Chapter Two

≈ Autonomy and Its Critics

WHAT AUTONOMY DEMANDS—AUTONOMY AS INTOLERANCE—AUTONOMY AGONISTES—THE TWO STANDPOINTS—AGENCY AND THE INTERESTS OF THEORY

What Autonomy Demands

Anna Karenina's dissolute brother has a weakness for oysters, and cigars, and unmarried governesses, but what a recent generation of ethicists has found most worrying is how totally he lacks a proper independence of mind. Here is Tolstoy's often-quoted description:

> Stepan Arkadyich subscribed to and read a liberal newspaper, not an extreme one, but one with the tendency to which the majority held. And though neither science, nor art, nor politics itself interested him, he firmly held the same views on all these subjects as the majority and his newspaper did, and changed them only when the majority did, or, rather, he did not change them, but they themselves changed imperceptibly in him.[1]

You can see why theorists of autonomy have pounced. For Gerald Dworkin, "the beliefs are not his because they are borrowed; and they are borrowed without even being aware of their source; and, it is implied, he is not capable of giving some account of their validity—not even an account which, say, stresses the likelihood of the majority being correct, or the necessity for moral consensus."[2] For Joel Feinberg, Stepan is a portrait of inauthenticity, in that he "can construct no rationale for his beliefs other than that they are the beliefs held by those to whom he responds (if he even knows who *they* are), and can give no reason for thinking that *their* beliefs (like those of some reasonably selected authority) might be correct."[3]

And, of course, Mill voiced congruent concerns: we know he viewed with disfavor the person "who lets the world . . . choose his plan of life for him," rather than choosing it himself. Yet a question immediately arises: what is required to choose freely? It's customary to mention the absence of coercion and the availability of options, but Mill (like contemporary theorists of autonomy) also worries about deformations of the will: about preferences that are unreflectively bequeathed by custom, about "likings in groups." So personal autonomy seems to entail a lot more than just being left to your own devices; it sounds like a capacity we need to cultivate, or perhaps one of those virtues, like courage or integrity, that people are likely to honor in the breach. Just how autonomous do you have to be to have true autonomy?

There's reason to take the question seriously. What we can call "autonomism"—following Lawrence Haworth and wresting the term from a few superannuated Italian radicals—undergirds a great deal of liberal thought; the notion is central to a range of normative theories of politics, including the ones that will be of particular interest to us in the context of what I'll be calling "soul making": the so-called liberal perfectionism associated with Joseph Raz and others.[4] Unfortunately, in making a case for the value of autonomy (in some instances as a primary value; in some instances just as a very fine thing indeed), many of its proponents have succumbed to the temptation to make it seem not just necessary but admirable—not so much a poured-concrete foundation on which to build as a shimmering jade mountain toward which to journey.

And so personal autonomy is promoted from value to ideal, one that directs us to do what Stepan does not—winnow the contents of our souls. In Robert Young's view, autonomy is a kind of self-direction that imposes a shape on the "principles of thought and action" that guide one's life: "To the extent that an individual is self-directed he (or she) brings the entire course of his life into a unified order. This suggests that a person who is free of external constraints and who has the capacity to pursue a particular pattern of living may fail to be autonomous . . . because he is not able to organize these principles in a unified way."[5] Stanley Benn, emphasizing the importance of critical reflection on one's norms and practices, sets the bar almost as high: "the autono-

mous person has realized the potentialities of his autarchic status to a higher degree than someone who merely falls in with the projects of others and assesses his performance by standards thrust on him by his environment."[6] It has, indeed, become commonplace to stipulate that the autonomous agent has distanced himself from social influences and conventions, and conducts himself according to principles that he has himself ratified through critical reflection.[7] Behold the citizen as a one-person ethics committee, tasked with from-the-ground-up axiology; how this leaves time for the humbler pursuits of getting and spending is anyone's guess.

There's a pattern here. Advocates of strong autonomy (as I'll call it) are responding to those who point out the ways in which our values and convictions and habits are often anything but autochthonous. Their solution has been to define autonomy *up*: to make it more exalted, more demanding. In short, faced with on-the-ground resistance, they have fallen victim to conceptual mission creep. The consequence has been to make autonomy look outlandishly exigent. Its devotees want it to be as common as crabgrass; but they talk as if it is a rare orchid, and just as particular about soil and climate.

The result is to bring autonomy some unearned adversaries. David Johnston's *The Idea of a Liberal Theory*, for example, worries that personal autonomy is something of a luxury item. Johnston starts by distinguishing personal autonomy from what he variously calls "agent autonomy" or, simply, agency. To have agency is just to be able to conceive and pursue projects, plans, values. By contrast, to have personal autonomy is actively to choose the values and projects you wish to pursue—to be a subject of self-authorship. (If this seems, as he anticipates, a too-stringent construction, he suggests "reflective self-direction" as a milder alternative.) What's an example of an agent who lacks personal autonomy? Johnston introduces us to Michael, who's born in a provincial town and attends public school and a local college, goes to work for his father's chain of drugstores, and marries his high-school sweetheart. Because Michael "never gives serious consideration to any pattern of life other than the one he actually pursues," Johnston says that, though he has agency, he "is not personally autonomous."[8] He concludes that a good society should create the conditions by which its members can become agents, and foster a sense of justice (that is, *moral* autonomy),

but that personal autonomy, contrary to Joseph Raz, is not essential. Given Johnston's overextended construction of personal autonomy, it's hard to disagree.

Yet this is not, one might point out, precisely Raz's construction. Raz, in *The Morality of Freedom*, says that the "autonomous person is part author of his life," but immediately goes on to issue a series of deflating caveats. The notion is "not to be identified with the ideal of giving one's life a unity"; and, he says, "a person who frequently changes his tastes can be as autonomous as one who never shakes off his adolescent preferences." The autonomous person

> must be aware of his life as stretching over time. He must be capable of understanding how various choices will have considerable and lasting impact on his life. He may always prefer to avoid long-term commitments. But he must be aware of their availability. This has led to some over-intellectualized conceptions of personal autonomy. I know of nothing wrong with the intellectual life, just as I know of nothing wrong with people who consciously endow their lives with great unity. But the ideal of personal autonomy is meant to be wider and compatible with other styles of life, including those which are very unintellectual.[9]

As Raz goes on to stress, awareness of one's opportunities and abilities "does not mean premeditation or a very deliberate style of life, nor does it necessitate any high degree of self-awareness or rationality All it requires is the awareness of one's options and the knowledge that one's actions amount to charting a course that could have been otherwise."[10]

Michael passes this test easily. For him, large issues about how else he might live his life don't arise, Johnston says. But what of it? He knows that his "actions amount to charting a course that could have been otherwise." Indeed, the capacity to form and execute plans, as Raz also points out, is a necessary feature of having practical reason.[11] George Sher has similarly elaborated a view of autonomy as "responsiveness to reasons," again centering the notion on the prerequisites of practical rationality.[12] So it would seem that what Johnston calls "agent autonomy"—along with the correlative requirement that society provide conditions under which people are able to formulate and pursue projects and values—is all that's necessary.

Yet even in this blandly tempered version, autonomy remains a fighting word. In this chapter, I want to defend what I take to be the core idea of autonomy against both those who worry it isn't strong enough and those who worry that it's too strong—both those who want to promote it to the status of unattainable ideal and those who want to demote it to the realm of parochial values. My aim is to protect it from its enthusiasts and its detractors alike. And yet, as we'll see, even a more modest version of autonomy can become easily ensnared in ambiguities and antinomies. And the real debates can't be dissolved by definitional refinements. In the end, I'll try to connect the debates over autonomy to the venerable opposition between structure and agency—and suggest that this opposition, too, has been wrongly framed in the first place.

Autonomy as Intolerance

The controversy over how to formulate autonomy—over what set of criteria best captures our intuition, or best expresses our ideal; or over the precise content of the ideal (the debate has both conceptual and normative dimensions)—immediately lets on to another: whether autonomy, even putting aside the details of its specification, is or ought to be a value in the first place, at least outside of the liberal democracies of the West. An availability of options, an endowment with minimum rationality, an absence of coercion: if this is the core of personal autonomy, what could be more anodyne and unexceptionable? And yet, perhaps goaded by the sort of autonomist overstretch we've seen, many political theorists write about it as if it were an industrial effluent, something generated by Western modernity and exported, willy-nilly, to hapless denizens of the non-Western world. In autonomism, they descry the tyranny of the *hypermarché*, paving over rooted, unglamorous ways of life that do not, themselves, embody the value of autonomy. By insisting that each person should have the ability to choose his own conception of the good, are we, paradoxically, truncating the available range of such conceptions? For Mill, as we saw, autonomy and diversity were plaited together in his ideal of individuality. For many critics, however, the language of autonomy reflects an arrogant insularity; all that talk of self-fashioning, self-direction, self-authorship

suggests a bid to create the Performance Art Republic, elbowing aside Grandma Walton in order to make the world safe for Karen Finley.

The apparent discord between autonomy and diversity has been variously framed; William Galston diagnoses a conflict between the Enlightenment and the post-Reformation projects—between the contrary ideals of self-directed reason and of tolerance.[13] As he says, a tension between tolerance and autonomy has surely been a part of liberalism since its origins. And yet autonomist overreach raises these tensions to the point where some theorists have sought their divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable differences.

The political theorist John Gray, rather hastily conflating Isaiah Berlin's critique of positive liberty with his strictures about the ideal of self-direction—states the critique forcefully, and with an interesting twist:

> Such autonomy-based liberalism, from Berlin's standpoint, elevates a controversial and questionable ideal of life uncritically and unduly. There are many excellent lives that are not especially autonomous, and which liberal societies can shelter: the life of a nun, of the professional soldier, or the artist passionately devoted to his work, may be lives in which rare and precious goods are embodied, and yet lives that are, in very different ways, far from autonomous. The idea which the 'basic freedom' of choice-making supports is not that of autonomy, but of self-creation, where the self that is created may very well not be that of an autonomous agent. To demand of self-creation that it conform with an ideal of rational autonomy is . . . an unacceptably and necessarily restrictive requirement. It excludes the life of the traditionalist, whose choices confirm a self-identity that has been inherited, as much as those of the mystic, or the playful hedonist, for whom a fixed identity may be a useless encumbrance, and the reflective deliberation that is involved in autonomous agency a burdensome distraction.[14]

In pitting autonomy against diversity—in painting autonomism as the bigotry of liberals—his voice is one of a chorus. "Autonomy-based liberalism ultimately contains no commitment to the value of diversity in and of itself," writes Susan Mendus. "It justifies only those diverse forms of life which themselves value autonomy and thus makes toleration a pragmatic device—a temporary expedient—not a matter of principle." Charles Larmore says, "liberals such as Kant and Mill, who have coupled their political theory with a corresponding notion of what in

general ought to be our personal ideal, have betrayed in fact the liberal spirit." According to Chandran Kukathas, many cultures don't "place such value on the *individual's* freedom to choose his ends. Often, the individual and his interest are subordinated to the community." Bhikhu Parekh joins this point to a larger critique of "monism" among moral and political philosophers, and Mill, despite his diversitarian rhetoric, is among the culprits: "Since Mill's theory of diversity was embedded in an individualist vision of life, he cherished individual but not cultural diversity, that is diversity of views and lifestyles within a shared individualist culture but not diversity of cultures including the nonindividualist."[15] And these are weaknesses that Mill, in Parekh's view, shares with his contemporary heirs.

Amid this enfilade of objections, some things can be clearly made out. There's a widespread anxiety that autonomism is predicated upon the notion of a "true self" that Berlin associated with the dangerous ideal of positive liberty. In this way, Gray wishes to separate Berlin from the "autonomist liberalism" he identifies with Raz: but the result is a persuasive reading neither of Berlin nor of Raz. One might note that the traditionalist whom Gray seeks to protect is precisely someone who rejects the voluntaristic model of self-choice or self-creation that Gray evidently plumps for, and it is a curious suggestion that "self-creation" is less (rather than more) burdensome an ideal than autonomy. For that matter, the ethic of autonomy shouldn't, on its face, pose any problems for the self-chosen life of the nun, or playboy, or artist.[16] To assume that a passionately committed artist fails to be autonomous implies that the autonomous must be only lightly committed to their projects; whereas some conceptions of autonomy, as we've seen, insist on precisely the opposite—they require that we embrace our norms and preferences.

As for Susan Mendus's worry that liberalism "ultimately contains no commitment to the value of diversity in and of itself," the autonomist might plead nolo contendere. Earlier, we saw—in Mill and such later theorists as Sen—an insistence that the *fact* of diversity be recognized and incorporated in the way we think about liberty (for Mill) and equality (for Sen); this was part of the doctrine of individuality, as it is part of the doctrine of autonomism. But to say that diversity in and of itself is a value, a primordial good, is to say something altogether different and less obvious, and I will explore this controversial claim in chapter

4. Mendus's additional charge of cultural cronyism—the charge that autonomism "justifies" only autonomist forms of life—invites a number of confusions. Autonomy-based liberalism, or any doctrine of social ordering, need not "justify" diverse forms of life in any strong sense; it need only accommodate them and extend equal respect to their members. Further, such toleration or accommodation, far from being a "temporary expedient," can plausibly be considered a precondition for the exercise of autonomy. It is true that associations that encroach on the autonomy of their members pose hard questions—and we will take these up later—but then, for a liberal society that seeks to guarantee the rights of its members, these groups *should* pose hard problems. The autonomist can consistently reject what Nancy L. Rosenblum has criticized as the "logic of congruence," according to which civic associations in a democracy must themselves be internally democratic.[17] At a minimum, as I've suggested, it's not obvious that autonomism must rule out voluntary membership in autonomy-scanting forms of life. "One cannot be, at one and the same time, a fully autonomous liberal individual and a dutifully obedient member of a traditional community," Gray says.[18] That can't be right. Notwithstanding Thomas Merton's elective membership in a faith-based community that valued obedience and self-abnegation, it would be very strange to say that Merton lacked autonomy; on the contrary, his intensely self-reflective attitude toward his own values seems to manifest autonomy of an extremely robust form.

Gray levels another charge against autonomy, one at odds with his charge that autonomy is ethnocentric: it is that autonomy is indeterminate. "There are many rival autonomies," Gray argues. "When pursued by people with differing views of what makes human lives worthwhile, the liberal project of promoting autonomy can have very different outcomes. . . . When we judge that choice is greater in one context than it is in another, we do so on the basis of an evaluation of the options that they contain. We have no value-free measure of relative autonomy."[19] His insistence that there is no "value-free" measure of relative autonomy is then used to justify a politics of retreat, the failure of nerve that he would ennoble as *modus vivendi.*

> If diversity comes into conflict with liberty, and the diversity is that of worthwhile forms of life expressive of genuine human needs and embodying

> authentic varieties of human flourishing, why should liberty always trump diversity—especially if one is a value pluralist? To claim that it must do so is to say that no form of life deserves to survive if it cannot withstand the force of the exercise of free choice by its members. But this is precisely the pure philosophy of rights that Berlinian value-pluralism undercuts.[20]

So Gray maintains, appealing to what we might call the Argument from Other Cultures; and yet it remains unclear by what value-free measure those forms are deemed "worthwhile" examples of human flourishing.[21] His doctrine of *modus vivendi* asks that we cater to authoritarian groups while maintaining some sort of exquisite impartiality among them. (Gray, it should be noted, rejects liberal neutrality—rejects both "political liberalism" and "comprehensive liberalism"—because, as he sees it, the workings of value pluralism apply to the Right, as well as the Good.) Liberty isn't an ultimate value, for Gray; harmony seems to be. And in his zeal to give peace offerings to *les coutumes étrangères*, we're offered a liberalism of bound feet, barely able to totter across the room to settle a dispute.

"We cannot agree on what most advances autonomy, because our views of the good diverge in precisely the ways of which value-pluralism speaks," he says, in an influential line of argument. "Autonomy is not a still point in the turning world of values. It is a point of intersection for all their conflicts." The error is to suppose that liberalism should *want* to remove such debates from the realm of politics, or that agreement on what best serves the purposes of autonomy should be reached in advance; on the contrary, the hard cases are meet subject for the rough-and-tumble of political debate and deliberation. Nobody promised that a liberal politics would be "a refuge from conflict."[22] Here, virtue is miscast as vice.

Gray finds it telling that in most "late modern societies . . . the liberal discourse of rights and personal autonomy is deployed in a continuing conflict to gain and hold power by communities and ways of life having highly diverse values. Where it exists, the hegemony of liberal discourse is often skin deep." Yet, from the perspective of conventional liberal theory, the thinness of liberal discourse is a considerable recommendation. American fundamentalism, he continues darkly, "appropriates [liberal values] for its own purposes."[23] But, again, politically speaking

that's what talk of values is *for*—to be appropriated by political actors for their "own purposes." This is not the subversion of liberal language so much as its vindication. (I'll be saying more about this, in the context of "incompletely theorized agreement," in chapter 6.) It is not a small service to provide a shared vocabulary through which people and groups may contend for the exercise of power. So when Gray warns that even the United States "is not hegemonically liberal but morally pluralist," this will not trouble the post-Rawlsian liberal, who regards its moral pluralism as a tribute to its political liberalism. A political liberalism that functioned only for comprehensive liberals, let us agree, would be a poor and shrunken thing. Once again, a virtue has been miscast as vice.

Autonomy Agonistes

It should be obvious, in any case, that the Argument from Other Cultures is a bit of a red herring. Indeed, what has been dramatized in terms of Us and Them, the West and the Rest, really plays out familiar conflicts between liberals and communitarians, between "atomistic" and "holistic" conceptions of society, conflicts that are *internal* to the West. We're like the astronomer who mistakes the fly on the other end of the telescope for a planet a good deal farther away.

After all, it can be disputed whether it makes sense, in *any* society, to speak of individuals' choosing their ends. "Can we imagine individuals without any involuntary ties at all, unbound, utterly free?" Michael Walzer writes. "The thought experiment is especially useful now, when postmodern theorists are writing so excitedly about 'self-fashioning,' an enterprise undertaken not exactly in a social vacuum but rather—so we are told—amid the ruins of conventional social forms. I suspect that the effort to describe a society of self-fashioning individuals is necessarily self-defeating." Charles Taylor makes a similar point when he says that a "self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution,' " that "living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood." Likewise Sandel's skepticism toward the "volun-

taristic" relation between ourselves and our ends which Rawls is said to posit: "we cannot regard ourselves as independent in this way without great cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history. To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments such as these is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character." Or Daniel A. Bell's insistence that "one's social world supplies more than trivial norm-government practices—it also sets the authoritative moral horizons within which we determine" what's worth striving for.[24]

There's a Wittgensteinian thread that runs through some of these considerations. Wittgenstein, of course, urged us to accept that the "form of life" might be explanatory bedrock in social thought. So, in an example of his, when children have learned how to proceed with the number-series, following 1,000 by 1,001 and 1,002, there's no content to saying they've "grasped the principle of adding 1": talk of "principles" puts a shiny top hat on the bald truth—that they have simply acquired a "way of going on." It is an easy step from here to the thought that there really is no place outside the practice of using numerals in the way we do from which to assess that practice: to understand elementary arithmetic is to participate in the practice; what is available outside the practice is not a review of arithmetical practice but only no arithmetical understanding at all. Wittgenstein (at least in one influential construction) wants us to stop simply with the recognition that it is part of the natural history of our species that most of us can count. This has led many people to stress that issues of value and rationality always arise within a form of life, and that it is only within the practices of a certain community—against a background in which these practices are taken as given—that we can ask the questions "Is this so?" and "Is that reasonable?" They might doubt whether it even makes sense to "reflect critically" upon our views, values, and preferences. We *are* our ends, the communitarians urge in a consonant spirit: we can't imagine ourselves as independent from our loyalties or convictions because, Sandel says, "living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are."[25]

One needn't be a card-carrying communitarian to accept that these considerations aren't without substance. As we saw in the previous chapter—in defending individuality from the charges of unsociability and arbitrariness—to give people a conceptual vocabulary is to influence them; but to deprive them of it is to cripple them, not to empower them. As we also conceded in that chapter, liberal talk about the role of critical reflection in arriving at one's life plan, or one's conception of the good life, can sometimes seem remote from lived experience. But these aren't considerations that cut against autonomism as such; they're considerations that our understanding of autonomy must accommodate.

So it's important to note that one needn't subscribe to autonomism to have autonomy. Now, there are many activities that must be conducted under a certain description; you can get married only under the description of getting married. To get married, that is, you have to recognize that this is what you're doing. By contrast, the exercise of autonomy—of what passes for uncoerced, unmanipulated choice making; of "reason-responsive" behavior—doesn't require an ethic of autonomy. To be autonomous you don't need the concept of autonomy at all. You might well exercise your capacity for practical rationality under the label, say, of Recognizing the Truth. People don't, as a rule, imagine themselves as having arrived at their own conception of the good life: their conception of the good or well-lived life would be undermined by their imagining it to be a wholly volitional affair, chosen among equally qualified candidates. Consider the religious believer who has decided to follow the One True Path: to him, what's crucial is that he has been guided by the truth, by the nature of the universe. He has (he may insist) no more "decided" to walk this path than he "decided" to view the sky as blue. And what's true of the zealot is true, as well, of the slacker. Neither sees himself as being in the plan-formulating business. Both can be plausibly credited with autonomy.

And so, for that matter, can poor old Stepan Arkadyich. His choice of his liberal paper isn't, after all, arbitrary: a conservative tendency was "also held to by many in his circle," Tolstoy assures us. But Stepan's paper was more consistent with his own everyday experiences—it "more closely suited his manner of life." (And in that sense he has "come to identify" with these beliefs and preferences, just as Gerald Dworkin asks.)

> The liberal party said that everything was bad in Russia, and indeed Stepan Arkadyich had many debts and decidedly too little money. The liberal party said that marriage was an obsolete institution and was in need of reform, and indeed family life gave Stepan Arkadyich little pleasure and forced him to lie and pretend, which was so contrary to his nature. The liberal party said, or rather implied, that religion was just a bridle for the barbarous parts of the population, and indeed Stepan Arkadyich could not even stand through a short prayer service without aching feet and could not grasp the point of all these fearsome and high-flown words about the other world, when life in this one could be so merry.[26]

His putative failure to be independent, then, seems really a deliberate policy of what we might call "intellectual outsourcing." And surely it counts in his favor that he seems to be a fan of Mill's, at least at second hand. (He reads with particular enjoyment an article "in which mention was made of Bentham and Mill and fine barbs were shot at the ministry," Tolstoy recounts.)[27] Since Stepan's name has been so besmirched, it may be worth pointing out that this is not his only appealing trait. Stepan, we're told, was "liked by all who knew him" for, among other things, "his kind, cheerful temper and unquestionable honesty." He commanded the respect of his colleagues, superiors, and subordinates, owing to such qualities as "an extreme indulgence toward people, based on his awareness of his own shortcomings," and "a perfect liberalism, not the sort he read about in the newspapers, but the sort he had in his blood, which made him treat all people, whatever their rank or status, in a perfectly equal and identical way." Elsewhere, Tolstoy stresses that he was "incapable of self-deception," which would suggest that his penchant for secondhand opinions is predicated upon something more complicated than bad faith.[28] Now, Stepan is a less than admirable character in lots of ways; he's a faithless husband, for one thing, and so, in the wake of his sister's ostracism, serves as an emblem of his class's sexual hypocrisy. But he stays loyal to the beleaguered Anna, and his unabashed enjoyment of luxury is unmarred by pretense or cruelty. There is nothing small or stunted about him. He enjoys the good life, has a sort of hedonistic full-heartedness—there are virtues here, too.

I'm not defending this wayward Millian just to be mischievous; the bigger point is that, in falling back upon the (congenial) cognitive authority of others, we are all Stepan. Certainly this is true in the rudi-

mentary elms-and-experts way that Hilary Putnam has written about.[29] Our cognitive division of labor is as useful and as widespread as the economic division of labor. It would be stultifying to abjure words we cannot fully explain or claims we cannot ourselves adequately defend. But it's also the case that, as a body of empirical research into the nature of political identity suggests, few of us acquire our political convictions with any greater rigor than Stepan does. Among the many reasons that autonomy (or authenticity or the other character ideals sometimes allied with it) cannot require a very high degree of self-scrutiny, the most persuasive is that we would be hard put to describe *ourselves* that way. What the psychologist John Bargh has dubbed the "automaticity of being" characterizes vast swaths of our waking existence.[30] (The phenomenon Stepan in fact demonstrates is rather more interesting: how a disapproving attitude toward the prevailing norms can be as reflexive as a blinkered adherence to those norms. For, as we saw, it is a liberal paper to which he subscribes, and the liberal paper is constantly calling this or that convention to the bar of rational scrutiny and finding it wanting.) In general, proponents of strong autonomy have moved too quickly from the fact that we sentient creatures have the ability to step back and evaluate our beliefs to the mandate that we actively do so. They confuse a capacity and its exercise. This much should certainly be conceded to some of autonomy's critics; but, as I say, it is not an objection to autonomy properly understood.

In arguing against ultrademanding conceptions of autonomy, I have been concerned that autonomy not price itself out of the market. But it must not sell itself too cheaply either. Though a more modest conception of autonomy sidesteps many difficulties, plenty of perplexities cannot be sidestepped, some of which, but only some, I've already touched on. Raz himself says that the autonomous agent, in addition to having minimum rationality and adequate options, has to be "free from coercion and manipulation by others, he must be independent."[31] And, of course, much depends on how aggressively the latter desiderata are specified. For the philosophical literature on autonomy has turned up countless puzzles: sometimes we are more autonomous than we might appear, and sometimes we are less.

Consider a particularly grueling day in the life of a store owner—David Johnston's incurious provincial, perhaps. In the morning, let's say, Michael reluctantly gives his assistant manager a raise; she's made

it clear that she'll quit the drugstore otherwise, and he can't afford the disruption just now. At midday, a blackmailer tells him that if he doesn't give him five hundred dollars, he'll inform Michael's wife that he's been having an affair. In the afternoon, he decides to open another drugstore downtown—based on misleading information supplied by his bookkeeper, who's looking to land her sister a job there. In the evening, a robber enters his store and demands that he open the vault where the cash is held. He weighs various options (should he pretend that the vault is on a timer, and that he can't open it? should he pretend that the key is with someone else, activate the silent alarm, and stall for time?) and decides to open the vault.

In short, it has been a day crammed with conundrums. Michael has twice had to pay dearly to prevent a person—the assistant manager; the blackmailer—from doing something that would harm him. Yet most people would classify only the second instance as involving coercion. During the robbery, Michael formed the intention to open the vault after considering all the options; although he wouldn't have made his decision without coercion, he could have done otherwise. Did he form his intention autonomously? Reasonable people may differ.[32] Michael's decision to open the store downtown is a pretty straightforward result of informational manipulation. But the information and opinion that any executive gets from his advisers will be affected by their biases, and so, just as you'd suppose, it's hard to demarcate manipulation from persuasion. Certainly, freedom from manipulation can't mean freedom from social pressure. As we saw, those who would insist on a heavy task of critical reflection are worried that such pressures may compromise our independence of mind. But there's no way to distinguish, even in principle, between such propagation of norms, on the one hand, and, on the other, the establishment of those "horizons of choice" that are necessary to choosing in the first place.

Mill himself stepped carefully here, and his celebration of diversity and nonconformity shouldn't distract us from his many concessions to both custom and "natural sentiment." People who identify autonomy with critical reflection often trace the position back to Mill.[33] And yet to dwell on deformations of will is to leave out the other half of the Millian picture. He did indeed deplore "liking in groups"; he also upheld the importance of moral consensus. Thus, for example, Mill, in

his *Utilitarianism*, raised a worry about the potentially corrosive effects of analysis on moral sentiment—and allayed it by suggesting that the crucial ethical norms would not be forever the object of such analysis. With the "strengthening of social ties, and all healthy growth of society," Mill says, an individual

> comes, as though instinctively, to be conscious of himself as a being who of course pays regard to others. The good of others becomes to him a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to, like any of the physical conditions of our existence. . . . Consequently the smallest germs of the feeling are laid hold of and nourished by the contagion of sympathy and the influences of education; and a complete web of corroborative association is woven round it, by the powerful agency of the external sanction. . . . This mode of conceiving ourselves and human life, as civilisation goes on, is felt to be more and more natural.[34]

Note the organicist language here—the way Mill speaks of what comes "instinctively," "naturally," "necessarily." The putatively natural basis of these sentiments (which society is directed to amplify) guarantees that they will be proof against "the dissolving force of analysis" that, Mill says, "intellectual culture" must pose to moral associations that are artificial in character. Nor was Mill generally dismissive of received wisdom, the norms and conventions one is bequeathed by society; he just thought this wisdom was more likely to be accurate about common things, and that when it came to things that were distinctively one's own, one should prefer one's own perspective. As we saw in the previous chapter, Mill's position flows, in part, from his ideal of self-development, but in part, too, from his belief that individuals were likely to be the best judges of their own interests. Unlike many theorists of autonomy today, who would assign us all to undertake a comprehensive assessment of norms and values, Mill never confused the job description of the citizen with that of the moral theorist.

The Two Standpoints

So what are we to make of that putative tension between, on the one hand, the theme of reflective self-direction as it runs

through Locke, and Kant, and, indeed, Mill—as well as through much recent liberal thought—and, on the other hand, the communitarian emphasis on a social matrix that not only constrains but constitutes our selves? By way of reconciling the two, it's natural to speak of "partial autonomy," and "partial authorship." In Raz's words, "All three conditions, mental abilities, adequacy of options, and independence admit of degree. Autonomy in both its primary and secondary senses is a matter of degree."[35] The partitive rhetoric, unexceptionable though it sounds, papers over a deeper divide.

When you stare at the language of autonomy for any length of time, you can start to wonder not whether it's good or bad, a basic need or a luxury item, but whether it's even coherent. The notion of partial autonomy suggests the conceptual possibility of "full" autonomy: if we have difficulty making sense of the latter, we should find the former equally elusive. In fact, *both* sides of the liberal-communitarian debate have trouble with autonomy. Here we can follow Samuel Scheffler, who, in an important essay on contemporary liberalism as a politics and as a theory, points out that it largely scants the notion of desert, and offers the following diagnosis: "The widespread reluctance among political philosophers to defend a robust notion of preinstitutional desert is due in part to the power in contemporary philosophy of the idea that human thought and action may be wholly subsumable within a broadly naturalistic view of the world. The reticence of these philosophers . . . testifies in part to the prevalence of the often unstated conviction that a thoroughgoing naturalism leaves no room for a conception of individual agency substantial enough to sustain such a notion."[36]

If this is right, talking about "partial authorship," or "partial autonomy," will sound like a bit of a dodge. In fact, there's a duck-rabbit oscillation between a perspective in which autonomy is salient and one in which it disappears entirely. Man makes history, Marx famously averred, but under circumstances and conditions not of his own choosing. That's a natural gloss to place upon the stricture that our autonomy is always only partial. Yet from the perspective that sees us as the product of history, society, culture—and, a fortiori, from the grandly scientific perspective that sees us enmeshed in causal chains that stretch from starfish to the stars—what really remains of autonomy? You, the putatively autonomous individual, are confined to the options that are avail-

able to you; and those options themselves represent substantial fixities, a nexus of institutions and practices you did not create yourself. If your values represent what you desire to desire (in David K. Lewis's elegant formulation), what you desire to desire may not be up to you, in the sense that your "will" is the product of forces external to it. Even sticking to the social realm, we know that, for example, the phenomenon that Jon Elster taught us to call "adaptive preference formation" tends to align what people want with what they can get—to conform their desires to their options. And your choices are further limited by your capacities. And those capacities are bequeathed by your natural endowments and your training, neither of which you chose.

The familiar determinist conclusion is that a really complete specification of your conditions and circumstances, internal and external, would permit one to infer your preferences, plans, and actions. From this highly granular perspective, the concept of autonomy simply has no role to play. You are not author; you are authored.

Recall Raz's caveat: "All three conditions, mental abilities, adequacy of options, and independence admit of degree. Autonomy in both its primary and secondary senses is a matter of degree." This suggests (among other things) that there can be better and worse arrays of options. Given that, as Gerald Dworkin has observed, more options aren't necessarily better, how are we to say what sort of option set would advance our autonomy?[37] Does the pianist who also had the skills to be a violinist have more autonomy than the pianist who lacked that second option? Does the rich bachelor idler have more autonomy than the family man with a full-time job? Is Levin more autonomous than Stepan Arkadyich? Such are the imponderables posed by talk of options. And the independence-function is even more vexing. What would complete independence of mind look like? Surely it would mean (as Walzer and others warned) not to be "minded" at all: to have no fixtures, no horizons of decision making, no pregiven ends or values or interests or goals. Such a creature starts to look distinctively inhuman.

And yet without such strictures, aren't we in danger of ascribing autonomy to automatons—to people in whom desires seem to be implanted, like a foreign body? To people who couldn't really want what they seem to want, but are subordinate to the will of others, or blinded by inadequate knowledge of the world? So we find our way back to the

quandary. As we saw, from certain perspectives, autonomy is a thing that most people have; from other perspectives, one has reason to wonder whether such an exalted state is achievable, or even intelligible.

How, then, to reconcile subject-centered and social-centered accounts? Perhaps the most persuasive attempt is the one made by Charles Taylor, who has elaborated a notion of social practices wherein our actions belong to the practices that give them shape and meaning. "A great deal of human action only happens insofar as the agent understands and constitutes himself as integrally part of a 'we,' " he writes.[38] And he invokes Bourdieu's notion of the "habitus," a "system of durable and transposable dispositions," to flesh out the essentially social nature of the self. Taylor is intent on giving human agency its full glory—he does not want to reduce us to epiphenomena—but insists that we see agency as constituted by the web of practices and collectivities in which it emerges and to which it belongs. It's a perspective, he says, that "runs against the grain of much modern thought and culture, in particular our scientific culture and its associated epistemology"—the kind of naturalism that has, in his view, deformed "our contemporary sense of self." In its place, he urges us to see the agent "as engaged in practices, as a being who acts in and on a world." What we should take from Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, he says, is that "practice is, as it were, a continual interpretation and reinterpretation of what the rule really means," that the relation between rule and practice is richly reciprocal.[39]

And yet the thesis can seem at odds with its Wittgensteinian underpinnings. "When I obey a rule, I do not choose," Wittgenstein says, in a passage Taylor cites; "I obey the rule *blindly*." Taylor's vision has thus been criticized—not least by Taylor's colleague James Tully—for being inadequately Wittgensteinian. Doesn't Taylor's emphasis on interpretation—the notion that "we must speak of man as a self-interpreting being, because this kind of interpretation is not an optional extra, but is an essential part of our existence"—invoke the sort of critical reflection and evaluation that Wittgenstein was at pains to call into question? To understand a sign is not to interpret it; to grasp it is "*nicht eine Deutung*," not an interpretation, but merely a "way of going on." The core of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule following was a line of reasoning aimed to eliminate precisely that interim step—interpretation—that Taylor would exalt.[40]

There have been numerous other attempts to reconcile agency and structure, subject and society, dancer and dance. Typically these insist upon their mutually constitutive character, or—as in Anthony Giddens's talk of "the duality of structure"—the recursive nature of their interactions. I will not dwell on the details of these accounts: for it cannot be said that Taylor has failed where others have succeeded. But then maybe it's no wonder that the matter should give us so much trouble.

There's an old urban legend about a couple who, during a trip to India, adopt an adorable stray kitten and return home with it to Cincinnati—only to watch, with mounting horror, as it turns into a child-mauling tiger. At this point, we might as well state something crashingly obvious. The problem of autonomy in political theory—like the "problem of agency" in the social sciences[41]—has a whiskers-to-stripes resemblance to one of the fiercest problems in all philosophy, that of free will.

The literature on the subject—as Providence has no doubt decreed—is immense, and immensely intricate. But I will find it useful to enlist one of the most familiar responses to the most familiar of problems. It is the "two standpoints" response associated with Kant. For some purposes, we must acknowledge that we are natural beings and regard ourselves and others as part of the natural realm, subject to theoretical explanations in terms of natural causes. From this standpoint, we belong to the so-called sensible world, the *Sinnenwelt*. But that is not a standpoint we can adopt when we ourselves act as rational agents: "All men think of themselves as having a free will," he noted. Accordingly, "for *purposes of action* the footpath of freedom is the only one on which we can make use of reason in our conduct." Here we situate ourselves in the so-called intelligible world, the *Verstandeswelt*. As he writes in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, "We can enquire whether we do not take one standpoint when by means of freedom we conceive ourselves as causes acting a priori, and another standpoint when we contemplate ourselves with reference to our actions as effects which we see before our eyes. . . . [W]hen we think of ourselves as free, we transfer ourselves into the intelligible world as members and recognize the autonomy of the will together with its consequence—morality."[42]

And these worlds of Kant's are indeed standpoints, not planes of reality. "The concept of the intelligible world is," for him, "only a *point*

of view which reason finds itself constrained to adopt outside appearances *in order to conceive itself as practical.*"[43] We have to act as if freedom is possible even though we can't provide any theoretical justification for it; in that sense, he says, it can't be explained, only defended. Let me arrest the argument, and close the *Groundwork*, right here. Kant's *zwei Standpunkte*, which derive, in some sense, from two kinds of purposes or interests, is the basic move I want to borrow.

For notice that the whole debate over agency and structure—between autonomists and their critics—has tended to suppose an opposition between them in which they compete, so to speak, for the same causal space. In simpler times, the case for structure might have been exemplified by the claim that in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas acts as he does because of his social conditioning. (So Mr. Max, Bigger's lawyer, believed, and argued lengthily at his trial.) The case for agency, posed in terms of the same simplicity, is the case for the individual: the figure whose escape from society makes the romantic subject its most obvious epitome. (So Bigger himself seems to have believed: "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em.")[44] To resolve this supposed tension, as I say, various dialectics have been proposed, in which structure is taken as enabling agency while structure is itself constituted by social practices.[45] What the two-standpoints doctrine suggests, by contrast, is that we give up trying to see structure and agency as competing for the same causal space. Instead, the logic of structure (which yields *causes* for action) and the logic of agency (which yields *reasons* for action) belong to two distinct standpoints. To act *as if*, to regard oneself *as if*: this notion of the *als ob* is central to Kant's way of arguing; it is the hallmark of his "critical" philosophy. And so is the allied notion of interests and purposes that select which *als ob* comes into play. (An "interest," Kant says, "is that in virtue of which reason becomes practical—that is, becomes a cause determining the will.")[46]

You hear echoes of this tradition, I think, when Habermas accounts for the distinction that Dilthey had sought to establish between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften* by arguing that each kind of theory is constituted by a distinct kind of interest. The natural sciences, Habermas says, are rooted in a "knowledge-constitutive interest in possible technical control," while the knowledge-constitutive in-

terest of the *Geisteswissenschaften* is "practical." There's plenty to quibble with here, but the basic idea that *interests* play a role in the constitution of areas of inquiry seems plausible enough.[47] Many philosophers (Donald Davidson and Daniel Dennett among them) have held, for example, that in understanding people as intentional systems—as having the beliefs, desires, intentions, and other propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology—we make a certain *projection* of rationality. We ascribe beliefs and desires to people in such a way as to "make rational" their acts, even though we know that people aren't fully rational. At this point, it is usual to mention "idealization." As Jerry Fodor has often insisted, we should not make methodological demands of psychology that cannot be met by chemistry and physics: and both in "bench science" and in scientific theory idealization is ubiquitous. Whether we count a theory as false *simpliciter* or approximately true turns out to be a question of judgment, a judgment that may legitimately depend on what we're interested in. A chemistry whose practical focus is on the development of industrial dyes might accept the idealizing assumption that filtered river water is H_2O; a chemistry interested in energy regulation at the cellular level could not. An idealization is a useful falsehood: and useful always means "useful for some purpose." Depending on our practical purposes, we may need to proceed as if planes were frictionless and firms were profit maximizers. We may suppose that, from the point of view of the universe, everything observable could be reduced to particle physics; but this is not a point of view available to us, and our theories, like all our products, are imperfect things. Indeed, the history of science is a catalog of the errors that flow from premature attempts to constrain theories of one level by the demand that they postulate only phenomena that can be understood in terms of theories at a lower level. Since we do not have perfect theories, we proceed with the best theories we can muster: and the best theory for some purposes may be better—for *those* purposes—than the best theory that meets this demand for methodological reductionism. We wouldn't want to jettison whatever useful insights we might get from economics or meteorology, say, just because we can't give an account of those disciplines in terms of the movement of molecules.

I say all this in order to soften up the target. If we get accustomed to the fact that there's plenty of *as-if*-ing even within the realm of natural-

istic explanation (by way of interest-guided "idealizations"), we might worry less about the bigger Kantian *as if* that we've been entertaining. And surely the basic notion that our theories are guided by our pragmatic purposes, our *praktischer Absicht*, has a Kantian taproot. The two-standpoints doctrine suggests, then, that talk of agency is guided by different interests or intentions from talk of structure; and we go only a little further when we say that these different interests make different idealizations appropriate, different *as if*s useful.

Agency and the Interests of Theory

"All men think of themselves as having a free will," Kant told us, which is to say that we are ourselves agents. To regard others as ends in themselves—to recognize their human dignity—is to regard them in this way, too. The standpoint of agency is connected, in the most direct possible way, to our concern to live intelligible lives in community with other people who are, first of all, lovers, families, and friends, and then colleagues, officers, checkout-counter assistants, garage mechanics, doctors, congressional representatives, strangers, and so on. This practical interest requires us to be able to articulate our own behavior in relation to theirs, and this we do through our understanding of them as having beliefs and intentions—in short, as reasoning—and also as having passions and prejudices: in short, as always potentially unreasonable. We have (in that phrase of Strawson's) "reactive attitudes"—we respond to others with gratitude and anger, praise and blame, and so forth—and we wish to hold on to and make sense of these attitudes. It's in this realm that we conceive our goals and aims, our decisions large and small, the life we want to make.

As you will have noticed, to adopt a third-person perspective on agency is already, as Kant says, to "contemplate ourselves with reference to our actions as effects which we see before our eyes." To theorize about the standpoint of agency is not to inhabit that standpoint; the autonomist's standpoint is a second-order one. But the model of standpoints and purposes is still helpful in parsing purely theoretical disagreement. Clashes between, say, traditionalist and libertarian perspectives express clashes about what people care about more—social

stability or expressive freedom; the management of society or individual liberty. They're not over what the world is like but what the world ought to be like. Yet sometimes the clash is really more basic: it concerns what we want to talk about. Taylor has diagnosed the old liberalism-communitarianism debates as involving "cross-purposes," and the notion that different agendas—cross-purposes rather than conflicting ones—might be involved seems right. If, like Rawls, you want to foreground distributive justice against an autonomist background, you may find it useful to be able to regard individuals in one way. If, like Sandel, you want to foreground the value of community, you need to conceive them in another way. In social thought, talk of "structure" has a specific historical trajectory, too, which passes through Saint-Simon and Marx and is guided by an active political interest in achieving a sweeping egalitarianism. To insist on agency within the discourse of structure—or vice versa—is simply, so to speak, to change the subject.

The two-standpoints approach ought to shed light on some of the other conundrums and indeterminacies that propelled us down this road as well. Recall, for example, Michael and his Bad Day at the Office. Whether we say he had autonomy when he opened the vault at gunpoint may indeed depend on what account of autonomy we're peddling. But rather than demand that our account supply an answer, we might instead attend to what we're interested in. The answer we give, as a matter of everyday intuition, will depend on what story we're telling, and what its constitutive interests are. It depends, *in fine*, on what we're trying to make sense of. If we're interested in the conditions that make people act a certain way—if we're interested, say, in "situationist" psychology—we tell one narrative: here's how Michael acts under these conditions. If we're interested in retribution and blame, we tell another: look what that villain did to poor Michael! What we should resist is the temptation to qualify and subtilize our accounts, to say that Michael had partial autonomy or (an even further remove) the potential of partial autonomy. When is something a condition of choosing and when is it a constraint upon choice? Inevitably, how we answer is a matter of interest-guided judgment, of what standpoint we adopt. As freedom and necessity can be decoupled and assigned to two different explanatory registers, so it is with debates in political theory.[48]

That is why—to return to my point of departure—talk of partial autonomy is an ill-fated attempt to split the difference between two standpoints: one in which I have autonomy and one in which I do not. Just as, in the specific debates over free will and compatibilism, it's not a way out to say that my actions are partly caused, so here, the language of partitive autonomy misguidedly seeks a midpoint between first-person and third-person perspectives, oblivious of the distinct purposes served by each of the two standpoints. To the contrary, as I say, there is something to be gained by disconnecting these concepts from each other analytically; by proceeding with the discourse of structure without always seeking an agent-based reduction. In fact, there is much to be said more generally for the noncoherence of our different theoretical practices, for the existence of theories that illuminate certain projects in ways that simply say, "So what?" to the fact that they contradict other theories that belong to other projects. Game theorists can legitimately make assumptions that differ from those of ethnographers; economists may need to idealize differently from psychologists. More grandly still: explanations in terms of reasons and explanations in terms of causes needn't proceed in lockstep. Once motivated, this noncoherence can be seen as both necessary and desirable; what we ask of a theory is that it be adequate to its own constitutive project—that it earn its *as if*s.

This is all, I'll admit, a little too quick. The various standpoints can't be made to converge, but they will sometimes be superimposed. You, as a theorist, can take account of agency; and I, as an agent, will be responsive to whatever "structural" or naturalistic theories of society I happen to have. And sometimes we do want to see ourselves as belonging to the *Sinnenwelt*. It's true that we fail to treat others with dignity when we insist on regarding what they take to be free actions as *caused*. Tell somebody, "Adjust your meds," in the course of a disagreement, and you'll rarely find your suggestion taken as benevolent. (This is a thought experiment only; do not attempt at home.) And yet one reason people go to shrinks—or, elsewhere in the world, to oracles and witch doctors—is to uncover supposedly hidden causes of their actions. Which is just to say that, in our actual lives, we aren't confined to any one standpoint, any one purpose.[49]

Kant said that freedom couldn't be explained, only defended. If we ought to defend the discourse of personal autonomy, it's chiefly because

of what this vocabulary allows us to see, and to say. To take autonomy seriously—even in the unaggressive form that poor old Stepan enjoyed—is not without consequences. It proposes a politics that regards persons as ends, as possessing dignity and inherent worth. It proposes a social order conducive to some version of individuality.

In the next chapter, we'll take up the seeming tension between those who view the entrenchment of social identities as a precondition for autonomy and those who view it as a threat to autonomy. Distinguishing between a road and a rut, between a citadel and cell, surely involves judgments of the interest-guided sort we've explored, judgments that are not just about politics but—precisely because, from the standpoint of our interest in social life, autonomy matters—part of politics, too. These judgments won't, in Tolstoy's formulation, "make themselves in us"; we have to make them.