



An Individualist Theory of Meaning

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Individualism is foundational to the liberalism of our time. Critics of liberalism in general, and of individualism in particular, often target its “emptiness.” Among other things, they argue that liberal individualism fails to provide *meaning* to people’s lives. The critique is not new, but it has recently gained momentum as it has been incorporated in novel conservative and nationalist arguments.¹

In this article, I present an individualist theory of meaning according to which the continuous pursuit of self-endorsement by a perfected, liberal, version of oneself provides purpose and a sense of direction in life. The “perfected, liberal, version of oneself” is a version of oneself characterized by the complete realization of one’s innermost desires, dispositions, and deeply entrenched wishes, and by a liberal mindset, in the Ancient Roman sense of the term, respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are, a distrust of power, faith in human progress, and the acknowledgement of inescapable ethical and material conflict within society.

The article has three sections. A first section expounds on the recent, nationalist, anti-individualist critique. It is shown how it is connected to communitarian and conservative critics of liberal individualism, and how it targets individualism on nationalist grounds. The notion of “meaning” is expounded with support in the critical literature. The main theory is developed in the subsequent section. The distinction is made between the manifested and the perfected self. This is followed by a theory of how, in more detail, the perfected self should be “liberal.” A brief final section concludes.

¹ See Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), and Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

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1 Individualism and meaning in life

On the mainstream understanding, individualism is the view that the single person should be the basic unit of moral and political analysis.² Individualism entails the view that the value of individuals generally trumps other competing values, such as that of collectives. This means individualists commit to the normative belief that wholes such as nations, communities, and families are less important than their constitutive members. Of course, there is room for nuances. For instance, a person can be an individualist in one sphere of life and a collectivist in others, just as one's individualism can be extreme, moderate, and everything in between. But the general understanding stands.

Individualism is often associated with political liberalism.³ For instance, Alan Taylor writes that the American revolution “validated a new conception of society as composed of individuals making free choices (save for the enslaved)”.⁴ Studies show that Western societies are more individualist than others, but also that individualism is increasing globally.⁵ Various intellectual historians have addressed a change liberalism underwent in the first half of the 20th century. Edmund Fawcett writes that liberals in the 1930s and 1940s began defining their ideology negatively as *not* totalitarian; liberalism, in their view, first and foremost *isn't*.⁶ Ola Innset argues that the change was driven by the double-headed idea that (1) economic planning leads to totalitarianism and that (2) laissez-faire is an inadequate political program to defeat totalitarianism, thus motivating rights-based free market politics; “[a]lmost all the early neoliberals would at some point between 1938 and 1944 write a book or paper including this dual argument”.⁷ Liberalism was reconstructed into an “empty”

² See Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (ECPR Press, 2006 [1973]); Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 59.

³ See, e.g., Howard G. Callaway, “Liberalism and the Moral Significance of Individualism: A Deweyan View,” *Reason Papers*, Vol. 19 (1994): 13–29; Émile Durkheim, “L’individualisme et les intellectuels,” in S. Lukes & J. Lukes, eds., transl., “Durkheim’s ‘Individualism and the Intellectuals.’,” *Political Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1969 [1898]): 14–30; George Kateb, “Democratic Individuality and the Meaning of Rights,” in N. L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Harvard University Press, 1989a); George Kateb, “Individualism, Communitarianism, and Docility,” *Social Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (1989b): 921–942; George Kateb, “Individuality and Egotism,” in B. Honig & R. D. Mapel, eds., *Skepticism, Individuality, and Freedom: The Reluctant Liberalism of Richard Flathman* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); George Kateb, “Democratic Individualism and its Critics,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2003): 275–305; Tapio Puolimatka, “Sphere Pluralism and Critical Individuality,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2004): 21–39; Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Books, 2014).

⁴ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016): p. 446.

⁵ World Values Survey (n.d.), retrieved (2020-09-14) from <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCOntents.jsp?CMSID=Findings>; Henri C. Santos, Michael E. W. Varnum, Igor Grossmann, “Global Increases in Individualism,” *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28, No. 9 (2017): 1228–1239.

⁶ Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 2014): pp. 275–9.

⁷ Ola Innset, *Reinventing Liberalism: Early Neoliberalism in Context, 1920 – 1947* (The European University Institute, 2017): p. 30.

ideology devoid of positive ideals, values, and interests. It now provides individuals with a sphere of liberty but is silent on what they should do with it.

After the change was completed, Helena Rosenblatt argues, it was forgotten that liberals “had championed community and morals for centuries”.⁸ The “empty” version of liberalism, and with it also of individualism, was established as the dominating liberal ideal. Its lack of moral substance motivates the critique that liberal individualism cannot provide meaning to people’s lives; the “empty or at least ‘unencumbered’ self [...] is metaphysically false or untenable. [It] is separated from those conceptions of the good that constitute the cognitive self and introduce those sentiments that make choice possible”.⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre writes; “I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual”.¹⁰ And Charles Taylor; “[p]eople no longer have a sense of a higher purpose, of something worth dying for. [They] lost the broader vision because they focused on their individual lives”.¹¹

Taylor has formulated one of the most well-articulated versions of the critique in his theory of authenticity, which means being “real” or “true to oneself.” He develops his theory of authenticity in light of individualism as a “source of worry”.¹² The rise of individualism has given people a right to “choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn’t control”.¹³ Before individualism, people “were often locked into a given place, a role and station that was properly theirs and from which it was almost unthinkable to deviate”.¹⁴ This is not an undividedly praiseworthy development. While individualism “came about through the discrediting of such orders” that restricted human beings, “these orders gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life”.¹⁵ There is a “dark side” to individualism, namely a “centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society”.¹⁶

Under liberal individualism, Taylor argues, an *ideal of authenticity* has been established. In this ideal, self-fulfillment is a most desirable standard.¹⁷ Many people sacrifice relationships, even the care of their children, to pursue their careers; they “feel *called* to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn’t do it”.¹⁸ Taylor wants to show that opting for

⁸ Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton University Press, 2018): p. 274.

⁹ Fred M. Frohock, “Conceptions of Persons,” *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1997): p. 132.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (The University of Notre Dame Press, 2007): p. 220.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991): p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

socially and morally neutral self-fulfillment is self-defeating, as it “destroy[s] the conditions for realizing authenticity itself”.¹⁹ Trying to find and cultivate what is meaningful about oneself requires a meaning-giving social context. Goals and agendas gain their importance “against a background of intelligibility” that Taylor calls an “inescapable horizon”.²⁰ It is self-defeating to seek significance in life “*in opposition* to the demands of society, or nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity.”

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters.²¹

Individualism, therefore, “must offer some view on how the individual should live with others”.²² Yael Tamir has recently reiterated the critique, placing her argument in the political debate on liberalism, globalism, and nationalism. She argues that “the political pendulum [has] swung too far to the individualist pole, leaving behind generations suffering from social alienation and anonymity”.²³ In words similar to Taylor’s, Tamir writes that “[w]ithout a collective interpretation that gives meaning to our actions we are likely to be misunderstood or simply unnoticed. Meaning-providing frameworks are therefore as essential as freedom itself”.²⁴ Also:

The need to belong to a cultural community, then, is not merely an expression of a psychological craving to live in a known environment and be part of a community to which we can develop feelings of attachment. It is an epistemological need for systems of interpretation that will allow us to understand the world and choose a way of life as well as a creative need for means of interpretation, exchange, and expression.²⁵

According to Tamir, globalization has entailed “the disintegration of unifying narratives”.²⁶ Liberal universal values have “nurtured a concept of the person as liberated from all particular relationships, memberships, or identities”.²⁷ Anything that can hold “stable meaning and connection” has been scorned, leaving people in the liberal world “terribly alone”.²⁸ “Self-centered individualism must therefore be replaced with a more collectivist spirit”,²⁹ namely “a new kind of nationalism that is rational and well calculated”.³⁰ In Tamir’s view, “nationalism allows individuals to

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 37.

²¹ Ibid, p. 40; emphasis in original.

²² Ibid, p. 45.

²³ Tamir, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 67.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 45.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 60.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 53.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, p. xvi.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 126.

expand their self to the collective sphere, thus endowing their life with meaning and allowing them to feel as active authors of their lives”.³¹ She endorses a form of liberal nationalism that would preserve the positive values associated with both ideas.

Similarly, but targeting liberalism as a political system, Patrick J. Deneen argues that liberalism has defeated itself.³² Liberalism “enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom”.³³ Its individualism entails that “local institutions and respect for natural limits diminish”.³⁴ With the development toward liberal individualism, people’s labor and their products have been reconstructed into “nothing more than commodities subject to price mechanisms, a transformative way of considering people and nature alike in newly utilitarian and individualistic terms”.³⁵ Thus, liberal individualism counteracts real pluralism in different ways of life and uproots people from the local communities in which their lives unfold.³⁶ To turn the development around, Deneen writes enthusiastically about a notion of liberty that “is consistent with authority, authority that now seeks to order society so that citizens are encouraged to make only those decisions and undertake actions that are oriented toward the ‘just and good’”.³⁷ The liberal notion of individual consent to political governance should be replaced by culture and tradition, which is “a deeper form of consent” that “generations have willingly accrued and passed on as a gift to future generations”.³⁸

As Tamir, Deneen argues against liberal individualism on the grounds that it fundamentally misconceives the nature and needs of human beings. Contrary to Tamir, Deneen supports the encouragement of local communities and a break with liberal conceptions of liberty and consent. His political theory radically deviates from liberalism, whereas Tamir’s theory should instead be understood as a form of liberalism. In what follows, focus is on Tamir’s theory. Because her theory is liberal, it should be more susceptible to the views that follow.

Tamir’s arguments against individualism have their roots in 18th and 19th century critique of liberalism. Edmund Burke then dismissed individualism on the grounds that it “relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction”.³⁹ Karl Marx wrote about the individualist understanding of humans as isolated beings that it “is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other”.⁴⁰

³¹ Ibid, p. 55.

³² Deneen, op. cit., p. 3.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 47.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 52.

³⁶ Cf. Ibid, pp. 189–90.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 175.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 190.

³⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on The Revolution in France* (1790): p. 7. Retrieved (2019-02-04) from: <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/burke/revfrance.pdf>

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy* (1859): p. 5. Retrieved (2019-02-04) from: <http://sites.middlebury.edu/econ0450f10/files/2010/08/Karl-Marx-grundrisse.pdf>

Contemporary thinkers who have directed similar critique against liberal individualism include Jennifer Nedelsky and Michael J. Sandel, among others.⁴¹

Not everyone would agree on the premises of Tamir's (or Deneen's) anti-individualism. For instance, Friedrich A. Hayek argues that the critics have distorted individualism into an "unrecognizable caricature".⁴² They mistakenly believe that "individualism postulates (or bases its arguments on the assumption of) the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals, instead of starting from men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society".⁴³ Ludwig von Mises, who many would think of as one of the most radical 20th century individualists, writes that "[m]an is inconceivable as an isolated being, for humanity exists only as a social phenomenon and mankind transcended the stage of animality only in so far as co-operation evolved the social relationships between the individuals".⁴⁴ George Smith writes that "[m]an's sociability and social relations have been a central concern of individualists since the 17th century".⁴⁵ Accordingly, the individualist John Dewey wrote in 1930:

Individuals who are not bound together in associations, whether domestic, economic, religious, political, artistic or educational, are monstrosities. It is absurd to suppose that the ties which hold them together are merely external and do not react into mentality and character, producing the framework of personal disposition.⁴⁶

Various contemporary individualists defend theories of individuals as inherently socially embedded. Gerald Dworkin, whose theory of personal autonomy is returned to below, writes that any theory of autonomy must satisfy a criterion of empirical possibility, and that "a theory which required as a condition of autonomy that an individual's values not be influenced by his parents, peers, or culture would violate this criterion".⁴⁷ He continues:

We are born in a given environment with a given set of biological endowments. We mature more slowly than other animals and are deeply influenced

⁴¹ See Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1984): 81–96; Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1982]).

⁴² Friedrich A. Hayek, "Individualism: True and False," in F. A. Hayek, ed., *Individualism and Economic Order* (The University of Chicago Press, 1948): p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (Yale University Press, 1951): p. 292.

⁴⁵ George Smith, "Introduction," in G. Smith & G. Moore, eds., *Individualism: A Reader* (Cato Institute, 2015): p. 5; see also George Smith, *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013): Ch. 9.

⁴⁶ John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (Prometheus Books, 1999): pp. 40–1.

⁴⁷ Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988): p. 7.

by parents, siblings, peers, culture, class, climate, schools, accident, genes, and the accumulated history of the species.⁴⁸

Paraphrasing Marx, Dworkin concludes; “[i]t makes no more sense to suppose we invent the moral law for ourselves than to suppose that we invent the language we speak for ourselves”.⁴⁹ John Christman is an even more recent example of individualist autonomy theorists who model the individual as a social being. According to Christman, individuals are constituted by “external, interpersonal, or social factors”.⁵⁰ They are “deeply connected to external factors in their self-identifications, cognitive structures, values, and the like”.⁵¹ In Christman’s individualist theory, humans are temporally and socially embedded beings whose identities and self-perceptions are at least partly socially determined, why any explanation of a person’s behavior must consider her as socially situated.⁵²

However, it is one thing to argue that the anti-individualist argument is ungrounded, and another to meet it on its own premises. I am currently interested in the latter. Assuming that Tamir has a point, what can individualists do about it?

2 Self-endorsement as a meaning-giving practice

2.1 The challenge

There are two relevant senses of the term “meaning” in this context. In the first sense, meaning has to do with *purpose* and *a sense of direction*. For instance, a firefighter might find purpose in her job. It gives her some degree of satisfaction and adds significance to her life. She might think putting out fires and assisting people in need is one reason for her to get up in the morning and go about with her daily life. Being a firefighter is meaningful in a purpose-giving sense. Similarly, a priest might find a sense of direction in the social and religious role she occupies. When she feels lost, as I suppose most people do sometimes over the course of their lives, she finds guidance in her priesthood. Her social and religious position is accompanied with certain obligations, and expectations of how she should think and act, that function as a compass in life. She knows, or has the feeling she knows, what she will do tomorrow and the day after that, how she should face difficulties when they appear, and what kind of person she will be and what kind of life she will lead in ten years’ time. Being a priest is meaningful to her as it provides her with a sense of direction in life. It is meaning in this first sense, i.e., as purpose and a sense of direction, that Taylor targets.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ John Christman, *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves* (Cambridge University Press, 2009): p. 22.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 30.

⁵² See also John Christman, “Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves,” *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 117, No. 1 (2004): pp. 143–164.

In the second sense, meaning has to do with intelligibility. For instance, suppose we traveled in time to the ice-age, kidnapped a human being, and brought her back with us to, let us say, USA in the 21st century. The ice-age person would be socially disoriented there. She would lack the frame of reference needed to make conventions such as the 40-hour workweek and celebrating Christmas intelligible. Many social events and phenomena would be incomprehensible to her. Therefore, she would not be able to grasp the meaning of, for instance, Dolly Parton's famous song "9 to 5" and the tradition of hanging stockings above the fireplace on the night of December 24.

Tamir considers meaning in the first sense, but also in the second. She argues that individualism alone cannot make an individual's life, and the world she lives in, intelligible. I think Tamir is partly correct about meaning as intelligibility. Individualism alone cannot ground a frame of reference that enables interpretations of social events and phenomena. Social and historical interpretation is too epistemically demanding to build from a scarce resource such as individualism. Real understanding requires historical contextualization, an intuitive sense for political power struggles, statistical analyses, and much else.

However, I disagree with Tamir's complete analysis. In her view, globalization leaves people socially disoriented, as it causes unifying narratives to disintegrate. Nationalism, she argues, enables individuals to expand their selves to the collective sphere, endows their lives with meaning, and allows them to feel as authors of their own lives. I think Tamir exaggerates the impact of globalization on how well people manage to orient themselves socially, that her belief in what nationalism can accomplish in this matter is too optimistic, and that she holds a too pessimistic view of what individualism can bring to the table if properly integrated as one element among many in social interpretation. Unfortunately, due to space constraints I will not pursue a detailed discussion of this disagreement.

At present, the topic is meaning in the first sense. Rosenblatt writes that liberalism "contains within itself the resources it needs" to meet its critics.⁵³ Drawing from such resources, I suggest a positive individualist theory of meaning that provides purpose and a sense of direction.

It is not a theory of *the* meaning of life, but a theory about meaning *in* life. The theory does not suffice to explain to individuals how socially and historically significant their lives are or answer their questions about Existence with a capital E. What is more, it is not a theory about virtue. In recent decades, theorists such as William A. Galston have acknowledged that liberalism needs to "give an account of individual virtue that supports rather than undermines liberal institutions and the capacious tolerance that gives liberal society its special attraction".⁵⁴ Theories of virtue are theories of good character and the good life. The theory presented here is a theory of meaning, which is categorically different. It is possible that any given

⁵³ Op. cit., p. 277.

⁵⁴ William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge University Press, 1991): p. 216; see also Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton University Press, 1999) and N. L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

theory of virtue needs to encompass an account of meaning to be complete since meaning appears to be an integral part of the good life. While the theory presented in this article could be incorporated into theories of virtue, that project will not be further pursued here. The presently discussed theory provides meaning, in the sense that it provides the individual with purpose and a sense of direction, and it locates that meaning in the individual's decision-making processes. Thereby, it falsifies the claim that individualism *cannot* provide meaning, in this sense. The theory substantively contributes to individuals' lived experiences, making their lives richer. It informs people about what they should do with the sphere of liberty granted to them by liberalism.

2.2 Self-endorsement as a theory of meaning

The theory is that the continuous pursuit of critical and informed self-endorsement by a perfected, liberal, version of oneself is meaningful. It draws from historical liberal resources in two ways. First, the structure of critical and informed self-endorsement is taken from an individualist tradition of theorizing about personal autonomy first introduced in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, the moral content in the notion of "the perfected, *liberal*, version of oneself" is taken from a variety of historical ideas that together form a traditional, pre-change, liberal outlook. This subsection presents the procedural structure of the theory, whereas the normative content is discussed in the subsection that follows.

To be autonomous is to be self-governing, i.e., to be one's own master. Autonomy is generally held to be a property that can be enjoyed by beings with some minimal capacity of self-directedness.⁵⁵ The concept of autonomy is comprised of both negative and positive elements. Negatively, autonomous persons are not subject to the control of external influences such as coercion or manipulation. Positively, autonomous persons have the capability to reflect upon their own desires, choose whether to be moved by them, and carry out their decisions in practice.

One of the most influential traditions of theorizing about personal autonomy, which came to be called "split-level" theories, began to take shape in a series of books and articles in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁶ In brief, according to split-level theories an agent is autonomous if, and only if, she endorses her own decisions, acts, or way of life, on a higher level of critical and informed self-reflection. Consider the following example for illustration. Smith is an alcoholic. She has an immediate and almost irresistible wish to consume alcohol. However, Smith also has a stable and more deeply fixed wish to lead a long and healthy life. When considering this

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Jesper Ahlin Marceta, *Authenticity in Bioethics: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice* (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2019) and James Stacey Taylor, *Practical Autonomy and Bioethics* (Routledge 2009).

⁵⁶ Of these, the most noteworthy may be Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (1986): 5–20; and Dworkin, op. cit. See also Marilyn A. Friedman, "Autonomy and the Split-Level Self," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1986): pp. 19–35.

wish, which she often does, she always thinks of it as “real,” as opposed to the “non-real” wish to consume alcohol. Smith’s wish to lead a long and healthy life is on a higher level than her wish to consume alcohol. According to split-level theories, the wish on the lower level is non-autonomous. If Smith had endorsed the wish to consume alcohol upon critical and informed self-reflection, it would instead have been autonomous.

The split-level way of thinking can be adopted by individualists in a theory of meaning. Harmonizing one’s lower level desires with one’s higher level desires is rewarding; it is psychologically motivating and, usually but not necessarily, one element among others in the development of good character. But it is a life-long and difficult project. Desire harmonization necessitates self-awareness, strategies, and discipline, among other things. Qualitative self-endorsement of the kind that is central to this theory requires two types of self-reflection, corresponding to the different desire-levels.

I call reflections about the set of desires one has and the kind of person one is for reflections about one’s *manifested* self. One’s manifested self is a product of biological, social, and self-chosen causes. Biology influences our manifested selves by, for instance, affecting our tendency to develop depression.⁵⁷ The influences from social factors are vast. For instance, the way we are brought up and the kind of education we receive greatly influence our manifested selves. Such factors shape who we are. Self-chosen causes involve the decisions we make that affect how our lives take shape, such as the relationships we develop and maintain as adults.

Qualitative reflections about one’s manifested self requires awareness of the self as such, but also of how one is socially situated. For instance, Smith cannot fully understand and account for her manifested, alcoholic, self unless she has some basic understanding of the physical and psychological effects of alcohol, the social function of alcohol consumption (such as why it is commonly consumed at parties but not during sessions in parliament), the general expectations and norms in society about alcohol and the values that guide these, and so on. It also requires awareness of the influences from various social forces affecting one’s intersectional identity. For instance, to fully understand how she is socially situated, Smith needs to consider her manifested self from the perspective of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, and other intersectional factors.⁵⁸ Thus, reflections about one’s manifested self is epistemically demanding. It is probable that one needs help and guidance from others to fully understand one’s manifested self. To paraphrase Tamir (see block quote above), reflections about one’s manifested self rely on a system of interpretation that allows one to understand oneself and the world one lives in.

Reflections about the set of desires one wants to have and the kind of person one wants to be upon critical and informed self-reflection are here called reflections about one’s *perfected self*. The perfected self is a theoretical construct that

⁵⁷ Lauralee Sherwood, *Human Physiology: From Cells to Systems* (Cengage Learning, 2016): p. 156.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Diana T. Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!” in C. Mackenzie & N. Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford University Press, 2000): pp. 151–180.

represents the complete realization of one's innermost desires and dispositions. Contrary to our manifested selves, which are often internally conflicting and irrational, the perfected self is coherent and instrumentally rational. Of course, it should not be taken to resemble real-world beings; it is a theoretical construct that functions as an aid for real-world decision-making.

One's perfected self may change over time. It is probable that the deepest wishes a person holds as a teenager are different from those the same person holds when she is old. That is one reason why self-endorsement needs to be ongoing to be truly qualitative. A person who has embarked on the life-long journey of desire-harmonization must continuously reflect upon, and be open to revise, her deepest wishes. Furthermore, one's perfected self is deeply connected to one's physical and psychological capabilities, tendencies, and characteristics. Therefore, not everyone's perfected selves are identical. Smith's perfected self is a person who leads a long and healthy life. Her friend Jones's perfected self is instead a short-lived, hedonist, daredevil. The perfected self may also be incomplete. A real-world person who reflects about the set of desires she wants to have and the kind of person she wants to be does so against a frame of reference limited to her particular experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. It is probable that she will face problems and find herself in situations she could not have anticipated when reflecting about her perfected self. The perfected self needs to be constructed in recognition of this fact. It should preferably be equipped with strategies on how to deal with the unknown; "how would the perfected version of me respond to new and unfamiliar situations?" Finally, the perfected self is not necessarily a *good* self; a thoroughly evil person may, for instance, have the entrenched wish to be selfish and condescending.

Self-endorsement is the process of harmonizing one's manifested self with one's perfected self. It is to adopt desires, live according to standards, and be the kind of person that would be endorsed by one's perfected self, according to the characteristics it has at the time. For instance, suppose Jones is at a party and is offered a new, illegal, drug with unknown origin and effects. Jones is reluctant to take it. Her perfected self—a short-lived, hedonist, daredevil—may not endorse this reluctance. To harmonize her two desire-levels, Jones should take the drug. However, Jones is the ultimate arbiter in this matter. It is also possible that her reluctance to take the drug indicates Jones has not correctly identified her perfected self, and that she should therefore engage in further self-reflection about her innermost desires. The theory of qualitative self-endorsement is procedural, not substantive; it suggests a positive structure, but is silent on which desires, characteristics, and ways of life should be pursued, and does not answer to whether an agent such as Jones has failed to harmonize her desires or whether she has failed to correctly identify her perfected self.

In this theory of meaning, *self-endorsement* is different from *self-realization*. The latter is to think about what one wants to become and try to become that. Self-realization is an ideal that may be difficult to achieve in practice, as we realistically cannot become the perfected version of ourselves; a person who sets out to fully realize her perfected self will probably fail. That pessimistic prognosis is likely to

reduce the value of a self-realizing project in terms of purpose and direction. This does not mean that ideal theory is *never* appropriate.⁵⁹ But at least to many, a project that is likely to fail does not provide as much purpose and direction as a project that, at least sometimes or in some respects, actually succeeds. Self-endorsement, to the contrary, could be achieved on a daily basis. For instance, it may be difficult for Smith to become a person who leads a long and healthy life. She is likely to fail if she would try. However, she could succeed in self-endorsement of particular desires and decisions, such as whether to have one more drink before going to bed. Her manifested self could be harmonized with her perfected self in this small, yet possibly psychologically important, decision.

Adjusting one's lower level desires in accordance with one's higher level desires provides purpose and direction in life; Smith chooses to not have one more drink before going to bed *because* she has adopted self-endorsement by her perfected self as a guiding principle. It is a way of life, something one's other projects and agendas relate to and build from, and which permeates one's social activities, habits, occupational choices, and much more. Once one has adopted qualitative self-endorsement, or desire-harmonization, as a guiding principle it soon becomes *the* organizing thing one does. Everything else one does follows from it. Self-endorsement provides purpose, as it is reason-giving in preference forming and decision-making. It provides a sense of direction, as it suggests how one should lead one's life. Therefore, qualitative self-endorsement provides meaning.

The theory of qualitative self-endorsement locates meaning in individuals' decision-making processes. Contrast this with, for instance, the firefighter mentioned above who finds purpose in life in putting out fires and assisting people in need, and the priest who finds a sense of direction in life in her priesthood. In those examples, meaning is located in social roles or phenomena external to the individuals. Similarly, Tamir locates meaning in nationalist narratives, and Deneen locates meaning in social communities. The theory presented here is thus fundamentally different from those alternatives, as it locates meaning in something internal to individuals.

2.3 The perfected, liberal, self

The principle of continuous informed and critical self-endorsement is procedural. It guides behavior formally, encouraging individuals to adjust their manifested selves to their perfected selves, but not substantively, as it is silent on the normative content of perfected-ness; a perfected self is not necessarily a good self. But the complete theory presented in this paper is that of a perfected, *liberal*, self. The notion adds normative content to the procedural principle of self-endorsement. Without this content, the complete theory of meaning would have been "empty" in a similar way as much post-war liberal individualism has been. In what follows, I discuss relevant

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Eva Erman & Niklas Möller, "Three Failed Charges Against Ideal Theory," *Social Theory & Practice*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2013): pp. 19–44; and Laura Valentini, "The Case for Ideal Theory," in C. Brown & R. Eckersley, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 664–676.

values from the history of liberalism that together make up the normative content I believe should guide self-endorsement by our perfected selves.

As Rosenblatt has noted, liberalism is a highly contentious concept. For instance, some historians argue the ideology originated *in* Christianity whereas others instead think it took shape in a battle *against* Christianity.⁶⁰ It is therefore difficult to define liberalism without committing to some theory of its history and moral essence. For the present purposes, I follow Duncan Bell in his conceptualization of liberalism as “the sum of the arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognised as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space”.⁶¹ This includes, among other things, arguments presented by Roman political thinkers that liberals have later adopted as their own, or as part of their tradition, and historical arguments about how liberals have conducted practical politics since the American and French revolutions in the late 18th century.

The word “liberalism” stems from the Latin *liber*, which means both “free” and “generous,” and *liberalis*, which means “befitting a free-born person”.⁶² To the ancient Romans, the noun *liberalitas*, which corresponds to *liber* and *liberalis*, referred to “a noble and generous way of thinking and acting toward one’s fellow citizens,” as opposed to “selfishness” or “slavishness,” which was to think and act with regard only to one’s own self and pleasures.⁶³ *Liberalitas* was a moral attitude the Romans thought of as essential to a free society. The great Roman political thinker Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) described it as “the bond of human society”.⁶⁴ Roman historian Jed W. Atkins writes that *liberalitas*, together with justice, promoted “social cohesion within a competitive political culture by preventing harm and promoting interdependence”.⁶⁵

The meanings of the words liberal and liberality remained almost unchanged at least until the Enlightenment. During the Middle Ages, the word liberality was “overlaid with Christian values such as love, compassion, and especially charity”.⁶⁶ French, German, and English dictionaries from this time defined “liberal” as “the quality of someone ‘who likes to give,’” and “liberality” as “the quality of giving or spending freely”.⁶⁷ During the Renaissance, liberality was treated as “a moral virtue that moderated men’s ‘desire and greed for money’”.⁶⁸ After the Reformation the word “liberal” appeared in King James’s Bible, then referring to “generous giving, especially to the poor”.⁶⁹ During the colonization of North America, some

⁶⁰ Rosenblatt, op. cit. pp. 1–2.

⁶¹ Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?” *Political Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (2014): p. 685.

⁶² Rosenblatt, op. cit. p. 9.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Jed W. Atkins, *Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2018): p. 77.

⁶⁶ Rosenblatt, op. cit. p. 12.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

demanded liberality of the whole community, so that its people were obliged to “think of the public good before themselves”.⁷⁰

The perfected self should be liberal in the Roman sense of the term. It is a characteristic of a person who recognizes the interdependence of individuals and the importance of acting and living as a member of a social whole. Being liberal in this sense is also to adhere to a mutual obligation of individuals to be generous, help those who are in need, and share each other’s ends in life. The suggestion that the perfected self should be liberal in this sense does not follow from some supreme moral principle. Instead, it is based on reasons inherent to the notion itself; it is valuable to be generous, feel compassion with those in need, recognize the interdependence of individuals, and so on. What is more, the suggestion reconnects ideological liberalism with its linguistic roots, offering a semantically more traditional ideology than the post-change liberalism that, at least to many, denotes moral “emptiness.” Throughout the remainder of this subsection, I use “the liberal self” instead of the longer “the perfected, liberal, self” to make reading more comfortable.

In Fawcett’s theory of the history of liberalism, the first liberals searched for a new order after the turmoil of early industrial capitalism and late 18th century revolutions.⁷¹ The old order had been static and characterized by social determinism, the new order had to be dynamic and capable of withstanding and incorporating social change. Early liberals had a dream about “order in a masterless world” to be “shaped by distrust of powers, monopolies, and authorities, by faith that the human ills of warfare, poverty, and ignorance were corrigible in this world, and by unbreachable respect for the enterprises, interests, and opinions of people, whoever they were”.⁷² These convictions served as guiding ideas that interlocked and reinforced each other. Accordingly, Fawcett takes the early liberalism for “a practice guided by four loose ideas,” namely conflict, resistance to power, progress, and respect.⁷³ Together, they formed “the liberal outlook”.⁷⁴ I adopt this outlook as part of the moral identity of the liberal self.

Fawcett argues that respect for others meant for the early liberals that people should be treated with equal respect regardless of their background, beliefs, and enterprises. Thus, *the individual*, an abstract model of human beings defined through properties shared by all humans but devoid of properties that separate them from each other, entered the liberal argument; “[l]iberals began to talk of defending the individual much as people today speak of saving the whale or protecting the planet, as if individuals were simultaneously many things and one”.⁷⁵

The view I present on this particular topic may deviate from Fawcett’s. In my view, respecting others as individuals is different from respecting them as particular subjects. As particular subjects, human beings are worthy of respect or disrespect

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 18–9.

⁷¹ Fawcett, op. cit. p. 4.

⁷² Ibid, pp. 4–5.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, pp. 119–20.

depending on specific factors, such as what they do and what they are or what they believe. As individuals, human beings are worthy of respect *full stop*. They are members of a set of beings that liberals recognize as equally valuable. In practice, this means human beings should enjoy equal political rights and liberties as individuals. Their background, beliefs, enterprises, and so on, should not matter to their political status as equals. Liberals may still praise or condemn others as particular subjects based on factors specific to them. For instance, they may direct blame against a person who fails to do her duty but would express this blame respectfully because the blameworthy person is an individual of equal status.

In light of this discussion, I take *respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are* as a characteristic of the liberal self, where respect is understood as an appropriate consideration of others as individuals.⁷⁶ The liberal self shows human beings a kind of respect compatible with full equal respect for everyone. In its fundamental attitudes, the liberal self does not favor or discriminate others based on factors such as their sexuality, skin color, religious beliefs, political interests, and other factors that separate them, but treats everyone as individuals of equal social, political, and moral status.

Respect for others is closely connected to distrust of power. Skeptical to power, the early liberals wanted to develop institutions that would prevent “domination by any one power, section, or interest”.⁷⁷ Fawcett mainly focuses on public power, which includes the state’s power over the citizen, of wealth over poverty, and of majorities over minorities. Among other things, public power can be used to obstruct people’s aims and enterprises, intrude on their privacy, and exclude the poor, the uneducated, and the unorthodox from protection. Liberals resisted public power by seeking ways to contain or channel it institutionally. One example of this is found in the constitutional separation of legislative, executive, and judiciary powers.

Following Fawcett, I take *distrust of power* as a characteristic of the liberal self. This means the liberal self resists domination, whether it targets the own person or others’, and whether it is exercised by others or by one’s own group. The liberal self prevents dominant power from emerging and dismantles it where it exists. This distrust is not only for public power but also for local and domestic, such as for the domination of one group over another in the workplace or of one member over the others in a family. The liberal self seeks to distribute power to individuals.

What is more, the early liberals believed in progress. They thought that both individuals and society at large could, and would, become better over time. Liberals had dreams about material prosperity, social equality, democracy, improvement of character, and other things they thought could be realized. They campaigned for women’s rights, worker’s education, and help for the poor, among other things.⁷⁸ However, their commitment to both progress and respect for persons led to a difficulty. On the one hand, liberals held the view that people must be allowed to choose their way of life for themselves and flourish in their own way. On the other, liberals also

⁷⁶ Stephen L. Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (1977): pp. 36–49.

⁷⁷ Fawcett, *op. cit.* p. 14.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

had substantive ideas of the good and the right; “liberals were teachers, preachers, and leading men in their communities, used to telling people what to do and how to behave”.⁷⁹ Fawcett illustrates this struggle by quoting Lord Acton: “[m]y liberalism admits to everyone the right to his own opinion and imposes on me the duty of teaching him what is best”.⁸⁰

Most importantly for the present purposes, liberals believed in improvement for individuals personally and materially; that “through hard work and good habits you could get ahead and stand financially on your own”.⁸¹ I thus take *faith in human progress* as a characteristic of the liberal self. This means the liberal self has faith in that humans can change to the better both morally and materially. They are not molded into fixed shapes or set to live under predetermined circumstances but can change both themselves and their situations.

This faith does not necessarily result in a *laissez faire* policy toward others, i.e., that progress will take place by itself if only people are left alone. Faith in progress is not the belief that things always solve themselves. Instead, it may just as well mean that one does not give up when supporting others in their endeavors. Faith in progress may motivate the liberal self to continue trying, or to assist their peers long after others have judged that there is little or no hope of improvement. It is an optimistic attitude to social, moral, and material change.

Finally, Fawcett distinguishes liberals from conservatives and socialists by employing a theory of their different views on conflicts in society. Liberals believed that ethical and material conflict within society is unescapable. Groups such as producers, consumers, owners, workers, natives, migrants, religious believers, atheists, rationalists, skeptics, and so on, form and act upon interests that cannot be breached or eradicated. This is one major reason why liberals supported the development of power-separating institutions in society that work to channel conflicts peacefully. Conservatives, Fawcett argues, had thought of society prior to the events that led to the rise of liberalism as “a harmonious, orderly whole”.⁸² Conflicts, in their view, were new and alien phenomena in society. Socialists, to the contrary, agreed with liberals that conflicts in society are unescapable, but thought they would end once material inequalities were overcome.⁸³

Following Fawcett, I take *the acknowledgement of inescapable ethical and material conflict within society* as a characteristic of the liberal self. This means the liberal self does not entertain or indulge in the comforting but mistaken belief that all conflicts can be overcome. Instead, the liberal self properly engages with conflicts through mitigating strategies, diplomacy, and compromise.

Thus, the liberal self should be characterized by Fawcett’s theory of liberalism as respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are, distrust of power, faith in human progress, and the acknowledgement of inescapable ethical and material

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 74.

⁸² Ibid, p. 12.

⁸³ Ibid.

conflict within society. As in the above, this suggestion does not follow from some supreme moral principle but is based on reasons inherent to Fawcett's theory; the four loose ideas reflect characteristics that individuals should adopt as part of their perfected selves.

3 Concluding remarks

To summarize, the theory is that a continuous pursuit of informed and critical self-endorsement by a perfected, liberal, version of oneself is meaningful as it provides purpose and direction in life. The *perfected* self is a version of oneself characterized by the complete realization of one's innermost desires, dispositions, and deeply entrenched wishes. The perfected, *liberal*, self is characterized by a liberal mindset, which among other things means noble generosity in recognition of the mutual interdependence of human beings; respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are, so that the perfected, liberal, self treats everyone as individuals of equal social, political, and moral status, regardless of factors such as their sexuality, skin color, religious beliefs, political interests, and private enterprises; a distrust of power, whether it is global, local, or domestic, leading to a wish to distribute power to individuals; a faith in human progress, which is an optimistic attitude to social, moral, and material change, whether it is due to one's own efforts or to assist by others; and the acknowledgement of inescapable ethical and material conflict within society, so that the liberal self engages with conflicts through mitigating strategies, diplomacy, and compromise, rather than by resorting to domination.

Self-endorsement, or desire-harmonization, is a life-long and difficult project requiring self-awareness and discipline, but it is psychologically motivating and, usually but not necessarily, one element among others in the development of good character. It is a way of life that permeates one's social activities, habits, occupational choices, and much more. Everything else one does follows from it. Building from historical resources, and acknowledging the interdependence of human beings, the theory allows the individual to be the ultimate arbiter in life, as it locates meaning in the individual rather than in some factor external to her.

There are things critics want individualism to do that the theory cannot do. For instance, it does not guarantee the kind of social stability conservatives value, namely a static order building on authority and tradition. There is no reason for individualists to develop theories that promote conservatives' values. However, I believe the theory can contribute to social orientation in a globalized world, i.e., contribute to provide meaning as intelligibility. Suppose that Tamir is right that globalization leads to the disintegration of unifying social narratives, a development that counteracts meaning-building frameworks. Self-endorsement by a perfected, liberal, version of oneself can nonetheless enable social orientation by forming an ideological point of reference in the meeting between the individual and the influx of alien cultural expressions that comes with globalization. Qualitative self-endorsement forms a liberal outlook. In combination with qualitative and quantitative methods, that outlook forms a standard for assessments of decisions, characters, and social events. It contributes to making the world *morally* intelligible. Those who feel persuaded by the

argument that nationalism is necessary to provide meaning should therefore reconsider their views at least partially.

Nonetheless, while the theory is developed as a response to recent critics of liberal individualism, I do not expect all critics to find the theory *convincing*; many would probably refute all theories in which meaning is located in individuals, as they *want* meaning to be derived from external factors. However, the critics should find the theory *satisfying*. It succeeds in providing individuals with purpose and a sense of direction, despite that it is from the “wrong” sources and, supposedly, in the “wrong” direction. And, most importantly—both to critics and to liberal individualists—the theory contributes to a needed revival of moral liberalism.

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