more or less the playthings of independent causes. And heteronomy constrains our choice by controlling our very principles of thought and the motives of action, which pull us in certain directions to the exclusion of other possibilities. Self-reflection can open up a distance from present assumptions and ends, allowing the self to envisage different options: 'the simply given meaning has ceased to be a cause...and there is the effective possibility of the *choice of meaning* not dictated in advance.'[5]

Similar intuitions run through contemporary 'hierarchical' analyses of autonomy in

---

[2] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.102-103, 122,158, 160, 194, 267-9, Castoriadis (1987), pp.104-105, Castoriadis (1991a), p.21.
[3] Castoriadis (1997a), p.160.
[4] Castoriadis (1991a), p.171.
[5] Castoriadis (1991a), p.165.

terms of second-order reflection and volition.[6] Agents are free of domination by inner forces when they desire to have their particular desires, and when they desire to be moved to act by the specific wishes they pursue. Autonomy is crucially about the free choice of our ends and norms. Castoriadis's autonomy takes on board these insights, but suggests a more intensive questioning of preconceptions and motivations. His frame incorporates the idea of second-order reflection, but learns also from Kant's theory, in which reflection does not reduce to a willing identification with particular preferences. The question is whether and how a greater dose of reflectiveness makes any difference to personal freedom (also, whether this signals a simple regress to Kantian autonomy and its vicissitudes).

The second-order desire to desire *x* is likely to be embedded in deeply ingrained principles and fundamental cravings, which are not themselves deliberately endorsed. This would qualify the *free* nature of consent to desire *x*, it would preserve unfreedom at a deeper level and would contain the possibilities we envision within the range allowed by particular overarching ends and principles. That is the reason for not limiting reflection to first order desires and for trying to extend it to deep-seated objects and pre-understandings in order to stop them from regulating the self as naturalised automatisms and open the way to new experiences. Reflective autonomy along these lines boosts the freedom to think and act unrestrained by congealed habits and entrenched influences.

b. autonomy and the social subject

This construction of autonomy receives further force and substantiation when we bring into play the picture of the human self set out in chapter 5. As the product of socialisation and the bearer of an unconscious psyche, the individual is swayed,

---

[6] Dworkin (1988), Frankfurt (1971).

regulated, inhibited by internal compulsions and internalised disciplines. From this vantage point, autonomy through reflection and imagination is pivotal to effective freedom, if freedom is relative to our independence from determination by prior causes.[7]

Because unchosen causes are always/already at work within the self, it is not true that 'men are born free.' Freedom is more of a potential and less of a natural state. And freedom demands a reflective wrestling with ever-present determinants that rule thought and action. Here lies the fundamental shift in the thinking of freedom that came about in the aftermath of the 'critique of the subject.' Instead of being naturally free and sovereign, the self is 'naturally' in the grasp of social and unconscious forces. The conclusion to draw is not that freedom is a chimera, but rather that it needs sustained effort, and is not a state achieved once and for all, but a process. Through practices of self-engagement and self-enhancement, freedom can always expand beyond its actual limits, but can never attain perfection. In the next two sections, I elaborate on how freedom is affected by our social construction and the unconscious, I analyse further the practices of autonomy and I show how these arts of freedom foster independent agency.

The fact of socialisation itself poses a major conundrum for freedom, because it engenders in and of itself an enormous subjection to externally imposed laws.[8] Social criteria and pre-understandings colonise the self from the dawn of one's life, and solidify into silent axes of thought and action. Habit hardens into a second nature of quasi-automatisms, and the possibility of doing something different goes by the wayside. Moreover, the self's conscious adhesion to social principles is often soldered through legitimating beliefs which invest historical forms with sanctity, authority or

---

[7] Castoriadis (1994a), p.337, Castoriadis (1991a), p.165.

[8] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.168, 267, 271, Castoriadis (1994a), p.337, Castoriadis (1999), pp.97, 109.

naturalness. Habituation and reification hold us captive to the specific axioms of our time and place and blind us to our domination by society.[9] The self is locked in static patterns of conduct, which drive out other possibilities and stunt original developments.[10]

Internalised norms work as a powerful mechanism of social power. Individuals are induced to conduct themselves in particular manners without overt coercion. This social manipulation of the self, which is restraining enough in and of itself, can also serve to entrench structures of subordination by leading agents in various social relations to reproduce 'of their own free will' roles that constrict their choices and place them under the rule of others.[11]

The virtue of reflective and imaginative modes of subjectivity is precisely that they clear a way out of passive engulfment in social forms and they resist voluntary servitude.

Reflectiveness draws sustenance from the anti-essentialist view of the world. When the understandings and practices that prevail in a certain context are thought to be 'natural', diktats of God, rational necessities, or sacrosanct traditions, this paralyses their interrogation and consolidates them as the self-evident frame of being.[12] By contrast, the recognition that all principles are conventional and historically variable mobilises detached and sceptical stances.[13] The self is aware that agency and life exceed any particular figures of being. The air of self-evidence dispels, and all conventions lie vulnerable to contestation. The bonds of identification with social norms, and *any* norms, grow looser. Individuals can see their social identity as if from

---

[9] Castoriadis (1997a), p.264.
[10] Castoriadis (1999), p.256, Castoriadis (1991a), p.163, Castoriadis (1997a), p.264.
[11] This point has been made by many theorists, including Castoriadis (1991a), pp.149-150, Foucault (1982) and Hirschmann (2003), pp.10-11, 98-99, 188-189, 202.
[12] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.86, 133, 265.
[13] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.86-87.

a distance, and hold out the prospect of change: when no single set of norms is necessary or authoritative, other possibilities are not by definition abhorred, debunked or simply inconceivable.

Informed by this enabling disenchantment, reflection probes the social infrastructures of personal identity, thematises regimented principles and objects, and questions their meaning in the light of other considerations and premises. This process shakes up the unthinking dominance of socialisation, puts up social sediments as possible objects of affirmation or rejection and enables different choices. The upshot is the disruption of social enclosure and a measure of active self-creation *ex post facto*. The socialised self can deliberately re-order, choose and revise its social norms.[14] A critical and defiant form of intercourse with social identity caters to freedom also by assailing the inner groundings of repressive social orders: the assimilated norms which sustain subjugated roles and the principles which naturalise structures of domination or instil the servile fear of social authorities.

Now, it might look as if individuals, being social products themselves, are deprived of any wherewithal for critical reflection and action on social conventions. But critique can derive its conceptual ammunition from incoherencies and contradictory elements in the web of social meanings. Reflection can also draw from alternative traditions of meaning and evaluation nurtured by minority enclaves or foreign cultures. And, finally, the radical imaginary of the self can produce viewpoints external to the dominant culture by dreaming up alternative ideals or by conjuring different ways of understanding.[15]

For its part, the weakening of social encrustations energises the active deployment

---

[14] Castoriadis (1991a), p.165, Castoriadis (1997a), p.271.
[15] Castoriadis (1997a), p.269, Castoriadis (1987), p.106.

of creative capacities in the fractures that break open,[16] while critical scrutiny may urge revisions and reformulations. Furthermore, since the principles of life are not seen as fixed up front by nature, reason or a sacred tradition, individuals can decide their own ends and practices unfettered by predetermined yardsticks. So, they feel free to unleash their original imagination in the generation of ends and forms.[17]

This release of the imaginary is the second axis of autonomy a la Castoriadis. The imaginary helps us to break away from the confines of social nurture and habituation in adjustment to objective circumstances. Without the potentiality of the new, the freedom made possible through self-reflection would remain ex ante circumscribed by historically available alternatives.[18] The imaginary throws up new possibilities and thereby allows choice and self-creation beyond any pre-given opportunity set.

The unimpeded expression of original imagination is a facet of freedom as such, since creativity is included in the bundle of personal capabilities.[19] But the emancipation of the imaginary is also of instrumental value. It feeds into our ability to devise freely the forms of our life. Through the episodic invention of new contents of thought and action, the self can become a true origin and reach a pinnacle of autonomy by literally making its own law.[20] The imaginary liberates also by enabling us to flee identity, the repetitive movement within routinised patterns.[21] Freedom of choice grows limitless and individuals gain a radical independence from social context as they think and act in new ways, which exceed the repertoire of already available forms.

The disclosure of new existential possibilities helps us to counter various other

---

[16] Castoriadis (1991a), p.165.
[17] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.160, 269, Castoriadis (1993), pp.78-79.
[18] Castoriadis (1997a), p.160.
[19] Castoriadis (1993), pp.75-76.
[20] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.160, 168.
[21] Castoriadis (1997a), p.133.

oppressive effects of social fabrication. Acts of original self-creation are acts of resistance against social forces that manipulate choice by defining the range itself of conceivable and eligible options. The idea of emancipation through the creation of the new may strike as vacuous or vain, but it gains a concrete salience when actually available choices are unduly restraining. The array of roles open to women in the patriarchal societies of the past forced them into social subjection and exclusion from the liberties of public life. Before recent developments, the gender identities that could be socially enacted in western societies were rigidly and narrowly determined. In either case, liberation was not carried further by means of different choices from present options but through the generation of new possibilities.

c. autonomy and the psyche

The same double bind of reflection and openness to imagination increases freedom in respect of the unconscious. If unnoticed impulses and fantasies can stage-manage conduct from behind one's back, a reflective engagement with oneself becomes paramount for free choice. To loosen the bonds of the unconscious one must take up present desires, representations and commitments, examine their grounds and seek out their meaning and their potential moorings in lost objects of desire. The tracing out of subliminal impulses brings them within the reach of deliberation. As a result, instead of being pushed and pulled by opaque psychodynamics, individuals can actively govern their conduct by filtering critically 'what of one's desires are to pass into acts and words.'[22] 'It is a matter of not being slave to the Unconscious...of being capable of stopping oneself from speaking out or acting out, while being conscious of the drives and desires that push one in that direction.'[23]

Psychoanalytic theory can supply tools and guidelines to track the possible

---

[22] Castoriadis (1997a), p.122; see also Castoriadis (1997a), pp.128, 165, 190, Castoriadis (1987), pp.102-103, Castoriadis (1999), pp.113, 231.

trajectories of desire and to cope with affective dimensions of reflective introspection; typically, soul-searching encounters resistances to the retrieval of unconscious contents which violate conventional morals and precious self-images, or they are otherwise traumatic.

In broader terms, a reflective bearing to the psyche amplifies deliberate self-direction. Among other salutary effects, it relaxes the grip of social identifications and ossified patterns of conduct, which find their point of anchorage in unconscious objects.[24] The awareness that a salient end of my life traces back, for instance, to a childish dream of world domination may activate a different stance towards this goal and make room for other choices. Rigid ideological allegiances may receive a few knocks when individuals glimpse their irrational roots in childish attachments.[25]

Castoriadis's two-tiered patterning of autonomy introduces in this field a number of critical amendments. First, the very sponsorship of reflective preoccupation with the unconscious marks an advance over Kantian autonomy and other contemporary notions,[26] which by-pass unconscious inhibitions. Furthermore, Castoriadis outlines a plausible conception of reflective autonomy. In light of the dynamic unconscious, absolute reflection and full rational mastery are not within our powers.[27] Reflection does not consist in 'an awareness achieved once and for all, but in *another relation* between the conscious and the unconscious, between lucidity and the function of the imaginary, in *another attitude* of the subject with respect to himself or herself, in a profound modification of the activity-passivity mix.'[28] The aim is to reach a higher degree of reflexivity and choice as to the motives of our action, although absolute

---

[23] Castoriadis (1997a), p.190.
[24] Castoriadis (1987), p.103; see also Chapter 5...
[25] See here above, Chapter 5, pp.175-176.
[26] See here below, Chapter 8, p.279.
[27] See here above, Chapter 5, pp.168-169, and Castoriadis (1997a), p.127, Castoriadis (1987), p.104.
[28] Castoriadis (1987), p.104.

lucidity may lie beyond us.

Second, this reconstruction of autonomy lives up to the critique of rational self-control as an ideal of self-determination and is attuned to my earlier points about the required balance between reason and desire.[29] Freedom thrives on a dialectical interplay between the two. The tyranny of reason and an unqualified 'liberation of desire' are equally to be avoided.

A permanent exertion of rational self-control may strangle spontaneity, suppress the life of desire and emotion, and preclude moments of careless self-abandonment.[30] Kantian autonomy is a model of such rigidity, subjugating thought and action to inflexible norms that permanently rule out incompatible objects of desire. On the other hand, and against the manifestos of a certain romanticism that was revived by thinkers like Reich and Marcuse,[31] freedom is not unequivocally on the side of desire. From Freud's equation of civilisation with repression and related theses, a certain line of post-war thought drew the moral that the emancipation of fantasies and impulses from social conformism will consummate human freedom. The unconscious was invested with a self-evident liberating force, which would deliver humanity from the strangleholds of a world imperiously repressed and flattened out by instrumental reason. But the lessons of psychoanalysis should be worked into more refined conclusions. Desire can be as constraining as subjection to stern imperatives of universal reason. Rigidified impulses may coerce the individual into compulsive behaviour, and unchecked drives may impel action which is unwelcome by the lights of other personal preferences. The 'liberation of desire' could proliferate self-defeating effects by pulling individuals in conflicting directions that cancel one

---

[29] See here above, Chapter 5, pp.166-167.
[30] Whitebook (1996), pp.86-89, 218-219, Kateb (2002), p.104.
[31] Marcuse (1955), Marcuse (1969), Reich (1983). For a discussion of Freudian libertarianism, see Frosh (1999), pp.157-175.

another out. Finally, an agent who is wantonly propelled by occurrent desires has given up on her freedom of choice and surrendered it to independent causes.

Against both rationalism and naturalism or pansexualism, freedom cries out for a more integrated mode of interaction between reason and desire so that a more flexible and daring type of selfhood can take shape. This self would avoid the counter-productive mechanics of repression in the management of illicit impulses, but would not be dragged, either, into a mindless hedonism. Castoriadis's design of reflection offers here the rudiments of what can be elaborated into an empowering practice of integration and emancipation.

Autonomy involves self-scrutiny and deliberation around desired objects, guided by reflective norms and counsels of prudence. But Castoriadis calls also for a reverse trend towards the (cautious) liberation of the unconscious imaginary: the freeing of unconscious fantasies from social repression engineered by the rational ego; the disclosure and partial realisation of unconscious desire. 'Desire, drives...this is me, too, and these have to be brought not only to consciousness but to expression and existence.'[32]

This other moment of autonomy requires the subversion of repressive defences against impulses that clash with reason and social mores. The first goal is to displace repression with dispositions that permit the self to come to grips with its inner drives irrespective of their content. This displacement is facilitated if, as Castoriadis admonishes, the subject of lucid thought and deliberation is not the socially manufactured individual, but this individual bent and transfigured through the development of reflective stances towards its guiding values and tropes of reasoning; critical reflection along the lines of the previous section chastens the authority of

---

[32] Castoriadis (1987), p.104; see also Castoriadis (1997a), p.128.

social norms and increases receptivity to otherness.[33] Furthermore, when unconscious wishes come up for consideration, they pass through the filters of examination and deliberation, which are wary of disastrous consequences.[34] But since reflection is not governed by sacred truths and rules, its workings are flexible and open-ended, allowing for the revision of one's norms in their confrontation with unruly visions. This enables experimentation with a wider spectrum of desires beyond immovable limits.

To combat the repression of the imaginary (representations, affects, emotions) and enhance free choice, deliberation should be carried out with a liberal cast of mind. Self-control should be tempered with experimental attitudes and a sensitivity to newly disclosed desires and fantasies. The aim is not simply to subdue the unconscious psyche to the reign of sober reasoning, but also to proceed tentatively in the opposite direction and expose the subject of thought to the heterogeneity of the unconscious.[35] Reason and mastery are entwined with openness to the unexpected and moments of abandonment.

In this manner, prudent self-direction and freedom from psychic fixations can be advanced in step with the freedom from the compulsion to control, the liberation of desire and freedom to explore new experiences.[36] The tentative emancipation of the unconscious from the thralls of social repression feeds back into the transformation of social identity and promotes freedom from social prescriptions. By tapping the creative reservoir of the unconscious soul, the individual can think and act differently from the present organisation of its life.

---

[33] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.128, 133, 166.
[34] Castoriadis (1989), p.400.
[35] Castoriadis (1987), p.104.
[36] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.128,132-133.

d. the limits of autonomy, the free will and other objections

In a nutshell, autonomy is punctuated with moments of critique, deliberation and choice bearing both on particular acts *and* on underlying principles and motivations. These practices work against the involuntary sway of the self by passive influences. The autonomous subject can wilfully draw the broader contours of its life and try other possibilities. Autonomy, also, initiates a move towards deploying the creative potentials of the self, whereby agents can literally make their own laws and avail themselves of new options.[37]

A vexing concern with this model of autonomous agency is how it comports with the modern interrogation of the sovereign individual. Another question is how it is affected by the debates around determinism and the free will.

The critique of the modern subject challenged the ideal of autonomy as rational self-determination or self-origination by evoking, *inter alia*, the unconscious and the social construction of the self. Inasmuch as thought is unconsciously conditioned and structured by social discourses, reflection cannot be autonomous. But this point carries limited force against a version of autonomy, which proceeds from a revised notion of agency and does not claim full sovereignty for the self.[38] Autonomy is reset as a process through which the individual becomes less of a passive product of happenstance and more of a partial co-author of its mode of life.[39] That the texture of thought is woven of social meanings does not preclude a pragmatic mode of critique and deliberate self-making that 'constantly re-organises [the] contents [of thought], through the help of these same contents, that produces by means of a material and in relation to needs and ideas, all of which are themselves mixtures of what it has

[37] Castoriadis (1997a), p.160.
[38] See here above, Chapter 5, pp.186-190.
[39] Castoriadis (1997a), p.168.

already found there before it and what it has produced itself.'[40] Culture is loosely integrated, changeable and potentially riddled with contradictory elements. In chapter 5, I also made the case that the unconscious cannot rule out any measure of mental independence. I argued, moreover, that the capacity for original creation can be reasonably upheld, and does not imply a full self-origination *ab initio*, but only episodes of innovative change or transcendence.[41]

The upshot is a reconstruction of autonomy in the tenable terms of a partial self-constitution that is conditional and constrained.[42] At the same time, however, the proposed view envisions a substantial degree of freedom. Agents grow freer as they break loose from the grooves into which thought and practice have settled through socialisation and the personal trajectories of affect and desire.[43] Critical reflection, deliberation, and imagination lay before us new possibilities. It may be that complete spontaneity and independence are beyond reach. But freedom can effectively expand through a different relationship between the active subject and its given constitution, movement and stasis, activity and passivity. The autonomous self is invited to return from time to time back on itself, its principles, ends and constitutive attachments. This enables us to 'escape the enslavement of repetition'[44] and deliver ourselves from fixed identities.[45]

No doubt, reflection and conscious decision remain here exposed to unchosen and unreflected-upon influences.[46] But while it does not claim a Kantian transcendence of *all* presuppositions, the revised cast of autonomy fosters limitlessness in another direction. Kantian autonomy, to recall, subsumes the autonomous self under

[40] Castoriadis (1987), pp.105-106, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.7, 111, 122, 166-170.
[41] See here above, Chapter 5, p.182.
[42] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.168-169.
[43] Castoriadis (1997a), p.271.
[44] Castoriadis (1991a), p.165.
[45] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.21, 31.

immutable laws. By contrast, autonomy is now freed of a priori restrictions. Any particular premises of vision and evaluation are subject to questioning that knows no limits and no final conclusion.[47] Moreover, individuals are endowed with a capacity for original figuration through which they can engender ideas, practices and works beyond the frontiers of the present.[48] These two twists project another type of transcendental freedom: the freedom to leap outside fixed limits of life and identity.

Yet again, autonomy in a secular vein is beset with certain problems from which Kantian 'absolute' self-determination is spared. The difficulties show up when the problematic of the free will is brought to bear.

On the reframed notion of autonomy, individuals deliberate about their preferences and principles, but the acts of deliberation can be heteronomously conditioned. Thus, autonomy qua higher-order reflection is arguably neutral on the debate between libertarians and determinists.[49] This could be presented as an advantage, because autonomy is disengaged from the endless controversies around the free will.

But it is idle to pretend that these debates do not hit home. Confining discussion to the scheme I outlined above, the virtue of self-questioning, deliberation and imagination is precisely that they expand the real freedom of the will understood as an undetermined capacity for choice. If the will is determined 'in the final instance' by uncontrolled powers, these practices lose their point. Why engage in a reflective struggle with the unconscious and social determinations instead of giving oneself over to a (coherent) gratification of actual preferences, if the degree of free choice remains in effect the same? Why should one be interested in enhancing the freedom of his or her will, if the will is ultimately determined in an objective manner?

---

[46] Dworkin (1988), pp.19-20.
[47] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.340-341, Castoriadis (1991a), p.163.
[48] Castoriadis (1991a), p.146.
[49] Watson (2003), p.21, Oxford: Oxford University Press ; cf. Dworkin (1988), p.19.

Our care for Castoriadis-style autonomy presupposes thus the reality of the free will and is qualified in this way. If the will turns out to be fundamentally unfree, the proposed reconstruction of freedom will become more or less irrelevant. But this cannot knock down anti-essentialist freedom before the nonexistence of a free will has been firmly established. Until then, the anti-essentialist construction can be warrantedly endorsed and pursued, because its presupposition remains a reasonable one. From a phenomenological perspective, the belief in the free will draws plausibility from the ordinary conscience of human beings. The positions which hold personal choice to be ineluctably governed by objective causes are intensely debatable in the contemporary philosophy of freedom,[50] and are as contestable as any other metaphysics.[51] It is worth noting that a commitment to reflective autonomy along the lines I sketched out does not enthral one to self-delusion, if the freedom of the will is indeed chimerical, because the former view of autonomy calls for a critical stance towards any belief and fosters the willingness to re-examine and revise any assumption.

One can anticipate three further objections to the ethics of reflective and imaginative self-fashioning. The first regards the emphasis on repeated self-inspection and critique. It looks as if the individual is invited to substitute real life and passionate attachments with an ongoing reflection on life and a sceptical distancing from self and others. No prescriptions are offered, however, as to the intensity of self-examination and deliberation, which are up to the agents to decide.[52] And reflection is not meant to be tirelessly exhaustive, anyway, since at issue is a part-authorship of the self. The main suggestion is that the questioning of operative assumptions and deep-seated motives should be taken up again from time to time. As such, regular pauses of self-

[50] See the various papers in Watson (2003).

[51] See Chapter 3.

review need not stop individuals from living and giving effect to their intentions any more than the ordinary revision of laws and policies in democratic societies entail that no policies are ever put into effect or that no social practices are enacted.[53]

A second issue turns on the grounds of decision. How can agents decide their preferred principles and values if no truths and standards are taken for granted? To answer this, it should be recalled that, in the revised frame of autonomy, reflection is not presuppositionless. Because deliberation is never carried out under conditions where everything is suspended in midair, it is not totally undecidable and unmanageable. On the other hand, it is true that different considerations may point in different directions, while no principle is recognised as an absolute ground that could dictate particular outcomes. There is an ineliminable residuum of arbitrariness in our decisions. However, this gap of indeterminacy is not a defect, but something to be valued, because, in a certain sense, it leaves choice radically free.

A final source of discontent may lie in the function of radical imagination. If the idea is that freedom and autonomy are more fully accomplished when life breaks new paths by means of the imaginary, this approach may appear as unnecessarily restraining. By way of a paradox, individuals achieve freedom from the restrictions of their actual identity, society and nature when their choice is bound to go down a specific route: to privilege the new, to do something original.

The scales are indeed tilted towards experimentation and invention as markers of an autonomous life. In Castoriadis's picture, this is partly justified on the grounds that he endows human individuals with the capacity for original figuration. When social and psychic fixations have loosened their grip, original creativity is allowed more play-

---

[52] Neither in my account nor in Castoriadis's own work; see e.g. Castoriadis (1997a), p.129.
[53] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.132-133, Castoriadis (1991a), p.164.

space to express itself.[54] Furthermore, a life of fossilised tradition and standardised practices is 'dominated by repetition.'[55] The self is confined within the selfsame routines and alternatives.

This said, the open choice of the meanings which orient our conduct is accorded clear priority over their novelty and originality.[56] Deliberative agency can head in various directions and is at liberty to affirm current values and practices.[57] The thrust of critical reflection is that it makes possible the change of our life, but change is not an imperative. The same facilitating role is imputed to imagination, which enables us to start something new and elude entrapment in the present.[58] But the outcrops of the imaginary are not necessarily worthwhile,[59] and the individual may resolve to reject them. Change and *original* self-creation are not fixtures that bind the will. Reflection and imagination are intended to free choice from prior constraints by widening the range of conceivable options.[60] They are means to 'the *possibility* of going beyond the informational, cognitive and organizational closure' of individuals.[61]

3. A different paradigm of freedom: beyond essentialism and negative liberty

It is now possible to pull the various threads together and tease out the ways in which this design of agonistic self-creation overcomes the flaws of salient conceptions and sets the stage for an enhanced configuration of freedom.

The main counterpoint is essentialist discourses, in which the agent comes laden with a core of unaltering features. Freedom is of a piece with a definite pattern of life, which realises the set identity of the self, or self-legislation and self-direction in

---

[54] Castoriadis (1994b), pp.342-345.
[55] Castoriadis (1991a), p.163.
[56] Castoriadis (1991a), p.165.
[57] Castoriadis (1991a), p.21.
[58] Castoriadis (1983b), p.308, Castoriadis (1996), p.357.
[59] Castoriadis (1991a), p.3.

accord with this identity. More generally, freedom moves within the specific norms and practices which express the unchanging essence of the person. The foremost consequence of such ideals is that free agency is entrapped in a closed orbit of thought and action that annuls the freedom to do otherwise, choice beyond predetermined possibilities, the liberty to reshape traits of identity and life. The scheme I put together by drawing on Castoriadis stands in principled opposition to essentialism and is intended to forestall its effects of closure and repression. Anti-essentialist freedom accentuates the mutability of norms and brings into play the capacity for radical change. Arts of self-questioning and creative praxis are folded into autonomous agency to set the self loose from actual fixtures in thought and action. Freedom aspires to be a flexible self-fashioning through open choice that can transcend preestablished limits.

But anti-essentialist freedom does not effect a total break with inherited understandings. It is rather a reconstruction that redeems the spirit of modern insights about freedom. It does so by contesting the *idées fixes* of modern thinkers on the constitution of the self and the bounds of freedom.

Kant placed inner lawgiving at the heart of freedom and brought deliberative choice to bear on subjective norms and inclinations. Reflective autonomy enlarges freedom by having individuals define for themselves the rules and incentives of their conduct. Autonomous agents are not tied to the given inclinations they happen to have due to their bodily constitution, their education, culture and so on. Kant showed also that freedom lives off the ability to start something new. Free individuals can proceed in ways which are not anticipated by their actual physical and personality structures. These notions valorise freedom from the clutches of settled identity. But their cutting

---

[60] Castoriadis (1991a), p.165.
[61] Castoriadis (1983 b), p.310 (my emphasis).

edge was blunted by Kant's gesture of vesting agents with an eternal and universal reason, which guides and constrains lawgiving, dissolving freedom into conformity to immutable laws. This spin runs counter to autonomy as open authorship of the self and cancels freedom from prior determinations: individuals are tied back to the eternal laws of their given rational constitution. Kantian agents forfeit the freedom to reform the norms of autonomous agency.[62]

The liberty to disengage oneself from oneself and autonomy as revisable self-legislation are boosted in anti-essentialist freedom through the reversal of the second move of Kant. The texture of reason is conventional, variable and contestable. Autonomy is a reflective choice of norms, which should not be slave to predefined laws and should remain inconclusive and subject to change. Kant's belief in eternal laws of reason is disowned, and autonomy does not reduce to an abiding adherence to static forms. On the contrary, autonomy makes all principles susceptible of questioning, and preserves our sovereignty over our norms by holding them open to revision. From Kant's attitude that nurtures the tight embrace of pre-given laws, autonomy is transfigured into an ethos of critique and experimentalism, which is always alive. From a life ruled by ossified rules, freedom shifts into a flexible existence with open horizons and alternative possibilities.

Prominent elements of this very art of liberty found powerful expression in Marx's vision of freedom, which animates his communist utopia. Under specified historical conditions, individuals will be no longer bound to class positions, encased in religious or moral dogmas and sealed in exclusive domains of activity in a rigid division of labour. The life of freedom thrives on the availability of diverse choices, variation of activity and the working out of creative potentials. The anti-essentialist alternative

[62] For this analysis and critique of Kant's theory of freedom, see here above, Chapter 2.

takes to heart two rallying points of Marxian freedom: the flight from closed shapes of being and the unleashing of creative potencies, which deliver individuals from a life of stasis into an adventure of unfettered becoming. But on these very terms, anti-essentialist freedom marks an advance over Marx's conception as it breaks with his attachment to a stable and universal self. To repeat, Marx's free agents are committed to the all-round development of their manifold capacities. They are associated producers in a society drained of conflictual political activity that can engage fundamentals. They are stuck in a positivist outlook on reality. They are stripped of religious beliefs, moral principles and particular group allegiances. Marxian freedom instantiates a determined pattern of life and society, which are not up for debate and reform. This contracts the area of discretion and contains creative activity and self-invention within preset limits.[63] Again, anti-essentialist freedom thrusts aside this residual inhibition. All images of human flourishing and social relations become an object of free choice and limitless interrogation. Creative praxis can thus colonise and reinvent the broader contours of life.

J.S.Mill anticipates three themes of the new articulation of freedom. As in Kant, the self's control over its personality and conduct is key to personal freedom, but contra Kant, autonomy favours individuality over universal principles. Crucially, freedom calls for a critical cast of mind vis-à-vis social norms. Resistance against conformist pressures frees us from uniform conventions. Last, Mill converges with Marx on the move to ally freedom with creative activity and the crafting of original forms. At the same time, he veers away from Marx and closer to the alternative scheme as he downgrades universal patterns and weds the making of life to the singular potencies of the self.

---

[63] See here above, Chapter 1.

But then again Mill rehabilitates the presumption of an *individual* essence of sorts, a definite bundle of capabilities and pleasures peculiar to the person. He envisages freedom as the flowering of one's distinct endowment uninhibited by external or inner impediments. As a result, freedom from regimented life and open choice encounter an ultimate term. Autonomous deliberation and new experiments in living are intended to fulfil the particular potential of the person, and are constricted by its demands. Choice does not include the option not to develop one's talents. And the possibility of drawing up new life-projects is not kept permanently alive. Individuals settle for the plans that best suit their distinctive capacities and inclinations.[64] In freedom as imaginative self-fashioning, identity and life remain unrestrained by predefined objectives, and any form of life is up for review.

In short, the revised interpretation coheres around pronounced elements of modern freedom: inner self-legislation through reflection, an enhanced power to soar above the prior constitution of the person, freedom from rigid roles, untrammelled creativity, independence from social conventions. Modern thought curbed the impulse of these ideas through rearguard gestures which re-install the spectre of a definite and abiding self and tie the life of freedom to entrenched principles and objects. The alternative notion eliminates these burdens of fixation and gives, thereby, full range to the emancipatory intuitions of modern freedom. The subject of freedom is not only dispossessed of necessary contents, but also incorporates self-attitudes that contend with actual rigidities of character. These two amendments empower the self to configure its life free of antecedent determinations, to escape from the strains of identity and to explore untried potentialities.

No doubt, the new approach inscribes certain specific traits in the subject of

[64] These arguments are developed in Chapter 4 of the thesis, pp.142-158.

freedom: critical reflection on the self and the world without dogmatic certainties, deliberation, a less repressed imagination and responsiveness to its offshoots. But these arts are intended to increase the chances for detachment from congealed patterns. Moreover, by way of a reflexive loop, they are subject to critique and revision on the level of each different individual. Their specific elaboration and form of enactment are at the discretion of the self.

This recoding of freedom defuses a series of other shortcomings of the essentialist paradigm. To start with the epistemological objections of chapter 3, the onus of epistemic and normative justification falls less heavily on the anti-essentialist view. It is intrinsic to this conception that individuals make up their lives in an open number of different ways. Accordingly, anti-essentialist freedom is compatible with an indefinite range of divergent self-understandings and modes of being. The need to vindicate a specific idea of human selfhood presses less urgently on this template than on essentialist theories, where freedom is set to actualise a singular sense of human nature.

There are, however, important limits to this ability of anti-essentialism to accommodate difference. The proposed conception works from particular premises about the capabilities and limitations of human agents, and delineates a model of free life which is not reconcilable with just any other ideal. In terms of its justification, this construction carries certain advantages over essentialism, but it is not the newfound land of neutrality.

A more precious asset of the new schema is that it fends off the repressive and paternalistic perils that attend essentialist discourses.[65] Freedom as unlimited questioning and creative self-making is not an ideal that can be foisted upon others. It

---

[65] See here above, Chapter 3, pp.111-115.

is substantively unspecific as to its possible objects, it prescribes an activity on the self by the self and it projects an unrestrained choice of variable forms by the different individuals. Moreover, far from promulgating absolute laws that can be enforced on other persons, it deprives all substantive norms of absolute authority. Furthermore, anti-essentialist freedom precludes the effects of repression and exclusion that radiate from its rival conception when the latter elevates a particular set of principles to the universal ideal that hegemonises social life. Prescriptive universalism pushes deviant styles of being to the margin of society, breeds intolerance and recommends the reform or punishment and persecution of aberrant differences.[66] By contrast, the new formation foments an ethics of equal liberty and differentiation, which will be figured out in the next chapter. Finally, essentialist models idealise or naturalise determinate laws and structures, which thereby exit the fray of politics. As the following section will explain, the agonistic freedom of self-invention removes these barriers to democratic autonomy.

At the same time, a corrective is also offered to the diagnosed failings of negative libertarianism.[67] Anti-essentialist freedom and negative liberty share a common concern for open choice and unimpeded action. They also converge on the tendency to displace singular conceptions of the good from the centre of freedom.[68] But negative liberty does not deliver a cogent alternative to essentialism and fails to dismantle the snares of entrapment within closed shapes of life. The phantasm of a permanent human nature still throws its shadow over discourses of negative liberty, even if only to furnish the criteria that circumscribe the space of non-interference with the individual.[69] More damagingly, negative liberty is marred by an insufficient care

---

[66] See here above, Chapter 3, pp.111-115.
[67] See here above, Chapter 4, pp.121-142.
[68] See Chapter 4, pp.121, 125-127.
[69] See Chapter 4, p.138.

for the inner self. It leaves the individual as it is, caught up in the particular routines of reasoning, ends and patterns of action that have crystallised in oneself as a result of social influences and deep-seated psychic structures.[70] Without a reflective engagement with their self, individuals are unlikely to probe the social axioms that have congealed into a silent background of understanding and behaviour since their early years. They will not be brought around to seeing the arbitrariness and revisability of their norms. The chances are that the self will remain in the throes of subliminal motives, autonomous longings and unexamined social dogmas. Agonistic and creative freedom speaks primarily to these concerns as it is made of stances and disciplines that deal reflectively with the present structures of the self.

Because it neglects the importance of the person, negative libertarianism fails also to promote effectively its professed priority, freedom from outer impediments to action. It is a sociological topos that social habituation makes individuals to conform spontaneously to restrictive institutions, oppressive relations and disabling circumstances. The contestatory ethics of reflective autonomy overcomes this deficiency of negative liberty by getting the self to grapple with the inner groundings of the social order. Free individuality is equipped with a critical frame of mind that challenges inculcated roles and standard ways of evaluating social conditions.

The creative impulses of the new paradigm contribute further to freedom from social prearrangements. By the lights of negative liberty, the social availability of various options is a sufficient condition of freedom. Free choice may thus encounter an outer limit in the actual range of alternatives. But, in freedom, we should be able to figure our own path in life beyond ready-made recipes or pre-established options. The narrowing of choices to a predefined set is sharply felt as a restriction when the

---

[70] See Chapter 4, pp.121-125, 129, 132.

alternatives on offer are all unpalatable or oppressive. Anti-essentialist autonomy promotes freedom from pregiven choices by foregrounding the prospect of the new.

Another defect of negative liberty is that it does not cater to freedom under the pragmatic conditions of human limitedness. Freedom in the negative means the absence of obstacles to the fulfilment of wants. But a multiplicity of such inhibitions is always/already in place in the social environment and within the agent. And some of these limits constitute simultaneously enabling conditions. Social laws allow certain forms of action at the same time as they bar other types of conduct. Legislation can furnish the regime of regulation that is required for the protection of life and private plans, for social provisions that empower individuals, for the prevention of mutually frustrating activity and unintended aggregate results. Inner laws are similarly double-edged. Practical principles and preconceptions serve to orient deliberation, and permit a coherent ordering of preferences that resolves or reduces inner conflict with debilitating consequences. By the same token, by virtue of being regulatory and directive, inner laws preclude certain courses of action.[71]

Freedom and law have been conceptualised along conflicting tracks by two salient strands in the modern theory of freedom. Under the rubric of lawful freedom and autonomy, a line of thought exemplified by Rousseau and Kant joins freedom to law. Freedom and law presuppose one another for a number of reasons, some of which I outlined in the previous paragraph. And freedom is fully compatible with law on the condition of autonomy, when the subjects of the law are also the sovereign authors of the law. In contrast, proponents of negative liberty have underscored the repressiveness of the law and counterpoised freedom to regulation.[72]

In view of the ambivalent qualities of the law, the stains of repression and restriction

[71] See here above, Chapter 4, pp.134.
[72] See here above, Chapter 4, pp.134-136.

are always present and should not be occluded. Rousseau and Kant conceal the traces of violence inherent in legislation by presenting their regulatory systems as the ideal regime of individual freedom. Moreover, in their formations of autonomy, the individual is subjected to the law of the majority or the eternal laws of reason in ways that are arguably more unqualified and repressive than necessary.[73] However, to pit freedom against law, as negative liberty does, cannot take us very far in softening the restraining edge of the law in autonomous freedom, and in freedom *tout court*, if total lawlessness is a non-option.

Freedom as non-conformist self-creation offers improved leverage on the dispute between the two discourses around freedom and law. To begin with, free agency is law-governed, both actually and ideally. Therefore, freedom demands the voluntary consent to the laws of thought and action. Second, laws are inevitable and required. But no specific law is necessary in itself. Laws should be divested of absolute foundations and sacred status. The freedom to question and alter any particular laws yields a less repressive relationship to law.

Agonistic self-making is not exactly a happy synthesis or medium between the legalistic rigorism of Kantian autonomy and the unlikely anarchism of libertarians. But it takes intuitions from both and makes something of them in its own way, which provides for freedom in pragmatic terms. The space of choice and contest that opens up between the need for laws and the non-necessity of any particular law salvages the would-be anarchism of negative liberty within the regulative bounds of reason and sociability.

By way of a preliminary conclusion, this chapter takes its inspiration from the work of C.Castoriadis to reconfigure freedom in response to the failings of influential

[73] See here above, Chapter 2, pp.70-71.

modern figures. The reconstructed version defines itself against essentialism. Its aim is to dissolve the side-constraints of theories which yoke freedom to definite norms and universal models of the free life. The revised conception renounces any fixed essence of the self, which would rigidly circumscribe choice and activity in advance. Moreover, free agents enact reflective practices of interrogation, imagination and deliberation, which unravel ossified blockages in their being, from the silent compulsions of social construction to hidden motivations of bodily origin. Choice and unfettered self-creation grow larger as the hold of particular objects and notions becomes weaker, alternatives become available to consideration and radically new possibilities come into view through the liberation of the imaginary.

The reflective and creative subject is an ideal of the self, but it is not of the kind that thrusts particular laws on the person and licences paternalistic interventions, the fears that torment negative libertarians.[74] On the contrary, free individuality bursts beyond any identity of norms, whether this is stipulated by regimes of freedom or the actual being of the self. The third paradigm displays all the advantages of negative liberty but is cleansed of its deficiencies. Anti-essentialist autonomy incorporates the practices of open self-questioning, self-determination and self-invention, which are lacking in negative liberty, to the effect that negative liberty cannot foster freedom from present habits and conditions.

4. Real freedom and social autonomy

a. opening remarks, and freedom of action

Freedom and autonomy are obviously not reducible to intrapersonal states. The liberty to behave in autonomously chosen ways, i.e. freedom of action, and the freedom to

---

[74] See here above, Chapter 4, pp.126-127, 133.

produce the social context of life realise and supplement the reflective making of the self. To figure out the social dimensions of self-creation, it is necessary to delve into questions of social justice, democracy, rights, political sociology and economics. This is a central task for a fuller account of freedom, but it could not be carried out in this space. For the same reason, I will not probe in detail Castoriadis's blueprint of a free society. The following sections adumbrate only the rudiments of an answer by capitalising on Castoriadis's social ontology and by drawing critically from his political and economic project. The main intent is to work out the difference that anti-essentialism makes to the way we envisage the social dimensions of freedom. My query focuses on the general form of society, which would enable the open self-creation of persons on the social level. This question is broached here from the *perspective of a plurality of individuals with equal rights to freedom*. In the following chapter, I will take up the standpoint of the singular self to tackle tensions between the individual freedom of self-fashioning and equal rights.

The external freedom of autonomous conduct hinges on two sets of conditions. First, it requires social laws that permit and secure the widest possible diversification of being.[75] The liberal commonplace of constitutional charters and negative rights states, for Castoriadis, 'an essential minimum.'[76] Autonomous individuals are expected to tread divergent and original paths, which they could not walk without sufficient freedom from incursions by the state and other agents.[77] Therefore, a system of rights is in order to safeguard individuals from unsolicited interference. External freedom includes also the institution of a 'free public space', in which individuals enjoy the opportunity to form associations and engage in group activities 'without

[75] Castoriadis (1980), p.251.
[76] Castoriadis (1994b), p.340, Castoriadis (1989), p.408. This shows that the critique of Castoriadis for his alleged rejection of constitutions and individual rights [see Heller (1989), pp.170-171, Feher (1989), p.403, Castoriadis (1989), p.405] is ill founded.

explicit regard to political questions.'[78] This unregulated sphere of civil society allows for open discussion, information and the confrontation of ideas.[79] On Castoriadis's view, then, creative and agonistic autonomy live on a liberalism of negative rights and a libertarian commitment to minimum legislation and state interference.[80] Arguably, an extensive social regulation of behaviour impedes flights from convention and prevents creativity from venturing into new directions.

By contrast, the second group of external provisions for realising individual autonomy derives from socialist thought on freedom. To give effect to their visions, individuals need access to material means.[81] This point is not affected by the insistence of certain liberals that material deprivation diminishes the conditions or the value of freedom, but not freedom itself, which they equate with political and social liberties.[82] Material goods are a pragmatic condition of freedom.

Different societies could meet this requirement in different ways, on the basis of considerations of feasibility, efficiency, justice and democratic choices. What follows generally from the value of (equal) personal freedom is a presumption in favour of arrangements which prevent disparities of wealth that issue in relations of dependence and domination.

These sketchy notes raise complex questions: how compatible is the trend towards unregulated libertarianism with material empowerment and the legal protection of individuals from repressive relations? How does the introduction of negative rights differ from liberal theories, which were chastised in previous chapters for setting rigid

---

[77] Castoriadis (1991a), p.172, Castoriadis (1980), p.251, Castoriadis (1989), pp.410-411.
[78] Castoriadis (1989), p.412.
[79] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.112-113.
[80] Castoriadis (1989), p.411.
[81] For a good discussion and defense of this idea against arguments that dissociate freedom from material presuppositions, see Van Parijs (1997), pp.21-33.
[82] See e.g. Berlin (2002b), p.272, Rawls (1999), p.179.

constraints on political autonomy?[83] I respond to these concerns in the following sections, after laying out more fully the social dimensions of freedom.

b. autonomy and radical democracy

The freedom to shape life in a reflective and open-textured manner is not an ideal addressed to hermits, but to individuals who interact closely with one another and are positioned in an endless web of social relations and circumstances. From this vantage point, autonomy has two key premises.

First, across the entire spectrum of social interaction, the distribution of power must tend to be symmetrical to the point of avoiding domination. Domination is a name for social relations in which certain agents command power of control such that other persons can be regularly obstructed from enacting autonomous decisions important to themselves.

Second, the freedom to make one's laws demands political autonomy: an effective power to form one's social laws.

Within society, an extensive range of norms and situations compose a shared frame that affects all co-existing parties. This intrinsically collective frame includes state legislation, social norms of interaction, cooperative projects, the distribution of benefits and responsibilities in social cooperation, objective circumstances that depend on all parties (from traffic to the economy) or cannot be divided and allocated to individual persons (e.g. clean air). The law of personal thought and action is here a social law that cannot be laid down by the self alone independently of other agents and social settlements. To be free to shape and reform the collective context of its life, the individual needs social power and political devices which give one leverage on social conditions. Democracy, as the regime in which all citizens can participate in

[83] See here above, Chapter 2, pp.76-77, Chapter 4, pp.138-139.

social lawmaking, enables the political autonomy of a plurality of individuals with equal entitlements to freedom.[84]

Considered from this angle, the value of autonomy mobilises an interest in a wide-scale democratisation of social relations, all the way from the state to the family and the workplace, in order to gain increased purchase and choice in all the domains of society that bear decisively on the life of the self.[85] The freedom to make and remake oneself stretches thus over the external social dimensions of one's existence. And this reflects back on 'private' autonomy, as agents achieve greater mastery over the social context that conditions their individual thoughts and activities.

But to give scope to autonomy in my sense of the term, democracy must be animated by a distinctive vision of societal self-direction. Individual autonomy contains the freedom to challenge fundamentals and recast life in new directions. Raised to the level of social arrangements, this freedom demands a social order which is deliberately produced by its individual members and allows social agents to interrogate and transform social forms beyond prefixed bounds. In Castoriadis's terms (which trace back to Hegel and Marx), individuals attain social autonomy by dismantling the alienation of their society to given social relations and conditions.[86]

Society is always/already self-instituted. But this self-institution is largely unplanned and anonymous. Moreover, established institutions tend to entrench themselves and to grow independent of actual ends and needs, subjugating individuals to their inner logic or leaving them at the mercy of unintended side-effects.[87] The

[84] Castoriadis (1987), p.107, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.167-8, Castoriadis (1997a), p.122. I agree with Castoriadis that personal autonomy extends necessarily to an interest in determining social laws and circumstances. But against Castoriadis, I do not believe that a commitment to *equal* autonomy and *equal* political rights, or democracy, follows self-evidently from an individual's investment of personal autonomy. This question is taken up below, in chapter 8, pp.292-303.

[85] Castoriadis (1957), p.56, Castoriadis (1983b), p.313, Castoriadis (1989), p.413, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.138, 172, Castoriadis (1997a), pp.122, 134.

[86] Castoriadis (1987), pp.109-110, Castoriadis (1974), p.29.

[87] Castoriadis (1987), pp.110, 114, 132, 213-214.

alienation of society to its own creations is evidenced in cultural practices that are unreflectively reproduced across generations, under the burden of tradition and habituation. Another classic Marxist example is 'free market capitalism.' Although the capitalist market is the result of human acts and institutions, it subdues its participants to priorities ('maximise shareholder value'),'laws' and systemic chains of effects, which are not necessarily aligned with the personal preferences of particular actors, they are frequently at odds with collective goods (for instance, the protection of the environment) and defeat conscious intentions pursued within the framework of the game.

There are various causes that engender the submission of individuals to the yoke of instituted society. The sheer lack of political devices for the deliberate direction and production of society looms large among them, and so do power relations and the influences of socialisation, which educate individuals into norms that sustain the actual order of things. Castoriadis makes much of legitimising beliefs, which cement allegiance to instituted social forms by effecting the 'self-occultation of society as origin.' Various societies impute the source of their arrangements to instances independent of social activity, such as God, nature, the authority of ancestors, reason or the laws of history. These imaginary origins naturalise or fetishise institutions, placing them beyond the reach of legitimate questioning. Individuals are tutored in the idea that prevailing principles and arrangements are not subject to change.[88]

So, to promote the social autonomy of persons, a radical democracy strips society of a fixed core of principles and relations which would not lend themselves to

[88] Castoriadis (1997a), pp.17, 86, 165, 265-266, Castoriadis (1987), pp.213, 372, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.114, 133, Castoriadis (1983b) 314-315; see also here above, Chapter 6, pp.199-200.

challenge.[89] First, it raises the consciousness that society is self-instituted. The perception of society as a human creation trains self-reliant individuals. Society has been made by human agents. We are able thus to remake our social arrangements in tune with our present needs and aspirations. Moreover, all social principles are represented as imaginary products of history to the effect that any laws of society come up for interrogation: 'Why this law rather than another' since it is an artifice devoid of natural or rational necessity?[90] All norms and social arrangements become amenable to questioning, which is radical and interminable, as radical democracy takes to heart the idea that society is self-instituted, and forswears any non-conventional, absolute standards (the law of God, universal reason and so on) that would fix the answer. Finally, Castoriadis's picture foregrounds the ability of human societies to bring radically new settlements into existence. Injected into democratic self-institution, this assumption empowers social agents to contest any pre-established set of alternatives (e.g. between capitalism, in its different versions, and traditional socialism) and encourages them to experiment with new possibilities.

In a democratic regime enlivened by such convictions and dispositions, individuals gain the mental freedom to revise any social law, to dispute any social value and to reprogram any social practice.[91] But the hallmark of radicalised democracy is that it translates this theoretical freedom into practice by setting up political institutions, which permit 'the questioning of the law in and through the actual activity of the community'[92] and issue binding decisions that are put to effect. Arrangements that maintain a regular activity and free struggle around the form of social institutions

[89] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.38, 114-115, Castoriadis (1983b), p.312, Castoriadis (1989), pp.374-375.
[90] Castoriadis (1997a), p.86.
[91] Castoriadis (1991a), p.136.
[92] Castoriadis (1991a), p.164; see also Castoriadis (1991a), p.172.

make the self-institution of society a deliberate, permanent and unlimited process.[93] This is the second defining moment of an autonomy-enhancing democracy. The representation of society as an artifice of human making clears the ground for the primary object: a democratic community that has overcome in practice 'the self-perpetuation of what is instituted by showing itself to be capable of taking a new look at it and transforming it in accordance with its own requirements and not following the inertia of the already-instituted.'[94] This type of autonomous society enables the imaginative self-fashioning of the person on the plane of society proper, as it enfranchises individuals to actively arrange, critique and transform the social contexts of their life, unconstrained by a priori principles.

An association of autonomous individuals cannot and need not reconstruct itself out of whole cloth every now and then. The objective is a positive change in the balance between the active institution of society and inert submission to sedimented structures; a different relationship between instituting and instituted society, the collective as constituent power and the collective as objective conditions, regularised practices, reified order.

The markers of an autonomous self-institution of society are reflectiveness and deliberation.[95] Procedures of collective deliberation provide the forum for informed discussion and confrontation of arguments, imbued with the understanding that social laws and practices originate in society itself. Society becomes effectively an object of unlimited interrogation and active reform.[96] The debate around prevailing arrangements cuts itself loose from settled points of judgement. In light of democratic deliberation that is carried out in these terms, citizens go on *'to make, to do and to*

---

[93] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.20-22, 168-169, Castoriadis (1983a), pp.272, 274-275, Castoriadis (1983b), pp.314-316, Castoriadis (1994), p.340, Castoriadis (1987), p.215.
[94] Castoriadis (1987), p.215.
[95] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.20-22, 172, 174.

institute.'[97]

The projected process of collective self-governance is self-reflective as it exposes to public debate its own structure, the rules of collective decision-making, and the meaning of its guiding principles, freedom and equality. The reflective quality of this regime of self-government is also expressed in the regular iteration of open deliberation, which renders any past decisions liable to challenge at frequent intervals. 'Society does not halt before a conception, given once and for all, of what is just, equal or free, but rather institutes itself in such a way that the question of freedom, of justice, of equity and of equality might always be posed anew within the framework of the ''normal'' functioning of society.'[98]

Organised along these lines, public arenas of legislation and policy-making give social embodiment to the ideal of personal autonomy, which may put any established conventions into question and is hospitable to the invention of the new. But radical democracy is also key to autonomy in private life and social interaction, because it makes the bearers of rights to private autonomy, sovereign authors of these rights.[99] The social autonomy of individuals allows them to adjust social arrangements to the distinctive needs and conditions of their 'private' autonomy.

And this is precisely what demarcates the present take on negative rights and material freedom from other liberal, Marxist and egalitarian theories. In the proposed set-up of radical democracy, it is the business of the autonomous individuals themselves to lay down the content of their rights and their material arrangements. The unlimited self-legislation of social laws is raised to the final and sovereign

---

[96] Castoriadis (1997a), p.87, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.125, 162, 169, Castoriadis (1983a), pp.281, 343.
[97] Castoriadis (1991a), p.164.
[98] Castoriadis (1997a), p.87; see also Castoriadis (1997a), pp.17-18, 122, 194, 329, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.104-105, 163.
[99] This proviso is also introduced and developed in J. Habermas's work, see Habermas (1997), pp.118-136, 408.

principle that can trump all prior definition of these laws. By contrast, in negative liberty and essentialist moulds of the free society, individual freedom is framed by prefixed rights and predefined economic provisions, which are not subordinated, as a matter of principle, to the constituent power of the multitude and its changing will.

Negative libertarians fix on the freedom to gratify our desire in a space safe from interferences, whose boundaries are drawn in a system of negative rights.[100] Freedom is divorced from the autonomous determination of social relations. Individuals are not invested with sovereign power over the definition of their rights and the limits of their freedom in society. By contrast, on the present conception, private liberty is tied up with political autonomy. This amendment should be clearly dissociated from a republican emphasis on the common good and the valorisation of politics. Political autonomy is reclaimed as a realisation of individual autonomy on the plane of social relations and because it empowers individuals to determine the very bounds of their private freedom and other conditions of their personal life. If private liberty is inevitably limited in social life, the right to negotiate these limits carries an obvious weight.

With essentialist schemes, the radical difference of the alternative paradigm is that it rejects entrenched constitutions or preconceived, detailed models of justice and economic structure. On the proposed view, the political, legal and economic frame of autonomy remains up for grabs. Society can thus respond to new claims in the interests of dominated sectors and can tackle new needs that arise from new ways of living or changing conditions. Radical democracy authorises social agents to publicly resist and overthrow systems of rights and patterns of distribution that foment relations of domination or leave certain groups without basic goods for life and

---

[100] See here above, Chapter 4, pp.138-139.

autonomy.

c. autonomy and the economy

The new vision aspires to the expansion of political autonomy across all social spaces of importance to the different individuals. The workplace and the broader economic circumstances of society are pivotal to the lives of most persons, and determine the chances of realising autonomy both in personal life and in social arrangements. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to even begin to address the relations of production and distribution from the perspective of autonomy. But given their central place, I want to bring in certain hunches from Castoriadis's project.

In rough outline, his economic program advocates the democratic regulation of the broader economy through recurrent citizen participation, the self-management of medium to large production units by their employees, and a pattern of distribution which impedes steep disparities of wealth. This configuration is premised on an extensive public ownership of productive assets, but does not ban private ownership of small business, a market for consumer goods and personal property. Citizens make regular use of collective forums to settle and transform the fundamental arrangements of the economy, including the distribution of the total product between investment, public and private consumption, the length of the working week, main tasks to be carried out by various economic sectors and the general rate of wages. The activities of the different production units are co-ordinated through central mechanisms that collect, process and disseminate economic data. The units are supposed to abide with the democratically determined frame, but with enough leeway for initiative. One of the key challenges is to combine decentralisation and the avoidance of bureaucratic domination with broad co-ordination of economic activity, and collective

deliberation.[101]

Castoriadis's main argument for workplace democracy is that it expresses the demands of individual autonomy in social settings. To deprive persons of decision-making power over the basic objectives and settlements of their work is to diminish their autonomy in a central domain of their activity. The judgements that accord centrality to this space need not go beyond considerations referring to the time it occupies in individual life and the implications of work for personal welfare in terms of working conditions, health, leisure, income, access to consumer goods and so on.[102]

Similar reasons speak for the importance of collective deliberation around the general rate of investment, the allocation of the surplus product, the working day, welfare provisions and protection of the environment. When the aim is to uplift the discretionary ability of all, an unregulated market could not supply here the main decision-making device. First, in some of these policy areas, e.g. in environmental protection or the distribution of the general product, policy-making is hardly possible at all without planned co-ordination and regulation. Second, in most domains, the leverage that the market would afford to different actors is power backed up by money, which tends to be unequal relative to inequalities in the allocation of resources, initial endowments and natural talents. A 'free capitalist market' is thus inclined towards unequal distributions of the ability to shape economic arrangements.

Under unequal private ownership of productive means, economic disparities constrain also democratic governments, through which all citizens could gain a measure of equal influence over economic settlements. This is the chief rationale for proposing extensive public ownership as an enabling frame of democracy. Most

---

[101] Castoriadis (1974), pp.7-8, Castoriadis (1955), pp.45-47, Castoriadis (1957), pp.58-59, 77-79, 81, 84-85, Castoriadis (1987), pp.84-86.

[102] A similar argument in favor of extending democratic processes to 'business firms' is developed by R. Dahl in Dahl (1989), pp.327-332.

basically, differential private control over productive assets leaves fundamental decisions about investment, employment, wages etc. at the discretion of unequal private capital, and diminishes the impact of other groups and the government itself. Second, private capital commands disproportionate bargaining power in public policy-making through the threat of lay-offs, the possible flight of capital, the relocation of plants or the inability to attract investment. These effects can be mitigated in a system of collective bargaining with strong trade unions. But capitalism sets considerable limits to how far corporatist arrangements can go in offsetting asymmetries of power. The balancing of unequal power depends on the effective reduction of the control that capital owners command over the means of production. In other words, it is relative to the gradual erosion of private property rights.

The justification for egalitarian patterns of distribution runs along similar lines. Society should disallow inequalities which result in constraining dependence and considerable asymmetries of power between the different parties in social relationships and politics. Also, commitment to the effective autonomy of all outlaws differences in personal holdings which leave certain individuals without basic means for their subsistence and pursuits, when it is feasible to supply everyone with these means.

The crux, however, is not to be found in any of these specific principles and proposals. *The nub of radical democracy is that citizens should have the final word over any model of justice and material arrangements.* The question of justice and the appropriate economic structure rests with the autonomous individuals to decide, and remains always up for debate and revision. The guidelines of economic reform I outlined in this chapter are qualified by this proviso, which drives a wedge between Castoriadis's socialism and Marx's doctrine.

The present sketch of radical democracy shares Marx's concern with social alienation. Marx pressed the point that freedom is subject to substantial restrictions when individuals are at the mercy of the unintended effects of uncoordinated action or when social relations are placed beyond the pale of conscious regulation. To make social relations responsive to the 'united power' of individuals is the impulse that drives Marx's communism.[103] But his vision of the emancipated society ends up inducing alienation in the economy and other social fields. The objectives and economic relations that he wrote into 'communism' were cast as a taken for granted background of individual freedom. They were not preserved as a legitimate object of ongoing discussion and review in response to collective resolutions.[104] On an anti-essentialist view, individuals are vested with the final authority over all matters and the question of the most fair and freedom-enhancing economy is kept permanently open.

Castoriadis, Unger and other anti-necessitarian projects of today have put forward more or less detailed blueprints of the social settlements, which would empower all individuals to define their economic arrangements.[105] Substantive, practical suggestions serve an important goal. They portray in concrete materials the abstract dream of a societal self-creation free of ossified limits, and they make this idea politically effective. But it goes against the overriding goal itself to absolutise definite institutional arrangements at the expense of the very freedom they are meant to foster: the power to transform any specific laws and policies. This freedom expresses our ability to rise above our contexts and allows us to renegotiate them in view of our particular ends and the interests of expanding individual autonomy within the webs of the economy and society at large. So, radical democracy should explicitly separate out

---

[103] See here above, Chapter 1, pp.41-46.
[104] See here above, Chapter 1, pp.29-33, 46-49.

the regulative ideal from its various possible embodiments and should give primacy to the former over the latter.

On a final note, a more strategic discrepancy with Marx is that, on the present theory, the economy is a pivotal space for emancipation, but it is not that magic device which by changing itself, will cut once and for all the Gordian knot of oppression and domination across society, all the way from class relations to race, gender, the family and politics. Economic reform is fundamental, but not sufficient. To promote the growth of personal autonomy in social relations, society must install a permanent political frame in which old and new forms of oppression could be publicly challenged and dismantled.

d. the political thrust of anti-essentialism and some hard questions

In sum, the coding of autonomy in the second half of the chapter set out to rescue the moment of openness, the space in which individuals can contest and transfigure any actual formations of society. This intent contrasts sharply with the decrees of essentialist doctrines, in which a set pattern of socio-economic relations becomes the necessary frame of freedom and rises above the threshold of debate (Marx), or civil autonomy dissolves into compliance with unchanging principles (Kant) or a fixed bill of rights is placed beyond question and reform (Berlin and early Rawls). To cast aside these fixtures is to shore up the freedom of individuals to set and reset the terms of their social life. The treasured independence from fixed clauses is a facet of freedom as such. But it is also an instrument for increasing autonomy in personal life and social relations. The fight against oppression and the promotion of material freedom can make greater headways in a polity that offers more opportunities for contesting and transforming any social circumstances.

[105] See e.g. Castoriadis (1987), pp.78-86, Unger (2001).

Critics could return at least two objections to the anti-essentialist vision of social freedom. An argument, which can be labelled 'libertarian', may object that the unlimited power of collective processes can stifle individual autonomy by bringing under social regulation dimensions that would be otherwise left at the personal discretion of individuals.[106] The unbounded legislative power of society gives collective bodies an unlimited right to legislate individual conduct. This allows in principle an unduly uniformising regulation, which would smother the liberties of the self to think and act differently. A 'liberal' variant on the previous critique could rehearse the standard liberal protest against majoritarian democracy. Collective decision-making, which is not constrained a priori by a fixed bill of rights, offers no warrants for the minimal protection of the freedom of all. It clears the way for an unlimited repression of minorities.

To allay these worries, it should be first reminded that, in the present perspective, popular sovereignty is not valued independently of individual autonomy. 'Radical democracy' serves the freedom of individuals to make autonomous decisions about their social arrangements and provides a political medium for addressing the socio-economic conditions of personal autonomy. *Hence the presumption in favour of minimal legislation....* The proposed regime is not just any schema of democracy, but one set to enhance individual autonomy.

Furthermore, any sympathetic reading would recall that the absence of absolute barriers to questioning and reform does not imply the absence of limits *tout court*.[107] Rational, natural and historical circumstances condition social possibilities. And social laws are in place to regulate social activity. What is advocated here is the rather different idea that any established limits should remain up for challenge and change.

---

[106] See Van Parijs (1997), p.8.
[107] See here above, Chapters 5, pp.186-190, Chapter 6, pp.210-215, present Chapter, pp.252-253.

To be sure, *within* the frame of autonomy and democracy, the value of individual autonomy itself is not up for grabs, because it defines the frame itself. But the specific contents and requirements of autonomy are on the agenda of public discussion, and emphatically so.

In answer to the libertarian concern, radical democracy respects the line between private and public, but keeps it open to contest so that victims of 'private' repression can enlist public means to rectify their condition. The envisioned model of democracy grants the importance of freedom from political regulation, but holds that the different communities should themselves negotiate the balance between lawless freedom and social intervention against conditions of dependence and domination. And this balancing should be never finalised. Thereby, decisions can be readjusted to changing circumstances or improved understandings, and previously silenced voices can be taken into account.

Likewise, autonomy is served by a liberal system of rights that is shielded from the ebb and flow of everyday politics and limited majorities. Radical democracy is fully compatible with a two-track system of collective self-legislation, in which both constitutional and ordinary statutes are programmed through democratic procedures, but the constitution checks ordinary legislation and constitutional amendments pass through particular processes. Under these conditions, it remains true that all laws are amenable to challenge and revision. What would clash with autonomy as unlimited questioning is entrenchment clauses and an attitude of sanctimonious reverence for the inherited constitution. Under entrenchment, the disadvantaged and future generations are deprived of democratic means through which to redress injustices in the original draft and to press for amendments that will meet new needs of freedom.

On a final note, radical democracy could be questioned from a pragmatic point of

view. Autonomy as the power to alter social arrangements cannot get off the ground without basic rights such as the right to participate in collective deliberation, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech. It looks as if a definite system of basic rights is intrinsic to autonomy and cannot be subject to review without restraints. But this impression evaporates as soon as one shifts the focus from general assertions to the specific *content and range* of basic rights: is private property in productive assets one of them? Who is entitled to political rights? Does pornography fall under freedom of speech? And how do we resolve potential conflicts among the various liberties? It is on this substantive level that radical democracy argues for openness and recursive public deliberation in the interests of universal freedom; because there are no unambiguous, objective and impartial answers, because every definition of rights may ensconce privileges and inequalities that should be liable to contest, because historical developments and new understandings may call for the inclusion of other rights on the list, because new groups may claim new rights to enshrine the free pursuit of their styles of living.

5. Conclusion of the chapter and the main body of the thesis

To be free is to be able to act on one's preferences, but it is also to choose one's preferences themselves. This is the key reason for weaving reflection, deliberation and imagination into the texture of freedom. By actively constituting their principles and ends, individuals do not simply get to choose a larger quantity of things. They undergo a qualitative shift, which frees them to venture into different experiences as a result of altering their actual premises and values. These liberating effects of engaging with the frames of personal conduct are drastically enhanced when critical reflection probes into fundamental principles and renounces belief in any sacred axiom, while

creative imagination projects new forms and ends we could try out. In this way, we become able to drift away from preestablished norms into new directions.

Self-fashioning in a reflective and imaginative vein acquires a new urgency when we recognise ourselves as social constructions that are also bearers of an unconscious soul. The proposed regime of freedom turned out to possess a double value: it loosens the hold of restrictive influences which are always/already present within us, and capitalises on the possibilities which open up from the artificiality of our norms and the context-transcending potentials of our repressed imagination.

Freedom as the energetic ordering of life through the deliberative choice of norms, and freedom as creative praxis that can burst through entrenched patterns: these are eminently modern ideals given voice and adorned with value by Kant, Marx and J.S. Mill, among others. A pre-eminent virtue of the new paradigm is that is redeems these elements of the modernist vision by eliminating dimensions of modern thought, which work in the opposite direction.

In Marx and Mill, creative freedom from settled figures is rolled back through the introduction of prewritten scripts that free individuals are bound to follow. In Kant, the independent formation of our person and active self-legislation founder on the bedrock of a universal rational self, whose autonomy equals endless submission to predefined laws. Anti-essentialist autonomy is set against any fixed notion of the self. All norms and ideals are divested of absolute authority, while the capacity for context- and self-innovation is brought to the fore. Self-legislation, self-development and self-creation are thereby cleansed of restraining fixtures. They are recast as genuinely open-ended and radically reflective processes, which can always reframe present styles of living and can set us loose from actual or prescribed captivity to specific routines.

By equipping freedom with arts of self-critique and soul-searching, the new configuration remedies also the defects of negative liberty, which is not as such attached to any determined idea of the self, but slides over the internal constraints on choice. Thereby, negative liberty perpetuates self-limitation to diminished possibilities, which result from social indoctrination, psychic inhibitions, repressed imagination, the servile respect of established authorities.

In short, the new paradigm rearranges and enhances inherited ideas to provide an uplifting vision of freedom, which corrects the deficiencies of dominant discourses, dismantles their arbitrary restrictions and is truer to some of their animating values. Herein lies the main strength of anti-essentialist freedom in the terms of the problematic which drives the present thesis.

The freedom of open self-creation is socially enacted and nourished in a regime alive to the insight that all social arrangements are changeable artifices of history. In this regime, the overriding principle is that all social principles, relations and policies remain susceptible of questioning and transformation. Society is organised in a manner that sets individuals free to lay down and reinvent their social contexts not only in extraordinary conjunctures, but regularly, in the normal life of society, and unconstrained by intangible laws or options given once and for all. A high-energy democracy along these lines enables individuals to give effect to the freedom of imaginative self-making in the properly social dimensions of the self, and empowers citizens to foster their private self-creation by readjusting its social terms to make them more congenial to personal independence and variable life forms.

Essentialist glosses collapse civic autonomy into the observance of determined laws or absolutise specific lists of rights, economic relations and patterns of justice as the necessary subtext of freedom. Negative libertarians do not pair personal freedom with

the freedom to determine its social context, and frequently institute settled bills of 'natural' rights. Both strands of theory constrain or fail to enshrine the freedom to make and remake the law of society. They also fail to acknowledge that any conception of the social frame of freedom is contestable, and may contain manifold imperfections that spawn oppressive relations. There is one way to facilitate the correction of flaws which will afflict any social structure, to prevent any schema of society from degenerating into an iron cage, to do justice to our context-transcending capacities, to enact political autonomy as the inalienable freedom to define our social laws: we should aim at an organisation of society which opens all social arrangements to deliberate determination, renegotiation and reinvention, regularly and without incontestable restraints. The elaboration of this ideal is the contribution of anti-essentialism to the way we understand the social dimensions of freedom.

These points sum up and conclude the core case of the dissertation, which focussed on issues of selfhood and pictures of the human world in order to draw out various limitations of modern freedom. The thesis made then the argument that a certain reconfiguration of freedom in contemporary theory yields a more plausible and empowering conception, which remedies the failures of the main alternatives in modernity.

In the remainder of the thesis, I want to explore further the emergent paradigm in its own right. To this end, I will engage with a wider range of its proponents and I will grapple with a persistent criticism of freedom as imaginative self-fashioning beyond a priori limits.

Chapter 8

A new ethos of freedom

1. Introduction

Freedom in the mode of reflective and open self-creation is an ideal hammered out by a growing chorus of late modern theorists, which features A. Honneth, S.I. Benn, R. Flathman, G. Dworkin, R. Unger, N. Hirschmann, J. Raz, G. Kateb and M. Foucault, to name but a few; all of them supply correctives to essentialist freedom and negative liberty. Castoriadis's construal was examined as exemplary of this broader movement of thought, which constitutes my main interest in the present study.

The first half of this chapter surveys recent work on freedom in order to demonstrate the presence of a wider paradigm and to cast more light on anti-essentialist freedom by fleshing out its general markers and its different variants. A parallel aim is to strengthen my case for the particular vision I laid out in the previous chapter. The contrast with congruent views, which share its basic premises and intents, throws into relief the distinctive virtues of Castoriadis's construction and shows why it carries more appeal than cognate responses to the same problematic of freedom. This offers a retroactive justification for my choice of Castoriadis as the main resource for the attempt to canvass an alternative to essentialism and negative liberty.

The second half pursues a different objective in the same wider context. Castoriadis, Foucault, Kateb and Unger form a sub-group in the new paradigm. They knit together self-creation with anti-conformism, radical critique and innovative self-transformation. This framing of freedom has become known mainly through the work of Foucault. And it has typically invited the objection that it propounds an a-moral individualism, which is politically irrelevant or even inimical to society and the

other.[1] The bite of this charge is less obvious against Castoriadis, who embeds individual self-invention into a democratic and socialist project. I will make the claim, however, that Castoriadis fails to rebut the above criticism, because the way in which he welds together individual autonomy and radical democracy does not carry conviction. He fails to show that a person that gives priority to her imaginative self-making should commit herself to democratic norms instead of being an egotist or amoral. The last section sets out to address this ethical and political questioning of agonic self-invention.

2. anti-essentialist freedom in contemporary thought

In recent decades, a variety of different readings of freedom in analytic and continental philosophy coalesce around overlapping assumptions and themes. The common thread that unifies these theories into a new paradigm is a set of three premises about the subject of freedom. The free subject lacks a fixed universal essence, whose realisation would be equal to the realisation of freedom. The human subject should be analysed through reference to processes of socialisation, which inculcate historically variable contents in the identity of the self. Finally, the agent cannot be apprehended on the model of a fully sovereign and naturally independent chooser.

These contemporary approaches face up to the challenge of revisiting the meaning and the presuppositions of freedom after the interrogation of the modern subject. Freedom cannot be absolute. It is a matter of degree relative to circumstances, attitudes and practices.[2] However, their intentions are not simply defensive. Their aim

---

[1] McNay (1994), pp.152-153, 158, Han (2000), p.148, Rochlitz (1992), p.255, O'Farrell (1989), pp.128-129.

[2] Raz (1986), p.155, Dworkin (1988), p.11, Young (1986), pp.7, 37, Hirschmann (2003), pp.ix-x, 10-11, Flathman (2003), pp.16-17, 20, 31, 83-84, 129-130.

is not only to rescue freedom by adapting it to the recognition of human finitude in our historical conjuncture. Rather, the new constellation seeks to carry forward the modern project of emancipation by variously amending earlier constructions and by arming freedom with practices that serve to contend with the multiple constraints on human agency. Freedom calls for self-discipline and resistance against the endless forces that diminish it. Freedom is not an all-or-nothing affair, but an agonistic striving through which the scope of open choice can always expand, without ever becoming limitless.

The late modern theories that endorse a non-essentialist and historicizing view of the subject split, actually, into two. One camp houses the doctrines of Raz, Benn, Dworkin, Young and others in the analytic liberal tradition. On the other side of the fault line, one can locate Foucault, Castoriadis, Kateb and Unger, who place a premium on unlimited critique, originality and the transcendence of conventions. I will take up first the liberal strain with two aims in view: to trace out the emergence of the new idiom in liberal theory, and to bring out the shortcomings of the liberal tack in comparison to the second branch of the new paradigm as represented by Castoriadis.

a. present-day liberalism

To begin with the case of J. Raz, his sense of freedom chimes with the conception of the previous chapter on four hinge points. Raz underscores the worth of autonomy intended as the exercise of choice on the values and overarching goals that guide particular decisions. Moreover, autonomous choice has both subjective and objective conditions. Third, the same rhetoric of 'self-creation' is deployed. The autonomous subject forges actively its personality and life through successive decisions that bear on its basic commitments, pursuits and values.[3] Finally, Raz sets forth an eminently

[3] Raz (1986), pp.204, 265, 369-373, 387, 389-391.

anti-essentialist notion. The forms of life that autonomous subjects work out for themselves are plural and partly indeterminate. They are not bound to any definite pattern of being, and they lend themselves to variation. Different options are available, allowing for a variety of different lives. Decisions among alternatives are often radically undetermined, because reason cannot yield authoritative criteria to fix these decisions.[4]

Being aware that individuals take over their goals and meanings from the communal pool of society,[5] Raz sets out to reconcile the social embeddedness of the self with the project of personal freedom as self-creation. The solution advocated by Raz is the constitution of pluralistic societies, which leave enough leeway for different personal choices by presenting individuals with an adequate range of diverse valuable options.[6] This is a principal external condition for autonomy. Another external requirement is the protection of the person from intentional acts of coercion and manipulation, which control one's actual opportunity set or impinge on the very way one develops preferences and reaches decisions. Subjective conditions, on the other hand, include the unimpaired exercise of the mental faculties that form intentions and plans, the capacity for understanding, and instrumental reason.[7]

The notion of a totally autonomous agent, who makes herself in a vacuum free of social and other constraints, is an unlikely mirage.[8] But individual autonomy can be effectively realised in a pragmatic sense, when the preceding provisos are met. The individual can become part author of its life by getting to define its values and projects through deliberate and independent choices from worthwhile alternatives. Like Castoriadis, Raz restates freedom in sober, plausible terms, which take human

[4] Raz (1986), pp.161-162, 340-345, 375, 387-388, 395-398, 425.
[5] Raz (1986), pp.247, 305, 309-311, 318-319.
[6] Raz (1986), pp.204, 372-375, 381, 391, 425.
[7] Raz (1986), pp.204, 371-373, 377-378, 408.
[8] Raz (1986), p.155.

limitations on board. Autonomous individuals are not fully sovereign over themselves and the circumstances of their lives, nor can they make themselves out of whole cloth. Autonomy is a partly free choice and limited self-constitution.[9]

What Raz fails to do is to fortify the critical resistances of autonomy so as to widen the ambit of inner choice against countervailing forces. Raz has no truck with the unconscious and lacks an acute sense of how deeply ingrained social principles regulate desire and behaviour in a heteronomous fashion. As a result, his autonomous chooser is not equipped with reflexive dispositions to wrestle with unconscious fantasies and curb the authority of social norms. His vision of autonomy is not critical enough towards internalised institutions, which dominate choice from within.

Raz's picture of free choice and self-creation amplifies the debilitating effects of his approach. To a large extent, Razian choice comes down to a consumer-like freedom of individuals who get to pick from various items in stock.[10] And self-creation signifies in essence a succession of unforced choices from different available possibilities.[11] The individual is not granted the freedom to go its own way and do something different from actual social forms or their possible variations. In Raz's words, 'the limits of the doctrine ...are two. First, it does not protect nor does it require any individual option. It merely requires the availability of an adequate range of options. We saw that this lends the principle a somewhat conservative aspect. No specific new options have a claim to be admitted....'.[12] Absent in Razian self-creation is any trace of imagination, through which individuals invent new potentialities in excess of preestablished alternatives. Missing is any appreciation of original praxis through which the self escapes containment within the actual frames of the social

[9] Raz (1986), pp.154-155, 369-370.
[10] Raz (1986), pp.387, 390-391, 398.
[11] Raz (1986), p.387.
[12] Raz (1986), p.425.

world. The stipulation that currently existing options suffice if they are valuable and varied,[13] coupled with the lack of a critical spirit towards tradition, entrap thought and conduct within the confines of internalised social principles and externally delimited opportunities.

Reflective and imaginative self-formation advances freedom by combating social closure and unconscious conditioning. Along with choice from different goods, the proposed account throws in the elements of reflective engagement with the unconscious, the unlimited questioning of social norms and openness to the radically new, which give an emancipatory dynamic to agonistic self-invention. It may be that Raz's tempered view of autonomy advances a less demanding and more practical ideal. But his stand could be hardly vindicated from the viewpoint of freedom, if freedom prizes independent judgement and the removal of unnecessary restrictions in the way of thought and action.

The figures of S.I. Benn, R. Young and G. Dworkin lie in closer proximity with agonistic autonomy given the accent that they place on a certain category of inner conditions of autonomy -the reflective stances towards personal identity and, particularly, its social layers. Critical dispositions empower the self to craft its mode of living free of enslavement to personal prejudices or convention. All three concur with Castoriadis in their understanding of the question of autonomy. How is it possible to talk of individuals ruling themselves by laws they have made for themselves when in effect we are governed by unchosen impulses and a nomos (values, principles) imposed by our socialisation?[14] When the take-off point are individuals placed under these constraints, autonomy gains a measure of reality only if the self comes to liberate itself from the unreflective sway of internal influences, and

[13] Raz (1986), pp.425-427.
[14] Dworkin (1988), pp.11, 36, Young (1986), pp.7, 37, Benn (1988), pp.124-125, 154, 179.

makes something of these influences in its own way. Minimum rationality conditions are not enough.

G. Dworkin, R.Young and S.I. Benn agree that individuals never get to choose the axes of their conduct in the first place, and cannot remake from scratch the totality of their principles and motivations. All persons remain fundamentally in the grip of cultural presuppositions.[15] Nevertheless, individuals can 'live according to laws they prescribe for themselves' by getting to work on their given norms and desires. Again, autonomy is not a natural state, but a regulative ideal which persons can attain in varying degrees.[16] Agents 'make their own laws' after the event, as it were, by having second thoughts about their particular preferences. The autonomous individual thematises its thoughts and desires, and submits them to conscious reflection. One can be led to revise her reasons and motivations or to identify deliberately with them. This process opens up the possibility of shaking off non-voluntary influences and allows us to mould actively our personality and manage our life with a greater independence from unchosen determinations. Autonomy is the ability and the practice of deliberately determining (questioning, endorsing, rejecting, changing) the reasons for one's actions.[17]

Up to this point, there are obvious parallels between their argument and the core propositions of the previous chapter. The three theorists grasp in analogous terms the predicament of human freedom and they come up with the same answer: the development of a reflective and deliberative subjectivity. Another significant point of convergence with Castoriadis is that all three refuse to bind autonomy to predefined

---

[15] Benn (1988), p.179, Young (1986), p.7, Dworkin (1988), pp.7, 11.
[16] Benn (1988), p.155, Young (1986), pp.38, 40.
[17] Dworkin (1988), pp.15-18, 31, Young (1986), pp.38, 40, 49-53, Benn (1988), pp.177-182, 184, 204.

criteria of correctness. The norms of an autonomous agent need not conform to 'objectively valid' principles.[18]

Yet, the patterns of autonomy engineered by Young, Benn and Dworkin part way with Castoriadian autonomy in crucial respects.

R. Young yokes autonomy to comprehensive goals which unify conduct throughout life,[19] while S.I. Benn raises the quest for self-consistency to a guiding principle of critical reflection and self-legislation.[20] Both gestures contribute to a partial rigidification of life into settled identities. Life-long attachment to set purposes and the commitment to coherence cut against freedom from the clutches of sameness. The intended unity of life contracts the liberty to revise current principles and try out new things. There is a stringent limit to such moves set at the point beyond which different choices will unsettle the established coherence of the self or the overriding purposes of the person. Agonistic and creative autonomy dispenses with such constraints in the practice of self-constitution and generates a more fluid scheme of self-identity. The autonomous self is not harnessed to specific goals. Conflicting elements and changes that disrupt continuity are allowed in one's person.

G. Dworkin, for his part, concludes that second-order reflection is sufficient for autonomy, as along as it meets the conditions of procedural independence. Critical scrutiny can, but need not probe deeper into the frame of second-order reflection itself, that is, the modes of reasoning, the motives and the values which pass judgement on individual preferences.[21] Dworkin knows that the reflective faculties of the self are themselves prone to manipulation to the effect that the activity of self-definition may be mastered by factors outside the choice of the self. This knowledge

[18] Benn (1988), p.181, Dworkin (1988), pp.21, 29, 49.
[19] Young (1986), pp.8-9, 50,72-73.
[20] Benn (1988), pp.176, 179-180, 182, 184.
[21] Dworkin (1988), pp.19-20.

is what prompts him to introduce the proviso that second-order reflection must be procedurally independent, that is, it must be free from external influences like hypnotic suggestion, subliminal direction and so on. Procedural independence, however, is compatible with an uncritical reliance on authority and tradition, which constitutes 'substantive independence.'[22]

The problem, then, with his 'hierarchical analysis' of autonomy is that it essentially reduces autonomy to acts of volitional negation of or identification with first-order desires to do (or not to do) *x*. This fails to promote the autonomous determination of the basic principles and motivations, which govern the particular acts of negation or identification and reflective deliberation at large. Critique and deliberation at this deeper level are simply not a requirement of autonomy on Dworkin's interpretation. The upshot is that persons remain fundamentally heteronomous, given Dworkin's admission that personality structures arise in non-voluntary ways under the impact of socialisation, individual psychology and biological endowments. Deep-structure heteronomy compromises the autonomous quality of endorsed preferences of the first order and diminishes the ambit of open self-making. By contrast, on the conception I sketched out, critical reflection seeks to engage with fundamentals so as to release self-authorship from the stranglehold of regimented norms.

A specific aspect of this difference between the three models and Castoriadis is that the former do not mobilise a robust critical stance towards tradition, which would break with the restrictive conservatism of Raz. The three doctrines reinforce the subjection of autonomous individuals to pre-established social laws or simply fail to actively lift freedom from the implanted mechanisms of instituted society. On Benn's version, critique operates from the fund of prior social meanings, from which

[22] Dworkin (1988), pp.18, 29-30.

individuals take their cues to think through their beliefs and standards in order to eliminate incoherencies. Tapping into present cultural resources, individuals paste together their own coherent pattern of beliefs by using one set of criteria to appraise other elements of their belief system.[23] Dworkin, on the other hand, protects from contestation the social axioms that drive second-order reflection, while Young remains silent on the topic of the criteria which govern the reflective turn upon the self. Contrast these attitudes with five features of Castoriadian autonomy, which give it sharp anti-conformist edges. Nothing is shielded from questioning. To foster emancipation, critique should strive to identify and work through basic cultural presuppositions, which install an internalised system of non-voluntary governance of the self, and may encompass norms that induce us to reproduce relations of subjection of our own 'free' will. Third, Castoriadis's autonomy is illuminated by the insight that social principles are makeshift human creations, which lend themselves to challenge and revision. Moreover, his view brings to the fore the constraining effects of enclosure within actual conventions. It conveys vividly the idea that autonomy is relative to our independence from instituted social forms, which subjugate us to the imperatives of established normality and narrow down our options. Fifthly, Castoriadis's vision plays up the creative potencies of the individual, which allow episodes of radical freedom from society and past history. The stress on original imagination serves notice that choice need not restrict itself to prior alternatives or a rearrangement of the old medley. Individuals have the power to chart their own ways in living.

---

[23] Benn (1988), pp.179-182.

b. Foucault

Castoriadis is not alone in affiliating autonomy with imaginative self-fashioning and an ethos of challenging instituted society. These connections, which split the new paradigm into two factions, are also traceable in the thought of Foucault, Unger and Kateb. By looking into Foucault's take on autonomy, I want to further explore anti-essentialist freedom in its different varieties, to adduce more arguments in support of the new outlook, and to sharpen the unique strengths of the specific version I favour: although Castoriadis's conception lies closer to Foucault's on important fronts, the two theories are not of a piece.[24]

At the heart of Foucault's freedom sits an anti-essentialist intuition that is spelt out and worked over in all his works. The human subject is shorn of a priori, determinate forms. The various modes of subjectivity, that is, the various domains of experience and manners of thought and action, are historically-socially constituted along three correlated axes: scientific and other theoretical discourses, which determine our rules of thought and order our knowledge about others and ourselves; relations of power and control, which organise individual behaviour; and ethics understood as 'technologies of the self', that is, the historically diverse ways in which subjects act intentionally on themselves, develop different types of self-conscience, govern and transform themselves.[25]

Foucaultian freedom calls us to entertain an agonistic relationship to our present moulds of subjectivity, which are socially established through the three systems. Foucault urges a critical ethos driven by the aim to set the self loose from instituted

[24] For reasons of space, the work of G. Kateb or R. Unger could not be examined here. I have chosen to consider the thought of M. Foucault, because of the intrinsic interest of his theory in the present frame of discussion and because his work and secondary literature have brought to light significant difficulties with the idea of freedom as original self-creation.

[25] Foucault (1998), pp.11-12, Foucault (1985), pp.3-7, 10-12, Foucault (1997a), pp.179-181, Foucault (2000a), pp.223-225.

norms. This requires reflection of a particular kind: a labour of thought that recoils upon itself, discloses unspoken axioms and ways of reasoning which underlie actual practices, dissipates the familiarity of social principles, contests their self-evidence and thereby enables the self to think and act differently. Foucault-style critique proceeds, more specifically, by way of historicizing. It unravels the genealogy of current patterns of being by tracking their accidental constitution and by revealing their moorings in power relationships. Its object is to expose the historically specific forms of present self-identity and to question them in respect of their presumed necessity and their coercive effects.[26] The 'critical question today' is: 'in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?'[27]

Foucault's posture towards instituted society enhances the actual freedom of socially made selves. By mapping out the complex relations of knowledge, power and technologies of the self which constitute thought and action, genealogical reflection tracks the way to deliberate interventions in these relations. Moreover, actual modalities of understanding and behaviour are placed at a certain remove, which opens up a breathing space of non-identification. Genealogy reveals the contingency of actual patterns, negating thereby their inevitability and suggesting the possibility of proceeding in different ways.[28]

Foucault's art of reflection shares with the model of critical reason in the previous chapter one of its main instruments–the emphasis on the historical arbitrariness of norms- and the anti-conformist drive, which marks it off from liberal constructions of reflective subjectivity. Critical reflection seeks to maximise independence from any

---

[26] Foucault (2000b), p.117, Foucault (1985), p.9, Foucault (1997b), pp.49-61, Foucault (1981), pp.154-156.

[27] Foucault (1997c), pp.124-125.

[28] Foucault (1985), p.9, Foucault (1997c), pp.121, 124-125, 127, Foucault (1997d), pp.161-162.

prewritten scripts (although the possibility of absolute transcendence is yet again renounced).[29] Critique pierces the implicit presuppositions of thought and action, admits no a priori limitations and no final point, and eschews reliance on axioms of the present in its interrogation of social principles. The questioning of social norms is carried out, instead, from the viewpoint of their historical trajectory.

The critical ethos proposed by Foucault is not only theoretical, but includes a certain activism, which experiments permanently with the practical change of rules that critique has made out to be contingent and artificial. The transformation of entrenched norms and institutions is sought especially when they foist unnecessary limitations on thought and action.[30]

The activist impulses of Foucault's freedom are more conspicuous in its second main component, the ethics of individual self-creation inspired from the ancient Greek 'aesthetics of existence' and modern dandyism.[31] Foucault's hint is that individuals are freer when they stylise their personal life actively and creatively, so that they maintain a flexible relation to any laws and they preserve a measure of independence from coercive institutions and scientific discourses with their normalising constructions of identity. In this ethical ascesis, agents make their own being an object of permanent attention and careful elaboration by themselves. They do not entrust themselves to external authorities nor do they conform unthinkingly to prevalent norms and scientific truths about sanity, sexuality and other domains of personal experience.[32] Genealogical critique helps to unbind the self from rigid social regulations, but it leaves unanswered the question of how should we conduct

[29] Foucault (1997c), p.127.
[30] Foucault (1997c), pp.121, 125-127.
[31] Foucault (1985), pp.10-11, Foucault (1990), pp.43-45, Foucault (1997c), pp.114-118, Foucault (1984), pp.49-51.
[32] Foucault (1985), pp.251-253, Foucault (1990), p.65, Foucault (1991a), pp.348-350, Foucault (1984), pp.49-51.

ourselves in the play-space of freedom carved out through genealogical critique and how we could safeguard our freedom. The ethics of self-stylisation is designed to fill in this gap.

Foucault's closest affinity with Castoriadian autonomy comes out in the value that Foucault bestows on new beginnings and original self-constitution, through which individuals bring into life new existential options that exceed the limits of the present.[33] Foucault's practice of self-creation is not limited to an undetermined choice of norms and pursuits. For both Foucault and Castoriadis, the force of original self-creation and its companion ethos of reflection is above all that they help to discharge the self from the enclosures of fixed identity.[34] The two activities work together to free individuals from an invariable matrix of being, which contracts the range of conceivable or legitimate possibilities. Imaginative self-invention and reflection conduce, more specifically, to freedom from the dominant standards of 'normal' conduct and the ordinary courses of existence in a certain social context. Through critical and genealogical reflection agents glimpse the non-necessity of their current routines in thought and action. Through the projection of different possibilities, the horizon of choice expands beyond the limited options that present patterns foreshadow.

A strength of Foucault's work that is lacking in Castoriadis is the way in which, through his historical inquiries into the formation of subjectivity, Foucault brought out tangibly the liberating thrust of the two arts of liberty. In his archaeologies of knowledge and his genealogies of power-knowledge, Foucault showed how various domains of subjective experience are regulated through scientific discourses, which configure personal identities on the basis of a particular body of knowledge and

[33] Foucault (1997c), p.118, Foucault (2000c), pp.157-158, Foucault (2000d), pp.163-167, Foucault (1980), pp.74-75; see also Han (2000), pp.138-141.
[34] Foucault (2000d), pp.164-167; see also Han (2000), pp.141, 146.

relative to set criteria of normality.[35] This process of subject construction radiates oppressive effects. It not only imposes exclusive contents of thought, which constitute the self to behave in particular ways, but also reinforces the ties of attachment to these contents by sanctifying them as 'scientific truths'. Foucault laid bare, moreover, how the discourses that mould individual identity get entangled with institutions that administer individual conduct, and feed into greater technologies of power that spread across various social sectors. To give an example from sexuality, the scientific diagnosis of sexual perversions did not merely seal the sexual identity of the person. It also placed the self under the authority of a medical expert, who would offer guidance and prescribe behaviour in accordance with specific norms.[36] This is a recurrent and pervasive technology of power in modernity: bodies of knowledge with a claim to truth fix the identity of the self in unique grooves and, by the same token, subject individuals to external authorities and institutions that supervise, normalise and regulate their behaviour based on particular norms.[37]

So, the ethics of self-creation acts as a bulwark against the specific workings of modern power. It invites individuals to create their identity for themselves and avoid conformity to institutionalised scientific discourses, which constrain their possible choices and subdue them to social control in line with determinate laws. Foucault's arts of existence work to free personal ethics and everyday life from the hold of science, systems of domination and the alliance of science with power.

His theorisation of power sets the stage for a broader argument to the same effect. Social power is the determination of personal conduct by social circumstances or other agents. A key mechanism of social power functions by ordering beforehand our horizon of options rather than by preventing us from exercising any degree of choice

---

[35] See e.g. Foucault (1979), Foucault (1989), Foucault (1998).
[36] Foucault (1998), pp.44-48, 65-66, 104-105, 139-141.
[37] Foucault (1982), pp.211-215, Foucault (1991b), pp.195, 201-204.

or by overtly coercing us into specific forms of conduct. Take the reproduction of patriarchal rule or gender norms in rigid heterosexual and monogamous societies. Power relationships are, for Foucault, an ineradicable feature of society. The effort to influence the thought and behaviour of others is intrinsic to social interaction. As such, social power cannot and should not be eliminated. What should be averted are situations of domination, which freeze the field of possible moves and immobilise certain parties into relations of subordination.[38] Imaginative practices of freedom liberate people by impeding the stabilisation of power relationships into states of domination and by countering the closing effects of power.

When we imagine new manners of thinking and acting, we gain a critical distance from the social pre-understandings that control our sense of the feasible, the desirable and the permissible. With the felicitous synergy of objective conditions, the self is set free to act beyond the confines of prewritten social scripts. The freedom to reinvent oneself and the world offers, moreover, a criterion to appraise and institute relationships free of domination. Social relations are mobile and reversible, that is, without entrenched states of domination, when all participants are at liberty to try out new modes of conduct and new forms of interaction. And our relational freedom runs deeper, as we are not ensnared in a closed sphere of possibilities.[39]

Despite, however, the far-reaching convergence between Foucault and Castoriadis, and the singular assets of Foucault's theory, his articulation of freedom is fraught, in comparison, with two important defects. Foucault holds that social practices and understandings are the sole source of the self. His explicit formulations make no reference to our capacity for original figuration. Foucault's argument appears at some junctures to presuppose such a creative ability. But in sharp contrast to the theory I

---

[38] Foucault (2000e), pp.283, 292, Foucault (1982), pp.220-225.
[39] Foucault (2000d), p.167; see also Han (2000), pp.138-142.

expounded in the last three chapters, Foucault does not conceptualise and vindicate any notion of original imagination. Consequently, the freedom to beget new existential options, which Foucault envisions and treasures, is rather precluded by his ontological theses and is left hanging in a theoretical vacuum. The second point of discrepancy is more significant and ambivalent. The standard objection to Foucault's ethics of self-stylisation is that it privileges the self over the other.[40] Foucault's moral individualism turns egotistical because his self-artistry does not incorporate any norms or moral sensibilities that would render the self answerable to others. His individualism is not integrated, either, into a wider social-political framework that attends to the interests of all and affords universal access to Foucaultian practices of freedom. His coding of autonomy comes out at best as a narcissistic ethos of little political relevance, applicable only to privileged elites who live untroubled by material anxieties.[41] At worst, it is yet another form of rugged individualism. My Castoriadian framing of autonomy has the clear advantage that it folds individual autonomy into a radical democratic project that caters to the freedom of all.

However, the quarrel over Foucault's ethics brings into light a vexing trouble with reflective and imaginative self-creation, namely, its potential tensions with dispositions of solidarity and our duties to others. At the root of the problem lies the arbitrariness of this ideal of freedom. Individuals are not constrained by any objective norms. All laws are amenable to questioning, and we are incited to make our own choices or conjure our own *nomos* uninhibited by a priori rules. Consequently, individuals may not feel bound by other-regarding norms, justice, solidarity, equality, which constitute just one way of making oneself, among many others. What is even worse, Foucault and Castoriadis's autonomy has built-in anti-social impulses. First, it

[40] See e.g. Foucault (2000e), p.287. For critiques, see McNay (1994), pp.152-153, 158, Han (2000), p.148, Rochlitz (1992), p.255, O'Farrell (1989), pp.128-129.
[41] Rochlitz (1992), p.255, O'Farrell (1989), pp.128-129.

valorises a critical posture vis-à-vis social norms and objective moral principles. Second, it sponsors original forms of auto-poesis and the creative transcendence of social models. Self-authorship in this key will effect multiple ruptures with shared meanings, which, on a wider scale, would lead to the disintegration of common bonds.[42] Autonomous individuals are eager to question social norms, they grant authority to their own normative decisions over and against social conventions, and shape their thought and action in independent, possibly idiosyncratic ways. A society made up of such individualities is likely to be riddled with extensive differences, social dissent and conflict, while the funds of shared values, which enable a consensual co-existence of liberties, will risk depletion.

These considerations cast a shadow of doubt over the connection that Castoriadis sets up between individual autonomy and democracy. The broader question concerns the ethical qualities of freedom as envisioned by Foucault, Castoriadis and kindred theories.

3. The ethics of self-creation

In Castoriadis's model, autonomous self-creation is not held in check by any determinate norms, but it is not totally unregulated, either. He insists that personal autonomy should encounter an outer limit in the other's equal rights to autonomy. The content of these rights should not be specified once and for all.[43] The limit is liable to redraw, but it is there: autonomous individuals should constrain themselves to respect the equal rights of others.[44] Castoriadis invokes mainly the social conditions of personal autonomy, and makes much of the need to have access to political

---

[42] Rorty (1992), pp.329, 331.
[43] Castoriadis (1991a), p.139, Castoriadis (1997a), p.87, Castoriadis (1989), p.410.
[44] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.137, 168, Castoriadis (1999), p.151.

influence.[45] The nub of his case is this. Individuals can frame autonomously the context of their social life and their private autonomy only if they can participate in the making of social laws on an equal footing with the other members of society.[46] Consequently, individual autonomy contains a commitment to democracy as its fundamental precondition.

This line of reasoning suffers from an obvious weakness. While it is nearly self-evident that my mastery over the social context is necessary for my autonomous determination of social conditions and serves the interests of my private autonomy, the same is not true for the proviso of *equal* power. On the contrary, equality can be seen as a burden from the standpoint of particular agents because it demands concessions to rival positions. The social choices of any participant are vulnerable to defeat or subject to compromises forced by the bargaining conditions of deliberation with others. In most democratic institutions, the preferences of the different actors are inputs in an open-ended mechanism that filters a variety of preferences. There is no guarantee that the autonomous preferences of the self will win out.

Castoriadis's second argument does not fare any better. He contends that if individuals hold their autonomy to be valuable *in itself* and see that it constitutes a good for everyone, it is only consistent with their beliefs that they should care for the autonomy of all.[47] This claim begs the question in that it takes for granted a necessary path leading from my recognition of a general good to my moral obligation to secure this good to everyone. This connection cannot be simply assumed (art, for instance, is seen by many as an objective good, but few would grant that its value generates an obligation to enable everyone to become an artist). And it is nowhere established by Castoriadis.

---

[45] Castoriadis (1991a), pp.76, 136-137, 167-168, Castoriadis (1987), pp.107-110, 365.
[46] Castoriadis (1999), pp.151-152, 230, Castoriadis (1991a), pp.137-138, 167-168.
[47] Castoriadis (1991a), p.168.

Pace Castoriadis, it is reasonable to think that the external self-determination of individuals or groups increases with the accumulation of social capital in their hands and reaches a peak in positions of increased power over others. The higher one's personal clout is, the higher her chances are of tailoring social circumstances and collective decisions to her personal preferences. In strategic terms, the social autonomy of individuals grows relative to their greater social influence and diminishes as influence tends downwards towards equalisation and positions of subordination.

Autonomy could not justify equal empowerment for pragmatic reasons, either, on the grounds, for instance, that an equality of rights is the only feasible or most stable way to safeguard the social autonomy of the self. Disseminated widely, the aspiration to social and political autonomy will throw into disarray societies of exclusionary elite rule. But the will to autonomy does not preclude societies of asymmetrical relations that afford some degree of social mobility and opportunities for access to sites of power, be they real or illusory. That this is a collectively stable position is amply witnessed by contemporary capitalist societies, which combine the idea of universal freedom with crying inequalities of power. Individuals of these societies, even when they come from subordinated classes, are likely to rank societies of equal power less highly than societies of open contest for social capital. The latter societies hold out an elusive promise of accumulating influence and resources in one's interests, while the former seem to rule out this prospect in principle.

In short, Castoriadis's arguments are too underdeveloped to serve his purposes, that is, to underwrite an allegiance to egalitarian democracy from the premise of individual autonomy *alone*. He fails to show why individuals that enact his vision of autonomy *as their primary or sole value* should heed the equal rights of others. Accordingly,

Castoriadis cannot refute the charge that, as such, agonistic self-creation is an a-social, individualistic ethos. And his thesis that 'radical democracy' is *the* institutional realisation of autonomy on the social and political level appears in a problematic light. If, following Castoriadis, we set out from the principle of individual autonomy alone, we are likely to end up with a different socio-political system, such as a liberal regime of open competitive struggle, which licences unequal power, or anarchy.[48] Democracy is the answer when autonomy is allied with a commitment to equality. Castoriadis does not bring in equality as an independent value, but he makes autonomy his primary foundation and seeks to deduce equality from autonomy, to no avail. This vitiates Castoriadis's case for democracy as the institutionalisation of individual autonomy. (My discussion of radical democracy in chapter 7 does not follow Castoriadis in this argument. I claimed that democracy institutionalises autonomy 'from the *perspective of a plurality of individuals with equal rights.*'[49])

In the remainder, I want to turn the tables on the ethical criticisms that are routinely rehearsed against critical and imaginative self-artistry. This constitution of autonomy carries normatively valuable properties and can become the animus of an improved egalitarian democracy. This point matters on three grounds. First, it can increase the appeal of Castoriadis-style autonomy to those who would be otherwise sceptical because of their social sensibilities. Second, the argument will back up the vision of radical democracy I sketched out in the previous chapter, a vision which is premised on equal rights to autonomy. Even if autonomy and equality were brought together as independent principles, the problem remains that an anti-social cast of autonomy with inegalitarian edges would cut against the commitment to equality. And democracy could not effectively promote both values, if they clash with one another. I want to

---

[48] Wolff (1988) has made the case that individual self-determination, when conceived independently of any prior commitment to objective norms, supports anarchy on the level of society and politics.
[49] See Chapter 7, p.255; see also pp.257-258, footnote 84.

dissolve this suspicion by showing how my sense of freedom is not only compatible with, but is actually supportive of equal rights. Turning the normative critique on its head, my argument will bring out the ethical and political value of open self-invention. This ideal supports the deeper democratisation of society, because it offers an exalted notion of freedom, which can also foster the other premise of democracy-equality.

My first thesis is that autonomy may not entail with necessity a duty to respect equal liberties; but it does helps us to recognise and heed the equal rights of others and may pull us in this direction.

Recall that independent and inventive self-enactment draws inspiration from a particular ontological picture and contains a distinctive relationship to identity. The subjects of autonomy look on the various norms of human life as artefacts of human doing. Individuals and societies are vested with creative capacities, which can beget the most varied and surprising progeny. Autonomous agents anticipate, therefore, an indefinite plurality of values, understandings and existential forms. They expect to encounter unforeseen practices and ideas. Moreover, in their eyes, no single pattern of being possesses an absolute standing, because human practices and meanings are the offspring of history and convention; they lack superstrong guarantees of validity. The upshot is that autonomous subjects do not presume that their 'view of the world is the only meaningful one' while 'others are bizarre, inferior, perverse, evil or unfaithful.'[50] The understanding that there isn't only one 'natural' or 'best' way of being disposes us to treat different identities as alternative possibilities rather than deviances from human nature or universal truth that are not worthy of equal consideration and should

[50] Castoriadis (1983a), p.268.

be, perhaps, tutored, assimilated or liquidated.[51] In short, their preconceptions, expectations and attitudes render autonomous agents receptive to the heterogeneity of being, which equal liberties permit and nourish, and make them more willing to respect the equal right of others to be.

This responsiveness to plurality and the readiness to acknowledge equal liberties feed on the absence of a rigid identification with the present forms of the self. A propensity for mobility, freedom from specific identities and the possibility of taking up different identifications are inherent to individual autonomy in the style of Castoriadis and Foucault. As a result, the will to inflict oneself on others and the drive to establish one's own criteria of correctness as the universal to which everyone should bow, are deprived of their necessary fuel. The autonomous self lacks the necessary strengths of attachment to its present desires and the required dogmatism of belief.

The willingness to come to terms with the 'other' draws further strength from the critical reflexivity that imbues the professed ethic of autonomy.[52] Critical attitudes towards my own worldview foment forbearance of alternative positions and can cultivate an eagerness to engage with others out of an interest in further testing my beliefs or out of a sentiment of wonder about the ways others have grappled with aporias of human existence. The critical-sceptical mindset that informs the ethos of autonomy underpins our ability to respect the equal freedom of conscience, speech, association etc. not only of others who have endorsed the same value of autonomy, but also of radical others, that is, of individuals and groups who give precedence to other ends and embrace different worldviews. (The toleration of these others, however, ends at the point where their actions repress the equal liberties of the rest.)

---

[51] Connolly (1995), pp.89, 196-197.
[52] Connolly (1995), pp.26-27, 39-40.

Furthermore, the proneness to revision and novelty, which is central to the proposed grammar of autonomy, facilitates democratic patterns of collective deliberation that attend to the needs of all. The said proclivity increases the readiness to compromise and to modify personal preferences, a process which is frequently required for reaching generally acceptable settlements in the interests of all.[53]

Finally, an autonomous rapport to self-identity sustains virtues that are of paramount importance for achieving justice in the contemporary situation. Autonomy enhances the ability to respond to new demands for recognition, claims for the redress of past injuries and the legitimation of deviant norms. To be able to listen to such claims, which 'new social movements' have pressed in the recent past, we need a different attitude towards the social law. We must grant the legitimacy of social contestation and be willing to rework present standards of judgement and conventional modes of intercourse.[54] These dispositions are pronounced elements of creative and agonistic autonomy. So, in a society of autonomous individuals, the struggles for justice and equal freedom stand a better chance to meet halfway the responsiveness that they need. Autonomy makes not only for pluralism, but also for pluralisation and the ongoing universalisation of freedom in society.

My argument up to this point indicated how autonomy, when glossed in terms of radical questioning and imaginative self-fashioning, provides a supportive soil for commendable stances of tolerance and attention to equal rights. However, ethical attitudes are not accommodated only in the manner of passive receptivity. Anti-essentialist autonomy offers substantial reasons that should motivate autonomous individuals to take a keen interest in the equal liberties of all. This is the second claim that I will stake out by deploying two lines of reasoning. First, the equal freedom of

---

[53] Young (2002), p.51, Cohen (1997a), p.74.
[54] Connolly (1995), pp. xv-xvi, 34, 98.

all to lead their personal lives by their own standards allows diversity to grow and thrive. And diversity nurtures the personal autonomy of the self. Second, the interplay of dissonances in a regime of universal freedom breeds an ongoing activity of struggle and critique around instituted relations. Thus, universal political and civil liberties create a society that increases the autonomy of the self with regard to established institutions.

No doubt, equal freedom comes at a cost that has to be borne. In the pursuit of their specific interests and projects, individuals will be restrained by the equal liberties of others. In politics and social activity, agents will have to adjudicate their conflicting demands on a footing of equality, which impedes the unchallenged prevalence of anyone. Strategically speaking, equal freedom is likely to be injurious to some of my particular interests. But when I observe the equal rights of others, the constraints on my autonomous action also foster my autonomy itself.

Let us begin by noting how the diversity vouchsafed by equal liberties feeds into personal autonomy. Encounters with others sharpen our self-understanding. Contrast and comparison with different assumptions awaken agents to the particularity of their own perspectives, and bring unexamined certainties and unconscious attitudes into focus. Exposure to difference heightens, moreover, the perception of contingent elements in our identity and reminds us that we need not be as we currently are.[55] Enhanced self-understanding and aliveness to changeable traits further autonomy, as they broaden the range of personality features that are problematised and open to transformation. So, by allowing the spread of alternative values, understandings and forms of life, equal freedom aids the subject of autonomy in its own attempts to elude closure. Difference generates a fund of ideas external to the self, on which one can

---

[55] Cohen (1997b), p.430, Young (1996), pp. 127-128, Connolly (1991).

draw to challenge one's presumptions. Difference may harbour alternatives to hegemonic norms and fossilised practices, enabling individuals to transgress the boundaries of dominant culture by embracing possibilities beyond prevailing orthodoxies.

Furthermore, equal liberties carve out a space of unhindered expression for the *creative* activities and experimentalism of infinite others. They are an essential condition for keeping afloat a stream of new ideas and forms, all the way from art to science, politics and ethics, which excite and inspire the imaginative powers of the self. Moreover, by serving to sustain an activity of questioning and new creation, equal liberties weaken the dead weight of the past and undermine the forces of habituation pressing on the self. Finally, a variety of fields are emptied of single ends and necessary forms, as conventions and other social authorities are constantly challenged and displaced. Multiple spheres of activity are constituted as an open project to which the self is incited to give its own responses in the space of freedom from pre-established norms. The history of 20th century art, science, philosophy and sexual ethics illustrates these correlations. So, by enabling social contestation and innovation on a wider scale, the equal freedom of others feeds into self-reliant attempts at original self-invention beyond the chains of convention.

In conclusion, the formal and substantive equality of liberties allows the diversification of being, which shores up the autonomy of the self: it nourishes the practice of self-questioning, it secures freedom from homogeneous social norms, in the interstices of which individuals can author their own forms and ends, it furnishes resources and stimuli for the work of imaginative creation and self-invention. All these salutary implications supply so many reasons to strengthen one's commitment to the equal liberties of others.

The equal distribution of freedom in *social interaction and politics* compounds the effects to benefit of individual autonomy. Democratic rules of intercourse, which give effect to equal freedom within social relations, mobilise the interaction of different ideas and life-forms. They grant to all participants the right to voice their views and assert their preferences. Others may actively confront the self with alternative viewpoints and challenge the self's assumptions and behaviours. By so doing, they stimulate self-reflection, they impede personal identity from congealing and they wake up the self to different possibilities.[56] On these grounds, autonomous individuals, who put a premium on reflexivity and revisable self-identity, should cherish equal freedom in social intercourse.

Crucially, equal political freedom enables the interrogation of the social institutions, which frame the life of the self. When others, taking advantage of their freedom of public expression and mobilisation, contest social relations, they initiate debate around present social circumstances and put them up for renegotiation. In this way, other agents prompt my critical engagement with social conventions. The disruption of established patterns allows the imagining of alternative possibilities or even presses the need to craft new settlements in the place of dismantled arrangements. My freedom of spirit and action gain a wider space in the fractures of social structures, which are problematised, weakened, and always in the making thanks to the initiatives of infinite others.

One of the freedoms encapsulated in equal political liberties is the right of all those affected by certain arrangements to be included in regular processes of collective decision-making, in which they will have an equal chance to influence outcomes. In these procedures of political deliberation, they should be entitled to raise questions,

[56] See among others, Young (2002), pp.22-23, Dryzek (2002), pp.58-59.

initiate debate, engage in discussion, make proposals and vote, on an equal par with others and uninhibited by a priori constraints on the content of their input, fear, coercion or other intrusive social influences.[57] Collective self-governance on these terms allows a large number of differences to be directly expressed. Thereby, it quickens the pace at which established arrangements are politically questioned and transformed.[58] The inclusion of marginal and oppressed groups and the absence of inflexible constraints help to bring fundamental disagreements to the fore, intensifying the contestation of instituted society. Regular instances of public deliberation along these lines can keep up social institutions in a state of relative flux and looser grip on living individuals. In other words, the more equal, inclusive and empowering democracy is, the more effectively it may chasten the authority of ruling dogmas and preserve social relations from coagulation.

In conclusion, equal political empowerment is a condition sine qua non for sustaining a state of affairs that enhances substantially the autonomy of the self in respect of society. The intensified treatment of social values and practices as an object of interrogation curbs conformist pressures exerted by long-established institutions, and encourages the development of hypothetical and reflexive attitudes towards them. Passive adaptation to instituted society falters on the absence of anything too solid or authoritative to adapt to. Actual settlements are regularly exposed to political renegotiation to the effect that the question of the ideal form of society remains permanently alive. Time and again individuals are spurred on to think their own answers and rearrange their social life according to their own visions. In sum, if autonomy is intended as an active forging of society and the self, the autonomous self

---

[57] Young (2002), pp.22-23, Cohen (1997a), pp.72-74, Benhabib (1996), pp.70, 72, Dahl (1989), pp.109-114.

[58] Gould (1996), pp.173, 181.

will have more reasons to adhere to democratic norms of interaction and will care more for the equal political rights of others in the same polity.

4.concluding remarks

The intent of this excursion into contemporary thought was to broaden my discussion of anti-essentialist freedom and to garner support for this ideal from kindred theories. The chapter sought also to foreground the singular virtues of the conception I endorsed, to uphold it against competing interpretations of freedom in present-day philosophy and to illuminate its contribution to contemporary debates around freedom. I argued that, set against liberal alternatives, self-creation in Castoriadis's style is more reflective and freedom-enhancing towards social conventions. On these grounds, and because it is enriched with the inputs of original imagination, Castoriadis's model fosters freedom as the active fashioning of the self and the world beyond predefined limits. The substance of Castoriadis's ideal is nearly identical to Foucault's ethic of freedom, but Castoriadis's theory has thought through the ontological premises of its argument and embeds individual autonomy in a wider political and normative template.

The last section sought to tackle the stock objection to reflective and imaginative self-enactment, which makes of this ideal a politically irrelevant and amoral ethos. My thoughts were not intended as a knockdown argument, which would establish that open self-creation compels with logical necessity an allegiance to equality or that it yields a sufficient foundation for the commitment to equality and solidarity. I made the subtler case that the proposed idea of freedom can support the egalitarian ethics of democracy. Individuals pursuing agonistic and creative autonomy have a stake in the effective equalisation of freedom, which can shore up effectively the autonomy of the

self. Autonomous individuals would have many reasons to enshrine the liberties of all and would help freedom from present conventions to grow across society. In short, agonistic self-invention can serve the democratic cause of expanding freedom and equality across the entire spectrum of society. And here lies a large part of its political significance.

Afterword

Since the outbreak of the modern 'democratic revolution' in late 18th century, freedom and equality have been recognised as the constitutive principles of democracy. But, by way of a temporal reversal (or an immanentization of the transcendent), the form of society that was founded on these premises was envisaged less as an actual condition and more as an unrealised commitment- an ideal to be achieved. In a multiplicity of social and political relations, freedom and equality were cast as an 'unfinished project', spawning a plurality of struggles for the redemption of the unfulfilled promises.[1] Workers, women, civil rights and anti-racist campaigns, oppressed cultural minorities and nationalities, sexual liberation movements staked public claims to the universalisation of freedom.

Although the specific concerns that spurred on these mobilisations were widely divergent, they all made manifest an aspiration to equal freedom as their end or the key condition for meeting their ends. The way to emancipation lay through various paths: the extension of the democratic franchise to previously excluded sectors, the transformation of relations of subordination, the breaking apart of restrictive social norms, increased control over social conditions, the institution of new rights and provisions that would allow different styles of living. But the broader goal of these battles was the same, as was the fact that they called into question established institutions, which were often entrenched as universal, sacred or laws of nature.

Few would dispute that equal freedom spread vastly through these struggles. But many liberals, socialists and others would also agree that the present still leaves much to be desired in the domain of gender relations, the material conditions of freedom, the effective equality of political freedom, freedom in the workplace, the rights of

---

[1] See among others, Habermas, Laclau and Mouffe (1985), pp.154-156, Habermas (1990c), Habermas (1997), Callinicos (2000), pp.22-25, Balibar (1990).

cultural minorities, relations between races, nations and states. At the dawn of the new century, new movements have surged up to resist the imperialism of corporate capital at the expense of democratic self-governance and the real freedoms of millions.[2] Arguably, the onward march of freedom and equality requires further reforms or the creation of 'another world.'

Whatever very concrete steps one considers indispensable for launching a more free and equal society, there is a lesson to be drawn from the history of the principle. The 'free society' should remain a near-empty signifier. That is, it should not be fully equated with any particular conditions and laws, any specific blueprint. All substantive visions of an emancipated society-and such visions are the necessary props and actualisations of equal freedom- should enshrine the moment of radical contestation witnessed in the history of modernity. Along with their specific realisation of equal freedom, they should preserve and affirm the right to challenge their social arrangements, and any other law of society, in the name of equal freedom. This is a central teaching that I sought to bring into relief. The free society should commit itself to freedom and equality as an open and always incomplete project.

Because here lie some of our main hopes and warrants that citizens will always be allowed to publicly contest any elements of repression that will linger on or arise anew in any future society. Here lie our safeguards against totalitarian terror under the banners of freedom; our powers to combat domination and unnecessary restrictions legitimated by various idols of 'human nature' and universal necessity; our weapons to rectify programs of social change that backfire and degenerate into iron cages; our prospects of reform, which will bring the actual ambit of liberties in line with new understandings or changing historical circumstances. Citizens are disabled from

---

[2] See Crouch (2004).

protecting and enhancing their freedom when freedom is identified with specific settlements (in essentialist freedom) or is limited to a safe haven of private choice (in negative liberty) and is severed from a series of other liberties: the liberty to challenge prevailing beliefs about what harms liberty, the liberty to participate in defining the contents and the frontiers of liberties, the liberty to redraw the private-public divide, the liberty to enlist public resources for securing material and other conditions which keep opportunities effectively open.

That the actual shapes of freedom should stay always amenable to revision does not follow only from an acknowledgement of human fallibility (any conceptions of the best way to achieve equal freedom can be variously flawed) and historical change (new problems and needs can always arise; freedom will have to be pursued under different conditions). As such, a perfectly free society is not a thing of this world, given human weaknesses, the unlikelihood of a fully coherent society, the conflictual plurality of reason. The meaning and requirements of equal freedom are the theatre of intense contest. They have been given competing interpretations, which can back themselves up with good reasons. Deriving, as it does, from disparate understandings, evaluations and lines of reasoning, reasonable disagreement is unlikely to be finally overcome. Any "free and equal" society embodies a particular rendering of its basic premises and denies to advocates of other interpretations the equal freedom to put theirs to effect. There is one way to mitigate this element of repression that is likely to stain all free societies: they should recognise the legitimacy of opposition to instituted conceptions of equal freedom and should make allowances for their reform.[3]

Last, through their very act of questioning and remaking the constitution of freedom the emancipatory mobilisations of modernity enacted freedom as the power to define

[3] See Mouffe (2000), pp.103-105.

the contours of society and life. This freedom is intrinsic to the principle of popular sovereignty. Individuals are sovereign over themselves and their society. The unlimited freedom to query and amend any law of society follows from the supreme law of democracy. How could any emancipated society regress behind this most primary of liberties? Any institutions, material conditions and legislation that are put in place to enable freedom, circumscribe the actual range of possibilities that are open to social individuals. Which freedom would be more valuable to sustain than the freedom to determine the range of socially eligible and feasible options?

Beyond political autonomy, a synergy of historical and actual experiences prefigures the expansive horizons of personal freedom along the lines adumbrated in this thesis. Stepped-up detraditionalisation, social change and cross-cultural interaction reveal the non-necessity of any particular mode of living. Tradition and divine sanction have lost their power to authorise a unique set of norms as exclusively true. The free exercise of reason in theory, science and all communicative circuits of society has heightened appreciation of uncertainty and divergence in matters of knowledge and normativity. The proliferation of contending doctrines in epistemology, ethics, politics and metaphysics, the precariousness of research results and revisions of theory in the natural sciences have increased awareness of human fallibility and contestability. They have bred more sceptical and relativist moods across society. All in all, these developments have impressed the idea that there are no indisputably ‘correct ways’ of seeing and conducting life. Life is an open question to which individuals can return different answers. The scope of personal choice broadens into an indefinitely wide plurality of existential options.

In most liberal democracies of today, the conflicting diversity of beliefs and ways of being is a fact. The enlargement of freedom would have to go *further* in the direction

of diversification. Any modern society that would try to replace multiplicity with a singular orthodoxy would set off waves of repression and would signal a deep regression in the emancipation of individuality and culture.

However, the liberal presumption that personal freedom means a consumer's choice from available alternatives is an impoverished notion. The vision of the 'strong poet' reflects the intensified experience of human creativity in an era, which has lived through a hectic pace of original inventions in technology, science, art, political and social forms. In the different departments of their life and activity, individuals are not bound to use second-hand recipes or to take their pick from a pre-arranged repertoire of possibilities. They can transcend established orders and break new paths. They can produce their own responses to the challenges of human existence.

Moreover, the foregoing liberal view fails to provide adequately for freedom, because it attends chiefly to external conditions. So much should have been learnt from 20th century phenomena of popular manipulation, as well as from struggles of liberation (feminism comes easily to mind), which had to conduct their battles against 'internal phantoms.' Social norms that restrain behaviour or reproduce relations of subordination regulate the very formation of preferences to create happy conformists or willing slaves. So much we should also know, if not from psychoanalysis, at least from the incidence of passionate attachment to enslaving norms, the self-destructive irrationalities and the frightening madness of human beings, for which the 20th century offers ample testimony. That's why I insisted that freedom feeds off anti-conformist impulses and lives on critical attitudes towards norms imbibed from society. And that's why freedom needs also a sustained engagement with the psyche, its obsessions, its cravings, its subliminal ties, its hidden dreams that fuel compulsions.

Indeed, the *Sartrean* ideal of the free-floating chooser, who fashions her life from scratch through completely undetermined decisions, is a red herring. Human individuals are finite beings, who labour under pre-given conditions, operate with prior inner and external materials and remain in thrall to deep-seated prejudices or unknown motivations. Freedom as the open invention of life is episodic, limited, agonic and tragic. We cannot afford to handle the making of our life as a carefree play. Death is an ever-present eventuality and the ultimate horizon; choices count because we may not be given a second-chance.

A society of equal freedom should make co-ordinated efforts to eliminate not human limitedness and tragedy, but self-destruction which turns against humanity en masse, and the cruelty of inducing or tolerating unnecessary suffering. A more free and equal society would strive, also, to make room for diversity *and* diversification; for the personal liberties of conservative choosers *and* of those who look forward to broader vistas of freedom through agonic reason and the creative expansion of human possibilities.

Bibliography[1]

Allison, Henry E. (1990), *Kant's theory of freedom,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Allison, Henry E. (1996), *Idealism and Freedom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Althusser, Louis (1977), *For Marx,* trans. Ben Brewster, London: NLB

Arendt, Hannah (1978), *The Life of the Mind,* San Diego; New York: Harcourt

Aron, Raymond (1968), *Democracy and Totalitarianism,* trans. V. Ionescu, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson

Arrington, Robert L. (1989), *Rationalism, realism and relativism: perspectives in contemporary moral epistemology,* Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press

Balibar, Etienne (1990), '"Droits de l'homme" et "droits du citoyen": La Dialectique moderne de l'egalite et de la liberte' in *Actuel Marx*, v.8, 1990

Barber, Benjamin (1996), 'Foundationalism and Democracy' in S. Benhabib (ed.) (1996), *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Barry, Brian (2001), *Culture & Equality,* Cambridge: Polity Press

Bauman Zygmunt (1997), *Postmodernity and its discontents,* Cambridge: Polity Press

Beck, Lewis White (1963), *A commentary on Kant's critique of practical reason*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Benedict, Ruth (1961), *Patterns of Culture*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Benedict, Ruth (2001), 'Anthropology and the Abnormal' in P.K. Moser & T.L. Carson (eds) (2001), *Moral Relativism. A Reader*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Benhabib, Seyla (1992), *Situating the Self*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Benhabib, Seyla (1996), 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy' in S. Benhabib (ed.) (1996), *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Benn, Stanley I. (1975-6), 'Freedom, autonomy and the concept of a person' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, v.76 (1975-6)

Benn, Stanley I. (1988), *A theory of freedom,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[1] Works used in the thesis (all works cited are included).

Berger, Fred R. (1984), *Happiness, Justice and Freedom: the moral and political philosophy of J.S. Mill*, Berkeley; London: University of California Press

Berger, Peter & Luckmann, Thomas (1991), *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Penguin

Berlin, Isaiah (1969), *Four Essays on Liberty,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Berlin, Isaiah (1991), *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. H. Hardy, London: Fontana Press, London

Berlin, Isaiah (1997), *Against the Current*, ed. H. Hardy, London: Pimlico

Berlin, Isaiah (2001), *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy, London: Pimlico

Berlin, Isaiah (2002a), *Freedom and its Betrayal*, ed. H. Hardy, London: Chatto & Windus

Berlin Isaiah (2002b), *Liberty*, ed. H. Hardy, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Blokland, Hans Theodorus (1997), *Freedom and Culture in Western Society*, London: Routledge

BonJour, Laurence (2000), 'Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?' in E. Sosa & J. Kim (eds) (2000), *Epistemology, An Anthology,* Malden Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Bourdieu, Pierre (1992a), *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R. Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press

Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant, Loic J.D. (1992b), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press

Bourdieu, Pierre (2000), *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. R. Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press

Brenkert, George (1983), *Marx's ethics of freedom*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Brenkert, George (1991), *Political Freedom*, London: Routledge

Callinicos, Alex (1990), *Trotskyism,* Buckingham: Open University Press

Callinicos, Alex (2000), *Equality*, Cambridge: Polity

Carnois, Bernard (1987), *The Coherence of Kant's Doctrine of Freedom,* trans. D.Booth, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1955), 'On the Content of Socialism, I' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1957), 'On the Content of Socialism, II' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1964), 'Recommencing the Revolution' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1974), ' "The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water": An Introductory Interview' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1980), 'From Ecology to Autonomy' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1982), 'The Crisis of Western Societies' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1983a), 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1983b), 'The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1987), *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey, Cambridge: Polity Press

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1989), 'Done and To Be Done' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1991a), *Philosophy, politics, autonomy*, ed. D.A. Curtis, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Castoriadis, Cornelius [Καστοριάδης, Κορνήλιος] (1991b), *Τα Σταυροδρόμια του Λαβυρίνθου* [Crossroads of the Labyrinth], Athens: Ypsilon

Castoriadis, Cornelius [Καστοριάδης, Κορνήλιος] (1993), *Ανθρωπολογία, πολιτική, φιλοσοφία* [Anthropology, politics, philosophy], Athens: Ypsilon

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1994a), 'Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1994b), 'Culture in a Democratic Society' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1996), 'Psychoanalysis and Philosophy' in D.A.Curtis (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1997a), *World in Fragments*, ed., trans. D.A.Curtis, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1997b), 'Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics' in *Thesis Eleven*, v.49, May 1997

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1999), *Figures du Pensable. Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe,* Paris: Seuil

Castoriadis, Cornelius [Καστοριάδης, Κορνήλιος] (2000), *Η άνοδος της ασημαντότητας* [The rise of insignificance], trans. from French K. Kouremenos, Athens: Ypsilon

Castoriadis, Cornelius [Καστοριάδης, Κορνήλιος] (2001), *Διάλογοι* [Dialogues], trans. from French E. Gerokwsta, Athens: Ypsilon

Cavell, Marcia (1993), *The Psychoanalytic Mind. From Freud to Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Chalmers, Alan Francis (1999), *What is this thing called science?,* Buckingham: Open University Press

Cohen, Gerald Allan (1978), *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defence,* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Cohen, Gerald Allan (1988), *History, labour and freedom: themes from Marx*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Cohen, Joshua (1997a), 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy' in J. Bohman & W. Rehg (eds) (1997), *Deliberative Democracy. Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press

Cohen, Joshua (1997b), 'Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy' in J. Bohman & W. Rehg (eds) (1997), *Deliberative Democracy. Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press

Connolly, William (1991), *Identity and Difference: democratic negotiations of political paradox*, Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press

Connolly, William (1993), *The terms of political discourse*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press

Connolly, William (1995), *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press

Connolly, William (1999), 'A Critique of Pure Politics' in W. Connolly, (1999), *Why I Am Not a Secularist,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Couvalis, George (1997), *The Philosophy of Science: science and objectivity,* London: Sage

Crews, Frederick (ed) (1999), *Unauthorised Freud. Doubters Confront a Legend*, London: Penguin

Crouch, Colin (2004), *Post-democracy*, Cambridge: Polity

Curtis, David Ames (ed) (trans.) (1997), *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell

Dahl, Robert A. (1989), *Democracy and its critics*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press

Donner, Wendy (1991), *The liberal self*, Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press

Draper, Hal (1977), *Karl Marx's theory of revolution,* New York; London: Monthly Review Press

Dreyfus, Hubert L. & Rabinow, Paul (eds) (1982), *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hempel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

Dryzek, John S. (2002), *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Dumm, Thomas L. (1996), *Michel Foucault and the politics of freedom*, London: SAGE

Dunleavy, Patrick & O'Leary, Brendan (1987), *Theories of the State. The Politics of Liberal Democracy,* London: Macmillan

Durkheim, Emile (1984), *The division of labour in society*, trans. W.D. Halls, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Dworkin, Gerald (1988), *The theory and practice of autonomy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Dworkin, Roland (2001), 'Do Liberal Values Conflict?' in R. Dworkin, M. Lilla & R. B. Silvers (eds) (2001), *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, New York: The New York Review of Books

Eagleton, Terry (1997), *Marx and freedom,* London: Phoenix

Elliott, Anthony (1999), *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition*, London; New York: Free Association Books

Elster, Jon (1985), *Making sense of Marx*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Engell, James (1981), *The creative imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Feher, Ferenc (1989), 'Castoriadis and the Redefinition of Socialism' in *Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales*, v.86, December 1989

Feyerabend, Karl (1975), *Against Method: outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge*, London: Humanities Press

Feyerabend, Paul (1987), *Farewell to Reason*, London: Verso

Flathman, Richard E. (1987), *The philosophy and politics of freedom*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press

Flathman, Richard E. (2003), *Freedom and its conditions*, New York; London: Routledge

Flikschuh, Katrin (2000), *Kant and modern political philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Fotopoulos, Takis (2001), 'The Myth of Postmodernity' in *Democracy and Nature*, v. 7:1, March 2001

Foucault, Michel (1979), *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison,* trans. A. Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (1980), 'Entretien avec Michel Foucault' (Interview for *Il Contributo*) in D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (eds) (1994), *Michel Foucault. Dits et ecrits. 1954-1988. IV. 1980-1988*, trans. G. Barbedette et al., Paris: Gallimard

Foucault, Michel (1981), 'Practicing Criticism' (Interview for *Liberation)* in L.D. Kritzman (ed) (1988), *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan et al., New York; London: Routledge

Foucault, Michel (1982), 'The Subject and Power' in H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, Paul (eds) (1982), *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hempel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

Foucault, Michel (1984), 'An Aesthetics of Existence' (Interview for the Italian weekly *Panorama*) in L.D. Kritzman (ed) (1988), *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan et al., New York; London: Routledge

Foucault, Michel (1985), *The History of Sexuality. V.2. The Use of Pleasure*, trans. R. Hurley, London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (1989), *Madness and Civilisation,* trans. R. Howard, London; New York: Routledge

Foucault, Michel (1990), *The History of Sexuality. V. 3. The Care of the Self*, trans. R. Hurley, London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (1991a), 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' in P. Rabinow (ed) (1991), *The Foucault Reader*, London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (1991b), 'The Means of Correct Training' (From *Discipline and Punish)* in P. Rabinow (ed) (1991), *The Foucault Reader*, London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (1997a), 'Subjectivity and Truth' in S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (eds) (1997), *Michel Foucault. The Politics of Truth*, trans. L. Hochroth et al., Semiotext(e)

Foucault, Michel (1997b), 'What is Critique' in S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (eds) (1997), *Michel Foucault. The Politics of Truth*, trans. L. Hochroth et al., Semiotext(e)

Foucault, Michel (1997c), 'What is Enlightenment?' in S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (eds) (1997), *Michel Foucault. The Politics of Truth*, trans. L. Hochroth et al., Semiotext(e)

Foucault, Michel (1997d), 'What Our Present Is' in S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (eds) (1997), *Michel Foucault. The Politics of Truth*, trans. L. Hochroth et al., Semiotext(e)

Foucault, Michel (1998), *The History of Sexuality. V.1. The Will to Knowledge*, trans. R. Hurley, London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (2000a), 'Technologies of the Self' in P. Rabinow (ed) (2000), *Michel Foucault. Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984. V.1*, trans. R. Hurley et al., London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (2000b), 'Polemics, Politics and Problematizations' in P. Rabinow (ed) (2000), *Michel Foucault. Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984. V.1*, trans. R. Hurley et al., London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (2000c), 'The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will' in P. Rabinow (ed) (2000), *Michel Foucault. Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984. V.1*, trans. R. Hurley et al., London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (2000d), 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity' in P. Rabinow (ed) (2000), *Michel Foucault. Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984. V.1*, trans. R. Hurley et al., London: Penguin

Foucault, Michel (2000e), 'The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom' in P. Rabinow (ed) (2000), *Michel Foucault. Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984. V.1*, trans. R. Hurley et al., London: Penguin

Frankfurt, Harry G. (1971), 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' in G. Watson (ed.) (2003), *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Freeden, Michael (1996), *Ideologies and political theory: a conceptual approach*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Freud, Sigmund (1900), 'The Interpretation of Dreams', Part I, in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. IV, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1900-1901), 'The Interpretation of Dreams', Part II, in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. V, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1905), 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1908), 'Hysterical Phantasies and their Relation to Bisexuality' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. IX, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1911), 'Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1914a), 'On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XIV, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund, (1914b), 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XIV, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1915a), 'The Unconscious' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XIV, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1915b), 'The Instincts and their Vicissitudes' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1916-17), 'Lecture 23: The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1917), 'Mourning and Melancholia' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XIV, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1918), 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XVII, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1920), 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1923), 'The Ego and the Id' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1924), 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1926), 'The Question of Lay Analysis' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1933a), 'The Dissection of the Psychical Personality' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1933b), 'Lecture 33: Femininity' in A. Freud (ed.) (1991), *Sigmund Freud. The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, London: Penguin

Freud, Sigmund (1933c), 'New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. XXXV', in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XXII, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1937), 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XXIII, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1939), 'Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XXIII, London: Vintage

Freud, Sigmund (1940), 'An Outline of Psycho-Analysis' in J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (eds) (trans.) (2001), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XXIII, London: Vintage

Frosh, Stephen (1999), *The Politics of Psychoanalysis*, Basingstoke; London: Macmillan

Fuller, Steve (1998), *Science*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Fumerton, Richard (2000), 'Externalism and Skepticism' in E. Sosa & J. Kim (eds) (2000) *Epistemology, An Anthology,* Malden Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Furlong, E.J. (2002), *Imagination*, London: Routledge

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1989), *Truth and Method*, trans. W.Glen-Doepel et al., London: Sheed and Ward

Galipeau, Claude (1994), *Isaiah Berlin's liberalism,* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Gaus, Gerald F. (1983), *The modern liberal theory of man*, London; New York: Croom Helm: St. Martin's Press

Gaus, Gerald F. (2000), *Political Concepts and Political Theories*, Boulder, Colorado; Oxford: Westview Press

Gellner, Ernest (1993), *The Psychoanalytic movement: the cunning of unreason*, London: Fontana

Geras, Norman (1983), *Marx and human nature: refutation of a legend*, London: Verso

Geuss, Raymond (2002), 'Liberalism and its Discontents', *Political Theory*, v.30, n.3, June 2004, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Giddens, Anthony (1979), *Central Problems in Social Theory*, Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press

Giddens, Anthony (1984), *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Giddens, Anthony (1993), *New Rules of Sociological Method*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Goodman, Nelson (1978), *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company

Gould, Carol C. (1996), 'Diversity and Democracy: Representing Differences' in Benhabib, Seyla (1996) (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Gray, John (1984), 'On Negative and Positive Liberty', in Z. Pelczynski, J. Gray (eds) (1984), London: The Athlone Press

Gray, John (1991), 'Introduction' in J. Gray (ed) (1991), *John Stuart Mill. On Liberty and Other Essays,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Gray, John (1993), *Liberalisms*, New York; London: Routledge

Gray, John (1995), *Berlin,* Hammersmith, London: Fontana Press

Gray, John (1996), *Mill on Liberty: A Defence*, London: Routledge

Gray, John (2002), 'Mill's Conception of Happiness' in J. Gray, G.W. Smith (eds) (2002), *On Liberty in Focus*, London: Routledge

Gray, Tim (1990), *Freedom*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Gregor, Mary (1993), 'Kant on "Natural Rights"' in R. Beiner & W. J. Booth (eds) (1993), *Kant and Political Philosophy. The Contemporary Legacy*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press

Grunbaum, Adolf (1993), *Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press

Guyer, Paul (2003), 'Kant on the Theory and Practice of Autonomy' in E. F. Paul, F. D. Miller & J. Paul (eds) (2003), *Autonomy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Habermas, Jurgen (1989), *The Theory of Communicative Action*, v.2, trans. T. McCarthy, Cambridge: Polity Press

Habermas, Jurgen (1990a), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* trans. C. Lenhardt and S.W.Nicholsen, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press

Habermas, Jurgen (1990b), 'Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel's Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?' in J. Habermas (1990a), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* trans. C. Lenhardt and S.W.Nicholsen, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press

Habermas, Jurgen (1990c) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press

Habermas, Jurgen (1997), *Between Facts and Norms,* trans. W. Rehg, Cambridge: Polity

Hacking, Ian (1982), 'Language, Truth and Reason' in M. Hollis & S. Lukes (1982) (eds), *Rationality and Relativism*, Oxford: Blackwell

Han, Beatrice (2000), 'Nietzsche and Foucault on Style: the Limits of the Aesthetic Paradigm' in E. Kiss, U. Nussbaumer-Benz (eds) (2000), *Nietzsche, Postmoderne- und danach?*, Cuxhaven; Dartford: T. Junghans

Harvey, David (1999), *Limits to Capital,* London; New York: Verso

Heller, Agnes (1989), 'With Castoriadis to Aristotle; From Aristotle to Kant; From Kant to Us' in *Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales*, v.86, December 1989

Hirschmann, Nancy J. (2003), *The subject of liberty: toward a feminist theory*, Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press

Hobbes, Thomas (1840), 'Of Liberty and Necessity' in Sir W. Molesworth (ed.) (1992), *The Collected Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. IV, London: Routledge

Hollis, Martin & Lukes, Steven (eds) (1982), *Rationality and Relativism*, Oxford: Blackwell

Honig, Bonnie & Mapel, David R. (2002), *Skepticism, Individuality and Freedom. The reluctant liberalism of Richard Flathman,* London; Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press

Honneth, Axel (1995), *The Fragmented World of the Social*, ed. C.W.Wright, Albany: State University of New York Press

Honneth, Axel (1998), 'Decentered Autonomy: The Subject after the Fall' in L. Langsdorf & S. H. Watson (eds) (1998), *Reinterpreting the Political. Continental Philosophy and Political Theory*, Albany: State University of New York Press

Hume, David (1978), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds L.A. Selby-Bigge, P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hume, David (1999), *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,* ed. T. L. Beauchamp, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press

Irwin, Terence (1984), 'Morality and Personality: Kant and Green' in A. Wood (ed) (1984), *Self and nature in Kant's philosophy,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Jahanbegloo, Ramin (2000), *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, London: Phoenix Press

Jamieson, Dale (1993), 'Method and moral theory' in P. Singer (ed.) (1993), *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell

Joas, Hans (1993), *Pragmatism and social theory*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press

Kalyvas, Andreas (1998), 'Norm and Critique in Castoriadis's Theory of Autonomy' in *Constellations,* v.5, n.2, Oxford: Blackwell

Kalyvas, Andreas (1999), 'Reviews: Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* and *World in Fragments'* in *Thesis Eleven*, n.59, November 1999

Kant, Immanuel (1958), *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan

Kant, Immanuel (1960), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T.M. Greene, H.H. Hudson, New York: Harper & Row

Kant, Immanuel (1991), *Political Writings,* ed. H. Reiss, trans. H.B.Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Kant, Immanuel (1996), *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., ed. M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Kant, Immanuel (1997), *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans., ed. M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Kant, Immanuel (1998), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., ed. M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Kateb, George (1992), *The Inner Ocean. Individualism and Democratic Culture*, Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press

Kateb, George (2002), 'Individuality and Egotism' in B. Honig & D.R. Mapel (eds) (2002), *Skepticism, Individuality and Freedom. The reluctant liberalism of Richard Flathman*, London; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Kearney, Richard (1994), *The Wake of Imagination,* London: Routledge

Kersting, Wolfgang (1992), 'Politics, freedom, and order: Kant's political philosophy' in P. Guyer (1990) (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Kirk, Robert (1999), *Relativism and Reality*, London; New York: Routledge

Kolakowski, Leszek (1978), *Main currents of Marxism: its origins, growth and dissolution,* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Korsgaard, Christine M. (1996), *Sources of Normativity,* ed. O. O' Neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Kuhn, Thomas (1993), 'Afterwords' in P. Horwich (ed.), *World Changes. Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press

Kuhn, Thomas (1996), *The structure of scientific revolutions,* Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press

Kymlicka, Will (2002), *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Laclau, Ernesto (1990), 'New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time' in E. Laclau (1990), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, New York; London: Verso

Laclau, Ernesto (1996), *Emancipation(s),* London: Verso

Laclau, Ernest & Mouffe, Chantal (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso

Laclau, Ernesto & Mouffe, Chantal (1987), 'Post-Marxism without Apologies' (pp.97-132) in E. Laclau (1990), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, New York; London: Verso

Larmore, Charles (1996), *The Morals of Modernity,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lefort, Claude (1986), *The political forms of modern society*, ed. J.B. Thompson, trans. A. Sheridan et al., Cambridge: Polity Press

Lehrer, Keith (2003), 'Reason and Autonomy' in E.F.Paul, F.D.Miller & J.Paul (eds) (2003), *Autonomy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Longino, Helen E. (1990), *Science as social Knowledge: values and objectivity in scientific inquiry,* Princeton: Princeton University Press

Lukes, Steven (1987), *Marxism and morality,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Lukes, Steven (2003), *Liberals and Cannibals,* London, New York: Verso

Lynch, Michael P. (2001), *Truth in Context. An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity*, Cambridge Mass.; London: MIT Press

Macfarlane, L.J. (1966), 'On Two Concepts of Liberty', *Political Studies*, v.14 (1966)

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981), *After Virtue; a study in moral theory*, London: Duckworth

MacIntyre, Alasdair C. (1988), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth

Mackie, John Leslie (1977), *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Marcuse, Herbert (1969), *An Essay on Liberation,* Boston: Beacon Press

Markovic, Mihailo (1991), 'Human nature' in T. Bottomore (ed) (1991), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought,* Oxford: Blackwell

Markus, George (1978), *Marxism and Anthropology*, trans. E. de Laczay, & G. Markus, The Netherlands: VAN GORCUM ASSEN

Marx, Karl (1973), *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus, London: Allen Lane

Marx, Karl (1975), 'On the Jewish Question', in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1975), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works,* v.3, trans. C. Dutt et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1976a), 'Theses on Feuerbach', in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1976), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works,* v. 5, trans. C.Dutt et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick (1976), 'German Ideology', in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1976), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works*, v. 5, trans. C.Dutt et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1976b), 'The Poverty of Philosophy', in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1976), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works*, v.6, trans. C.Dutt et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1985), 'Provisional Rules of the Association', in E. J. Hobsbawm et al. (eds) (1985), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works*, v.20, trans. R. Livingstone et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1989a), 'Economic Manuscript of 1861-1863.[XII-636 (Continuation)] Ricardo's Theory of Surplus Value', in E. J. Hobsbawm et al. (eds) (1989), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works*, v.32, trans. E. Burns et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1989b), 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' in E. J. Hobsbawm et al. (eds) (1989), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works*, v. 24, trans. D. Forgacs et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1989c), 'Notes on Bakunin's Book *Statehood and Anarchy*' in E. J. Hobsbawm et al. (eds) (1989), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Collected Works*, v. 24, trans. D. Forgacs et al., London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1990), *Capital, Volume I*, trans. B. Fowkes, London: Penguin

Marx, Karl (1991a), *Capital, Volume III*, trans. D.Fernbach, London: Penguin

Marx, Karl (1991b), 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*' in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1991), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1991c), 'Letter to Pavel V.Annenkov' in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1991), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1991d), 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1991), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1991e), 'The Civil War in France' in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1991), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1991f), 'Wage Labour and Capital' in J. Cohen et al. (eds) (1991), *Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

Marx, Karl (1997), *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. D. J. Struik, trans. M. Milligan, New York: International Publishers

Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick (1998), *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. S. Moore, London: Verso

McCarthy, Thomas (1990), 'Introduction' in J. Habermas (1990) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press

McMahan, Jeff (2000), 'Moral Intuition' in H. LaFollette (ed) (2000) (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

McNay, Lois (1994), *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press

McNay, Lois (2000), *Gender and Agency*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Meikle, Scott (1985), *Essentialism in the thought of Karl Marx*, London: Duckworth

Meiland, Jack W. & Krausz, Michael (1982), *Relativism: cognitive and moral*, Notre Dame, Indiana; London: University of Notre Dame Press

Meszaros, Istvan (1975), *Marx's theory of alienation,* London: Merlin Press

Miliband, Ralph (1979), 'Marx and the State' in T. Bottomore (ed) (1979), *Karl Marx,* Oxford: Blackwell

Mill, John Stuart (1963a), *A System of Logic. Ratiocinative and Inductive*, ed. J. M. Robson, Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press & Routledge

Mill, John Stuart (1963b), *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, ed. J. M. Robson, Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press & Routledge

Mill, John Stuart (1991a), 'On Liberty' in J. Gray (ed) (1991), *John Stuart Mill. On Liberty and Other Essays,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Mill, John Stuart (1991b), 'Utilitarianism' in J. Gray (ed) (1991), *John Stuart Mill. On Liberty and Other Essays,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Mill, John Stuart (1991c), 'The Subjection of Women' in J. Gray (ed) (1991), *John Stuart Mill. On Liberty and Other Essays,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Moody-Adams, Michele (2001), 'The Empirical Underdetermination of Descriptive Cultural Relativism' in P. K. Moser & T. L. Carson (ed) (2001), *Moral Relativism. A Reader*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Moser, Paul K., Mulder, Dwayne H. & Trout J.D. (eds) (1998), *The theory of knowledge: a thematic introduction*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Moser, Paul K. (2000), 'Justification, Meta-epistemology, and Meaning' in E. Sosa, & J. Kim (eds) (2000), *Epistemology, An Anthology,* Malden Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Moser, Paul K. & Carson, Thomas L. (2001), *Moral Relativism. A Reader*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Mouffe, Chantal (1993), *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso

Mouffe, Chantal (2000), *The Democratic Paradox,* London: Verso

Mulholland, Leslie Arthur (1990), *Kant's system of rights*, New York: Columbia University Press

Musgrave, Alan (1992), *Common sense, science and scepticism,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Norris, Christopher (1997), *Against Relativism,* Oxford: Blackwell

Novitz, David (1987), *Knowledge, fiction & imagination*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press

O' Farrell, Clare (1989), *Foucault: Historian of Philosopher?*, Basingstoke; London: Macmillan

Ollman, Bertell (1976), *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in capitalist society,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

O'Neill, Onora (1989), *Constructions of Reason. Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

O'Neill, Onora (1992), 'Vindicating Reason' in P. Guyer (ed.) (1992), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

O'Neill, Shane (1999), 'Introduction: Reconstituting Criticism Today' in S. O'Neill, & I. MacKenzie (eds) (1999), *Reconstituting Social Criticism. Political Morality in an Age of Scepticism*, Basingstoke; London: Macmillan

Parsons, Talcot (1977), *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, New York: Macmillan

Paton, H.J. (1947), *The Categorical Imperative,* London: Hutchinson's University Library

Paul, Ellen Frankel, Miller, Fred D. Jr. & Paul, Jeffrey (eds) (2003), *Autonomy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Pettit, Philip (2001), *A theory of freedom*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Poltier, Hugues (1989), 'De la praxis a l'institution et retour' in *Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales*, v. 86, December 1989

Popper, Karl (1972), *Conjectures and Refutations: the growth of scientific knowledge*, London: Routledge

Quine, Willard Van Orman (1960), *Word and Object,* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

Quinn, Philip L. (2000), 'Divine Command Theory' in H. LaFollette (ed.) (2000), *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Rachels, James (2001), 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism' in P. K. Moser & T. L. Carson (eds) (2001), *Moral Relativism. A Reader*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rawls, John (1980), 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory', in S. Freeman (ed) (1999), *John Rawls, Collected Papers,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Rawls, John (1989), 'Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy' in S. Freeman (ed) (1999), *John Rawls, Collected Papers,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Rawls, John (1996), *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press

Rawls, John (1999), *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Raz, Joseph (1986), *The morality of freedom,* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Rees, J.C. (2002), 'A re-reading of Mill on Liberty' in J. Gray & G. W. Smith (eds) (2002), *J.S.Mill, On Liberty in Focus*, London; New York: Routledge

Reich, Wilhelm (1983), *The Function of the Orgasm*, London: Souvenir

Ricoeur, Paul (1970), *Freud and philosophy: an essay on interpretation*, trans. D. Savage, New Haven; London: Yale University Press

Riley, Patrick (1993), 'The Elements of Kant's Practical Philosophy' in R. Beiner & W. J. Booth (eds) (1993), *Kant and Political Philosophy. The Contemporary Legacy*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press

Robinson, Gillian & Rundell, John F. (eds) (1994), *Rethinking imagination: culture and creativity*, London: Routledge

Rochlitz, Rainer (1992), 'The aesthetics of existence: post-conventional morality and the theory of power in Michel Foucault' in T. Armstrong (ed) (1992), *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

Rorty, Richard (1980), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Rorty, Richard (1989), *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Rorty, Richard (1992), 'Moral identity and private autonomy' in T. Armstrong (ed) (1992), *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

Rorty, Richard (1999), *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin, London

Rosen, Michael (1996), *On Voluntary Servitude. False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology,* Cambridge: Polity Press

Rosenberg, Alexander (2000), *Philosophy of Science: a contemporary introduction,* London: Routledge

Rundell, John (1994), 'Creativity and judgement: Kant on reason and imagination' in G. Robinson & J. F. Rundell (eds) (1994), *Rethinking imagination: culture and creativity*, London: Routledge

Ryan, Alan (1998), *The Philosophy of J.S. Mill*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Ryan, Alan (2002), 'John Stuart Mill's Art of Living' in J. Gray & G. W. Smith (eds) (2002), *J.S.Mill, On Liberty in Focus*, London; New York: Routledge

Sassoon, Donald (1997) *One Hundred Years of Socialism,* London: Fontana Press

Schott, Robin May (1997), 'The Gender of Enlightenment' in R. M. Schott (ed) (1997), *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant,* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press

Siedentop, Larry, 'Two Liberal Traditions', in A. Ryan (ed) (1979), *The idea of freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Simons, Jon (1995), *Foucault and the political*, London; New York: Routledge

Simopoulos, Kwstas (2000), 'Φαντασιακή Αυτονομία ή Φαντασιακός Αυτοεγκλωβισμός;' ['Imaginary Autonomy or Imaginary Self-entrapment?'] in *Νέα Εστία*, v. 1722 , April 2000, Athens

Sinnot-Armstrong, Walter & Timmons, Mark (eds) (1996), *Moral Knowledge?: new readings in moral epistemology*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press

Smith, G.W. (2002), 'Social Liberty and Free Agency' in J. Gray, G. W. Smith (eds) (2002), *On Liberty in Focus*, London: Routledge

Smith, Michael (1993), 'Realism' in P. Singer (ed) (1993), *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell

Stavrakakis, Yannis (1999), *Lacan and the Political*, London; New York: Routledge

Sumner, William Graham (2001), 'Folkways' in P. K. Moser & T. L. Carson (eds) (2001), *Moral Relativism. A Reader*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press

Taylor, Charles (1985), *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Taylor, Charles (1992), *Sources of the Self,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Taylor, Charles (2001), 'What's wrong with negative liberty' in N. Warburton (ed.) (2001), *Freedom. An introduction with Readings,* London: Routledge

Thompson, John B. (1984), *Studies in the theory of ideology*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Timmons, Mark (1999), *Morality without foundations: a defence of ethical contextualism*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press

Trigg, Roger (1999), *Ideas of Human Nature*, Oxford: Blackwell

Tully, James (1999), 'To think and act differently' in S. Ashenden & D. Owen (eds) (1999), *Foucault Contra Habermas*, London: Sage

Unger, Roberto Mangabeira (2001), *False Necessity*, London; New York: Verso

Van Parijs, Philippe (1997), *Real Freedom for All,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Warnock, Mary (1976), *Imagination*, London: Faber & Faber

Watson, Gary (2003) (ed), *Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Wellman, Carl (1988), *Morals and Ethics*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall

White, Stephen (2000), *Sustaining affirmation: the strengths of weak ontology in political theory*, Princeton N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press

Whitebook, Joel (1996), *Perversion and Utopia. A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press

Whitebook, Joel (1998), 'Requiem for a Selbstdenker: Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997)' in *Constellations*, v.5:2, June 1998

Wiggins, David (1998), *Needs, Values, truth: essays in the philosophy of value*, Oxford: Clarendon

Williams, Bernard (1993), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana Press

Williams, Bernard (1993), 'Foundations: Practical Reason' in B. Williams (1993), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* London: Fontana Press

Williams, Caroline (1999), 'Reconstituting the Subject of Political Discourse: from Lacan to Castoriadis' in S. O'Neill & I. MacKenzie (eds) (1999), *Reconstituting Social Criticism. Political Morality in an Age of Scepticism*, Basingstoke; London: Macmillan

Williams, Caroline (2002), 'Subject and Subjectivity' in A. Finlayson & J. Valentine, (eds) (2002), *Politics and Post-structuralism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Wilson, Fred (1998), 'Mill on psychology and the moral sciences' in J. Skorupski (ed.) (1998), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wolff, Robert Paul (1998), *In defence of anarchism*, Berkeley, London: University of California Press

Wong, David (1993), 'Relativism' in P. Singer (ed.) (1993), *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell

Wood, Allen (1981), *Karl Marx,* London: Routledge

Wood, Allen (1984), 'Kant's Compatibilism' in A. Wood (ed) (1984), *Self and nature in Kant's philosophy,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Wright, Erik Olin, Levine, Andrew and Sober, Elliott (eds) (1992), *Reconstructing Marxism: essays on explanation and the theory of history,* London: Verso

Yack, Bernard (1993), 'The Problem with Kantian Liberalism' in R. Beiner & W. J. Booth (eds) (1993), *Kant and Political Philosophy. The Contemporary Legacy*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press

Young, Iris Marion (1996), 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy' in S. Benhabib (ed.) (1996), *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Young, Iris Marion (2002), *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Young, Robert (1986), *Personal autonomy: beyond negative and positive liberty*, London: Croom Helm

Zerilli, Linda M.G. (2002), 'Castoriadis, Arendt and the Problem of the New' in *Constellations,* v. 9:4, December 2002