Power and Happiness: C.B. Macpherson's Overlooked Contribution

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Introduction

C.B. Macpherson is usually remembered, if at all, for a single contribution to political theory—the introduction of the concept of possessive individualism (PI). Indeed, Joseph Carens proposes that we approach Macpherson's work keeping in mind the adage of Archilochus: "The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one. One good one."[1] The concept of PI, which describes a conception of human nature that came to dominate Anglo-Saxon societies[2] beginning in the seventeenth century, is used as a prism through which liberal theory and society are critically analyzed. Though Carens grants that Macpherson's normative theory, focused around PI's antonym "creative individualism,"[3] should also be appreciated in its own right, he agrees with the standard view that it is subordinate to the more critical motivating centerpiece of PI.

Yet as is so often the case when approaching authors of the distant past with present preoccupations, one misses much of what is most interesting in Macpherson's work—distant, perhaps, in spirit rather than time—when reading the text only for those issues found particularly arresting by contemporary theorists.[4] At present, the prevalent reading focuses on his controversial analysis of the history of liberal thought which chronicles the rise of PI. His normative theory, on the other hand, informed by the British new liberalism of the early twentieth century and developments in postwar Marxism, does not seem to address the major controversies of contemporary liberal philosophy, post-structuralism, or post-Marxism. It is as a result overlooked. However, we would do well to keep in mind Quentin Skinner's sagacious observation that writers typically address issues which are controversial to the times in which they live or the milieu in which they work. Though great writers, especially those who have studied distant societies, will expose some aspects of prevailing common sense as problematic or insightful, they too will silently propound most prevailing opinions informing their work simply by failing to identify these preconceptions.

[1] Carens 1993, 1
[2] Macpherson has in mind England and the North American colonies (1962).
[3] Term first proposed by MacIntyre 1976, 178 which Macpherson subsequently adopted
[4] See Quentin Skinner's work on the so called "mythology of doctrines" especially Skinner 2002, p.59-60, 64-65 and 1988, 67. I address concerns of method in more detail in 1.2.

Sometimes it is how these largely unarticulated background assumptions work their way into a distant theory that gives it an especially interesting or fruitful perspective for those for whom such assumptions are foreign. An important component of political theory is the recovery of these perspectives. This enables us to appreciate not only the different motivations of distant authors but also their unique background contexts to view the subject anew.

This essay attempts to excavate such an element from Macpherson's normative theory by developing a framework for treating the problem of self-oppression or 'internal' impediments that has ceased to occupy significant attention for political theorists. This problem is related to a larger issue typically referred to as false consciousness or the dominant ideology thesis. Though having various dimensions, the issue trades on developing an account of forms of domination whereby individuals internalize a false perception of their own interests or nature creating a kind of self-oppression. It often includes theories of 'real interests' against which false perceptions are juxtaposed, along with an explanation for how these are perpetuated or recommendations for how they can be transcended. These issues have ceased to generate much discussion partly due to arguments against the very plausibility of their foundational frameworks.[5] One typical argument holds that in order to gain credence, these theories must invoke an unacceptable theoretical device in the form of a conception of human nature that perpetuates rather than curtails oppression.[6] Two of Macpherson's critics, Virginia Held and Steven Lukes, believe a theory of internal impediments does not require a conception of human nature and can instead rely on an account of the common good and moral virtue to establish 'real interests.'[7] They criticize Macpherson not only for failing to develop a theory of internal impediments, but also for a theory of the good society dependent on a conception of human nature.[8] My main contention is that Macpherson's account of human nature (creative individualism) does provide a basis for a theory of internal impediments even though he

[5] Abercrombie et. al. 1980, Rosen 1996, Scott 1990
[6] Cooke 2008, 4, 15
[7] This position is not explicitly established by either theorist yet is evident from their critiques of Macpherson as I show in 2.1.3 and 3.1.1.
[8] Held 1993a,b; Lukes 1979

never made such an argument. I argue additionally that creative individualism, for precisely the reasons it is eschewed by Held and Lukes, remains resilient to many of the classic objections to the use of human nature faced by such theories.

Firstly, I outline the basic features of a theory of internal impediments, deal with some considerations of method, and present an exegesis of Macpherson's normative theory. Here my aim is to establish that, notwithstanding his unwillingness to develop an account of internal impediments, one is logically necessitated by his normative commitments and is provided with plausible foundations by his conception of human nature.

Secondly, I develop the criticisms of Held and Lukes, who admonish Macpherson's apparent failure to develop an account of internal impediment and who charge that his particular conception of human nature is necessarily antithetical to such an enterprise. Their arguments on this score, however, are incomplete and require substantial reconstruction from their other works to be at all plausible. I therefore devote the majority of the second chapter to reconstructing the assumptions upon which the plausible version depends. Their reconstructed case relies on the claim that an individualist conception of the good life, which is attributed to Macpherson, necessarily overlooks the degree to which human beings are socially constituted. As a result, individualist theories of the good construe as natural or essential what are in fact historically contingent features of human beings and thus reproduce internal impediments.

The final chapter argues that Macpherson's conception of human nature is capable of maintaining a cogent framework for a theory of internal impediments without the background commitments Held and Lukes assume are requisite. These include aspects of a 'holist' conception of human nature that sees the good life as a collective project with which individuals universally identify. I compare Macpherson's more 'individualist' conception of human nature with that of Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* wherein resides a deep appreciation for the extent to which human beings are shaped by social and historical context without having to see our good as a collective identity. I argue that it is precisely because Macpherson does not commit in this

way that his framework remains more defensible in the face of common objections to such accounts.

The reader already sceptical of or wholly unfamiliar with theories of internal impediments or the dominant ideology thesis likely wonders why bothering with their resurrection is at all helpful. I offer two rejoinders. Firstly, I aim not to defend a fully articulated theory of internal impediments. Rather, I am interested only in extricating from Macpherson's philosophic anthropology a foundation for such a theory more capable of meeting some standard objections levelled against it. Nor is it my intent to defend a framework for the entire genus of the dominant ideology thesis or theories of false consciousness. As I elaborate in the first chapter, a theory of internal impediments does not seek to explain why a particular conception of well-being, human flourishing, or human nature comes to enjoy hegemonic, common-sense status. It is restricted to positing a particular view the good life against which those held by individuals and promoted by their cultural context are evaluated. Yet such a theory goes further than an account of 'external' impediments with which Macpherson is more directly concerned that aims to identify and critique how a conception of the good life is promoted or undermined by various institutions. A theory of internal impediments more ambitiously seeks to identify impoverished and stultifying conceptions of the good actually held by individuals and offers an alternative in the hope of equipping them with a greater ability to avoid self-oppressive conceptions.

Secondly, a theory of internal impediments is instrumental to Macpherson's project of realizing the potential of a liberal society given the predominant form of 'mass' politics in modern democracies. The expansion of the franchise in the capitalist societies of Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the rise of this new politics frequently disparaged by reactionary conservatives of the time but also more thoughtfully critiqued by admirers of rational public discourse[9] and the romantic ideal of individuality.[10] These observers noted a growing awareness amongst ruling elites of the political significance of irrationality. This

[9] Tocqueville 2004; Habermas 1962
[10] Mill 1998 ; Weber 1958

awareness, they observed, was applied both in overt attempts to secure legitimacy from an ever more uncertain electoral foundation and in commercial advertising to reap the potential windfall of urban mass markets through the normalization of consumption habits. As Eric Hobsbawm observes: "Political life thus found itself increasingly ritualized and filled with symbols and publicity appeals, both overt and subliminal. As the ancient ways—mainly religious—of ensuring subordination, obedience, and loyalty were eroded, the now patent need for something to replace them was met by the *invention* of tradition, using both old and tried evokers of emotion."[11] One important repercussion of these developments was the proliferation of efficient mechanisms for manipulating conceptions of the good life held by individuals in the name of stabilizing political legitimacy and securing economic growth. Assuming one values the liberal ideal of autonomy, or in Macpherson's language the ability to develop creatively one's own essentially human capacities, the justification for such institutions upon which mass politics still depends is questionable at best. A theory of internal impediments can contribute not only to the critique of their justifiability in this respect, but also helps us to notice the power these institutions hold, hopefully staying us against their worst excesses.

[11] Hobsbawm 1987, 105

1. A Macphersonian Framework for Internal Impediments

This chapter introduces Macpherson's normative theory, arguing that its main characteristics direct it to the development of a theory of internal impediments. I argue that this is so since the logic of his normative thought requires such a theory, even though he did not care to develop one, and because his conception of human flourishing presupposes the elimination of such impediments. I begin by outlining the idea of human impediments in general and the role they play explicitly in Macpherson, before offering a definition of their 'internal' manifestation and the elements a theory attempting to account for them would require (1.1.1). I then contrast such a theory with the better known 'dominant ideology thesis,' a related group of theories against which a variety of objections are typically made—only some of which apply to a theory of internal impediments. I briefly develop one line of objections relating to the use of a concept of human flourishing which applies to both types of theory (1.1.2). This is followed by the consideration of an objection to the methodology of the argument from a Skinnerian perspective (1.2) before moving on to the argument itself (1.3).

1.1 What Is a Theory of Internal Impediments?

1.1.1 Human flourishing and impediments

The language of internal impediments will be unfamiliar even to those acquainted with the debates surrounding the dominant ideology thesis and false consciousness. I will address this relation after clarifying internal impediments themselves. The concept of "impediments" emerges from Macpherson's theory of human flourishing[12] and the good society, though it is also found in some of his critics and admirers. This theory is built around the idea of "creative individualism" which holds that human beings are composed of a number of capacities whose exercise constitutes

[12] I use the term 'human flourishing' synonymously with 'the human good' and 'the good life.' I follow Macpherson in holding that conceptions of human flourishing are based upon conceptions of human nature where human nature refers to attributes whose appropriate development or activation embody a well-lived life for any human being (see 3.1.3 for further clarification).

well-being or flourishing.[13] The exercise of these capacities depends on their cultivation or development and, crucially, the involvement of the individual from whom they issue in directing their development and exercise. Macpherson draws two conclusions from this idea. Firstly, human beings create themselves in the sense that our nature does not 'genetically' furnish us with developed capacities or the ability to use them in flourishing activity. Instead, we have to develop this ability by cultivating our capacities. Secondly, each one of us must undergo this development, and ultimately exercise our capacities, in a unique manner. This self-creation, to a large degree, depends on the context in which an individual finds herself. Upon these two observations Macpherson builds a theory of the good society, albeit negatively, focusing on social forms that *impede* creative individualism. The motivation here is to leave up to individuals the concrete shape of human capacities, so long as each individual has the adequate resources for their development. Each individual faces unique contexts to negotiate in the development and exercise of her capacities.

Macpherson is clear that he is primarily interested in identifying and proposing means of alleviating "external impediments."[14] A central component of his political economy is necessary to grasp his meaning here. He defines flourishing as the activity in which an individual engages when in possession of an adequate degree of "developmental power" which is in turn defined positively as (a) the degree of control over the development and exercise of one's human capacities and negatively as (b) the degree of freedom from external impediments to that ability. His concern here is with ending the "extraction" of (a) from some individuals for use by others which he sees embodied in various institutions of modern capitalist societies, especially the market economy. External impediments are thus those social forms which extract developmental power from some individuals for use by others.

This focus on external impediments is criticized by Virginia Held and Steven Lukes for overlooking equally repressive features of modern societies which produce impediments that are

[13] Macpherson is actually concerned only with "essentially human capacities" (see 3.1.3) rather than simple biological or asocial capacities. In the interests of clarity and since the distinction is insignificant for the present discussion, I postpone explaining its significance.
[14] Macpherson 1973, 76

"internal" to individuals and in so doing make them complicit in their own subjugation. I explore these arguments in chapter two. Though, as I argue in 1.3, it is unclear whether Macpherson's external impediments in fact exclude "the phenomenon of men hugging their chains" or becoming "slaves to their own passions;"[15] his own claim that, insofar as these statements refer to internalized impediments, they are not addressed by his theory does provide fodder for Held and Lukes' criticisms. Yet these passing statements in Macpherson and loose definitions in Held and Lukes do not adequately distinguish the one form of impediment from the other. Held, for instance, contrasts "external" obstacles such as the inability to find employment with gender identities into which men and women are socialized which greatly contribute to the latter's subjugation.[16] Yet it is unclear precisely what kind of distinction Held is trying to draw here. The logic of Macpherson's theory suggests that these kinds of impediments ought to be identified since they greatly impinge on an individual's developmental power.

If we stay close to Macpherson's use of impediments in general, however, we can specify a reasonable conception of internal impediments that nonetheless seems to capture what Held and Lukes believe is lacking in his theory. Firstly, we can say that, like its external counterpart, a theory of internal impediments depends upon a conception of the human good. The language of impediments is usefully precise only if something specific is being impeded. Where impediments exist, human beings are prevented from flourishing according to a particular account of what that actually means. If having to relinquish control of how one uses one's capacities in order to survive (what Macpherson believes having to sell one's labour power amounts to) is deemed an impediment, it can have this status only if having control over the use of one's capacities is considered a component of the human good. Moreover, a conception of the good *for human beings* is necessary if impediments are to apply universally. Though Macpherson believes human flourishing and hence impediments are contextually shaped, he is not interested in identifying impediments to the

[15] Ibid., 76
[16] Held 1993b, 178-79

flourishing of individuals—such as wage labourers or aspiring academics. He is interested only in those contexts that impede individuals from flourishing as human beings.

Secondly, a theory of internal impediments must identify forms of consciousness that cause the individuals who hold them to contribute to their own oppression—"the phenomenon of men hugging their chains," by conceptualizing that harm in the form of impediments. That is, as harmful conceptions of human flourishing or the good life. It therefore seems reasonable to maintain that such a theory seeks to identify those conceptions of the human good which some individuals hold, or which certain institutions presuppose or propound, which impedes from emerging the conception of the human good upon which the theory depends. Where a theory of external impediments focuses on concrete institutions and social forms, internal impediments are concerned with what we might call 'ideologies' insofar as that term refers to widely-held views about the good life that obscure the 'real interests' of the individuals in question.[17] This is not to say that such a theory is unconcerned with existing institutions or human lives and only with the ideas they reflect. Rather, it can assume, as Macpherson does, that human institutions and forms of life embody conceptions of the good that should be the objects of critical analysis. Nor is this to say that a theory of internal impediments must assume all conceptions of the good except that which it presupposes are pernicious and qualify as impediments. This conclusion is premature as conceptions of the good do not have to be of the same type. The conception of the good presupposed by the theory does not have to be 'thick,' determining in detail the types of activity, forms of association, and psychological proclivities which are 'legitimate.' Instead, as in Macpherson, the good life can be defined in 'thin' terms such as creative individualism which demands that 'thicker' articulations of well-being be adopted in a certain manner or include particular features.

Finally, a theory of internal impediments seeks to underline assumptions about human nature upon which stultifying conceptions of the good depend, showing these to be contingent or socially variable, and therefore amendable, rather than essential or inevitable. These can figure at multiple

[17] Geuss 1981, 45

levels of analysis, from assumptions concerning natural or inescapable human behaviour to claims about the extent to which human beings are shaped or determined by their historical/social context. While Macpherson believes that a conception of human nature or essence is ultimately necessary both to posit a vision of the good and to 'denaturalize' aspects of other visions, Held and Lukes believe the very idea of a human essence is an internal impediment (3.1.1). This difficulty will be discussed at length in chapters two and three. For now, it suffices to notice that a theory of internal impediments relies on this 'denaturalizing' function to ultimately do the work of identifying impediments themselves.

1.1.2 Internal impediments vs. dominant ideologies

Insofar as a theory of internal impediments is a theory about harmful forms of consciousness, it is similar to what is usually called the dominant ideology thesis (DIT). The DIT consists of a group of theories which purport to explain the apparent quiescence of subordinated groups to their lowly lot. They have in common that they do so by reference to a dominating ideology, though its precise origin, significance, function, and consequences are widely disputed. Following Scott (1990), it is common to divide accounts of a dominant ideology between thick and thin theories of false consciousness where the former claims that "a dominant ideology works its magic by persuading subordinated groups to believe actively in the values that explain and justify their own subordination" and the latter that it "achieves compliance by convincing subordinate groups that the social order in which they live is natural and inevitable."[18] However both versions, on Scott's view, assume (a) that the subordinated group actually accepts its subordination, (b) that it is relatively disadvantaged, and (c) that it is not directly coerced.[19] Moreover, they often combine the view that false consciousness is socially produced with a view that it is produced in the interests of a self-maintaining socio-economic system.[20] Finally, all these versions take for granted (i) that subordinated groups and individuals can be wrong about what is, in fact, in their interests, (ii) that,

[18] Scott 1990, 72
[19] Ibid., 71
[20] Cooke 2008, 11

necessarily, real interests can be identified independently of the groups or individuals to whom they belong, and (iii) that, also as a consequence, observers not directly sharing in the subordination can have at least approximate knowledge of these interests.

A theory of internal impediments shares assumptions (i), (ii), and (iii) but is not committed to (a), (b), or (c) nor is its purpose to provide an explanation for the apparent quiescence of the subordinated. Its more modest aim is to identify false—as in incorrect or relatively poor—conceptions of the human good held by individuals or promulgated by institutions contrasted to a correct—or relatively better—conception. Two points of clarification are worth noting here. Because the aim of a theory of impediments (either external or internal) is to realize a better conception of the human good by theorizing its obstacles rather than its positive content, and since one of the reasons for doing so, on Macpherson's view, is to leave the concrete articulation of flourishing activity to the discretion of individuals adequately endowed with developmental power, it is reasonable to assume that the true/false dichotomy concerning conceptions of the good is unhelpful. The internal impediments theory that seeks to identify 'false' conceptions of the human good more appropriately aims to underline *relatively* worse conceptions. That said, the human good is still being presupposed in an objective manner as are the 'real' interests in the DIT.

Secondly, as we've said, a theory of internal impediments defines real interests in terms of the human good. This is often not the case for theories subscribing to the DIT (Marx being an important exception) or at least not explicitly apparent. This is significant since the assumption in (iii) that the theorist can have knowledge of the real interests of a subordinated group or individual becomes problematic insofar as the theorist has nothing in common with the subordinated. The problem is a potentially very deep one into which I will not delve in any detail. It suffices to note the concerns of many prominent ethicists that value can only have meaning beyond utterly subjective preferences insofar as the valued thing is good for you and I, that is, *for us*.[21] To be able to ascribe value to something, so the argument claims, requires positing a conception of goodness for things like

[21] Taylor 1994, 559, MacIntyre 1981, 213

ourselves which in turn demands that we have something in common to which we can appeal. By appealing to the fact that we are beings for whom a type of life and, broadly speaking, form of activity embodies our flourishing, a theory of internal impediments can assume (iii) without succumbing to this particular worry.

There are, however, other objections to the DIT from which theories of internal impediments cannot be so readily disentangled. The major objections with which the DIT is faced can be grouped under two headings: those which challenge some or often all aspects of its explanatory aspirations, and those which take issue with its treatment of interests. The former objection has been the focus of sustained discussion in what is known as the structure-agency debate. Here the effort to explain the quiescence of subordinated groups by reference to characteristics of the socio-economic background is questioned on the grounds that it presupposes an unrealistic view of human freedom, in the sense that it overestimates the degree to which individuals are duped into self-oppression.[22] Since theories of internal impediments make no effort at this kind of explanation, we can put these concerns to one side.

The second group of objections does impinge on theories of internal impediments since it questions the assumptions (i), (ii), and (iii). One of these objections—the claim that only those who share the real interests of the subordinated can actually identify these interests independently of the subordinated themselves—we have just addressed. But others object to precisely the way a theory of internal impediments gets out of this last issue, namely by positing a conception of the human good. These concerns can in turn be divided into two types, those which express scepticism on the matter of whether there is a single good or flourishing way of life common to the human species[23] and those which hold that, even if there is, it is not within our power to know it.[24] These scepticisms towards the language of human flourishing or the good life motivate objections to their use in critiquing prevailing conceptions of flourishing for fear that all such conceptions are by their

[22] See Lukes 2005, 54-58 for a brief synopsis of this debate.
[23] As in the 'poststructuralist' reading of Nietzsche
[24] As in Arendt (1958)

nature repressive.[25] On the one hand they risk legitimizing authoritarian political projects against the will of the 'subordinated.' On the other they seem to oversimplify the subjective differences between the interests of individuals and groups, whether stemming from legitimate preferences individuals might have for living a particular life over another or from the various social/historical contexts in which individuals and groups find themselves. The very idea that all individuals in all these situations have a fundamentally similar mode of well-being suggests to those who raise these objections the naturalization of an oversimplified and therefore unrepresentative account of real interests whose existence is counterproductive to the project of emancipation.[26]

1.2 Methodological Considerations

As I mentioned in the introduction, part of what inspired the extracting of a framework for a theory of internal impediments from Macpherson, who himself claims not to be concerned with such a theory, is an argument in Skinner. This argument holds that by paying attention to the unique background assumptions taken for granted by distant authors, we can discern original ways of approaching old problems or even entirely new problems we had not considered before.[27] Though Macpherson does not directly construct a theory of internal impediments, it might be the case that aspects of his thought are especially helpful in such an endeavour precisely because these aspects are generally thought to be incompatible with theories of this kind. We have seen that theories of internal impediments are beset by objections to their dependence on a conception of human flourishing. We have also seen, though I have yet to lay out their arguments, that Virginia Held and Steven Lukes criticize Macpherson for holding a conception of human flourishing incompatible with the particular structure such conceptions are supposed to require within these theories. My claim, to repeat, is that Macpherson's conception of human flourishing is, for precisely the reasons Held and Lukes admonish it, a good basis upon which to build a theory of internal impediments as it is resilient

[25] *Effectively* repressive in the case of the Arendtian view.
[26] See Cooke 2008, 3-4, 11-12, 133-160
[27] See Introduction 1-2

in the face of objections to the use of such conceptions where theirs, implied in their arguments, are not.

Yet even as Skinner has provided inspiration for this theoretical archaeology, he also presents a challenge to my reading of Macpherson and also of Held and Lukes. This is because the same motivation to interpret a distant text by understanding the context in which the author writes leads him, following R.G. Collingwood,[28] to dismiss interpretations besides that which can most reasonably be attributed to the intentions of the author herself, given the text's content and the details of its context. The same effort with which I am attempting to understand the necessary characteristics of a conception of human flourishing capable of grounding a theory of internal impediments—that is, of looking for characteristics typically but incorrectly assumed to be incompatible with such a theory—leads me to commit a version of what Skinner calls "the mythology of doctrines."[29] Though, properly speaking, the mythology of doctrines refers to his view that perennial problems do not exist in the history of thought, it depends on the premises that (a) historical contexts are adequately distinct to ensure that no two authors address precisely the same issues and (b) the only way to understand the issues which distant authors address is by understanding the intentions of the authors who address them. Since Skinner believes that one of the major preoccupations of the political theorist should be the recovery of these different intentions, the tendency for those of an 'analytical' persuasion to recover arguments from distant texts regardless of the intent of their authors[30] is looked on with concern. To the extent that I am drawing on Macpherson's conception of human flourishing to make an argument he did not intend to make and to the degree that I reconstruct the arguments in Held and Lukes in chapter two with a view to their reinforcement, I am reading into these authors positions they themselves may not have intended. Skinner would not be pleased.

[28] Collingwood 1939; 1995
[29] Skinner 2002, 59-60, 64-65
[30] Plamenatz 1963

However I do not think that Collingwood and Skinner's worries require that we look at thinkers past or present only in the terms they understand themselves to be writing in. We can, it seems to me, look at a given text for good ideas regardless of how these ideas have been perverted by reading modern assumptions into past texts or what the authors of the ideas with which we engage meant us to get out of them. This is not to say that we should not try and make every effort to, in fact, understand what an author meant his or her audience to understand by the things he or she actually wrote. We would miss too many interesting and useful insights lost to the modern mind by failing to make honest attempts at reconstructing past modes of thought and problematization. However, this should not prevent us from elucidating good arguments and valuable insights wherever they can be found. If they happen to emerge, for example, by exposing an interesting aspect of a political theory the full breadth of which the author herself was unaware, all the better. This simply means that in developing ideas partly formed by a given author in response to a different concern than that which enables us to more fully develop them, we cannot then pass judgments on the author for failing to grapple with a concern she did not share with us.

1.3 The Need for and Foundations of a Theory of Internal Impediments in Macpherson

We saw in 1.1.1 that a theory of internal impediments displays three elements: it must at least imply a conception of human flourishing, it must identify alternative conceptions which cause the individuals who hold them to contribute to their own oppression, and it must underline assumptions about human nature upon which these stultifying conceptions depend that can be shown to be historically or socially arbitrary and thus dispensable. I now provide two arguments for why Macpherson's political theory commits him to provide a framework for such an account even though he did not set out to do so. These are, firstly, that the identification of such impediments is required by the logic of his normative theory and, secondly, that his conception of the human good presupposes their elimination. I will treat each in turn.

1.3.1 Logical commitments (a): theories of political justification

Macpherson's normative vision consists of three components: an account of the function of theories of political justification, an explanation of the role conceptions of human nature inevitably play in the arguments of these theories, and a conception of human nature upon which is based his own account of human flourishing. In explicating the logic of the overall argument I draw upon the first two components, looking at the third in 1.3.3. For Macpherson, one of the primary functions of political thought is to provide a theory of political justification, that is, a theory of the conditions a political order must satisfy in order to be ethically defensible. This should be distinguished from a theory of political obligation that would outline conditions under which citizens of a political order are morally obligated to obey its laws. He is interested in the former only, which for him has several dimensions.

First of all, theories of political justification are not only philosophical theories applied to political realities as models of an ideal arrangement. They are also, Macpherson believes, intrinsic to every political order, always present in one form or another on the level of "ideology."[31] This is because political order depends on citizens believing either that the present distribution of power and types of lives it affords are decent or that the cost of changing the political order to better match prevailing views in these areas is too high. If neither of these conditions is met, he maintains, the stability of the political order is seriously undermined.

Secondly, theories of political justification inevitably consist of a vision of the good society which in turn ultimately depends upon a conception of human nature. The first move is relatively uncontroversial. A theory of political justification relies on an account of the good society[32] with which to compare and judge prevailing conditions. The second requires some explanation. Macpherson believes that for a theory to make claims about the good society, it must invoke not only some notion of the human good—either of what it means for a human to live a full and

[31] Macpherson 1973, 157

[32] For Macpherson, an account of the 'just' society is also a claim about the good society

flourishing life or more narrowly what constitutes good and bad human actions or behaviours—it must also make assumptions regarding the content of human nature, the former flowing from the latter. "Any ethical theory," he claims, "and therefore any justificatory political theory...must start from the assumption that there are specifically or uniquely human capacities different from or over and above, animal ones."[33] He defends this claim by arguing, with Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, that it is an inevitable part of the language of value to make appeals, whether explicit or not, to a conception of human flourishing based on assumptions concerning the nature of human beings.[34] This is essentially the same argument I raised in 1.1.2 so I will not rehearse it again here.

Now, obviously there are many thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who either make no attempt to ground theories of the good society in a conception of human nature or go out of their way to avoid doing so. Indeed there are familiar arguments against essentialisms of this kind that these thinkers have often invoked. I mentioned the two forms these arguments usually take in 1.1.2 as scepticism about answers to questions concerning 'the essence of man,' either because these questions are absurd as no such answers exist or because if they did, we could never know them for certain. Yet as Lindsay points out, "Macpherson's contention is that to avoid ontological claims (on the grounds of uncertainty) is to lose the basis upon which moral convictions stand."[35] At the end of the day he seems perfectly content to admit the weaker claim to uncertainty of knowledge in this area. His point is that regardless of the philosophical tenability of a human essence, if we want to make claims about the good society we are obliged to invoke one. Lindsay suggests that while one might conclude from this that Macpherson must endorse a relativist position between such conceptions, if we read him as positing better and worse evaluative arguments concerning the nature of human beings rather than trying to demonstrate the truth or falsehood of given conceptions, his arguments can retain a solid grounding. Similarly, "while we can never be sure

[33] Ibid., 53
[34] I. Berlin, 1962; Taylor 1994
[35] Lindsay 1996, 18

that our apprehension of reality is 'true' in some ultimate sense, this fact hardly precludes us from having convictions which we would defend as being *better* than others".[36]

An important qualification to this picture is that Macpherson does not see conceptions of human flourishing (and the conceptions of human nature upon which they draw) only as competitors in an attempt at giving an account that is objectively true. Historical circumstances constrain the kinds of conceptions that will appear plausible. Moreover, they also delimit the kinds of flourishing that are possible for the kinds of human beings they produce. The kinds of flourishing that are open to us under late capitalism in Western societies are very different than those of pre-capitalist Europe or South-East Asia, for instance. While meditation formed and continues to form an important component of conceptions of flourishing for a variety of traditions in South-East Asia, the demands of market society produce human beings who *tend* to find little value in such practices, who are unreceptive to the benefits they provide. It stands to reason, therefore, that given the practical impossibility of certain forms of life under certain historical conditions, that philosophical conceptions of flourishing produced under those conditions will be similarly constrained. This proviso captures what Macpherson means in describing "the problem of human needs" (i.e. the nature of human beings and their flourishing) as both "ontological and historical."[37] It is historical in the sense just outlined, that human nature is malleable and so theories attempting to define it are always limited in scope by the kind of human beings they encounter; ontological in the sense that there remains something essential to human beings enabling the identification of better and worse conceptions of their flourishing as they are made and make themselves available.

Finally, Macpherson assumes all conceptions of human nature can be divided into what he calls "essentially human capacities."[38] These correspond to types of activity emblematic of essentially human purposes, i.e. those which human beings are exclusively capable of performing and which are inscribed with inherent value. Since Macpherson maintains that human nature is

[36] Ibid., 18-19
[37] Macpherson 1977a
[38] Macpherson 1973, 53. See 3.1.3 for a detailed explanation of his meaning here.

historical as well as ontological, essentially human capacities, though based on an account of the human essence, are dependent on how prevailing historical conditions shape that essence. Consequently, as historical conditions change, new capacities will become recognizable and demand our attention.

The conviction that every political theory making claims about the good society *must* also make claims about the nature of human beings prompts Macpherson to actually define the object of political theory as the analysis, critique, and promulgation of these claims. "The adequacy of a political theory is to be assessed by the penetration of its analysis of human nature," he declares.[39] Given that human nature is historical as well as ontological, this means that a "penetrating analysis" perceives as many essentially human capacities as possible under present historical conditions and given present 'ethical' knowledge, that is, knowledge of different ways of life and social conditions in which different capacities are given opportunity to develop. Macpherson thus provides an overarching moral imperative to political theory in the form of grasping as accurately as possible essentially human capacities and, as we shall see below, in promoting their development.

This brings us back to theories of political justification. Insofar as these theories depend on conceptions of the good society which are in turn based upon analyses of human nature, Macpherson believes their plausibility ultimately relies on the accuracy of this last element, whether explicitly elucidated or not. Thus all theories of political justification, according to the argument, should ultimately hold the maximum development of essentially human capacities as their central condition for the justifiability of a political order. If a given society develops in such a way as to enable its members to conceptualize possibilities for developing new capacities or already apparent ones in a fuller fashion, then the political order in that society, to the extent that it does not facilitate these possibilities, is unjustified. Indeed, this is precisely what Macpherson believes has occurred in liberal democracies of the late twentieth century.

[39] Ibid., 202

Already, we can notice the theory's need for a concept of internal impediments. To the extent that a theory of these impediments seeks to identify certain conceptions of the good and/or of the human essence as inimical to the realization of a better conception in these respects, the moral imperative Macpherson ascribes to theories of political justifiability necessitates precisely such an account. A theory of political justification not only presupposes a conception of human flourishing, but also, if properly constructed, has a responsibility to espouse the conception most reflective of present 'ethical knowledge.' This responsibility corresponds to an obligation to continually re-examine the justification of existing political orders, positing a new theory taking into account the fullest expression of essentially human capacities with the aim of *replacing* less developed justificatory theories. Consequently, theories of political justification seem to be 'activist' in the sense that Macpherson has ascribed to them not only the role of justifying solely those political orders that best develop essentially human capacities, but also of undermining the justification of those which do not, In effect, this requires undermining the tenability of the conceptions of the human essence upon which they rely and thus of defining these conceptions themselves as internal impediments. We can see this element of his thought more clearly by examining his treatment of what he takes to be the present theory of political justification.

1.3.2 Logical commitments (b): the present predicament

The market society characteristic of Western capitalism that began to emerge in the seventeenth century supported and was supported by a corresponding theory of political justification that Macpherson believes to be *no longer* ethically defensible. He calls this theory "possessive individualism" (PI), describing it as a type of liberalism which posits human flourishing in terms of the satisfaction of market preferences and conceives of human beings as bundles of infinitely desirous appetites seeking satisfaction through commodity exchange.[40] Following Marx, he believes this theory satisfied the condition of justifiability for centuries as it supported an economic regime of rapid material expansion with the result that, eventually, a greater proportion of the

[40] Ibid., 199

population of the political orders in which it was promulgated had the opportunity to develop their capacities (as conceived by PI).[41] However, as the social surplus grew larger, more "essential" human capacities could conceivably be developed in a greater number of persons and the theory began to lose its power of justification. PI was challenged by Millian liberals and socialists in the nineteenth century who sought to affirm a notion of human essence encompassing such capacities, based on the maximization of individual human powers, "that is, their potential for using and developing their uniquely human capacities."[42] Macpherson believes this new conception of human essence, what he calls "creative individualism," came to exist alongside PI as an alternative and more defensible liberal theory of political justification. Yet, he contends, the social relations and institutions of liberal societies have remained coherently justifiable only on possessive individualist grounds even as PI has seemed increasingly problematic. Consequently, both liberal theory and society have become unstable, the existing social arrangements being profoundly unjust given an appropriate articulation of the defensible version of the theory as it exists as a philosophy of justification.

As we said, Macpherson believes the primary task of the political theorist is to hasten the demise of such outdated theories of political justification both by positing alternatives and, especially, actively undermining the conceptions of human nature upon which they depend. Consequently, he sees the "essays in retrieval" of *Democratic Theory* (1973) not only as a philosophical contribution to a theory of political justification based on a more defensible conception of the human essence in the form of creative individualism. They are also a political contribution to the project of undermining the denuded conception in PI which still enjoys a 'natural,' common-sense whereby its normative status goes unrecognized. In this respect "he was intent on showing our self-conception as infinitely desirous to be time bound and unnecessary."[43] By demonstrating not only the debt owed by the prevailing liberal theory to a particular conception of human beings but also the plausibility of equivalent alternatives, Macpherson hopes PI can be seen

[41] Ibid., p.37; Lindsay 1996, 60
[42] Macpherson 1973, 4
[43] Lindsay 1996, p.60

for what it is, just another theory of human needs requiring philosophical justification, one that can be rejected if found inadequate.

These main elements of Macpherson's normative project quite clearly display the primary features of a theory of internal impediments we identified in 1.1.1. Firstly, the formulation of a better theory of political justification posits a conception of human flourishing, that is, a conception of the human good based on a normatively loaded account of essentially human capacities. Secondly, it identifies conceptions of flourishing which cause those who hold them to stifle their own development both by seeing the political order which contributes to that stultification as at least tolerably just and therefore not being motivated to contribute to its replacement and also by not themselves seeking to develop potentially recognizable essentially human capacities. Finally, Macpherson sees his project of retrieval as one attempting to underline aspects of the conception of human beings espoused by PI as arbitrary and dispensable, especially the idea of human needs as the maximum satisfaction of insatiable desires.

It is therefore surprising that Macpherson concludes his essay, "Non-Market Theories of Democracy," by insisting that he is concerned only with identifying external impediments.[44] Surely, one might object, if we are using a concept of internal impediments derived from Macpherson's language, and if he himself claims not to be pre-occupied with such impediments, then we should take him at his word. Indeed, besides his characterization of PI, he does not mention forms of false consciousness Held believes are crucial to emancipation, such as patriarchal conceptions of gender. However, I think we can explain this reluctance to conceding the need for a theory of internal impediments. It is understandable that, given the many objections to the DIT with which such a theory seems akin, Macpherson would want to distance himself from it. It is likely that he takes a theory of internal impediments to require not only the identification of stultifying conceptions of the good, but also a detailed explanation of how these serve particular class interests or are the product of the economic base of a given society, positions associated with the DIT. Additionally, though he

[44] Macpherson 1973, 76

does not explicitly deal with various impediments such as racist or sexist conceptions of gender, Macpherson does provide a framework capable of appreciating them insofar as they are associated with present theories of political justification. It seems reasonable to suggest that he sees external impediments as the material manifestation of stultifying conceptions of flourishing whose elimination is helped along by his theoretical reconstruction. Aiming at external impediments thus provides a more concrete benchmark for the realization of the better theory of political justification with its superior conception of the good.

1.3.3 Ontological foundations

Macpherson's political theory is not only logically committed to developing a theory of internal impediments; the conception of human flourishing it espouses, creative individualism, embodies their elimination. This conception is best explained in contrast the PI. Macpherson believes the present character of liberal democracies have exposed new human capacities that demand both a reformulation of the dominant conception of human nature and flourishing found in PI and a transformation of liberal democratic societies to enable individuals to develop them. PI assumes all individuals own their capacities. Capacities here constitute the Lockean conception of labour, human practices of innumerable kinds that, when directed towards particular objects, appropriate those objects into one's self and one's self into those objects. Thus if I labour on given objects more than others, I am entitled to ownership of them since they have become part of me. Further, PI assumes that humans display a psychological drive to satisfy infinite desires and that the application of our capacities to the pursuit of such satisfactions constitutes our freedom. Since (a) our capacities are our labour, and (b) they are always directed at the pursuit of satisfactions, and finally (c) the pursuit of satisfactions is freedom, freedom *is* ownership or possession. Therefore, "everyone is free, for everyone possesses at least his own capacities."[45]

Yet the idea that everyone *possesses* this kind of freedom has become increasingly hard to maintain as the class divisions created by capitalist society have meant the growth of a class

[45] Ibid., 199

dependent on the sale of its one possession (its labour) and so the freedom of its members as owners of their capacities. This was inevitable, Macpherson believes, as long as our labour was understood as a possession (i.e. as a commodity). Since possessions are part of ourselves and since they are also commodities that can have a price and so can be bought and sold, the human person is similarly commodified and the liberal individualism it represents thereby degraded. Thus a new need or capacity had to be posited to counteract this deficiency. While this salvage operation has taken various forms[46], the most defensible version represents itself as the *need* to be in control of one's capacities, as the *capacity* to "create, exert, shape and transform, rather than simply react passively to concrete social and environmental conditions or accept the boundaries given by [our] psychological proclivities."[47]

Human capacities themselves take on a different meaning under this *creative* individualism, being more fragile and requiring development rather than constituting pre-existing desires and abilities. What turns out to be a higher-order capacity to creatively self-develop one's lower-order capacities also changes the subject matter of these lower-order capacities. Whereas under PI these are limited to what can be expressed in the commodity form, creative individualism emphasizes capacities as all attributes that are distinctively human. "The [capacities] for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creating or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and sometimes, for religious experience"[48] are offered as tentative candidates in this regard.

What is crucial to understand about creative individualism is that it sees individuals as unfinished projects who inevitably create themselves using the raw materials their biology and socially constituted selves provide. Macpherson believes having a maximum degree of control over this development is a *prima facie* good as it enables us to creatively create ourselves, increasing the extent to which we exercise the essentially human capacity of self-creation. This control of self-

[46] For example, Mill and the 'New Liberalism', Pluralist political science, or Rawls' 'neo-idealism'
[47] Lindsay 1996, 22
[48] Macpherson 1973, 4

development depends on self-knowledge, knowing what one's essentially human capacities are and the various ways in which they can be developed given prevailing historical conditions. Insofar as one lacks this self-knowledge, either because one subscribes to a view of human nature which overlooks human creativity or because one's conception of self-development lacks breadth of vision in terms of possible avenues for development, one can be said to suffer from internal impediments. In this sense, Macpherson is defining the human good as activity free both of external impediments that prevent a self-knowing person from flourishing and of internal impediments ensuring that such a person can take advantage of that freedom.

2. Macpherson the Individualist: The Criticisms of Held and Lukes

Macpherson's project is amenable to, and indeed requires, some account of internal impediments to flourishing. However Held and Lukes maintain that his theory betrays a pernicious form of liberal individualism of the very kind it is supposed to exculpate in the name of saving liberalism as a defensible utopian project. This fatal flaw, they argue, renders his theory incapable of adequately conceptualizing power in the form of internal impediments altogether, posing a major challenge to the interpretation I defended in chapter one. Unfortunately their arguments on this topic are quite brief and fail to convincingly establish a connection between the individualism they attribute to Macpherson and an inability to identify internal impediments. The reader is left wondering why individualism necessarily results in such dismal consequences. Yet rather than dismiss their arguments, I am interested in further developing the concerns they raise. If their claims can be reinforced by a convincing argument, then, insofar as a liberal theory of the good society presupposes an individualist ontology, it will be inherently problematic, a devastating conclusion for a theory like Macpherson's.

This chapter subjects their arguments in this regard to criticisms based on internal consistency and textual accuracy with respect to Macpherson with a view to establishing the most defensible interpretation of their critique. In doing so, I aim to determine the kind of individualism that prohibits the conceptualization of internal impediments. I argue that the most plausible response, given Held and Lukes' comments, holds that Macpherson's individualism corresponds with a view about *the kind of thing* he takes human capacities to be, specifically one that overlooks their social embedded-ness. The resulting conception of human flourishing, according to the argument, misses how the ability to develop one's human capacities creatively presupposes a social background amenable to that practice, thus failing to give adequate scope to pernicious impediments derived from a problematic social background. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of Townshend and Lindsay's rejoinders to these claims, arguing that they leave Held and Lukes' case

misrepresented—since neither treats the argument as a challenge to Macpherson's concept of the human good—and thus unanswered.

2.1 What kind of individualism prohibits the conceptualization of internal impediments?

2.1.1 Ignoring expression and imagination at our peril

Virginia Held's contention in *Feminist Morality* (1993) and "Freedom and Feminism" (1989) is that Macpherson's conception of flourishing, and consequently his understanding of impediments, overlooks some activities that should be constituent of the good life and some that are indicative of disempowerment. In the former category she places care-giving activities such as a mother displays towards her children, in the latter, what Sandra Bartky in her influential work on the psychological oppression of women calls "the shame of embodiment," the profoundly disempowering "'condition of dishonour' which is woman's lot in a sexist society."[49] Shame, we are told, exemplifies a kind of self-oppressive condition experienced by individuals who identify with a social category that is devalued by the culture around them. Held mentions the work of post-colonial thinkers such as Fanon, Said, and Husseen Abdilahi Bulhan which she believes identifies a correlative experience of "oppressed persons of colour." For Held, such oppression qualifies as an 'internal impediment' because of the way it is experienced by individuals as the internalization of an identity whose meaning is devalued by the culture of which they are a part. Since their very identity becomes alienating, something unworthy or even demeaning and yet essential to who they are, victims are in a sense forced to contribute to their own subjugation. As Held quotes Bartky,

> The heightened self-consciousness that comes with emotions of self-assessment may become, in the shame of the oppressed, a stagnant self-obsession. Or shame may generate a rage whose expression is unconstructive, even self-destructive. In all these ways, shame is profoundly disempowering. The need for secrecy and concealment that figures so largely in the shame experience is disempowering as well, for it isolates the oppressed from one another and in this way works against the emergence of a sense of solidarity. [50]

[49] Bartky 1990, 85
[50] Ibid., 97 quoted in Held 1993a, 142

Yet Macpherson does gesture to the importance of care as an essentially human capacity. His "emotional activities of friendship and love"[51] certainly seem inclusive of such activities. And though it is true that he does not explicitly identify shame-like forms of oppression in his typology of impediments, this does not mean the framework must exclude them. This, however, seems to be the claim Held advances by pointing to a deeper problem from which the limited outlook exclusive of care and shame *necessarily* follows. "As I interpret him," she writes, "Macpherson values collective enterprises only instrumentally, and in terms of the contribution they make to individual self-development."[52] Once individuals are free of impediments, "they will not be defined inherently by any other social group or by ties to any other persons[53]...There seems to be no way, on Macpherson's scales, to appreciate the value of shared, relational activity in itself." [54] On Held's view, not only does this account undervalue the extent to which human beings are social animals whose functioning relies on healthy social environments, it also necessitates a misinterpretation of the nature of impediments to that functioning. Those resultant from or constitutive of dysfunctional social contexts will not be adequately addressed if the conception of flourishing under consideration overlooks the extent to which valuable human activities are social in nature. Even if Macpherson appears to value social activities, his commitment to the maximization of individual human flourishing precludes him from valuing them in the right kind of way. And since conceptualizing flourishing in this way is a precondition for conceptualizing internal impediments, and given that he does not compensate by explicitly identifying internal impediments on his own, Macpherson cannot present a framework for their elimination.

We can get a better idea of why Held takes such a firm position by looking at her work on mass media and culture as forms of domination. In a number of articles and in *Feminist Morality*, she argues that the basic human right of freedom of thought and expression, when adequately understood to mean a sufficient degree of control over one's own consciousness, is threatened not

[51] Macpherson 1973, 57
[52] Held, 1993a, 149
[53] Ibid., 147
[54] Ibid., 149

only by coercion and censorship but by particular forms of cultural production.[55] Acknowledging its manifold articulations, Held sticks with a usage of 'culture' denoting "the creation and reception of symbolic messages, images, and ideas" as well as the "social and material realities in which and by which these are created and transmitted."[56] Culture in this sense should be distinguished from economic and political institutions with which it interacts since it can take on a character independent of their influence. Though she is unclear on this point, Held seems to imply that the kind of individualism to which Macpherson subscribes is inherently inimical to conceptualizing culture in this manner. The distinction made between culture and economic/political structures presupposes a sensitivity to how the symbolic representations constitutive of culture can function outside of formal institutions such as legislatures or markets and apart from interactions between individuals. In order to see how this is possible, she explains, we must be prepared to analyze "shared phenomena" such as human "expression" (the meaning particular behaviour takes in a given context) and "imagination" (the ability to contemplate one's life under multiple alternative circumstances).[57] Though written laws, constitutions, and the configuration of markets also influence our capacities for expression and imagination, in modern societies their influence is paltry when compared to TV networks and broadcasting studios, newspaper chains, printing presses, movie studios, or internet websites. Once expression and imagination are singled out as inherently social activities, these kinds of cultural institutions figure prominently as their primary influences.

The distinction between cultural and economic/political structures thus serves to isolate one type of power (control over how expression and imagination are used) and locates its primary source in 'cultural' institutions. Because expression and imagination exist as activities only in a background of mutually understood symbols, individualism of a kind that limits the perception of such backgrounds must be what Held has in mind when criticizing Macpherson. Since expression and imagination are thus conceptualized, if at all, with difficulty, so will the kind of power that most

[55] Held, 1988; 1989; 1998
[56] Ibid. 1993b, 92
[57] Ibid., 93

influences them be removed from analysis and the cultural institutions from which it emanates remain unproblematized. The following claims must then be added to complete the argument:

(a) Expression and imagination are the activities through which human beings exert control over the formulation of their conceptions of the good.
(b) The *ability* to flourish is proportional to the degree one possesses this kind of self-control.
(c) Internal impediments to flourishing are those that interfere with modes of expression and imagination that maximize this self-control (ex. Shame).

So the claim against Macpherson's individualism seems to be that it prevents his theory from conceptualizing internal impediments by precluding expression and imagination, and hence cultural sources of flourishing or its suppression, from analysis. Since the proper exercise of these activities is necessary for being sufficiently in control of one's conception of the good (in order to avoid disempowering experiences such as shame), and since self-control of this kind is an important component of human flourishing, Macpherson is overlooking vital human impediments.

As it stands, this argument is unconvincing. While it is true that modern systems of mass media and popular culture can play a significant role in shaping our capacities for, and the eventual content of, the formulation of conceptions of the good, it is questionable whether Held's concepts of expression and imagination best capture the human activities most influenced by these institutions. Surely the kind of power Held envisions individuals capable of under different cultural institutions is not simply the ability to imagine one's life under a variety of circumstances, for these possibilities could all be quite insufficient. Our present system, for instance, best facilitates a wide variety of conceptions of living within a narrow spectrum amenable to a consumer lifestyle. It is necessary to distinguish between meaningful and trivial differences in this regard so as to establish the kind of institutions supportive of the broader kind of imagination. Yet there remain important and complicated questions concerning precisely what this would involve. Should cultural institutions promote the deepest possible pluralism in terms of life plans within an individual's conceivable range? How deep can this kind of pluralism go? Can individuals conceptualize substantially different life plans as possible without having to imagine an entirely different type of society? If not, what kinds of cultural institutions could support this kind of imagination and how far could it go? Held

addresses none of these questions, fails to differentiate between meaningful and trivial imagination, does not provide an account of how cultural institutions can prevent or promote this deeper kind of imagination, nor attempts to spell out what it might involve, leaving her argument in a bit of a lurch.

Moreover, it remains unclear why a distinction between cultural and economic/political structures is necessary to highlight these forms of power at all. Since they clearly operate through economic and political structures as well—indeed many of the cultural institutions Held identifies are instruments of domination precisely because of concentrations of economic power (ex. privately owned media outlets dependent on commercial advertising)—it is reasonable to suggest that a redistribution of economic power would at least make strides towards accommodating her concerns. Indeed, it seems odd to suggest that political and economic institutions are not themselves 'cultural' in the sense of impacting expression and imagination by enframing our daily lives.

However the argument does retain some force if we correct for these obscurities. It remains plausible that a conception of human flourishing such as Macpherson's, defined in terms of the removal of disempowering impediments and whose aim is the fullest possible empowerment of the individual, might, precisely because of its focus on individual empowerment, overlook impediments more social in nature. If it turns out that important components of human flourishing depend on particular cultural characteristics beyond economic and political institutions that empower individuals collectively, and if Macpherson's theory proves incapable of promoting such characteristics, Held's argument will indeed be decisive. This point, however, remains unclear. To get a better view of what exactly is at issue here, I will proceed by adding Lukes' argument to the debate wherein he provides some new dimensions, though the general contention that an individualist conception of flourishing threatens the adequate empowerment of human beings will require further clarification.

2.1.2 The problem of vagueness and abstraction

Lukes makes a similar criticism of Macpherson's treatment of impediments, characterizing its problems as the inevitable consequences of a latent liberal individualism. Macpherson's theory "is successful in separating out the developmental from the possessive elements of liberal individualism," he argues, but "it fails in so far as it does not carry the argument through to the criticism of that very individualism itself."[58] Again, the theory's capacity for identifying the full breadth of disempowering impediments is necessarily limited by the account of human flourishing it provides, which, as in Held, evinces the commitment to a pernicious tendency for seeing "the individual ('man') abstractly as an atom whose nature ('capacities') is independent of the relations in which he is involved."[59] However, rather than point to specific instances of impediments which such a framework 'necessarily' overlooks, such as shame-like forms of self-alienation caused by a problematic cultural background, Lukes more directly attacks the way flourishing is conceptualized.

Lukes starts from the perspective he adopts in his *Power: A Radical View* that to understand and combat "third dimensional power" presupposes a determinate conception of human flourishing. Since power of this kind is defined as that capable of "stunting, diminishing, and undermining [an individual's] powers of judgment and..falsifying, distorting and reducing their self-perceptions and self-understanding," it is essential that we have a normative account of what full or adequate judgment, self-perception, and self-understanding might entail.[60] Thus to talk of third dimensional power at all requires a conception of the 'real interests' of whatever group or individual is supposed to be under its influence—in most cases this 'group' will be human beings in general as it is in Macpherson—where real interests represent a conception of flourishing which would otherwise be naturally recognized and pursued. It follows that the scope of a given account of third dimensional power will correspond with the conception of real interests at issue. It therefore becomes crucial

[58] Lukes 1979, 144
[59] Ibid., 146
[60] Lukes 2005, 123-24

how real interests are conceptualized and important that we get them right if we are concerned with having, so far as is possible, an accurate account of power in all its manifestations.

Though in his critique Lukes does not directly appeal to this account, it clearly motivates his central concerns with Macpherson. And although he eschews the language of internal impediments,[61] his third dimensional power is concerned with an equivalent idea of harmful self-ignorance caused by a problematic social environment. Since Macpherson's understanding of power is also based on a determinate conception of real interests and seeks to eliminate internal impediments of some kind, Lukes holds the theory to the same standards as his own. Thus the notion of flourishing as developmental power, as the ability to develop one's essentially human capacities creatively, suffers because these capacities "presuppose, rather than ground, a particular moral theory."[62] For Lukes they remain hopelessly obscure and unspecified, defined concretely, if vaguely, as "rational, moral, aesthetic, emotional, and productive activities in the broadest sense." [63] This problem of vagueness is manifold.

Firstly, it seems Macpherson assumes, precisely because these capacities are defined so thinly, that they are also uncontroversial and empirically demonstrable. Like Nussbaum's theory of capabilities, they can take on myriad forms and articulations, leaving enormous room for individual and cultural creativity, while also providing hard boundaries and guidelines for the functioning of decent societies, demanding resources for their development in each individual. However, even at the 'thin' level, essentialisms based on human nature remain controversial. "We differ about human nature and what is essential to it," Lukes protests, "and some—from Plato to St Augustine to de Maistre, Nietzsche, and Dostoevksy's Grand Inquisitor, not to mention Locke and Bentham—have asserted very different basic postulates and drawn very different social and political conclusions. Furthermore they have, in general, assumed that the social and political problem is not to maximize

[61] Lukes, 1979, 145
[62] Ibid., 147
[63] Macpherson 1973, 61-2

human capacities but rather to minimize the harmful consequences of their exercise."[64] Thus even these open-ended, roughly defined capacities are controversial, perhaps even overlooking the darker side of human nature whose manifestation requires containment rather than development. To sing the praises of these capacities and of the requirement of the just society that they be maximized begs the question of why the just society should not instead (or also) minimize the expression of more pernicious human capacities. Are these simply not the concern of political institutions? Do they not, therefore, threaten the maximization of more positive capacities? These questions at the very least require addressing.

Yet granted Macpherson does not adequately address these kinds of possibilities, it is important to keep in mind precisely how he characterizes the theoretical role of human nature. It is a "basic postulate," he maintains, empirically verifiable (though only in the limited sense we saw in chapter one) and normatively binding, of any "justificatory political theory," that is, a theory that attempts to give an account of what a justifiably good society looks like.[65] However, as Lukes himself points out, human nature is not used to define the capacities of which it is constituted in any kind of determinate fashion. In other words, Macpherson does not seek to settle questions such as what precisely constitutes "rational understanding" or "friendship and love." But if this is the case, the claim that Macpherson assumes the actual instantiation of these capacities to be uncontested seems misplaced. Of course "people widely disagree about what constitutes 'rational understanding', 'moral experience', and so on."[66] But this fact is no criticism of Macpherson's view of capacities. Their development into concrete manifestations is left open. Moreover, Lukes' point will be moot if it is taken to mean the *necessary* exclusion of aspects of human nature envisaged by the likes of Dostoevsky or Plato. The set of capacities identified as "essentially human" is not arbitrary as he implies when asking "why *this* list?"[67] Nor is it based solely on some armchair observation of human behaviour meant to capture all its possibilities, as he also appears to suggest. "The question [of the

[64] Lukes 1979, 148
[65] Macpherson 1973, 53-4
[66] Lukes 1979, 147
[67] Ibid., 147

validity of Macpherson's list of capacities] cannot be resolved empirically," we are told, "since the capacities I have mentioned [consumption and acquisition, emulation and competition, status-ranking, domination and subjection, inflicting suffering, etc] and doubtless many others, are indubitably characteristic of humans, even 'essential' to them—and not obviously less in evidence than those on Macpherson's list."[68] This is an important misreading of Macpherson to which I will return in chapter three. It assumes that his vagueness is unintentional; he sees the need for demonstrating his list of human capacities to possess some kind of essential normative status apart from others though fails to do so. Yet this is one of Lukes' requirements for identifying internal impediments read into Macpherson. The fact that Macpherson does not seek to identify essentially human capacities in a determinate fashion and sees their identification and potential development connected to historical conditions as well as human nature is never entertained. Consequently, the indeterminacy of Macpherson's capacities cannot also imply an assumed settlement on more determinate meanings such capacities could have. The force of the argument must rest rather on criticising the theory's inability to exclude and work against deficient meanings these capacities could take on.

This is in essence the second and, as it turns out, more fundamental problem Lukes identifies with the theory's vagueness on the matter of human capacities, risking to undermine the aim of the entire project. If the goal is to provide normative justification for a society that seeks to maximize the developmental power of each individual, and if developmental power requires minimizing internal impediments (understood as third dimensional power), its inability to specify exactly what constitutes human flourishing in terms of these capacities means a failure to illustrate "adequate judgment, self-perception, and self-understanding." To the extent that the conception of flourishing remains vague, so therefore does the understanding of its impediments. This causes a chain reaction, collapsing the tenability of the theory's claim to have identified a means of maximizing flourishing through the removal of impediments. Because the capacities necessary to define the

[68] Ibid., 147

impediments are indeterminate, so too are the impediments in need of removal, as is the developmental power whose maximization constitutes both human flourishing and the aim of liberal democracy. The theory risks legitimizing many of the inequalities of power it seeks to redress as it fails to distinguish those concrete institutions and cultural attributes conducive to—from those restrictive of—maximizing human development. It commits the characteristically liberal blunder of asserting principles in abstraction without tying them to aspects of social reality in need of reform or embodying their realization.[69]

The resultant indeterminacy of all the theory's key concepts leads to the further difficulty of confusing *existing* with *potential* capacities, the activities that constitute their full development, and the impediments to their recognition, development, and exercise in the individual.

> The 'maximization of powers' is the maximization of individuals' 'ability' to use and develop their human capacities, as measured by the impediments to their doing so. It therefore amounts, formally speaking, to a set of counterfactuals which specify what individuals could attain but for specified present preventing causes. But how are these counterfactuals to be specified? How distant is the possible world we must imagine from the actual world? (Of course, the more distant it is, the greater the scope and complexity of the impediments or preventing causes.) In other words, how much of the actual world are we to take as given in setting up the counterfactuals? Or, in yet other words, what do we hold constant in comparing the actual with the possible? In particular, do we hold the very individuals, the maximization of whose abilities (power) is in question, to be constant, or themselves subject to transformation, and, if so, to what extent? *Which* individuals' powers are to be maximized: present, actual individuals or future, 'morally regenerated' ones?[70]

Though the answers to these questions are vital to Macpherson's case, on Lukes' view he fails to provide them because he fails to give adequate determinacy to the foundational concept of human capacities. Unlike the first problem, the second cannot be dismissed straightforwardly as a misreading. If Lukes is right to insist that, as it stands, the theory cannot distinguish between perceived and real interests, not only will it be incapable of having a decent account of third dimensional power according to Lukes' criteria, it will also be unable to account for internal impediments in the way Macpherson envisages. Rather than equipping his conception of human nature with an historical specificity, indeterminacy will have actually undermined this goal. And since the project of disentangling liberalism from PI depends on showing that PI's contribution to human

[69] Ibid., 151
[70] Ibid., 150 (Lukes' emphasis)

development was an historical anomaly and that advanced capitalist societies are leaving other potential capacities underdeveloped due to their continued commitment to PI, Lukes' argument presents a deep challenge indeed.

However, this second problem of indeterminacy requires further clarification for the argument to be plausible. Turning as it does on the assumption that the degree of vagueness present in Macpherson's conception of human capacities is enough to sufficiently alienate abstract impediments from their actual reality, it remains to be seen what defines this sufficiency threshold. Presumably every theoretical conception of internal impediments requires some indeterminacy. The underlying conceptions of capacities and human nature, in order to be at all realistic given their unavoidably considerable degree of historical contingency, cannot be utterly determined. It would, for instance, be difficult to defend the idea that flourishing, or even the full functioning a single human capacity, consists in one concrete activity such as meditation or sex or abstract thought. Where does Lukes propose we draw the line?

Though silent on this score in his critique of Macpherson, Lukes does provide an answer in his helpful conceptual analysis, *Individualism*. There he argues that individualism is a deviant species of a liberal theory committed to equality and liberty, one that fails to live up to some of its constituent core values.[71] Of these, autonomy stipulates that part of an individual's liberty is dependent on that individual being aware of the determinants of her own values, behaviour, character, and attributes and being in a position to alter them, thus transcending third dimensional power. Since Lukes believes that our entire self is in some sense contingent on historically specific circumstances, autonomy depends on historical knowledge in the broadest sense, knowledge of the myriad possible ways in which one's attributes might be alternatively constituted so as to avoid seeing any such features as inevitable or unavoidable. An individualist version of this theory confuses contingent for universal attributes by holding at least some aspect of the individual to be essential and unchanging. It does this by abstracting away from how any given individual is actually socially constituted, peeling

[71] Lukes 2005

away the layers like an onion, to reveal some supposed yet ultimately inaccessible permanent self. Insofar as a conception of the individual, her flourishing, or its impediments employs this kind of abstraction, therefore, its vagueness is individualist and inimical to autonomy, the transcendence of third dimensional power. "Individuals and their powers and capacities," he claims of Macpherson, "are conceived in abstraction from the social relations and forms of community which, on the one hand, impede and, on the other, facilitate and constitute their further development. By reasoning exclusively in terms of man and the individual, Macpherson retains too much of the abstract humanism for which Marx criticized Feuerbach."[72]

If this is what Lukes has in mind when accusing Macpherson of abstract individualism, it raises additional questions both about the accuracy of his interpretation and the consistency of his implied alternative account of internal impediments. As we have seen, Macpherson is sensitive to the idea that our understanding of human nature is shaped by historically contingent circumstances (1.3.1). It is precisely because of changing historical circumstances—namely the elimination of acute material scarcity—that the conception of human beings underscoring liberal society can and should be altered. Yet Macpherson also believes that fundamental biological characteristics frame this historical contingency. Essentially human capacities, though highly alterable in different individual and historical circumstances, reflect basic biological possibilities of the human organism. Either Lukes misses this central aspect of Macpherson's thought or, more likely, takes it to imply a belief in an unchanging natural core of human attributes beneath historical variation. No room is being made for a view, as I argue in chapter three should be attributed to Macpherson, that could both posit fundamental human characteristics not wholly determined by historical contingency and yet adequately grasp the inevitably unique conditioning to which each of these characteristics is subjected.

[72] Lukes 1979, 151

Another question is whether this view is consistent with the rest of Lukes' argument. As we saw in chapter one and as Lukes himself reiterates,[73] it is important that a theory of internal impediments have an account of human flourishing that is in some sense objective in order that real interests can be separated from stultifying self-understandings. Given his view that abstract individualism undermines the pretensions to such a theory, and given that he takes even Macpherson's historically informed essentialism to betray such a perspective, it is difficult to see how Lukes' desire to avoid positing any human essence can be squared with the identification of real interests. He disparages Macpherson's apparent reluctance to distinguish between capacities worthy of development and those requiring restraint and control. This supposedly betrays an essentialist understanding of human flourishing consisting in the activation of certain traits inherent to individuals conceived apart from their historical context. Moreover, this essentialism actually prevents making such distinctions with any kind of accuracy anyway as it prevents the theorist from fully appreciating the entirely contingent nature of flourishing. Yet Lukes does not provide an explanation for how such a distinction could be non-arbitrary if we follow him in holding that not only are *conceptions* of flourishing social products of this degree but so are the actual types of activity that form their embodiment. By demanding a determinate conception of flourishing, Lukes seeks not just a fully articulated philosophic anthropology, but one that fully reveals its dependence on prevailing cultural conditioning. Paying attention to the cultural sources of our conceptions of flourishing—the sources of internal impediments—requires, for Lukes, that we see human flourishing as such as a cultural product. Lukes thus refuses to contemplate a more moderate appraisal of our social conditioning that could accommodate both an essentialist conception of flourishing and a sensitivity to cultural conditioning. This position leaves his implied alternative framework lacking an explanation for how internal impediments can be conceptualized. Taking a closer look at the roll individualism plays in his and Held's arguments however, we can infer such an explanation as I now set out to do.

[73] Lukes 2005, 114

2.1.3 Individualism and Holism

Held and Lukes bring arguments against Macpherson's developmental power that display important similarities. Though motivated by different concerns and despite divergent characterizations of the malady, they diagnose a common pathogen. Both are involved in projects to identify and propose means of rectifying inequalities of power that encourage the adoption of stultifying conceptions of flourishing and each holds that it is possible and necessary to posit some kind of objective conception against which these can be criticized. Moreover, both look for explanations of deficiencies in a theory's characterization of these inequalities in its own objective account of flourishing. Thus they find Macpherson's failure to, in Held's case, incorporate social practices themselves as components of flourishing and, in Lukes, to sufficiently define flourishing in terms of concrete activities, as causes of the theory's inability to adequately recognize and rectify inequalities of power, characterized as internal impediments. Finally, these shortcomings are defined by both critics in terms of an implicit commitment to a form of liberal individualism in the sense of a particular way of thinking about human flourishing that under-appreciates the social dimension of well-being.

Though we are now much closer to answering the question with which we began—what kind of individualism prohibits the conceptualization of internal impediments?—there is some ground yet to cover. Both Held and Lukes write as if individualism in all its guises is prohibitive in this sense. Yet, on the one hand, the forms they respectively criticise are sufficiently defined to preclude such a strong conclusion. Moreover, Lukes has argued elsewhere that individualism as an historical concept relies on a distinct interpretation of two component values of equality and liberty. These he regards as worthy ideals if only expressed in a non-individualist theory.[74] On the other hand, the negative treatment of individualism remains vague and question begging. If Lukes is right to chastise Macpherson's abstraction when it comes to outlining the good life for human beings, the ill-defined individualisms against which he and Held rally rob their own arguments of critical acumen. Two

[74] Lukes 1973, 125-37, 146-57

questions in particular stand out: (1) what role is individualism supposed to play in their arguments against Macpherson? and (2) why does this individualism commit him to an excessively restrictive conception of internal impediments?

With respect to the first, it is clear that Held and Lukes see individualism playing a pivotal role in the reasoning they offer for why Macpherson fails to provide an adequate grasp of internal impediments. Yet precisely what role it is supposed to play is puzzling. Both seem to describe the problems they find in his conception of flourishing as resulting from *and* constitutive of individualism. They describe these problems as evidence of a commitment to individualism, implying that they are *necessarily* produced by such a commitment and suggestive of the further implication that the one is in at least some sense inclusive of the other. Is this intentional? Does this make sense? In order for individualism to play a role in the argument, the claim cannot be only that the problems underlined in the conception of flourishing are its equivalent for then these problems (the absence of care-giving activities and concretely defined capacities) and not individualism would be the ultimate culprits. If individualism is preventing the resolution of these problems, it must, at least in some sense, be separable from them.[75] Yet neither Held nor Lukes explicitly defines individualism apart from its role in producing these problems. In order to put any kind of force behind their arguments, therefore, it will be necessary to glean their meaning from tangential comments.

We know that both critics see the kind of individualism in Macpherson consisting in certain assumptions about human nature and hence human flourishing. Lukes, for instance, reproaches him for pre-supposing rather than defending a specified moral theory of the good, presumably explaining how a theory ostensibly opposed to liberal individualism could itself turn out to hold similar commitments. “In the absence of such specification,” he says, “we simply have the promise of an abstract, anti-utilitarian, individualistic moral perfectionism formulated in the language of man’s

[75] It is, of course, possible that a commitment to individualism in the sense used by Held and Lukes (i.e. as a characterization of human flourishing) by definition means excluding certain kinds of human attributes or activities from consideration. However, since a conception of flourishing could exclude such activities by virtue of other commitments (valuing honour as a competitive good, for instance), if individualism is to play some kind of causal role in their necessary exclusion and not be simply defined in terms of that exclusion, it must have some kind of independent meaning.

essentially human capacities".[76] It is individualism's relation to (or role in) human flourishing that remains obscure. There are three ways this can be interpreted within the confines of their arguments.

1. One possibility is to see individualism as a position concerning *which* human capacities ought to be developed. Macpherson's failure to, for Held, speak to care-giving practices and, for Lukes, adequately specify real interests is indicative of a mistake concerning the value that should be ascribed to creatively developing certain human attributes over others. This would at least accommodate one of the problems we have identified in Lukes' argument—the false claim that Macpherson cannot distinguish between those human capacities worthy of development and those in need of some kind of restraint. Individualism would commit him to a particular conception of flourishing implicit in the very vagueness that supposedly prevented such distinctions from being made. It might also capture Held's argument insofar as she is concerned with Macpherson's supposed reluctance to value care-giving as a capacity worthy of development. On the other hand, it seems a stretch to suggest Lukes and Held have this meaning in mind, even if it is more congruent with Macpherson. Given Lukes' emphasis that vagueness, though indicative of individualism, constitutes an inability to have any real commitments to particular human capacities at all, to charitably read Lukes' understanding of individualism as constituting a converse claim is untenable. And individualism in Held, as we've already seen, must constitute an inability to see cultural sources of flourishing and impediments rather than a claim about human capacities because Macpherson's actual conception of human capacities does not seem individualistic. The inclusion of "emotional activities of friendship and love" in his list of capacities as well as his repeated assertion that the theory "does not deny that society is also a positive agent in the development of capacities...that every individual's human capacities are socially derived...that their development must also be

[76] Ibid., 149

social...[and that] human society is the medium though which human capacities are developed"[77] certainly makes such an accusation incredible.

Moreover, this interpretation does not provide an independent meaning to individualism apart from particular human capacities and so cannot provide a causal explanation for why individualism must result in a problematic conception of flourishing. In order to make good on the claim that, regardless of Macpherson's assertions to the contrary, his conception of human flourishing is characterized by an individualism that precludes an adequate account of internal impediments, Held and Lukes must show how individualism, as something apart from his ostensibly non-individualist human capacities, disables the more penetrating analysis of power they have in mind. If their arguments are sound, they cannot mean by individualism merely a position concerning which human capacities should be developed.

2. Another alternative is that by individualism they mean a view about which capacities *are properly* human. Rather than acknowledge human nature as it manifests itself historically and in the present and from that recognition argue for which characteristics to promote and which to repress, this version would have individualism turn on a claim about which characteristics are most human and hence in need of development. This would corroborate the way Macpherson actually talks about human nature, where "natural" is not limited to an empirical claim concerning genetic attributes but also involves a normative claim about the goodness of developing one's nature. To say that something is natural, therefore, is to give a *prima facie* reason for its goodness. Here Macpherson is drawing on the Ancient Greek concept of teleology familiar to students of Plato and Aristotle where a thing's essence, including that of human beings, consists in a natural function whose excellent performance is said to constitute the good of the thing in question. Though philosophers have subjected the concept to sustained criticism for centuries, it retains an attractive subtlety in explaining organic development. Living things, by virtue of the kind of thing they are, will, under ideal conditions for which they are best adapted, develop into the fullest expression of their

[77] Macpherson 1973, 57

nature, their *telos*. The claim that certain human capacities are natural is therefore to say that these are constitutive of the full development of a human being rather than to describe how beings *tend* to behave.

If individualism is a claim of this kind, Held and Lukes must identify its detriment as a function of an inaccurate portrayal of either the conditions necessary for the full expression of the human *telos* or with the content of that *telos*. Either Macpherson fails to grasp the extent to which the social background in which humans develop needs to be altered to enable full development or that human development is such as to require this kind of manipulation. Again, however, this does not seem to capture their meaning. Noting Macpherson's ascription of normative value to the development of human capacities *per se*, Lukes accuses him of vagueness on the grounds that some capacities should surely not be developed. Here he relies on the assumption that capacities refer to observable human nature and not some kind of normative ideal constitutive of full development.

3. A more plausible argument would be for individualism to be a claim about *the kind of thing* that human capacities are. On this view, internal impediments are inadequately theorized not because an individualist conception of unimpeded human capacities mistakes which capacities should be developed or are properly human but because it fails to understand their nature. Macpherson's aim is to maximize each individual's ability to creatively (i.e. independently) develop her capacities when in fact that is impossible. Because the good (in terms of a possible mode of developing one's capacities) can only be conceptualized through the possibilities made available by a given culture and social milieu, creative self-development is only meaningful if understood as a form of culture and type of society. It is thus more useful to describe human flourishing itself as a type of society rather than activities in which individuals ought to engage. This position, typical of communitarian authors, is often referred to as holism. Charles Taylor, perhaps its best known contemporary proponent, describes it as an ontological claim—that is, one concerning "the factors [one] will invoke to account for social life."[78] Specifically, holism is a claim about the nature of the

[78] Taylor 1989, 159

common good, one that sees it as "constituted out of individual goods [but with a] remainder."[79] This remainder, Taylor explains, is the good of the community as such apart from the good of individuals. It is the good not only of me and you, but of "us."[80]

This interpretation is not only most congruent with the claims made by Lukes and Held, but also presents the most serious challenge to the defensibility of Macpherson's internal impediments. Though neither critic explicitly defines individualism in these terms there is evidence to suggest they have such a meaning in mind. Held, for example, expresses concern that the abilities Macpherson identifies with individual empowerment are actually social products, inescapably shared activities dependent on particular arrangements of power within the social structure. "Without social ties of a deeper kind than offered by liberal theory," she writes, including Macpherson within the latter, "there may be no society within which to respect individuals."[81] Furthermore, Held interprets his individualist perfectionism as a species of selfish egoism simply because it aims at maximizing the developmental power of each individual. Though, as Taylor points out, a holist theory of the common good does not necessarily demand altruism or self-denial of individuals, to hold as Held does that prioritizing one's own excellence or the excellence of any one individual precludes caring deeply for others suggests a holist priority of ascribing value to collective concerns or a common good.

Lukes too suggests this reading in several telling passages. When criticizing Macpherson's purported acknowledgement of society as "a positive agent in the development of capacities," Lukes claims "this acknowledgement does not extend to his seeing social relations as in part constitutive of the identity of the individual, which is, accordingly, transformed as those relations change." It is, on the contrary, because Macpherson sees capacities as internal to the individual and "separately identifiable (indeed measurable) and independently generated," that he fails to adequately conceptualize power that operates through social relations, "determining both [an individual's]

[79] Ibid., 166
[80] Ibid., 167
[81] Held 1993a, 152

potentialities and the impediments to their realization."[82] This commitment to a deep social determinism as a pre-requisite for fully appreciating potential impediments strongly suggests a holist ontology since valuable activity as well as the order of explanation are ultimately being derived from a social source.

Moreover, Lukes reiterates the egoism-altruism dichotomy in his conceptual explanation of individualism.[83] Here he suggests that the principle of respect for persons as ends in themselves is the starting point for moral virtue and hence an objective component of human flourishing derived from reason.[84] Though this principle is a motivation for abstract individualism, he argues that, since individualism always conceptualizes morality as the pursuit of self-interest and assumes an essentialist, "abstract" conception of human nature, it cannot support moral virtue. The implied premises here are, firstly, that an injunction to pursue self-interest means excluding respect for others for their own sake from moral reasoning. Secondly, it implies that one cannot value others for their own sake if that is seen as an expression of some kind of universal, unchanging nature attributable to individuals. Yet if Lukes believes this conception of moral virtue can coexist with a theory of internal impediments it must be included in the objective account of flourishing such a theory requires. It would be odd to expound conceptions of moral virtue and human flourishing without including the former within the latter. If this is the case, the theory must seek to demonstrate, given Lukes' definition of moral virtue, that one's interest is in a morality that does not value self-interest. Since he has also cut himself off from appealing to an ahistorical conception of humanity, the logical alternative is to encourage individuals to see their self-interest as the common interest inductively reasoned from *a priori* moral principles such as the principle of respect rather than deduced from certain 'natural' features of human beings. Holism thus enables Lukes to maintain an objective account of flourishing without having to rely on either an essentialist human nature or an ethical individualism.

[82] Lukes 1979, 147
[83] Lukes 2005
[84] In *Individualism* (2006) Lukes takes moral truths to be accessible through a rationality independent of any reference to a philosophic anthropology.

Besides the textual evidence, attributing this view of individualism to Held and Lukes best maintains the logic of their arguments. As we've seen, individualism requires a definition independent of human capacities in order to commit Macpherson to an excessively restrictive conception of internal impediments.[85] Defining it as a claim about the type of things human capacities are (i.e. as components of an essential, unchanging human nature defined independently of any social conditioning) fulfills this requirement. If Macpherson does in fact subscribe to such a view, he will be precluded from espousing a holist ontology, one that sees human capacities as components of the common good considered apart from an aggregate of individual goods. Rather than seek to identify ways in which the social structure itself impedes the common good, Macpherson is purportedly concerned only with how it impedes abstract, ahistorical human capacities. This conception of capacities can itself be an impediment since it prevents individuals from seeing their interests as they 'in fact' exist, that is, as the collective interest of the good society.

Seeing the critique of Macpherson in holist terms also helps with understanding the earlier difficulty we noted with Lukes' criteria for sufficiently defining conceptions of human flourishing.[86] It will be recalled that his sufficiency threshold in this regard requires that we grasp as fully as possible the extent to which both individually held conceptions of flourishing and flourishing as such are entirely products of social conditioning. Even if we grant that this view can make room for agency, presumably by seeing this conditioning as providing possible avenues of activity rather than mechanically determining human life, Lukes must still explain how an objective conception of flourishing can differentiate between genuinely good conceptions and those that are somehow pernicious given this framework. Such an explanation can issue from individualism if by that term we take Lukes to mean the failure to appreciate the nature of human capacities in a holist manner. Internal impediments are thus defined as those features of conceptions of flourishing held by individuals that prevent them from seeing their good as part of a communal good. Since Lukes believes that only by seeing flourishing in this manner will we be able to appreciate the 'fact' that

[85] See p.42
[86] See p.40

social institutions fostering specific social practices are to blame for robbing individuals of the power to creatively develop themselves, a framework such as Macpherson's is problematic in the sense that, though attentive to the need to criticize social practices and the institutions upon which they depend, it seeks to enable individuals to *independently* fashion themselves as much as possible.

Interpreting individualism as a rejection of holism also enables us to answer the second question presupposed in Held and Lukes' vague use of the term. Macpherson fails to provide a framework capable of identifying internal impediments because his conception of human flourishing is an ahistorical, essentialist picture of human nature composed of capacities possessed by each individual. It can only appreciate the impact of cultural institutions and social life on human flourishing insofar as these affect the good of individuals. Since human flourishing also involves the flourishing of communal life apart from the good of each individual, the extent to which these institutions impact that separate level is unaccounted for in Macpherson's framework. Moreover, this failure to grasp flourishing as a communal activity results in a false articulation of developmental power. On this interpretation, Held and Lukes hold that creatively developing one's human capacities free from stultifying conceptions of flourishing requires that one reject the very ideal Macpherson defends. To develop one's capacities independently of how others develop theirs is impossible since that develop is inherently a common enterprise. More formally, the argument looks like this:

(1) Internal impediments to human flourishing exist when individuals do not have adequate power over how their conceptions of flourishing are shaped and as a result pursue conceptions that do not correspond to human flourishing;
(2) A given account of internal impediments depends for its content on a corresponding theory of human flourishing which is being impeded, an essential characteristic of which is power to avoid internal impediments;
(3) Human flourishing is an inherently common activity;

Therefore:

(4) dissolving internal impediments cannot result in maximizing an individual's ability to independently derive her conception of flourishing;
(5) Insofar as human flourishing consists in being free of internal impediments, it must be defined in terms of the social practices constitutive of their minimization.

When applied to Macpherson, we can see the full force of Held and Lukes' argument given a theory that denies (3) because of its individualism but remains committed to (1) and (2). To deny (3)

is to fail to grasp the kind of thing human flourishing is. This has thus far been discussed in Macpherson's language of human capacities, understood by Held and Lukes to denote potentials inherent to fully functional human beings for activities that together constitute the flourishing of those humans. The claim that Macpherson fails to appreciate how human capacities are part of an inherently communal conception of flourishing is equivalent to denying (3). Even if he claims his theory sees society as a mechanism of both the suppression and enablement of human capacities, Held and Lukes understand his aim of maximizing developmental power in terms of maximizing each individual's capacity to *independently* develop her other capacities. Because they hold that one's views concerning how to develop one's human capacities (and in Lukes, what those capacities actually are) are inherently products of the social environment in which they live, Macpherson's avowed goal betrays a lack of appreciation for the nature of both human flourishing and its impediments. What is required, they seem to argue, is not the maximization of developmental power in the individual but the nearest approximation of a social order and background culture that promote the practice of creative self-development.

2.2 Inadequate Interpretations and Misdirected Rejoinders

Clarifying precisely what is at issue in this debate has been necessary not only because of ambiguities on the part of its participants. More recent commentators have understood its significance in quite different terms. In their reconstructions of Macpherson's normative political thought, both Lindsay and Townshend raise the criticisms voiced by Held and Lukes, though neither takes their arguments as much more than misinterpretations nor as claims concerning internal impediments. Instead they are briefly considered as examples of feminist and communitarian criticisms respectively, their common rebuke of his supposed individualism raised only insofar as it pertains to Macpherson's conception of the individual rather than to the theory as a whole. Nor is any attempt made to square Held and Lukes' superficially false claim that Macpherson fails to appreciate the scope of human sociability with their acknowledgment of his readiness to say

otherwise. How Macpherson might be guilty of a residual individualism regardless of his explicit claims to the contrary is left unconsidered. In part this is because Lindsay and Townshend do not see an account of internal impediments as an important or defensible component of Macpherson's political thought. However this is no reason not to address the thrust of Held and Lukes' arguments admonishing Macpherson's failure to generate such an account. Lindsay and Townshend's silence on this point suggests a misapprehension of the force of the criticisms under consideration. Indeed on closer inspection this is evident.

Lindsay treats both arguments as strictly communitarian criticisms of a perceived individualist conception of human nature. He dismisses Lukes especially quickly, characterizing his accusation of abstract individualism as a misreading whose crux depends on mistakenly believing Macpherson to distinguish capacities from abilities on the basis of an internal/external axis.

> The criticism makes sense only if we follow Lukes in reading Macpherson's 'capacities' as 'signify[ing] an "inner" potential' as opposed to 'abilities' which are 'seen as the absence of "external" impediments.' As we have seen, Macpherson did not delineate between capacities and abilities in such an 'internal/external' fashion, and thus while Lukes's argument that such a distinction distorts 'the boundaries of the agent's self' is correct, his target for criticism is not.[87]

Lindsay's rebuttal on Macpherson's behalf is instructive even if it misinterprets Lukes' misinterpretation. He correctly sees Macpherson's concept of labour encompassing human capacities (in the teleological sense of our defining activities, i.e. creative self-development) and argues successfully for interpreting it as an analytic concept whose concrete meaning is always contextually defined based on prevailing social/cultural conditions. Moreover, because of Macpherson's claim that the human essence is realized in labour (we are doers and creators), labour is "embedded" in the person—our capacities take on concrete forms through our labour. Since "the formulation, construction, and development of labor all take place in the milieu of social interaction", and since labour is embedded in the self, the self, Lindsay concludes, must also be socially constituted and not defined by an unalterable "inner" potential.[88]

[87] Lindsay 1996, 29
[88] Ibid., 27

These comments are directed at the crux of an argument Lindsay has failed to acknowledge. Lukes uses the argument about abstract individualism to point out difficulties in Macpherson's concept of developmental power. This individualism is a problem not because of the resultant inability to define the boundaries of the self or a concrete account of flourishing, but because these are necessary for an adequate understanding of the pernicious possibilities of power and hence for delineating the requirements of a good society. Furthermore, even if Lukes' particular variant of this argument fails, the version I have outlined here does not depend on the attribution of an internal/external distinction to Macpherson. Rather, it latches on to the notion that creative self-development is described as an independence from external influences, missing the fundamental point that it is not a condition of the individual but a particular arrangement of power within social institutions that enables this kind of creativity.

Lindsay does acknowledge the vague formulation of this point in Held, though he neither attempts to spell it out in detail nor feels it greatly impinges on Macpherson's case. The argument is seen more accurately as (partly) concerning a failure to account for internal impediments and not dismissed simply as a misreading. "I think she is correct," writes Lindsay, "to point out that Macpherson's notion of 'self-development is not seen as intimately tied to the development of social relations, relations of trust for instance.'"[89] In response he rightly raises the objection that though development of social relations amenable to creative individualism such as worker cooperatives or the proliferation of 'independent media' is not the primary focus, that does not in itself preclude their inclusion within self-development. Finally, he acknowledges Held's insistence on pinning individualism necessarily to Macpherson by attempting to show creative self-development and the development of social relations to be conceptually distinct, the latter being valued mistakenly only for its contribution to the former. "This portrayal of Macpherson strikes me as being quite accurate," Lindsay concedes. "Collective enterprises were seen as instrumental; his ultimate point of reference was the individual." However, requiring that relational activity be valued in itself strikes him as odd.

[89] Ibid., 33

"What I am not sure of is whether this admission would count as a strike against him." It is difficult to see, "how good social theory could not, in the end, return to some concern for the individual (however socially constituted)."[90]

Here, in contradistinction to his treatment of Lukes, Lindsay correctly sees the structure of the argument rather than its crux. Had he attempted to flush out Held's claim that Macpherson values good social relations only instrumentally rather than give it up as incomprehensible, he might have seen how it can be variously interpreted. For instance, he might have seen that it is claim about the relationship between human flourishing and relational activity and only consistent with the rest of her argument if interpreted as a claim about the kind of thing human flourishing is. Thus Held's argument turns not on insisting that relational activity must be valued in itself in order for internal impediments to be adequately conceptualized, but on seeing their minimization corresponding with functional relational activity, with a specific type of society that enables creative self-development as a common practice.

Lindsay does, however, make an excellent interpretative point, if in the end misdirected, in accusing Held of holding Macpherson to a problematic position he never explicitly adopts. Though we can interpret her argument in a way that does hold him to the supposedly problematic position based on his explicit elucidation of creative self-development, Lindsay's point does apply strongly to many of Macpherson's other critics. The problem stems from an insistence on theoretical completeness. Macpherson is deficient as a theorist because, though he made great strides in showing the type of political economy necessary for sufficiently guaranteeing developmental liberalism, he failed to see other ways in which that ideal is undermined. "We should be troubled by tendencies in this direction," worries Lindsay. "We should be troubled because Macpherson's relative single-mindedness is, in my mind, the quality for which modern political science is most indebted to him."[91] In providing a framework capable of directly challenging prevailing views concerning the human good that justify theory incapable of more fundamental social criticism than

[90] Ibid., 34
[91] Ibid., 158

is typical of contemporary liberal thought, we owe Macpherson a great debt. Yet, it is precisely because of the attractiveness of this framework that Held and Lukes should be taken as seriously as possible, for their arguments, as we have seen, ask whether such a framework is really valuable after all or if, instead, turns out not only to leave considerations of culture and gender in the shadows, but actually precludes them from playing a role.

In Townshend, the intellectual effort is reversed, Lukes is given more credit while Held is quickly dismissed. Though the criticism of Macpherson's oversight on the question of internal impediments is raised with respect to both arguments, it remains a tangential concern rather than a motivating animus. Echoing Lindsay, Townshend characterizes Lukes' argument as communitarian and hence chiefly taking issue with an apparently problematic conception of the individual. He does, however, come close to describing the critique of individualism as a position regarding the type of thing flourishing is. He describes Lukes' point as "whether an individual's capacities are blocked or facilitated will depend on the social relations that generate this identity," presumably referring to how these relations generate an individual's perception of her capacities.[92] Yet the argument is not seen as impinging on Macpherson's key concept of developmental power and is defended on Macpherson's own grounds of strategy. Since external impediments such as poverty and alienating work conditions are in part causes of internal impediments, their elimination should not only take priority over internal impediments but can also contribute to their alleviation. However this smacks of misinterpretation. As is by now quite evident, Held and Lukes recognize this strategy as futile in Macpherson. It is precisely because of the way he attempts to recognize impediments and characterize their dissolution as a resultant independence of the individual's creative self-development that they are suspicious of his ability to recognize sources of and solutions to internal impediments.

Though Townshend correctly approaches Held's argument as an attempt to show Macpherson's necessary oversight of certain feminist concerns, his exposition here is also inaccurate. He makes the

[92] Townshend 2000, 137

same error as Lindsay in interpreting the crux of her case as reliant on Macpherson's failure to value relational activity intrinsically. Were this true, he would certainly be justified in questioning whether it follows from this consideration that internal impediments are necessarily expunged from the picture. As Lindsay argues, it is also unclear whether it is possible to value relational activity apart from its value for individuals. However, with some effort towards developing a consistent argument, we have seen that Held must not be putting weight on a claim about which activities constitute human flourishing but rather on what kind of activities these are.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide the strongest possible statement of the critique made by Held and Lukes of Macpherson's political thought and to demonstrate that this charitable interpretation is absent from the two most important commentators on their arguments. I have argued that such an interpretation rests on understanding the individualism they ascribe to Macpherson as a view about the type of thing human capacities actually are, specifically that they are attributes whose proper functioning can be cultivated creatively in the absence of external interference. If Macpherson actually does hold such a view, and if the additional premise proves true that internal impediments arise from an inequality of power whose supersession depends on some particular social structure facilitating creative self-development, then my overall argument that Macpherson's political thought provides a basis for a defensible theory of internal impediments will be false. I argued further that Lindsay and Townshend are able to dismiss the case made by Held and Lukes on the grounds of a misreading by failing to see what is actually at issue in this debate. Though I agree that the Held/Lukes' critique does rest on a misreading of Macpherson, as I will establish in the next chapter, it is much more significant than Lindsay and Townshend recognize.

3. A Two Trick Hedgehog? Defending Macpherson's Framework

This chapter advances two lines of argument. Firstly, it responds to the criticisms developed in the preceding chapter, arguing that the individualism to which Macpherson subscribes does not preclude his theory from providing a defensible framework for the identification of internal impediments. I show that individualism does not necessarily correspond with the distorted view of human capacities Held and Lukes attribute to it and that Macpherson's framework does not elicit this distorted view on an accurate reading. I use Aristotle as a counter-example to this central claim, arguing that he best exemplifies an individualism of this type with which Macpherson's conception of human capacities displays the relevant similarities. Secondly, I argue that the very individualism Held and Lukes admonish, when properly interpreted, constitutes the framework's chief advantage over their own theories of internal impediments. While their criticisms betray commitments susceptible to classic objections to the DIT, Macpherson's framework, precisely because of its liberal individualism, saves face. Before advancing these arguments, I draw out two assumptions on which depends Held and Lukes' insistence that only a holist conception of human flourishing can adequately grasp internal impediments. These are that conceptions which display essentialism and individualist perfectionism (or what I clarify in 3.1.4 as self-centredness) imply a denial that human capacities can only be developed within appropriate social arrangements. My argument depends on showing (a) that neither of these commitments must have this result and (b) that, as they figure in Macpherson, they achieve this result without succumbing to two objections to the use of human flourishing within theories of internal impediments that I raised in 1.1.2.

3.1 Moderate Individualism

The previous chapter established the most defensible elaboration of Held and Lukes' main criticism that Macpherson's individualism necessarily prevents his framework from identifying internal impediments and offering solutions for their suspension. This amounted to the claim that human capacities by their nature cannot be developed individually. A theory that seeks to identify

and help relieve us of impediments to their development cannot limit itself, as a psychologist would, to diagnosing the malady without also identifying its root in broader social phenomena. Held and Lukes suggest, by implication, that individualism cannot escape such a position for they do not differentiate a pernicious from a more benevolent form. However, as I will now argue, there exists at least one form of individualism, most appreciable in Aristotle but also recognizable in Macpherson, which does not have to deny human capacities this degree of social embedded-ness.

3.1.1 Submerged Issues

As occurred so often in the context of the liberal-communitarian debate of the 1980s, Held and Lukes are drawing a dichotomous, either/or distinction between individualism and a more socially aware perspective, this time associated with the nature of human capacities. While a charitable reading sees them using a specific and controversial interpretation of individualism, they both assume that rejecting this specific type means rejecting individualism all together. Just as in Sandel and MacIntyre, individualism is being interpreted as a form of the rejection of a sociological fact which holds that the identity of individuals is deeply constituted by the community in which they live. And just as similar claims so articulated seemed unhelpful within the liberal-communitarian debate, being uncontroversially true, so does the dichotomy drawn by Held and Lukes obscure more important issues.

First among these is the very specific conception of community to which Held and Lukes adhere (given the characteristics they identify as individualistic in Macpherson) and suppose to be indispensable for capturing the broader thesis that human capacities cannot be developed outside of an appropriate social structure (I will follow Kymlicka in calling this broader position the social thesis[93]). For instance, one of Macpherson's cardinal sins on Held's view is that he instrumentalizes the value of community or "relational, shared activities" to the cause of promoting the flourishing of individuals.[94] This is used as evidence to support her argument that he subscribes to a conception of

[93] Kymlicka 2003, 245
[94] Held 1993a, 149

human flourishing incompatible with the social thesis. Yet it is not clear why valuing community in this way requires abandoning the social thesis. We saw in chapter two that Held and Lukes can only reach this conclusion by insisting on a holist conception of human flourishing that sees the development of human capacities as coterminous with the development of good collective practices. The issue therefore does not concern the truth of the social thesis but whether a holist conception of human flourishing is necessary to see the complexity it captures.

Having to demonstrate the dependence of the social thesis on a holist conception of flourishing in order to make their arguments convincing also raises sub-issues such as that of abstraction which so animates Lukes' critique. Here Macpherson's individualism is deemed 'abstract' because it is supposedly characterized by the 'onion theory' of the self, stipulating that human beings have an essential core nature unalterable by social conditioning and accessible by peeling away the layers of historical context around individuals.[95] Since the social thesis holds that such an ahistorical core nature is impossible—all aspects of humans being subject to social conditioning—this "abstract individualism" will posit as universal some features of human beings and the conceptions of flourishing they might hold when they are in fact contingent. The individuals making this mistake fail to grasp the extent to which they could adopt different conceptions of flourishing and develop their different capacities in different directions and are therefore subject to internal impediments. However the argument depends on the assumption that Macpherson's essentialist view of human nature necessarily precludes him from seeing universal human attributes as historically conditioned, committing him instead to the 'onion theory' of the self. That this assumption is controversial is a possibility Lukes does not entertain. The issue, then, is not whether the onion theory of the self could overcome these difficulties for it seems obvious that it could not. Rather, the controversy rests on whether an essentialist conception of human nature can accommodate the view that all features of human beings are socially altered.

[95] Lukes 1979; 2006

Yet this argument depends upon two further and equally contentious controversies. Its major assumption—that the idea of human beings having an essential nature not entirely contingent on historical circumstances is incompatible with the social thesis—does not commit its adherent to a holist conception of human flourishing on its own. Holism, in Lukes, is opted for only because he (a) desires an account of objective human interests compatible with this assumption, thus having to forgo an essentialist view of human flourishing, (b) subscribes to a non-naturalist morality[96] capable of generating an objective account of how one should live based on the dictates of reason, and finally (c) holds that caring for others as ends in themselves is one of these dictates and that in practice this means valuing collective activities for their own sake. The first submerged issue here concerns the complicated question of self-interest. In rejecting an essentialist picture of human beings, Lukes seems to hang his conception of real interests on a combination of autonomy[97] and moral virtue. However it is difficult to see how these interests that all human beings supposedly share can be in any sense objective without relying on some account of human nature. Lukes owes us an explanation for how, in rejecting the idea of essential nature, autonomy and moral virtue are nonetheless in our interests. Secondly, (c) is reached only because Macpherson's individualist perfectionism is taken to imply egoism, where the former is the idea that human flourishing consists in *individual* excellences[98] and the later the disinterest in the welfare of others. Crucially, egoism for Held and Lukes is assumed to be so disinterested because it sees individual excellences as plural (because it is taken to be whatever is in my particular self-interest) and antagonistic. In order to avoid egoism as an impediment in one's conception of flourishing, Held and Lukes demand that we see flourishing as compossibly realizable between individuals, realizable without antagonism. They

[96] By a 'non-naturalist morality' I mean reasoning about the good life in terms not dependent on facts about human beings, though still potentially drawn from moral facts.

[97] Understood to mean adequate knowledge of how one's self and situation are in every aspect shaped by social forces. One's autonomy "will be reduced to the extent that he is unaware of the determinants of his behaviour and to the extent that the alternatives before him are restricted." It can thus be thought of as "self-determined deciding and choosing on the basis of consciousness of one's self and one's situation." Lukes 2005, 128, 157

[98] In Macpherson's case, an individual's ability to creatively develop her essentially human capacities with a maximum degree of her own input (i.e. independently).

thereby draw the conclusion that flourishing must consist in *collective* excellences that champion mutual concern based on a common good. The second submerged issue, then, is whether individualist perfectionism does in fact imply egoism so that only by seeing flourishing as a collective excellence can we properly value others.

These issues are enormously difficult. My intention in raising them is only to show that Held and Lukes' rejection of individualism as the basis for a theory of internal impediments relies on assumed answers to each of them. Individualism in the context of this debate is a view about the nature of human flourishing. It amounts to a rejection of the social thesis that human capacities are developed through social institutions rather than within individuals based on two reasons. On the one hand, its commitment to an essentialist conception of human nature is taken to imply the 'onion theory' of the self. On the other, its promotion of developing individual excellences is thought to imply egoism. But the overarching issue here is not whether a theory of internal impediments must recognize the social thesis in order to look in the right places for sources of stultifying conceptions of the good that individuals can come to hold. Rather it is whether these features of an individualist understanding of the good preclude its adherent from seeing the social thesis in full scope. My suspicion is that a prime motivation these authors have in rejecting a Macphersonian framework for internal impediments has more to do with their view that one must choose between individualism with these consequences and holism without them than it does with Macpherson's actual individualist commitments. Since an individualist conception of human flourishing does not have to display these features, as will now be shown, this motivation can be put to rest.

3.1.2 The Aristotelian Counterexample

It is widely agreed that Aristotle's account of the relationship between human flourishing and community draws on an essentialist conception of human nature and an individualist perfectionism yet also, either despite or as a result of this, displays a keen appreciation for the extent to which an individual is shaped by the nature of the community in which she lives. Aristotle thus provides an

example of a theory that is individualist in the two senses implied by Held and Lukes without also rejecting the thrust of the social thesis. However interpreters are divided on the question of the theoretical device whence this virtue comes. Communitarian and civic republican authors such as Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor invoke Aristotle to support their arguments about the social nature of human beings. They argue that fully grasping this social nature (in both a descriptive and normative sense) requires a holist prioritizing of a collective identity in constituting individual identities (and the correlative priority of the common good to individual goods), something to which they believe Aristotle is firmly committed.[99] It is thus Aristotle's holist conception of community and its role in human flourishing that, despite his other 'individualistic' views, ensures his deep grasp of humanity's sociability.

This view is vigorously contested by many Aristotelians, prominently by Fred D. Miller Jr., Martha Nussbaum, and Bernard Yack. They maintain that Aristotle is what Miller calls a "moderate individualist" who, despite the fact that he realizes human flourishing is inextricably dependent on appropriate social forms, values those forms only insofar as they promote the flourishing of individuals.[100] They further claim that Aristotle's conception of the good community which enables that flourishing does not depend on a collective conception of the good to be held by its citizens. Thus they conclude that Aristotle does not depend on holism in either a descriptive or normative sense for his account of the social nature of human beings. I believe a similar position concerning the relationship of community to human flourishing can be attributed to Macpherson, leaving room for his framework, despite the fact that it is individualistic, to appreciate the social nature of human beings so necessary to an account of internal impediments.

I now proceed to outline Aristotle's essentialist conception of human nature and perfectionist account of human flourishing arguing that neither does the former entail Lukes' 'onion theory' of the self nor the latter egoism. I also show that Macpherson's individualism is an analogue to Aristotle's in each of these respects. This is followed by an exegesis of the holist-individualist debate amongst

[99] MacIntyre 1981; Taylor 1989
[100] Miller 1995, 191-251; Nussbaum 2000; Yack 1993

contemporary Aristotelians with the aim only of demonstrating the credibility of the moderate individualist interpretation in order to meet the objection that Aristotle's conception of flourishing grasps the social thesis regardless of his individualist commitments because of a holist understanding of the common good. Aristotle is helpful in meeting Held and Lukes' arguments against Macpherson for a number of reasons. Firstly, since their case is based on the assumption that all forms of individualism which display the elements we clarified in 3.1.1 fail to grasp the social thesis, a counter-example will suffice as refutation. Secondly, Aristotle has a much more developed theory of human flourishing with a far greater number of commentators than that upon which Macpherson builds his normative theory. It is easier to elucidate the counter-example with the kind of detail Aristotle affords. Thirdly, a major controversy amongst Aristotelian commentators centers on whether his undisputed grasp of the social thesis is due to individualist or holist aspects of his thought. Those arguing for the individualist interpretation provide further detail to a plausible counter-example. Finally, and most importantly, Macpherson's conception of human flourishing evidently borrows a great deal from Aristotle, to the extent that, though less well-developed, it displays precisely those features that enable Aristotle to provide the counter-example.

3.1.3 The Charge of Asocial Essentialism

We have seen that a necessary assumption in Lukes' argument against Macpherson is that an essentialist conception of human nature is ultimately and necessarily naive about the extent to which human beings are shaped by their social context. But Aristotle, widely thought to have an excellent grasp of precisely this matter, also employs a variant of essentialism. This is accomplished because Aristotle's essentialism transcends the dichotomy Lukes constructs between an ahistorical, unchanging core nature and a self whose nature is entirely contingent on historical circumstance. If essentialism, broadly speaking, is the view that human life has certain defining features, Lukes takes the very positing of these features to imply a perspective, as Aristotle exemplifies, that they do not have to display. That perspective, the so called 'onion theory' of the self, stipulates that what is

unaltered by social/historical context is what is essential to a human being. Since, whatever else is true, we are by nature social beings for whom everything is shaped by social/historical context, the onion theory of the self is false.

Aristotle's view is most simply that even that which is most essential to human beings is shaped by historical/social context. This takes some unpacking to appreciate. Firstly, what is essential to human beings is, for Aristotle, a teleological question. Like all things that exist by nature, human beings have a characteristic function that defines us as the kind of thing we are and which is good for us to perform.[101] That which performs its characteristic function well is said to be *aretē*, translated variously as excellent or virtuous. Any 'natural' substance or human artifice that has a function can be *aretē*[102] so the concept is best appreciated in tools such as hammers or simpler organisms like trees. A particular species of tree, for instance, will, under ideal environmental circumstances for which it is best adapted, grow into its fullest potential, flourish as the kind of thing that it is. Under these conditions, we would say that the tree is exhibiting its virtues, those characteristics best displayed under these conditions that make the tree distinctive. If, however, it is planted in a climate and soil-type for which it is ill adapted, its growth will be stunted, it will be more vulnerable to disease, and will likely die prematurely. In a similar sense, humans can be conceived as beings who flourish as the type of things we are under particular 'environmental' conditions. Our complicated natures, of course, greatly complicate both what this flourishing involves and which environmental factors are most conducive to its enablement, but the general idea is not hard to grasp. The human virtues are those traits whose full development constitutes human flourishing and their content depends on how we conceive of our characteristic function. The human essence is thus being defined both descriptively and normatively. That which most defines us as the types of beings we are is also that which is best for us to perform.

Secondly, Aristotle is preoccupied with developing and describing character traits disposing one to excellent activity rather than with formulating a procedure to reach correct decisions about

[101] *Nichomachean Ethics (NE)* 1168a6-9; *Politics (Pol.)* 1253a23-25
[102] *NE* 1098a7-20, *Physics (Ph.)* 195a23-25

excellent activity in particular situations. One feature of this preoccupation is what is often called the doctrine of the mean. Aristotle defines the excellent exercise of characteristically human activity in terms of a variety of virtues whose appropriate articulation is found in a mean between excess and deficiency, usually of some characteristic activity. Alternatively, the *aretē* individual is she who aims at intermediates within the possible range of human activities (in the descriptive, not teleological, sense). What is striking about Aristotle's thought here is the degree of open-endedness with which he regards excellent human activity. The virtue of temperance, for example, is never defined as a general rule or decision-making mechanism to be applied to particular situations, as is predominantly the case with modern moral philosophy.[103] Insofar as it captures an aspect of human excellence, it does so by describing a type of activity—in this case felt anger or passion—to which is applied the doctrine of the mean. The temperate person thus aims at intermediate activity with regard to feeling and expressing anger and passion. Aristotle leaves the working out of hard cases to individuals. His concern is with the cultivation of character appropriate to making those decisions, a habituation enabling ourselves to reason properly and to listen to reason.

More controversially, some have argued that this preoccupation with the development of character as opposed to a decision-making procedure similarly applies to Aristotle's conception of political justice. Usually his well-defined conception of the human good is thought to extend directly to a well-defined conception of the good society—typically the utopian regime of books VII-VIII of the *Politics*. Nussbaum, for instance, maintains that Aristotle equates political justice with the good of the political community and the good of this community with the good of its composite individuals. Thus she believes Aristotle derives from the identification of the nature of the good for human beings a specific account of how the political community should be organized even though he never specifies a list of human goods or a guide to authoritative standards of justice.[104] This view is challenged by interpreters for whom Aristotle's reluctance in this regard is no mere accidental

[103] Annas 1993, 443
[104] Nussbaum 1992; see also Galston 1980

omission but rather indicative of his more central motivation of ensuring the rule of the virtuous.[105] The argument here holds that Aristotle believes the activity of citizenship, ruling and being ruled in turn with one's relative equals in virtue,[106] embodies the political articulation of the human good. Just as the cultivation of excellent character preoccupies Aristotle's ethical thought, so facilitating the application of excellent character to participation in public life illustrates his conception of the common good. The distribution of goods, the defensibility of particular institutional orders, and the establishment of terms of fairness beyond supporting this activity is a matter for those citizens not philosophers to determine.

> Justice thus represents, for Aristotle, a disposition to seek and promote states of affairs in which citizens will find some common advantage rather than a disposition to identify and apply supposedly true knowledge of the common good. Knowledge of the human good is far from irrelevant to identifying these states of affairs, but it does not provide us with a target to hit in our assessments of the justice of laws and public acts. It acts instead as a limiting condition on the choices we should make. We need to know something about the nature of a good life in order to avoid political choices that would make that life impossible—for example, by eliminating the private control of personal property that is a necessary precondition for the virtue of liberality (*Pol*. 1263a-b). But within these limits, knowledge of the human good does not yield us determinate standards of justice. [107]

Standards of justice, Yack suggests instead, should be based on the particular circumstances of the political community in which they are sought. This is because, as we will see him argue contra holist interpretations of Aristotle, the political community exists to facilitate the training necessary for leading a virtuous life.[108] Though the ideal regime will do this best, a regime that maintains political activity for its citizens will also contribute to that end. Since maintaining political activity requires compromises and accommodation to the particular claims made by the unique set of competing interests in different political communities, and since political activity embodies the formulation of principles of justice suitable to regulating these particular claims, Aristotle, Yack maintains, leaves the working out of standards of justice to citizens. Shrinking from pre-determining their philosophical content thus also opens the possibility for a wide variety of regimes to be capable of promoting human flourishing.

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[105] See Charles 1988; Yack 1993, 166-74
[106] See *Pol.* III 1275a23-24 and "political rule" 1277b7-16, 1283b41-84a3
[107] Yack 1993, 171
[108] Ibid., 170

Together, these two features enable an essentialism that, while attentive to how the organization of common life shapes the possibilities for individual flourishing, does so without having to rely on a pre-social conception of the self. Though Aristotle believes human beings have an essence embodied in our defining activity (the excellent exercise of our rational capacity), that essence is inevitably realized in unique ways. Excellence or virtue is composed of multiple components (the virtues). These represent particular manifestations of a learned ability to have one's self listen to reason as a result of which one chooses right action as a mean between extremes of the particular type of activity in question, such as the expression of anger. Since this process will be conducted under myriad different circumstances, the corresponding virtuous activity will also always be contextually tailored. The identification of the human essence, which is defined as virtuous activity, is therefore inseparable from how that activity is uniquely enacted by each virtuous individual in their particular social, cultural, or historic context and according to the random circumstances with which they are confronted. Instead of implying a pre-social natural core to humanity, Aristotle's essentialism embodies an account of excellent character that seeks to be objective but whose concrete instantiation requires individual definition. The courageous person thus embodies a component of the human essence in her courageous actions which are made possible by her excellent character. But to define her excellence apart from these actions, apart from that excellent activity, is to lose sight of it altogether.

Furthermore, Aristotle's teleological conception of the human essence does not describe what is human in terms of a lowest common denominator as the 'onion theory' of the self would suggest. To say that something is essentially human is, for him, to say something about what human beings are *and* what they ought to be. Insofar as a particular capacity or virtue is essentially human, it is a component of our defining function or excellence and hence an expression of our fullest development. Yet the only capacity he defines in any kind of ahistorical, concrete manner is the overarching ability emergent from a character disposed to moral virtue, what he calls *phronēsis* or

"practical wisdom."[109] *Phronēsis* can thus be considered a sort of super-essentially human capacity since it describes the need for every human being to negotiate the myriad circumstances with which they are confronted and themselves work out the particular manifestations of virtue in these particular situations and given their own dispositions, developed or inherited. Aristotle's essentialism, then, is highly contextualized even as it defines what a human being is since in doing so it suggests what a human being ought to be without pre-determining the exact nature of the outcome.

Finally, if Aristotle's conception of the common good is as politically open-ended as Charles and Yack maintain, and if the common good is truly being defined in terms of the good of the community's individual citizens, then Aristotle's conception of the good society will also be tremendously flexible. For as long as that community enables virtuous activity, though it might not be perfect, and though it might have to abide by strange laws necessitated by its particular competing claims in order to sustain political participation and appropriate civic education, it deserves the commendation 'good'. In forgoing the philosophic determination of universal standards of justice, Aristotle enables not only his conception of the human good in individuals but in the common life upon which the good of individuals depends to have an equivalent degree of flexibility. Aristotle thus provides a strong counterexample to the claim that individualism (in the sense of an essentialist conception of the human good) implies an account of the human good defined abstractly outside of social contexts.

In a general way, Macpherson's essentialist individualism displays both these features with the result that he too understands human beings to have an essence that is nevertheless shaped by cultural/historical context. As we saw in 2.1.2, one aspect of Macpherson's conception of human flourishing with which Lukes takes issues is his apparent reluctance to define which capacities are 'essentially human' and what is entailed in their development. It seems to Lukes that Macpherson values the development of any human capacity and thus has no criteria to distinguish between real

[109] As usually translated. Irwin unconventionally uses 'prudence.'

and false goods.[110] However this criticism proves unfounded because his essentialism is teleological. We are now in a position to better grasp what that means. To define the human essence teleologically is to define it in terms of our characteristic activity, which for Aristotle—and as it turns out for Macpherson—is the exercise of our capacity for rationality. It is also to inscribe that activity with normative value. Thus to say something is essentially human is to say that is a component of a good life for the kind of thing we are. That is not to say that human beings do not engage in other activities or that other forms of activity are not also requisite to the good life. Rather, it is to remark that without our characteristic activity, life is not lived in a flourishing manner. Thus Macpherson does not define as essentially human capacities such as the ability to inflict terrible pain on others or to eat and drink but "the capacities for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creating or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and sometimes, for religious experience."[111] To say that a capacity is "essentially human," therefore, is not to say either that it is a pre-social characteristic of all human beings which we exhibit naturally or an attribute necessary to sustain basic human life. Instead it describes a conception of excellent human activity requiring cultivation and the application of skill and practice to develop.

Moreover, like Aristotle, Macpherson is chiefly concerned that we be equipped with the ability to direct our lives under the guidance of reason, preferably our own,[112] rather than with developing a procedure to direct good behaviour. Just as *phronēsis* encompasses a meta-virtue for Aristotle, referring to an ability to maximize excellent activity under various particular circumstances, so Macpherson believes that "activity in pursuit of a conscious rational purpose" is what defines the creative capacity in human beings he seeks to maximize.[113] This is what Lindsay calls, "the idea of purposive action" which he believes Macpherson, following Marx and Mill, derives ultimately from Aristotle. Essentially this is the thought that human flourishing is defined by activity rather than

[110] Though, of course, Lukes is sceptical of the very enterprise of defining any capacities as 'essential.'
[111] Macpherson 1973, 4
[112] It is, of course, well known that Aristotle believes some human beings are not properly human in the sense that they either do not possess a rational capacity (slaves) or they lack the emotional equipment necessary to have their souls listen to reason (women). Macpherson does not share this view.
[113] Macpherson 1965, 54

sensation or pleasure alone and that good activity for human beings requires motivation and guidance from the individual exuding it. “Like Aristotle,” he explains, “Macpherson has difficulty conceiving of any activity as being as valid as any other. And like him, the crucial distinction between the valid and the invalid is made on the basis of whether purpose and direction lie behind action, or whether, in Macpherson’s language, we have no further end than simply the maximization of utility.”[114] Though Macpherson does not elaborate a moral psychology as Aristotle does to habituate our selves to listen to reason and be attracted to noble activity in different situations, his emphasis on purposive action being creative fits well with the open-ended flexibility of *phronēsis*.

Similarly, Macpherson believes the context in which one seeks to develop one’s capacities greatly shapes what that development will actually constitute. As we saw in chapter one, for him, the human essence is both ontological and historical, by which he means that, because human beings *are* the activities in which they engage, the forms of activity available under given historical conditions will constrain the creative application of purposive action. In other words the human essence is something that is realizable only in living and since forms of life are constrained contextually so too will be the human essence. In all these ways Macpherson shares Aristotle’s contextually sensitive essentialism that transcends the dichotomy Lukes draws between an ahistorical, unchanging core nature and a self whose nature is entirely contingent on historical circumstance

3.1.4 The Charge of Egoistic Perfectionism

Another element as necessary of Held’s argument against Macpherson as of Lukes’ is the assumption that individualist perfectionism implies egoism. And again, Aristotle provides a powerful counterexample. The assumption here is not that perfectionism itself, the idea that in at least some sense there is a single good for human beings, is necessarily egoistic. As we’ve seen, Held and Lukes are committed to a perfectionist conception of the common good as they seek to maintain a conception of internal impediments with some kind of objective standard of well-being. Rather it is

[114] Lindsay 1996, 23

perfectionism applied to individuals apart from what is good 'for us' that they find suspicious. Macpherson's purported aim of maximizing the power of each individual to creatively develop her essentially human capacities independently and based on a conception of the good life *for an individual* is the target here. The claim that this approach is egoistic and hence cannot appreciate certain social dimensions of human capacities comprises two related points. Firstly, it is egoistic in that it cannot value Held's "relational activities" in themselves as all value is being derived from the needs of individuals. Since valuing relational activities in themselves is necessary to value the good of others, the approach fails to accommodate this crucial dimension of morality. Secondly, it is egoistic in the sense that prioritizing the good of individuals is taken to undermine the ability to value the objective standards of right upon which Lukes' collective perfectionism is based. This is because prioritizing the good of individuals is assumed to require moral subjectivism, as value is being derived from individual affirmation rather than rational discourse.

As with the accusations levelled at Macpherson's essentialism, these charges reach conclusions only required by a particular kind of individualist 'perfectionism' which they grossly conflate. They hold false premises that an Aristotelian perfectionism quickly undermines. To see this it is helpful to follow Christopher Toner in distinguishing between self-centredness and egoism, where the former is the view that one should place one's own excellence at the centre of one's life and the latter that one should care only that one's own life goes well, caring for the well-being of others only insofar as they contribute to this project. If these still seem quite similar it is because Toner holds egoism as a pernicious species of self-centredness where aiming at living well becomes construed with caring only for oneself.[115] Aristotle, it is widely held, subscribes to the self-centred rather than egoist position, though some commentators, including Toner, argue that he is not even self-centred. To show this in the context of the arguments by Held and Lukes, it is necessary to demonstrate that the self-centred position does not entail moral subjectivism and accommodates valuing the good of others.

[115] Toner 2006, 596

The first issue is easily demonstrable in Aristotle. No interpretation of which I am aware denies that he is concerned both with the good of individuals and with an objective account of flourishing. But since Aristotle seems such an obvious counter-example, Lukes' apparent position here deserves closer scrutiny. The first thing to appreciate is why Lukes believes moral subjectivism is egoist. Moral subjectivism, what he calls "ethical individualism," is described as "a view of the nature of morality as essentially individual...this may be seen as having taken the form of ethical egoism, according to which the sole moral object of the individual's action is his own benefit. Thus the various versions of self-interest ethics, from Hobbes onwards, maintained that one should seek to secure one's own good, not that of society as a whole or of other individuals."[116] Ethical individualism is contrasted with "objectivist ethical views, according to which the content of moral values and principles and the criteria governing moral judgements are not open to choice but are given."[117] Lukes thus considers ethical individualism subjectivist in the sense that it leaves the determination of moral norms to individual discretion, though he allows for variations in its extent. Since he also takes such a view to reduce the value of the good of others to a mere facilitation of one's own good, he believes it is also egoist.

Now, as we have seen, although Macpherson posits a conception of the good as objective, he (like Aristotle) leaves its specification largely to individual discretion. Moreover (again like Aristotle), he subscribes to a self-centered ethical perspective that encourages individuals to organize their lives around their own excellence. Insofar as these theorists display these commitments, Lukes' can plausibly fit them into his scheme in the following way. A conception of the good is egoist when it is a type of ethical individualism (moral subjectivism). Self-centred ethical theories such as Macpherson's and Aristotle's utilize conceptions of the good of this type. Therefore self-centred theories such as theirs are also egoist. So while Aristotle appears to be a committed objectivist, Lukes' argument would have us believe that in the relevant respects he is an ethical individualist

[116] Lukes 1973, 99
[117] Ibid., 106

because he provides individuals with too much discretion over the determination of moral norms and makes those norms dependent on the chosen goods of individuals.

If this is indeed part of what Lukes has in mind in claiming that individualistic conceptions of the good undermine a defensible account of internal impediments, Aristotle still provides a clear counter-example. He is indeed an "ethical individualist" if by that Lukes means he subscribes to a self-centred conception of the good. Yet Aristotle has a self-centred conception that neither values the chosen goods of individuals equally simply for being chosen nor reduces the value of the goods of others to an instrument of one's own good. A position that held that conceptions of the good which are individualist (in the sense of being self-centred) are as a result committed to these views would conflate two very different types of self-centredness, one which is much more vulnerable to the charge of egoism and subjectivism than the other. These are utilitarianism and eudaimonism.[118]

Whereas the utilitarian defines the good only as that which produces pleasure in the agent, eudaimonism holds that the good lies in forms of activity (which includes a concept of pleasure). Though utilitarianism is not necessarily self-centred—the good might be defined as prioritizing the production of pleasure in others—one of its more influential variants, embodied in the classical economic conception of self-interest, combines a priority of self-satisfaction with a second order subjectivist conception of the good. The good is objectively defined as that which produces pleasure in the agent, subjectively as whatever produces that pleasure. Eudaimonism, in contrast, is a set of ethical theories which, broadly speaking, ask us to focus on living good lives. In Aristotle, though *eudaimonia* asks each of us to determine the right course of action in particular situations, he provides us with a blueprint for human excellence in terms of activity and the type of character such activity requires. Pleasure, which plays an important role in his ethical theory too, is defined by the activity with which it is associated rather than as a single, commensurable sensation.

[118] From the Greek e*udaimonia* usually translated as human flourishing or the good life, more rarely and inaccurately as 'happiness.' Translated literally, it means to have a good *daimon* or spirit, suggesting a life of good fortune. Incidentally, the etymology of the English word 'happiness,' from the Middle English 'happ' which also forms the root of 'happenstance,' is also suggestive of fortune though it has lost that association in modern usage (McMahon 2006).

> Since activities differ in degrees of decency and badness, and some are choiceworthy, some to be avoided, some neither, the same is true of pleasures; for each activity has its own proper pleasure. Hence the pleasure proper to an excellent activity is decent, and the one proper to a bad activity is vicious; for, similarly, appetites for fine things are praiseworthy and appetites for shameful things are blameworthy.[119]

It is these activities which are scrutinized, some deemed constitutive of human flourishing such as contemplation, political participation, and moral judgment, others emblematic of a life unfitting for a human being to live such as thoughtlessness, lack of self-control or self-rule, asceticism, and even manual labour. We are asked to develop a taste for the pleasures corresponding to the former activities and a repulsion to the latter rather than assume that any activity which produces pleasure is a *prima facie* good. So while Aristotle's conception of the good is self-centred in that it asks us to direct our lives towards our own excellence, even to the extent of choosing how excellence in a particular activity ought to be manifested in a particular situation, he is no subjectivist on the matter of which activities, broadly speaking, constitute the human good. Aristotle, then, provides a counterexample to the charge that individualist perfectionism (in the sense of a self-centred conception of *the* good of human beings) implies subjectivism when it comes to the application of moral judgement.

However there is still the charge against individualist (self-centred) perfectionism that it is egoist in failing to properly value others. To begin with, we can observe that the additional premise required by Held's argument that relational activities must be valued in themselves in order to value the good of others[120] is plainly false. An important part of valuing others is surely valuing them as particular individuals rather than only for their contribution to relationships or the common good *en masse*. It might be true that some component of valuing others is exclusively captured by valuing them through the common good, however it is certainly true that one can care deeply for the interest of another person singled out from others. The difficulty of the charge is that self-centered perfectionism might be necessarily egoist. Such a claim is often made by those influenced by variants of Christian and Kantian moral theories who accuse ancient ethical systems such as Aristotle's which

[119] *NE* 1175b25-30
[120] See p.52

tend to be self-centred of some kind of pernicious selfishness. Defenders of ancient theories, usually under the banner of "virtue ethics," have developed their own standard replies. Any defensible self-centered theory which places one's own excellence at the heart of one's ambition, so they maintain, does so by including at least *concern* for the good of others within one's own good, sometimes even including the flourishing of others within one's own.

Aristotle presents an example of self-centeredness that is non-egoist because it is of this latter type, including the flourishing of others within the good of each individual. This is apparent from his discussion of friendship. Friendship for Aristotle is a state of character that develops out of shared ends and activities between individuals. The more significant these ends and activities are in terms of constituting human flourishing, the deeper the connection between friends. "The friendship of good people is friendship most of all..." he writes, "for what is lovable and choiceworthy seems to be what is good or pleasant without qualification, and what is lovable and choiceworthy to each person seems to be what is good or pleasant to himself; and both of these make one good person lovable and choiceworthy to another good person."[121] Recall that Aristotle holds that ultimately the ends and activities towards which a person strives are those things towards which one's character is attracted by habituation.[122] While he believes human action should be self-centered in the sense of aiming at what one believes to be one's own good, a person who displays 'noble' as opposed to 'base' self-love is drawn not to the idea of her own flourishing but the activities and states of character she believes constitutes that flourishing.[123] Friends can therefore share their perceived ultimate ends and the activities they believe constitute the human good. Insofar as they do, they aim simultaneously at each other's good as well as their own. They are drawn to the ends and activities they share, which also constitute their sense of each other and themselves. In such friendships [those in which individuals share in the activity of flourishing] the dichotomy between egoism and

[121] *NE* 1156b34-57a
[122] *NE* 1113b3-14b25
[123] Annas 1988, 12; Miller 1995, 200; *NE* IX.9

altruism is suspended since acting in one's own self-interest is equivalent to acting in the interests of one's friend in whose flourishing one actually takes part.

Macpherson's individualism is analogous to Aristotle's in being self-centred but not egoistic. Though offering no developed ethical theory that could be described as eudaimonistic, Macpherson is motivated by a palpable anti-utilitarianism from a position clearly influenced by Aristotle's conception of pleasure and activity. Indeed the conception of human flourishing he associates with possessive individualism is pernicious primarily because it eliminates distinctions of value between types of activity, in the sense of purposive action vs. activity lacking rational self-direction and hence creativity. "Humans [according to PI] become not purposive actors, but rather reactors to pre-given utilities and desires," writes Lindsay. The good, for Macpherson as for Aristotle, resides not in felt sensation no matter the source, nor in abiding by pre-determined principles of right, but in the activity of applying cultivated rationality and a habituated character to determining the right in given situations and the pleasures this form of action bring. Macpherson writes:

> It is almost incredible, until you come to think of it, that a society whose keyword is *enterprise*, which certainly sounds active, is in fact based on the assumption that human beings are so inert, so averse to activity, that is, to expenditure of energy, that every expenditure of energy is considered to be painful, to be, in the economist's term, a disutility. This assumption, which is a travesty of the human condition, is built right into the justifying theory of the market society, and so of the liberal society. The market society, and so the liberal society, is commonly justified on the grounds that it maximizes utilities, i.e., that it is the arrangement by which people can get the satisfactions they want with the least effort. The notion that activity itself is pleasurable, is a utility, has sunk almost without a trace under the utilitarian vision of life.[124]

However, Macpherson does not distinguish virtuous from base activity apart from the emphasis on purposive action, which significantly differentiates his account from Aristotle's. Though the claim that individualism *implies* Lukes' "ethical individualism" is discounted by Aristotle's counter-example, Macpherson might appear vulnerable to a charge—though not advanced by either Held or Lukes—that purposive action is ethically individualist (in the sense of subjectivism). This argument fails for two reasons. Firstly, nothing in Macpherson suggests he is hostile to the Aristotelian notion that purposive action requires the development of a moral psychology through

[124] Macpherson 1965, 38

habituation of character and cultivation of practical reason that grounds Aristotle's account. Indeed such self-development seems a precondition for purposive activity. Without a character disposed to listen to reason and a rational capacity disposed to seeing which actions would be fine in particular situations, one runs the risk of internalizing prevailing opinion without adequate critical analysis. Secondly, the emphasis on purposive activity does rule out a range of activities as non-valuable. The distinction between valid and non-valid activity can be understood in several ways in Macpherson. Perhaps most simply, we can think of invalid activity as that which denies a person control over the use of her essentially human capacities, her labour. PI, for example, is a conception of flourishing that allows for precisely this outcome since it considers our capacities to be owned and therefore potentially separable from what is essentially human. "Thinking of labour as a possession leaves us intact after control over labour has been stripped from us, for to quote Michael Sandel, 'if I lose something I possess, I am still the same "I" who had it.'"[125]

Macpherson has nothing like Aristotle's theory of friendship. However, his conception of flourishing as creative activity, what he calls "labour," does embody an other-regarding component. As we saw in chapter two, Held dismisses his inclusion of "emotional activities of friendship and love" as potentially indicative of genuine concern for the good of others because his self-centred perfectionism apparently betrays what we have now defined as egoism (2.1.1). However, just as Aristotle presents an example of self-centredness that includes the good of others within one's own flourishing, Macpherson's conception of labour, the activity embodied in flourishing, also presupposes a social background in which others flourish, where they too control the development and exercise of their labour. There are two reasons why this is the case.

Firstly, because his essentialism is teleological, essentially human capacities require cultivation and development, being acquired and dependent on favourable social conditions rather than genetic attributes. Indeed, when describing impediments to flourishing, Macpherson considers only "[those] which are socially variable." Physical impediments "which cannot be altered by any action of

[125] Lindsay 1996, 72 (quoting Sandel 1989, 55)

society"[126] are not considered real impediments at all. When we add to this the fact that many essential capacities Macpherson mentions correspond to activities requiring reciprocation from others who are engaging in the same activity, something like Aristotle's recognition that the human essence is manifested through other people surfaces. Actively cultivating healthy relationships with other people and doing good unto others, activities which require the creative application of one's rational capacity and emotional habituation, thus seem as necessary of Macpherson's conception of flourishing as Aristotle's.

Secondly, Macpherson assumes that essentially human capacities are properly developed and exercised only if they do not impede the development and exercise of similar capacities in others.[127] Thus only those capacities which foster the equal development of others are, on Macpherson's view, worthy of being developed at all. This is a striking position in that it rules out any activity requiring the subjugation of any others from being valued at all. To the extent that market, slave, or feudal economies require some individuals to do work which prevents and/or degrades the development of their essentially human capacities[128] but in doing enable others to enjoy more leisurely lives which afford what would otherwise be considered capacities which are essentially human, these systems are not enabling the development of any such capacities. This certainly reveals an intense concern for the interests of others embedded within his conception of the good though it also seems to stray quite far from Aristotle's view. Indeed, an Aristotelian might object that though it is unfortunate that under certain historical conditions such subjugation might be necessary to develop essentially human capacities, this does not mean that the capacities which are being developed are any less valuable. On the other hand, Macpherson's position here can be seen as Aristotelian in that it corroborates Aristotle's view that cultivating one's own excellence requires that others with whom one interacts exhibit at least some degree of excellence themselves since one participates in the

[126] Macpherson 1973, 59
[127] Ibid., 73
[128] Through, for example, coercing unfortunates into working long hours at highly stressful occupations leaving little energy for developing aesthetic tastes, satisfying curiosities, experimentation, communing with nature, cultivating relationships, etc.

good of others with whom one shares virtuous activity. These considerations, however, do not bear on the present discussion.

3.1.5 Holist vs. Individualist Interpretations of the common good

We have seen that Aristotle's conception of human flourishing is individualist in respect of its essentialism and self-centred perfectionism yet neither does the former result in an 'onion theory' of the self nor the latter in egoism, two characteristics Held and Lukes are committed to concluding from a theory displaying these attributes. This goes some way in undermining their central claim that an individualist conception of flourishing necessarily prevents an appreciation of the social thesis. However, using Aristotle as a counterexample requires confronting an additional controversy. Those who argue that Aristotle's conception of flourishing is holist maintain that his sensitivity to the social embedded-ness of human beings is a product of that holism. Insofar as his open-ended essentialism and other-regarding perfectionism contribute to that sensitivity, they do so because they are informed by that holist perspective. This position is far too complex to refute here. Instead I will only attempt to establish the plausibility of interpreting his conception of the good in individualist terms.

There are several reasons why Aristotle is sometimes thought to have a holist conception of the good. All have to do with his meaning of the common good or the flourishing of the political community. Aristotle's criterion that the ideal polis be ruled for the common advantage rather than for the private good of its rulers[129] and the claim that the good of the city is prior to that of the individual[130] are usually taken to mean either that the good of individuals is entirely derivative of the separate good of the polis or that the good of the polis includes the separate goods of individuals but is also superior and that these individual goods are identical. Miller attributes the former interpretation to Popper (1962) and Barnes (1990) who, he claims, see Aristotle as an "extreme

[129] *Pol.* 1279a28-31
[130] *Pol.* 1253a19

holist" like Plato.[131] Here the claim is that individual welfare is defined in terms of a separate, community welfare where individuals exist for the sake of the whole. Since the good of the individual consists in the good of the community, the individual's good will only be differentiated from that of others to the extent that performing a different function contributes to the common end. That end is shared by all in the sense that it determines the ends of individuals. Miller stresses that Barnes' interpretation of what he calls "Aristotle's axiom"[132] that supposedly underlines his holist conception of the human good is controversial to say the least. The component "if, and only if it is good for *Y* that *X* is *F*" delivers the extreme holist conclusion only if taken to imply the stronger premise that "individual interests are determined by and depend upon the interests of the whole."[133] In fact, Miller points out, "Aristotle's axiom" can equally convey an individualist reading where it is good for the whole that the part flourishes where that flourishing is derived from the part rather than the whole.

Holist readings of Aristotle's conception of human flourishing are more typically "moderate" where the end of individuals is inherent to those individuals and not simply a means to the end of the political community. These interpretations remain holist in the sense that (a) they read the common good or good of the political community as retaining a distinctiveness apart from the good of individuals and (b) they insist that the good of individuals consists in common, more or less identical, activity, what Yack calls "communion." Communion has the additional characteristic of shared activity which involves an intense identification not just with what one holds in common with others but with a separate collective identity or common actor. [134] MacIntyre exemplifies this perspective, arguing that Aristotle sees the political community as one in which human beings together pursue a single human good rather than the presumed alternative of "providing the arena

[131] Miller 1995, 196-97
[132] "If *X* is essentially (or naturally) a part of some natural whole *Y*, then it is good for *X* that *X* is *F* if, and only if, it is good for *Y* that *X* is *F*" (Miller 1995, 196).
[133] Ibid., 197
[134] Yack 1993, 31

in which each individual seeks his or her own private good."[135] He takes the Aristotelian combination of the good of the polis and that of the individual to mean a single activity in which we ideally engage collectively. "There is no way of my pursuing my good which is necessarily antagonistic to you pursuing yours," he writes, "because the good is neither mine peculiarly nor yours peculiarly."[136]

From this perspective, MacIntyre interprets Aristotle's essentialism in a much less open-ended fashion than I have here (3.1.3). While the human essence remains sensitive to social context, it does so as a result of being defined as a communion-like activity. Here the claim that human beings can only flourish within a political community[137] is taken to presuppose "a wide range of agreement in that community on goods and virtues" and this agreement is taken to imply social harmony and a lack of civil conflict.[138] Thus the activity which defines human excellence is much more spelled out and predetermined. Though recognizing the central role of *phronēsis* and personal judgement, his emphasis on excellent activity being coordinated and harmonious suggests he sees the community sharing in the exercise of *phronēsis* as one sharing its particular uses or outcomes. For MacIntyre, Aristotle appreciates the thesis that human flourishing is a social activity requiring particular forms of community to be realized by employing as a highly determined essentialism, one that demands we harmonize our particular uses of *phronēsis* to act nobly in a similar manner and identify with a common good apart from the good of our shared action.

Similarly, MacIntyre's moderate-holistic interpretation shapes his understanding of Aristotle's theory of friendship. The ends and activities friends share are construed as the collective identity to which they adhere. The good attained by fellow citizens in civic friendship is considered part of one's own good not because our common activity is the *aiming* at a good which happens to be the same—though might be divergently articulated by our individual circumstances and proclivities—but because we share the same aim *and* the activities of its particular manifestations. No room is made for a general, shared activity with individually particular manifestations. This is why MacIntyre

[135] MacInytre 1981, 160
[136] Ibid., 213
[137] The famous "man is a political animal" (*Pol*. 1253a2-3)
[138] Ibid., 141, 47

bemoans the irreconcilable moral pluralism of modern society as a grave tragedy. Only under ancient or medieval conditions where there supposedly existed overwhelming moral consensus could his version of Aristotelian perfectionism actually hold.

However even this moderate-holistic interpretation is widely disputed by Aristotelians. What Miller calls "moderate individualism" is often offered as an alternative account of the relationship between the flourishing of individuals and that of the political community. Bernard Yack describes this position as an interpretation of Aristotle's "political teleology" which maintains that the political community exists "by nature" (i.e. has a natural function) only to the extent that it is composed of human beings who exist by nature.[139] In other words, the political community has no end or 'good' apart from that of its member citizens considered as individual human beings. This is because the political community *is* its component individuals whose flourishing it serves. The polis flourishes only when its citizens flourish not because their flourishing is derivative upon its own or part of it as a hand to a body, but because the good of the political community is precisely those organizations of political offices and social institutions that promote the flourishing of individuals.

Yack offers the following argument to support the moderate individualist position. Firstly, A holist interpretation that has the claim that the polis exists by nature imply that it has its own internal, natural function presents a contradiction for Aristotle's account of natural substances and political regimes. A natural substance realizes its essence or function "always or for the most part."[140] Yet Aristotle also insists that no existing political community closely resembles the good society of *Pol.* VII/VIII. "In all other natural species that Aristotle examines the individual members that fail to realize their complete natural form are the exceptions. If the polis almost always fails to complete its development, it seems impossible to justify Aristotle's description of it as natural."[141] Secondly, human flourishing, though only possible within certain forms of political community, does not require the ideal political community. Here Yack extends the role of phronesis as a universal

[139] Yack 1993, 89-90
[140] *Phys*. 197a32
[141] Yack 1993, 89

virtue requiring individual application to enable human excellence across varied contexts to the specification of particular social norms, laws, and the distribution of powers as we saw in 3.1.3. The moderate individualist interpretation of the common good therefore gets around the contradiction posed by holist interpretations by seeing only the individual citizens as natural whose flourishing becomes possible even in imperfect regimes. As long as the political community embodies conditions under which the development of virtuous character is possible, even if not ideal, it will be contributing to what is natural about it—its individual citizens.

Holists will object to this argument claiming that social harmony and the compossible realization of human ends is no longer possible if those ends are allowed to differ radically in terms of actual activity. After all, this is why Aristotle saw the necessity of the institution of ostracism which enabled the political community to maintain the agreement on matters of the good upon which the flourishing of its members depends.[142] However, as any reasonable individualist would admit, in order to best approximate a congruence between the flourishing of individuals, a part must sometimes be sacrificed. "In this respect," explains C.D.C. Reeve, "Aristotle thinks we are like hands. One will find this insufficiently reassuring only if one thinks...that congruence must be guaranteed in all circumstances. Aristotle certainly fails to provide such reassurance, but this is almost certainly a strength rather than a weakness of his view." [143] Yet such a sacrifice need not be made in the name of maintaining more or less homogenous views concerning the good. If *the* human good embodies a great range of particular activities issuing from general habits and character traits, such sacrifices will be made in order to maintain the order that, given local circumstances, best provides for the development of these habits and traits. Where the holist sees congruence between the flourishing of individuals in conformity, the individualist seeks a more modest congruence that can accommodate competing interests and articulations of noble character.

[142] *Pol.* 1280a30-34
[143] Reeve 1998, lxxii

3.2 Meeting the Classic Objections to Internal Impediments

3.2.1 Ethical autonomy

I mentioned in 1.1.2 several objections typically levelled against theories of false consciousness and the DIT some of which do not apply to a theory of internal impediments. However, the same cannot be said of those which raise concerns about the use of conceptions of human flourishing in identifying false needs. I distinguished two types of concerns in this respect, those sceptical of the intelligibility of claims regarding a human essence from which conceptions of flourishing issue and those which deny that, though such claims may be intelligible, they are not subject to knowledge. Two versions of these concerns especially relevant for a theory of internal impediments hold that conceptions of human flourishing (1) exaggerate similarities between individuals in positing a single human good and (2) universalize what are in fact historically contingent human capacities in holding them to be essentially human.[144] The former expresses a concern that promulgating a single good for all humanity, regardless of its desirability, will undermine legitimate differences in life paths chosen by individuals and cultures promoted by groups. The latter is a worry about flexibility, which fears a conception of human flourishing overlooks differences of context, making judgments about the good too final and unquestionably valid.

Both these objections are made in defence of a particular conception the good perceived to be of a higher order, usually referred to as autonomy. As Maeve Cooke helpfully remarks, "the intuition...at the heart of autonomous agency is the importance of the individual's freedom to form and pursue her conceptions of the good on the basis of reasons that she can call her own. Thus, I interpret autonomy as *ethical* autonomy, as a form of freedom that involves an orientation toward the good."[145] The objections to the use of human flourishing in theories of internal impediments informed by this 'ethical' autonomy constitute what we might call a 'family disagreement' as they

[144] Cooke 2008, 146-47

[145] Ibid., 134. By "ethical" Cooke means thinking devoted to elucidating a conception of the human good as opposed to a context-specific conception of the good as in Habermas (2008, 8).

are not opposed to the foundational idea that individuals can be mistaken about their real interests. Instead they worry that a theory which employs a conception of flourishing in identifying these errors risks becoming one itself. Indeed Held and Lukes seem to have precisely this concern in mind in criticizing Macpherson's conception for its essentialism and self-centredness. However, meeting these objections, as I now argue, requires invoking a conception of the good that is both essentialist and self-centred as the ethical autonomy they seek to preserve depends upon its own account of the good which includes these features. Consequently, insofar as Held and Lukes believe essentialism and self-centredness must be rejected, they betray commitments more harmful to autonomy (on the interpretation I use here) than Macpherson or Aristotle.

Cooke develops "the central intuition" of autonomy as a form of freedom involving an orientation towards the good into four core elements: strong evaluation, rational accountability, independence, and purposive action. Though she does not directly appeal to an essentialist or self-centred conception of the good as an underlying criterion for the invocation of these elements, it is evident from her remarks that such a conception is necessary, at least insofar it consists in an injunction to a type of reasoning. She borrows strong evaluation from Taylor (1985), describing it as "the human agent's ability to construct her identity in reflective engagement with a range of important questions about the good," a capacity to form "second-order desires and volitions" by raising the question: "do I really want to be what I now am?" and being "able and willing to evaluate what [one now is], and to shape [one's self] on the basis of that evaluation."[146] Taylor's point here, ultimately inspired by Aristotle, is that the capacity to choose which way of life to lead depends to a great deal on being able to distinguish "constitutive goods," activities constitutive of excellence, from marginal or despicable ways of life and, crucially, to be receptive to the power of the former and not the latter.[147] Also, as we saw in 1.1.2, Taylor holds that the language of value compels us to see constitutive goods as good activities for things like us, i.e. for human beings.[148] Consequently,

[146] Ibid., 134
[147] Taylor 1985, 18-27
[148] Ibid., 1994, 559

essentialism is required by the reasoning of the strong evaluator as she distinguishes good from bad activity on the basis of whether the activity is constitutive of her conception of what it means to live well as a human being. This reasoning closely resembles Aristotle's *phronēsis* insofar as it consists in making judgments about concrete activities with respect to whether they correspond with abstract *forms* of activity constitutive of one's sense of the good and to the extent that it involves self-analysis in habituating one's desires and proclivities to support excellent activity. In this last sense, strong evaluation is also self-centred. Thus, if one of autonomy's core elements is strong evaluation and if strong evaluation requires reasoning (as a component of the good) that is both essentialist and self-centred as Taylor seems to suggest, then autonomy is facilitated rather than impeded by these commitments in Macpherson.

Rational accountability and independence, though not necessarily requiring an essentialist conception of the good, do demand a self-centred ethic. The former, "the willingness and ability to take responsibility for one's actions, judgments, and self-interpretations" requires precisely what Macpherson's self-centred notion of creative individualism entails—that "individual identity not simply [be] the product of the community's values but a creative appropriation and interpretation of them."[149] Cooke is at pains to underline each individual's need for a "personal space of exploration and experiment" in order that one's life be as self-determined as possible. She suggests that only by ensuring individuals have this space and are equipped with the practical reasoning of strong evaluation to make use of it can they be expected to coherently justify their activity to and be in a position to critique and learn from others with whom they live. Independence similarly requires a self-centred conception of the good be adopted by the individual as it refers to the capacity that enables her to creatively formulate and pursue a plan of life by having within oneself the resources not to totally withdraw but to negotiate prevailing opinion, beliefs, and desires without being determined by them, no matter how true they might be. For Cooke this means being equipped with the "capacity to engage with [one's] surroundings, with other subjects, and with [one's] own self-

[149] Cooke 2008, 138, 140

interpretations and life history in a receptive, flexible, open-minded, sensitive, and imaginative way, without undue reliance on the opinions of others."[150] Finally, since purposive action is essentially the equivalent of Taylor's "constitutive goods," it also demands the essentialist and self-centred features of Macpherson and Aristotle's conceptions of flourishing.

Two objections might be raised on behalf of Held and Lukes that deserve addressing. Firstly, the critic would point out, I am drawing on a single, controversial version of autonomy to show that an essentialist and self-centred conception of the good must be presupposed in (1) and (2) above. There are other theories of autonomy, one might claim, which do not presuppose a conception of the good at all, or at least not one with these features. Of course, many theories of autonomy expressly seek to fashion themselves against positing any conception of human flourishing whatsoever, autonomy representing an ability to do so rather than a substantive conception on its own. However, insofar as we are interested in preserving a theory of internal impediments, obliging us to posit a conception of the good, we are forced to subscribe to something like Cooke's *ethical* autonomy[151] or the perfectionist theory defended by Joseph Raz.[152] Thus, the objection only applies to my invocation of a version whose central elements are essentialist and self-centred. Yet, again following Taylor, it is doubtful whether, once one is using the language of 'the human good,' one can avoid appealing to some notion of the human essence. Moreover, it seems an incontrovertible "central intuition" of autonomy to foster a self-centred ethic in the sense of ensuring an individual be capable of a sufficient degree of self-determination, resisting the straightforward adoption of prevailing norms.

The second objection holds that I have only indirectly shown that (1) and (2) are better met by a Macphersonian framework for conceptions of flourishing. I will address this claim by briefly contrasting how the moderate individualism of Aristotle and Macpherson fares against objections (1) and (2) with the implied alternative in Held and Lukes.

[150] Ibid., 142
[151] Though Cooke does not see autonomy itself as a 'conception of the good' of the order which autonomous individuals affirm, she clearly sees it as a component of a higher order "human flourishing" (2008, 1).
[152] Raz 1986

3.2.2 Objection (1): conceptions of human flourishing deny value to diversity

This first objection issues from the concern that positing a single conception of the good life for all human beings dangerously limits the possibilities for 'experiments in living' and self-determination as well as being insensitive to cultural diversity. As we have said, this objection is actually based on its own conception of the good life, albeit one that is expressly 'thin.' Rather than considering arguments defending homogeneity, I am assuming this element to be a component of any reasonable conception of the good. Thus, the issue is how well the features of moderate individualist and holist conceptions of the good we have considered can incorporate it. Though there are certainly forms of essentialism and self-centredness which would tend to discourage their adherents from valuing diverse forms of activity, those espoused by Aristotle and Macpherson, because of the high priority they place on purposive activity and practical reasoning do not. We saw in 3.1.3 that neither thinker believes the good life, in terms of particular activities embodying human excellence, can be fully spelled out philosophically. Rather, both argue that human beings should live in an environment where they are encouraged to cultivate the ability to habituate themselves, based on their own proclivities, to be able to realize human excellence in the particular situations they find themselves in. It is vital, especially for Macpherson, that each individual have a maximum degree of control over determining the concrete content of her activity since only then can she be said to be actually creative and hence living a fully human life (see 1.3.3).

The perspective Held and Lukes betray does not seem so resilient to this concern, though ironically the objection seems to be one of their motivations in criticizing Macpherson. In order to recognize the full dimension of internal impediments, they believe it is necessary to see human flourishing completely outside a framework that conceives of human beings as having an essence and derives value from the well-being of individuals. Yet the alternative their comments imply (2.1.3) suggests that we equate flourishing with a harmonious collective identity and perhaps even with a

particular understanding of moral and political virtue[153] (3.1.1). The implication is that valuing others demands not only a kind of selflessness which seems inimical to cultivating the resiliency against stultifying conceptions of the good which a theory of internal impediments should furnish, but also an intolerance, or at least a scepticism, of unrecognizable forms of care as Held and Lukes would have these be pre-determined philosophically. The dichotomy they construct between individualism incapable of valuing others and a holist conception of the common good that does, leaves them open to the charge that they would have us value others by adhering to particular standards of right intolerant of experimentation and untrusting of contextual adaptation. Moreover, the equation of flourishing with this highly determined moral virtue seems to deny the importance of non-moral practices—either those which are entirely self-regarding yet can nonetheless be subject to internal impediments or those which involve others but not as the discharge of duties or obligations—to a well lived life. Their alternative framework for a theory of internal impediments presupposes, therefore, a conception of the good which risks unnecessarily diluting diversity.

3.2.3 Objection (2): conceptions of human flourishing universalize contingent features of human beings

These same elements in Held and Lukes' argument also open them to the charge of absolutism. It is a virtue of the Aristotelian and Macphersonian conceptions of human flourishing that they remain adaptable to changing circumstances, particularly their political theories. Macpherson is especially disposed to this position given his argument that essentially human capacities are historical as well as ontological (1.3.1). That is to say, our understanding of human beings depends on presently available 'ethical knowledge' such as accounts of distant societies and experiments in living by individuals and groups in our society. Moreover, human beings develop their capacities through the resources afforded by their historical context, including the 'ethical knowledge' available and passed on. Consequently, he believes conceptions of human flourishing based on essentialist views must be continually re-examined as ethical knowledge and historical

[153] Contrast with Aristotle and Macpherson's view that neither moral nor political virtue consist in the same activities or institutions across contexts.

conditions change. However, this position is also dependent on seeing essentially human capacities as individually malleable, a position Held and Lukes refuse to adopt. Instead, out of the same desire to see individuals as socially constituted, they insist on seeing well-being as social forms embodying moral virtue. Yet it is unclear whether this apparently *a priori* moral theory can adapt to changing historical circumstances which might throw its pre-determined philosophical dictates into question. In other words, their account is more not less disposed to judging valid conceptions of the good from impeding invalid ones in a final manner as 'false' rather than 'worse' impediments of a 'true' rather than 'better' understanding of flourishing.

Conclusion

This chapter has met the claim in Held and Lukes that Macpherson cannot provide a framework for a theory of internal impediments because he subscribes to an individualist conception of human flourishing. The argument relied on showing Held and Lukes' position to depend on two assumptions: firstly, that an individualist conception of flourishing is essentialist and therefore incapable of grasping the social thesis; secondly, that an individualist conception is also self-centred and therefore hostile to valuing others for their own sake. Since their case depends on an individualist conception of flourishing that displays these elements necessarily resulting in these two outcomes, my argument relied on constructing a counter-example not necessarily in Macpherson's own theory. This was most clearly on offer from a moderate individualist interpretation of Aristotle which also happens to display striking similarities with Macpherson's conception of flourishing in the relevant respects. Finally, I argued that objections to the DIT relevant for theories of internal impediments, namely those issuing from concerns that the reliance on a conception of human flourishing threatens autonomy, are better met by an essentialist and self-centred moderate individualism than by the holist conception of well-being implied in Held and Lukes' criticisms.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that C.B. Macpherson's conception of human nature can provide a defensible foundation for a theory of internal impediments. Though his political thought does not explicitly attempt to do so, such a theory, as we saw in chapter one, is logically required by the overall structure of his normative arguments and presupposed in his conception of the good life. I have advanced this claim by refuting the arguments of Virginia Held and Steven Lukes, both of whom maintain that Macpherson cannot provide a framework for a theory of internal impediments because his conception of the good life is individualistic. Upon reconstructing their vague arguments in this regard, I established that they are consistent only if internal impediments are understood to depend on a holist conception of the good since only a holist conception can grasp the extent to which human beings are socially constituted (2.1.3). My counterargument depended on revealing that this conclusion relies on two further assumptions about individualistic conceptions. These were, firstly, that individualism implies what Lukes' calls the "the onion theory of the self" and, secondly, that it implies egoism (3.1.1). Because Held and Lukes' arguments hold that all accounts of the good which feature these characteristics necessarily fail to grasp the extent of our social embedded-ness, I was able to refute their central claim using a counter-example. This was most effectively accomplished with the moderately individualist interpretation of Aristotle's theory of human flourishing, upon which Macpherson's own account is closely modeled (3.1.2-1.5). Finally, I argued that objections to the DIT relevant for theories of internal impediments, namely those issuing from concerns that the reliance on a conception of human flourishing threatens autonomy, are better met by an essentialist and self-centred moderate individualism than by the holist conception of well-being implied in Held and Lukes' criticisms.

If this argument is valid, it has important implications for the interpretation of Macpherson's legacy, the viability of philosophical anthropology in normative political theory, and the supposedly decisive critiques of theories of false consciousness and the DIT. Macpherson's political theory should be appreciated not only for its contribution to the history of political thought, but also for its

particular Aristotelian model of practical reason unusual amongst Aristotle's contemporary followers. Whereas neo-Aristotelians such as MacIntyre and Nussbaum tend to emphasize either a holist conception of human flourishing or a perfectionist political theory relying on the principled application of his moral philosophy (3.1.3), Macpherson offers a theory of the good society that sees its aim as the maximization of the good of each individual while leaving the precise determination of its principles of justice to citizens. This is, if nothing else, a refreshing perspective within the contemporary context where theories of political justice tend to favour pre-determined, and therefore potentially absolutist, accounts. In these respects, Macpherson also exemplifies the plausibility of basing a recognizably liberal theory of the good society on a conception of human nature without obviously violating our cherished ideal of autonomy. Finally, Insofar as theories of false consciousness have been objected to on the grounds that they invoke conceptions of human nature, Macpherson's moderately individualist conception offers good reasons to rethink these claims. Though, to be sure, such theories remain beleaguered by a number of other objections, one the more important is strongly challenged by Macpherson's example.

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