AUTONOMY AND PLURALITY

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According to a familiar criticism, liberal pluralism is undermined by the special value which liberals give to autonomy. This special value is then undermined by the exercise of autonomy in practical judgment, since rational agents ought to give priority to values they have judged to be worthy, not to autonomy. This criticism presupposes an over-theoretical view of practical judgement which overlooks our need to integrate our diverse practical judgements into our lives. I explain this integration through a conception of autonomy as the ability of a plurality to act in common. Drawing on Rawls’ account of overlapping consensus, I argue that this view fits not only cases of collective activity, but also cases of individuals making life-structuring commitments. Understanding the essential connection between autonomy and plurality reveals what is mistaken about the familiar criticism of liberalism.

1. A familiar criticism of liberalism takes the following form.1 Liberals claim to insist on political arrangements that can be endorsed by all persons, regardless of their ethical and/or religious commitments. This claim, however, looks less like a positive view about what is politically valuable than a description of the plurality of ethical and religious commitments. So what political arrangements do liberals actually admire? It is natural for liberals to reply that what they value are political arrangements that protect autonomy, the ability of all agents to reason for themselves in practical matters. At this point, the critic of liberalism observes that many ethical or religious doctrines do not place autonomy so high on their rankings of value; instead, those doctrines insist that individual autonomy should be subordinated to hierarchy or tradition. Surely liberals do not have equal respect for doctrines like that. So the original liberal claim to be neutral among ethical and/or religious doctrines turns out to be a sham.

In this form of argument, the critic’s own reliance on the liberal principle of pluralism is merely instrumental; it is intended to discredit the liberal as insincere, not to endorse the principle in the way the liberal would hope. If...
critics of liberalism are to avoid being equally insincere, they must admit that what is really of value is not respect for the diversity of practical doctrines, or for the choices of individual agents, but some more substantive set of commitments. Implicit in this claim is a second and ultimately deeper criticism of liberalism, this time aimed directly at the idea of autonomy. How can it be, this criticism asks, that mere choice, an individual’s judgement that something is valuable, could itself be the highest value? Does not an individual’s autonomous judgement that something is valuable already imply by itself that what is valuable must be something beyond the will, i.e., what the will judges to be valuable? At this point in the argument, it is too late to argue that choice must be subordinated to the higher value of universal law, since the critic claims to have already shown the liberal principle of universal respect to be insincere. What the liberal has been shown to value is not plurality but autonomy, yet it is hard to see how autonomy could be of any intrinsic value. The very exercise of autonomy in practical judgement seems instead to suggest that autonomous individuals must submit to values that they themselves have judged to be worthy. Without the (supposedly insincere) brief on behalf of pluralism, the liberal case must rest on the value of autonomy alone, and it is hard to see how autonomy could have any value in itself.

2. As these last remarks should already suggest, the critic’s case against the independent value of autonomy assumes a model of practical choice which is both individualistic and ultimately theoretical. What is individualistic is the identification of autonomy with independence of judgement; to be autonomous, the critic is suggesting, is to judge for oneself that something is worth pursuing. What is theoretical is the subordination of independent judgement to the fact of what is truly good. On this kind of view, once a judgement of goodness is made, the activity of willing ought to follow trivially from that judgement, as a kind of normally healthy result. Of course we ought to do what we judge to be good, and of course we ought to do it because of its goodness. The model here is one of recognition, drawn without fundamental alteration from the case of belief. Certainly we ought to exercise our autonomous judgement about what to believe, but just as certainly we ought to believe what we judge to be true, independently of anything about ourselves. In the theoretical case, our thoughts are necessarily directed towards objects beyond ourselves, and so the role of our will must be to subordinate itself to our best judgements about the nature of the object. But if the critic of autonomy is right, the practical case is not particularly different. Our wills ought to submit to what we judge to be truly good.

2 See Taylor, Sources of the Self, part I, ch. 3.
To be sure, philosophers with naturalistic commitments have worried greatly about how we can judge something in the physical world to be truly good, so as to feel compelled not just to believe something about the world but also to do something to alter it. Still, it is relatively easy to respect this naturalistic worry while preserving the recognitional model and thus the affinity between theoretical and practical judgements; most naturalistic philosophers, working within a broadly Humean framework, have done just that. The familiar naturalist axiom that desires must motivate our practical claims is supposed to ensure that the objects of those claims are already ‘lit up’ for us with the force of physical attraction. Our claims about goodness are directed to precisely those objects that we are already tempted to pursue. Practical judgement is then a special case of theoretical judgement, one which requires and focuses especially on the fact of what we desire. On this kind of view, practical judgements are theoretical judgements about a special class of objects, objects that carry a special motivational force for us, and it is this motivational force, not anything about the activity of practical judgement itself, that explains the need in the practical case to will, rather than merely to believe things about the world.

Scepticism about the value of autonomy, then, is independent of metaphysical disputes about the relationship between claims about value and the natural world. Whether one believes that claims about goodness are substantive claims about the world or, at the other extreme, that they are simply reports of our own desires, one can argue that the activity of autonomous practical judgement can and must be directed towards claims which necessarily go beyond the autonomous will, and to which the autonomous will ought to submit. In either case, the function of autonomous practical judgement is to select good ends, and it is those ends that have real value. If one is to maintain that autonomy nevertheless has practical value in itself, this can only be because there is something wrong with this picture of autonomy as individual independence in the exercise of practical judgement, and of practical judgement as a kind of recognition of value beyond the will.

In fact, I shall argue, this entire picture of practical judgement is quite mistaken, and mistaken in particular about the distinctly practical activity of willing. On the recognitional model, as I have already remarked, willing is supposed to be the trivial result of a normally healthy agent’s practical judgements about what is good. Good objects, whether metaphysically or naturalistically conceived, are supposed to carry with them a kind of force of volitional attraction, so that when one makes judgements about their goodness, one has already committed oneself to will the objects that one has
judged to be good. But this picture is quite confused about what it means to will something, because willing requires a kind of practical commitment that goes well beyond a judgement of goodness. To judge something to be good is not yet to will that object – not yet to set it as an end for oneself.

This sort of gap is not simply a matter of weakness of will. It is perfectly possible for a fully rational agent to judge both that an object would be good to pursue, but nevertheless that the object should not serve as the agent’s end. This happens all the time: we decide that a possible course of action, though worthwhile in itself, does not fit with other things we have chosen for our lives. One may of course object that the relevant judgement of goodness must be understood to be an ‘all things considered’ judgement: when we judge something to be truly good, we are judging it to be worthwhile in the context of all the other things we have judged to be worthwhile. But this reply just underscores the distinction I am emphasizing. In the language of the objection, there is a distinction between judging something to be good and judging it to be ‘good all things considered’, where this means judging that it should have a place among the various ends of one’s actual life. Once the distinction is granted, we would do better to discard the clunky philosophers’ talk of ‘all things considered’ judgements. We would do better to stick to the plainer language that describes the truth of our practical life: that there are many things which might be good to have as ends, but which we have none the less chosen, after conscientious deliberation, not to make part of our lives. Since willing something is making a commitment to pursue something as an end in one’s life, willing is more than judging something to be good to pursue. To will something is to have committed oneself to the further and specifically practical conclusion that the thing is worth pursuing in the light of one’s other pursuits.

At some level, these remarks are commonplaces. But the commonplaces turn out to imply certain important and perhaps counter-intuitive claims about the nature of agency and practical judgement. These claims break sharply with the assumptions of the recognitional model, on which practical judgements are simply individual judgements about the value of objects or ends. I do not deny that such recognitional judgements can and do play an essential role in our practical lives. Indeed, recognitional judgements are essential to the account of practical judgement which I am offering here. But I maintain that being an agent also requires a second, quite different sort of practical judgement, in which we endorse an end or object as worthy of pursuit in our individual lives, as fitting together with our other ends.

What kind of judgement is this? Even in those accounts of practical reasoning which have emphasized the role of ‘reflective endorsement’, which have stressed the need for agents to commit themselves to practical
identities that go well beyond recognizing the value of an object or end, there is a tendency to gloss over the nature of this further sort of practical judgement. In Christine Korsgaard’s well known account, reflective endorsement is the acceptance of a practical identity as worthy, and our commitment to a practical identity is supposed to explain the relative value we give to worthwhile ends.3 Those ends which are constitutive of a practical identity, without which we could not be said to have an identity at all, have an essential priority in our practical lives, regardless of the value other ends might have. But when it comes to how it is that we decide that a practical identity is worthy, it is not clear that Korsgaard has very much to say, and it is hard to understand this silence as anything other than a retreat to the recognitional model, on which certain identities simply stand out to us as particularly compelling, or particularly our own.

Korsgaard’s more recent work might be read as trying not so much to answer but to move beyond this question, by tying the value of our particular identities to a deeper, more teleological model of the acting self; on this ‘constitutional’ model, certain fundamental practical principles are said to be constitutive of action.4 But even if Korsgaard is right that any action is in some sense an expression of our identities as rational agents, there remains the question of how we are to choose among the various particular identities that might express this supposedly deeper sense of agency.

My suspicion is that Korsgaard’s account of the relationship between practical identities and particular ends gets things backwards. Rather than endorsing identities which then structure the relative value of our ends, I suggest, we endorse identities because they can accommodate the variety of ends we have recognized to be valuable. The idea here is to explain reflective endorsement as a recognizable and recognizably cognitive kind of judgement: we judge that a plurality of ends can fit together into a certain sort of life. But if this kind of judgement is in fact essential to our practical lives, more needs to be said than that we are all reflective agents who have certain practical identities. It must be that we come to endorse those identities because, at a deeper level, we lack them, because we are reflective agents with pluralities of potential ends, ends that need to be put together into coherent forms of life. Agents who have coherent understandings of their forms of life are, I claim, autonomous. They govern themselves, by ordering their many judgements of value into stable wholes. Autonomy is in fact of essential value to us as agents, because our recognitional judgements of value fall short of what we need to govern our lives. They fall short

because they are irreducibly plural, because there are too many things we might find to be valuable. For this reason, I shall argue, the liberal commitment to plurality is not insincere: there is in fact a deep connection between autonomy and plurality. Autonomy is the essential condition for pluralities to be able to govern themselves.

This kind of position has been suggested before, most prominently by Onora O’Neill.5 But while O’Neill has been clear that autonomy, at least in the Kantian sense she favours, is fundamentally about finding a set of principles for a plurality of agents (or enquirers), she has not explained why this problem is of fundamental importance for ourselves as agents, and in that sense she has not really offered an account of the value of autonomy (which Korsgaard’s theory of self-constitution is meant to provide). Indeed, she seems to resist agent-centred accounts of any sort as too ‘individualistic’. But no socially isolated or impossibly self-sufficient individualism is presupposed if it is asked why we as individual agents ought to value autonomy, and particularly autonomy as essentially connected with plurality. Any account of practical justification is going to be agent-centred in the weak sense of explaining why we as agents have reason to care about what is claimed to be good. So O’Neill’s account of autonomy cannot do without an argument which speaks to the nature of our agency. If plurality is essential to autonomy, and autonomy is to be of fundamental value to us as agents, we need to understand the connection between agency and plurality. This connection is something that O’Neill’s account has not explained.

4. What is counter-intuitive about the connection is the thought that agency should be understood in terms of the practical judgements of groups, not of individuals. Indeed, I am suggesting that individual agents themselves need to be understood as a kind of group. I do not think the idea of the self as a plurality should seem particularly novel: it goes back at least to Plato, and has been updated in various ways by modern theorists like Hume and Freud. If we compare the Christian distinction between our spiritual and physical natures with these more secular accounts of the divisions within ourselves, we might fairly conclude that in the history of Western thinking about the self, pluralized conceptions have tended to dominate. From this larger historical perspective, it is the Cartesian view of the self as a kind

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of atomic unit of judging which looks more like the outlier, the oddly theoretical view which demands special explanation. But of course historical predominance is not what finally matters here: the question is whether a pluralized conception of the self, and specifically a pluralized conception of autonomous judgement, makes any sense of our practical lives. In order to show that it does, I propose first to look more closely at the autonomous practical judgements of groups. Once it becomes clear what it means for a group to govern itself, once it is clear what specific assumptions this sort of claim entails, it will then be understandable why these same assumptions might well be applied to the practical judgements of an individual agent.

In speaking of a group governing itself, I do not mean to refer just to examples that are political in any specific and thus restrictive sense. What I have in mind is any case in which a group of individuals decide to do something together, without external pressure from others. For present purposes, a single and very plain example will suffice: a group of people who get together once a week to play basketball. All the example is intended to show is the necessary connection between the group’s activity and a kind of practical judgement. That there is a game every week, that the players show up and play, even though no one is forcing them to do so, itself implies that the group has agreed on a kind of practical judgement, that it is a good thing to play a regular basketball game. I am not going to specify the content of this practical judgement any further. In practice, the group’s practical judgement is probably more complex, because there are many different kinds of basketball games – half-court vs full-court, more and less competitive, more and less physical. There might well be disagreement within the group over these or other matters, but any stable weekly game tends to have a particular form, one that implies more particular judgements about what kind of basketball is good to play together. It can then be said that the group has agreed on the more complex practical judgement that it is a good thing to play a regular game of this type of basketball. But the important point here is not the complexity or extent of the group’s practical judgement. The important point is that one cannot describe the group as acting autonomously, as doing something as a group, without describing its members as agreeing on some sort of practical judgement.

Compared with this everyday sort of example, the specifically political case turns out to be more complicated, because political life always includes the kind of action that is not at all autonomous, namely, obedience to an authority with coercive powers. But even in this more complicated case, the connection between autonomy and agreement in practical judgement is very clear. When we pay our taxes simply because it is the law, and because
we shall be penalized if we do not, there is yet no agreement on the practical judgement that these particular taxes are good to have. On the other hand, if we all did agree on a particular form of taxation, and enacted it into law, then we could be said to have autonomously legislated a political norm. Whether, or how, autonomous government could be possible in large and complex modern societies is still, of course, a vexing and pressing question. But the meaning of political autonomy can be specified much more clearly: all competent citizens have agreed that a particular set of political arrangements are the ones we ought to have. If there is no such agreement, and there are coercive laws, then some people who obey those laws are not acting autonomously. In the specifically political and in every other case, a group acts autonomously when its members agree on a practical judgement of a certain sort.

5. The next point is that the practical judgement on which an autonomous group agrees is just that something is good for the group to do, not necessarily about why it is good to do this. Of course any individual has particular reasons for endorsing the group’s judgement, but it is not crucial for the group’s autonomy that each person endorses the same set of reasons. Some may play basketball every week for exercise, others because they like the competition, and some to maintain and enhance personal and even professional relationships. Depending on the particular players and type of game they favour, some of these reasons may be more or less compatible with the group’s agreement on their favoured type of game. But for the group to act autonomously — to come together to play basketball every week — all that is required is that there is agreement on the favoured type of game. There is no practical reason why each person who agrees to play has to justify the favoured type of game in the same way.

The model here is of course the one proposed by John Rawls in his notion of overlapping consensus. According to Rawls, the goal of political liberalism is agreement on a political conception of justice, a set of norms to guide our political life. This political conception is supposed to be entirely independent of what Rawls calls comprehensive doctrines, theories about the ultimate ends of human life, and of how those ends can be justified. Citizens should all be able to endorse the political conception, but they do not have to endorse it for the same reasons. Instead, Rawls imagines that individual citizens seek to justify the political conception in their own ways, in the terms of their own comprehensive doctrines.6 This last thought, which was not present in his earlier work, has often been seen as a weakening of the justification which Rawls thinks can be given for his theory of justice.

While the earlier Rawls hoped to provide a fully rational justification for a best ‘theory of justice’, it has been suggested, his later work seems interested only in achieving a practical consensus on a particular form of justice in a particular form of society. In my view, this kind of reading is quite mistaken. Rawls’ later work is not simply pragmatic, but concerned with rational justification in a quite deep sense; in fact, he believes that an overlapping consensus would provide his theory of justice with a much stronger sort of justification. That comprehensive doctrines are themselves exercises of practical reason, and that those doctrines are not able to achieve general agreement on the ultimate ends of human life, are both, for Rawls, fundamental truths about the nature of practical reasoning under modern conditions (Political Liberalism, pp. 36–40, 54–66). Given these truths, it is both rationally necessary to have a political conception which is independent of comprehensive doctrines, and rationally sufficient that individuals justify this conception in terms of their own comprehensive doctrines.

For my purposes, what is important about the idea of overlapping consensus is Rawls’ insistence that the relationship between agreement and justification looks very different in the practical as opposed to the theoretical case. A theoretical claim, a claim about the nature of objects in the world, demands rational justification, and if the reasons given for the claim are good ones, then the agreement of all competent persons ought to follow as a result. But whether or not agreement does follow is irrelevant to the truth of the claim, and to the reasons advanced for it. If some do not come to believe in the truth of the claim, then we may well have a problem, but the problem is practical rather than theoretical, viz how to deal with those who do not accept what look to us like good reasons. When it comes to practical claims, on the other hand, or at least practical claims which are meant to apply to groups, agreement does play a central role. A political claim, for instance, is a claim about what laws or institutions we ought to have, and since we expect everyone in a polity to conform to those laws and institutions, a political theorist must care whether some individuals do not or cannot accept the claims which the theorist understands as justified. In Republic, for instance, Plato famously describes not just his ideal city, but also how to get less than fully rational citizens to accept the norms of that city. For Rawls, the goal is political agreement among citizens holding diverse comprehensive doctrines, but since the diversity of comprehensive doctrines is a fact about practical reasoning under conditions of modern pluralism, he cannot

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construct, like Plato, instrumental devices intended to bring less rational citizens into political consensus. Instead, he leaves the task of ultimate justification to individuals and their comprehensive doctrines, recognizing that in the practical case, what matters is agreement on what is rational; we have this kind of agreement if each person who agrees understands what is agreed to as rationally justified.

In practical matters, it does not matter if others justify their agreement with reasons which I take to be defective. In the theoretical case, this sort of claim would look bizarre. Suppose some scientists take a set of experiments to have established a particular theory, while others reject the alleged results of those experiments entirely. The second set of scientists hold that the same theory is in fact justified, but in virtue of a wholly different set of experiments, which the first group of scientists regard as equally spurious. Could it be said that there is a scientific consensus on the theory? It seems fairer to say that in a case like this, all scientists are drawn to a particular theory, but the theory itself is not scientifically established, since there is no consensus on what the evidence for it is. But in practical affairs, this kind of overlapping consensus happens all the time, and is utterly unproblematic. If we all think that playing basketball every week in a certain way is a good thing, for our own reasons, then we have achieved a rational consensus around that practical judgement, even if you are playing for reasons which I would reject.

In the theoretical case, what ultimately matters is good reasons for what is true, and agreement on those reasons should follow from that. If agreement is lacking, then either the reasons are not good ones (the scientific theory is not really established), or some people are not good reasoners (they are unable or unwilling to look at scientific evidence). But in the practical case, what ultimately matters is acting on what there is good reason to do, and this requires agreement on what is good to do, not agreement on the reasons for its goodness. A group is autonomous when it acts together, when it achieves agreement in practical judgement, whether or not its members justify this practical judgement in the same way.

6. Do these examples really demonstrate something about the nature of practical reasoning in general? Or do they simply describe the special case of groups which need to come to a practical agreement? I have suggested that the former is so, and I have been focusing on the second, special, case merely because it most clearly illustrates the idea that autonomy has independent practical value. A group can act for itself, I have argued, only when it achieves a rational consensus on a practical judgement. Still, this does not show that autonomy, taken generally, is of independent practical
value, because in the examples I have used, the rational consensus of the group depends on the individual practical judgements of its members, and I have not yet shown that these individual practical judgements imply anything about the independent value of autonomy. Unless it can be shown that these claims about the practical judgements of groups somehow apply to the practical judgements of individuals, then autonomy is simply a possible property of groups, not any sort of fundamental value that is essential to practical judgement. Indeed, it looks as if a group has the property of autonomy only when its members make individual practical judgements about why the group’s commitments are good ones to have. These individual practical judgements seem to be simply claims about what it is good to do, independently of any considerations about the agreement of others. The autonomy of the group thus seems to depend on the substantive practical judgements of its individual members. It cannot be shown that autonomy is of fundamental practical value until it has been shown that an individual agent is somehow like a group, and it seems impossible to do that when a group must be made up of individuals.

One version of this problem can be addressed straightforwardly. The distinction between groups and individuals is methodological, not ontological. If, for purposes of politics (and basketball, and much else), we treat groups as composed of individual agents, this does not mean that those agents could not themselves be understood as different sorts of groups, composed of different sorts of individuals, for different sorts of practical purposes. We well understand that what we call atoms are atomic only in the sense that they are the fundamental units of a certain sort of physical activity, described and then explained in a certain way. We grant both that atoms can be further explained in terms of more fundamental particles, and that these further explanations do not undermine the molecular explanations in which atoms are treated as fundamental. So there is no problem if what we usually call individuals turn out to be groups of other sorts of ‘individuals’, for the purpose of explaining agents’ practical judgements. The more difficult question is why an agent’s practical judgements should be understood in this way, as in any sense analogous to the practical judgements of a group. If the analogy is to be revealing, what needs to be held fast is what has been shown to be required for the autonomy of a group, that is, agreement on a practical judgement, and not necessarily on what justifies that practical judgement. The question then becomes whether the practical judgements of individual agents can and do reflect this structure, in which what matters is agreement in judgement, not necessarily in justification.

In claiming that our individual practical judgements can and do reflect this structure, I shall not be thereby claiming that all practical judgements
are of this type. As I have already mentioned, I do not deny that we do make recognitional practical judgements through which we come to hold that an end or object is truly valuable. But I claim, once again, that such recognitional judgements must be brought together under a different sort of practical judgement, in which we come to hold that the end or object fits together with other things we have judged to be valuable, and thus should have a place in the life we want to live. In making this second sort of judgement, we are not simply making claims about what is valuable and why it is valuable. Rather, we are taking claims of these types and arranging them into a livable form. What matters here is not what is of ultimate value, but whether the different things we might find valuable ultimately might cohere in some stable way. The problem we face is whether we can come to an agreement within ourselves about how we can actually achieve a reasonable balance of the different things that different aspects of ourselves judge to be valuable. To will a certain sort of life rationally, I argue, requires agreement among our diverse practical judgements, not a single judgement about what is best to do.

I imagine that there may be some who, hoping to preserve a more purely recognitional or theoretical model, would understand the kind of judgement I describe here as less like an agreement and more like a kind of summative judgement. That is, it might be said that when we will to live a certain sort of life, we are taking the values we have judged to be worthy, and are then weighing and balancing them until we find the most optimal from the various options that are practically available to us. Saying this would block the thought that we as individual agents are like a group agreeing on a practical judgement, by continuing to insist that practical judgement is simply a single claim about what is best. The problem is that what ‘weighing and balancing’ to find the ‘most optimal option’ means here seems hopelessly vague. Actual cases, I believe, show that the kind of summative judgement imagined here is practically meaningless: to say ‘I have chosen what is best’ does not amount to much more than saying ‘I have chosen it’. The question is then whether the model of agreement can say anything more informative than that.

7. What sort of actual cases do I have in mind? I am thinking foremost about the two largest decisions that an individual has to make in a modern bourgeois society: whether and whom to marry, and what sort of career to pursue. (If the reference to ‘modern bourgeois society’ makes my conclusions historically and culturally specific, then so be it; I suspect that the range of application of my conclusions is still quite wide. I tend to prefer the more strongly Hegelian view that the conditions of modernity are what
allow us to recognize a more general truth, but I shall not insist on that view here.) Erikson famously summarized Freud, the best known modern theorist of a divided self whose parts are in conflict, as saying that our two great human needs are for love and work, and these two large decisions are fundamentally about how the two needs are best satisfied. In what follows, I shall concentrate on the decisions to marry a particular person and to choose a particular career, but in so doing I certainly do not mean to imply that one has evaded these decisions if one chooses not to marry, or not to have what others would commonly regard as a career. To remain single, to pursue some other sort of relationship outside the context of traditional marriage, to work at a series of jobs, to be free to move to different places or to pursue some sort of leisure activity – all of these are different ways of deciding how best to solve the problems of love and work. Each person’s life implies some set of judgements about how to solve these problems; the positive choices to marry and have a career simply illustrate the nature of what may look like a summative judgement in the clearest way. To marry and to have a career are, it seems, to say ‘This person and this work are what are best for me’.

There is certainly a summary judgement here, and not just in grammatical form: a person must always choose, in up-or-down fashion, to get (and then to stay) married, and to pursue (and continue to pursue) a particular career. But summary is not the same as summative: the question is whether the up-or-down judgement is itself a recognitional judgement, derived from other recognitional judgements by a kind of additive process. The model of group agreement which I have described not only can but must accommodate summary judgements, since I have argued that a group acts autonomously when it agrees on a practical judgement. But in the case of the group, there is no justification for this practical judgement beyond the individual and potentially diverse judgements of its members. In this case, the summary judgement is simply the group’s autonomous existence, its acting together: it is not a kind of super-justification, somehow adding to or completing the justifications accepted by the individual members. The question is whether the choices to marry or have a career are justifications, or super-justifications, of any meaningful kind. Anyone who thinks they are should try to imagine what it would mean to argue, in any overall sense, that your spouse is the ideal partner, or that your job is the best form of work.

To marry is to choose a particular person from all the others. Can my choice ever finally be warranted, without my really knowing what all the others are like? Some people are debilitated by this question: for them, there

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might always be someone better out there, more attractive in some way, less flawed in another. In the happy case, we hope, love will solve this problem for us: one person will stand out for us as inevitable, constantly occupying us, crowding out the thoughts of others and their possible attractions. But love, even if it is lasting, is not the same as marriage. Love is a condition, but marriage is a decision — a decision to shape a life around a lover, to allow one person to play a whole set of roles in one’s life.\(^\text{10}\) It is also essential to marriage as a social institution that these roles are plural and highly diverse. Depending on the particular expectations of the culture and of the individual partners, a spouse can be or is expected to be the person you talk with most and most intimately, the person you have sexual relations with now and every time in the future, the person you live and build a home with, the person you conceive and raise children with, the person you integrate into your extended family and into whose extended family you will be integrated, the person you will be with when one or both of you are not what you would like to be, when one or both of you are weak, inadequate, and eventually, inevitably, in decline. To choose to marry someone is to judge that this one person should play most if not all of these roles.

Again, could this kind of judgement ever really be warranted? There is no spouse who could ever be best suited to all of these roles; there are always some roles for which it would be easy to imagine a better partner. To choose to be and to stay married, though, is to put this kind of recognitional judgement aside, to commit to a life where one’s spouse is allowed to be the one who plays the full range of roles that the marriage entails. Once more, love can make this kind of commitment easier: it can happily distract us from the advantages of other possible partners. But in the case of building a marriage, unlike choosing a partner, love cannot solve the problem for us: a marriage is a good one only if the spouse really can play at least an important subset of these expected roles. (Getting clear about what those expectations are, of course, is one of the highest priorities for any marriage.) So the summary judgement that I should marry A really amounts to a series of individual recognitional judgements that A is suited to play a series of different roles in my life, together with a commitment to allow A to play them as my spouse, even when A’s suitability for a particular role might well be open to question.

A similar story can and should be told about the choice of a career: it will determine a whole range of judgements about the role work should play in one’s life. How much money we make, how we contribute to the good (or ill)
of society, whether and how we are respected or honoured by others, the type and variety of tasks we must do on a regular basis, the sort of environment (both physical and social) we work in, how our work coheres with our family lives – all of these and more are inevitable consequences of a career choice. The task for us is to make a choice that matches at least an important subset of our individual recognitional judgements about what would be best for us in these various dimensions of life, and then to commit to our choice, even when some dimensions of our work might seem less than fully adequate to our judgements.

Without that further commitment, in both career and marriage, it is sometimes hard to sustain the summary judgement that we have chosen well, in the face of recognitional judgements which suggest the opposite. Should it be said, in cases like these, that the recognitional judgements which point against our choice are outweighed by other recognitional judgements which point in its favour? I am not sure that what this could mean is even intelligible in cases like this, where it is commitment to our choice that must sustain us. If the weight of evidence could be said to point in the direction of one judgement, it is not clear that commitment would need to play any role; we would simply commit to what our judgement told us was best. But I think there are cases in which we do want to say ‘I will continue on in this direction, despite what I recognize as the truth of my marriage or my career, because without it, I would not have the marriage or the career at all, and all that goes with it’. If our commitment is sustained, it is not, I think, because our positive recognitional judgements somehow outweigh our negative ones (how would we even recognize this?), but because the positive recognitional judgements cohere into a life of the sort we imagined in our original choice.11

At the same time, the choice of a life, or the commitment to it, should not be seen as taking place at some higher level of recognitional judgement, over and above the individual recognitional judgements about the ways a particular spouse or career would or would not satisfy us in a particular dimension of our personal or working lives. There is no set of lives available for us to choose from, even though we have plenty of lives available for us to examine. No matter whose life we admire, we must construct our lives for ourselves, out of the diverse contingent materials of our experiences and the

11 Compare the discussion in B. Herman, ‘Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgement’, in *Moral Literacy* (Harvard UP, 2007), p. 47, especially the passage ‘There is nothing compelling in the picture that describes the choice to move to a different career track or a different model of successful parenting as a choice to gain one thing at the expense of another. This is to accept the idea that our interests have some independent standing in our lives, some autonomous claim to expression. One could equally view one’s life as involving in an essential way the development and mutual adjustment of a variety of interests.’
diverse conclusions of our various recognitional judgements. What we might come to call a good life, for us, is simply those recognitional judgements, brought together in a stable and understandable way.

8. This conception of a good life, I maintain, is just the model of group agreement, now deployed to explain the commitments of an individual. I have argued that the autonomy of a group, its acting for itself, is simply the agreement of its members to a practical judgement, as justified by those members in the ways they believe to be best. Now I am arguing that the autonomy of an individual, our committing ourselves to something, as we do in marriage or career, is simply the convergence of different recognitional judgements on a certain sort of life. The different aspects of ourselves lead us to a variety of recognitional judgements about a variety of matters, justified in a variety of ways; and we are then faced with the task of combining those judgements into some sort of coherent life. The world places constraints on what a coherent life can be, just as it places constraints on what a group needs to do to act. If we cannot find a time and place to play, then there will be no weekly basketball game, despite our agreement that such a game is good to have. Similarly, we cannot do everything in life we would judge to be good. The task is to find people and institutions to commit to, practical identities to have and sustain, which can accommodate the various judgements we make about what it is good to do. People who cannot do this are effectively immature, no matter how old they are in years; they have failed to live lives of their own.

Since I have stressed the connection between autonomy and commitment, I may seem to have left an opening for a critic to resurrect the methodological objection to my account of individuals and groups. I have said that an autonomous group is one that acts together, in agreement with a practical judgement which is then justified by the individual commitments of its members. I have then said that an autonomous individual is one who has made a commitment of one sort or other; this is then justified by the individual recognitional judgements which converge on the commitment. The parallel might seem to break down at the level of the commitment. A group can act only because its individual members are committed to its common practical judgement. But in my account of individual autonomy I have described the commitment as coming at the higher level of the ‘group’, the mature self who pulls together the individual recognitional judgements. So while I have spoken of groups composed of individuals who themselves can be seen as groups of lower-level ‘individuals’, it seems that in fact I believe that there is really one kind of individual, of the familiar sort, who is capable of making commitments.
In one sense, the objection is exactly right. Only individuals, in the familiar sense, are capable of making judgements. So an autonomous group must be composed of individuals in the familiar sense, because only they are capable of agreeing to the practical judgement which defines the autonomy of the group. Since an individual commitment to a marriage or a career requires a judgement that the partner or line of work is a good one, only an individual in the familiar sense can be said to have made such a commitment. But the account of autonomy I have given here is not intended to show how it is that we can make commitments. Rather, it is intended to show how our commitments can explain the intrinsic value of autonomy. The account is therefore about what makes our commitments valuable, about what justifies them. A group’s commitments, I have argued, following Rawls’ model of overlapping consensus, are justified by the agreement of the best practical judgements of the group’s individual members. An individual’s commitments, in turn, are justified because they combine a plurality of practical judgements in a coherent way. Though the atomic unit of judging is always the individual in the familiar sense, as maker of practical judgements, the atomic unit of a theory of practical justification is the individual practical judgement. Since an individual in the familiar sense is the maker of a plurality of practical judgements, each individual can live a good life only by making that plurality into a kind of unity, a mature and hence autonomous self.

9. What I have offered here is a comprehensive liberal view of practical justification. In discussions following Rawls, who recommended his liberal theory of justice on the ground that it was merely political, there is a tendency to understand comprehensive liberalism as inherently excessive and dangerous, as always violating the boundaries of the political. But this is a misunderstanding of how Rawls understands comprehensive liberalism, and more generally of the role which Rawls understands comprehensive doctrines to play in the justification of political liberalism. For Rawls, all reflective citizens hold comprehensive views, and must use those comprehensive views to justify their own individual commitment to political liberalism. So there is nothing wrong with comprehensive liberalism, as a possible comprehensive view, unless endorsing that comprehensive view requires others to endorse political justifications which depend on comprehensive liberal claims.12 Nothing in the view I offer here implies anything like this.

I have argued that autonomy is of essential value to us as agents, because an autonomous group is one that agrees on a practical judgement which is then justified by the group’s individual members, and because we as agents are like an autonomous group in needing to construct life-shaping commitments which are then justified by our individual recognitional judgements. Nothing in this view implies anything more general about what those life-shaping commitments should be: they are justified entirely by the agent’s own recognitional judgements. So there is no reason why a citizen holding this comprehensive liberal view would favour any political arrangements dictating that citizens ought to live certain sorts of lives. Since political arrangements must be justified to all citizens, no matter what sorts of lives they understand as justified, political claims must be independent of the sort of agent-centred practical justifications I have been emphasizing here. There is nothing wrong politically if other citizens advance other kinds of practical justifications for their own lives, perhaps grounded in the sort of summative recognitional judgements I have rejected as implausible. There is liberal political autonomy if all citizens can agree that liberal political claims are justified, even if they justify their liberal political commitments in terms of comprehensive views which deny the value of individual autonomy.

What is liberal about my account of autonomy is that it does not seek to show that there is any best form of life. But nor does the account suggest that what is of value in autonomy is choice or freedom in any abstract sense. As I have described it, the goal of autonomy, whether political or individual, is to achieve unity out of a plurality of individual judgements, without overriding or undermining those judgements. With that said, I can return to the criticisms of liberalism with which I began. The liberal insistence on plurality, the demand to find principles that diverse individuals could all accept, is not at all insincere; there is no other value, like freedom or choice in an abstract sense, lurking behind the hope for universal law. Liberals are often accused of moving back and forth between sceptical pluralism and sweeping devotion to individual freedom, but in a properly liberal theory there is neither vacillation nor equivocation. There is only one fundamental liberal value, the construction of unity out of plurality. The type of unity required depends on the kind of plurality we have. In the political case, what we have is a plurality of comprehensive doctrines, each of which advances rational claims, and none of which can generate a rational consensus. Under these conditions, what is required is a political conception which is independent of comprehensive doctrines, including comprehensive liberal views like my own, which emphasizes the plurality of claims which our most important commitments, like marriage or career, must accommodate. But if this further account of our commitments is correct, then what is required is
forms of life that can accommodate the diversity of our recognitional judg-
ments. In neither case is there any guarantee of success, because liberal
political conceptions and good liberal forms of life are justified not by
independent arguments for their overall value, but by their success at
achieving an overlapping consensus of individual judgements. In each case,
the name we give to this success is the same. It is autonomy, the ability of a
plurality to act in common.

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