ARTICLES

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

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What is the relationship of the individual to society? This paper argues it is one of mutual dependence. Individuals can not hold beliefs or perform actions apart from against the background of particular social structures. And social structures only influence, as opposed to restricting or deciding, the beliefs and decisions of individuals, so social structures can arise only out of performances by individuals. The grammar of our concepts shows it is a mistake to postulate a moment of origin when either individuals or social structures must have existed prior to the other. Our concepts of an individual and a social structure are vague, and this allows for their existence being dependent on one another.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

What is the relationship of the individual to society? This oft asked question remains as important as ever it has been. One of the most disputed issues in the philosophy of history and the social sciences, and indeed in literary theory, concerns the rival merits of explanations in terms of social structures and explanations in terms of agency (structuralists and their successors debate with agency theorists).[1] And one of the most disputed issues in moral and political philosophy concerns the relative claims of the community and the individual as objects of value (communitarians debate with liberals).[2] Of course, no straightforward path leads from an understanding of the general relationship between the individual and society to solutions to these particular issues.[3] Nonetheless, it is worth our while standing back from these particu-

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[1] An earlier version of this essay appeared in Political Studies. A useful introduction to the structuralists and their successors is J. Merquior, From Prague to Paris, (London, Verso Press, 1986). On their relevance to literary theory see J. Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

[2] A useful introduction to this debate is S. Mulhall & A. Swift, Liberals and Communitarians, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992).

[3] cf. C. Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate", in N. Rosenblum, ed., Liberalism and the Moral Life, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 159-182.

lar issues, and considering the general matter of the relationship of the individual to society. Quite apart from anything else, doing so enables us to avoid the problems of interpretation awaiting all attempts to address these particular issues directly. We can abstain from debates about what Foucault, Rawls, and others actually meant, and concentrate instead on developing our own theory.[4]

We will find the relationship of the individual to society is one of mutual dependence. Individuals always adopt their beliefs and perform their actions against the background of particular social contexts. And social contexts never decide or restrict, but only ever influence, the beliefs and actions of individuals, so they are products of performances by individuals. The grammar of our concepts – in the Wittgensteinian sense of grammar – compels us to accept individuals exist only in social contexts, but social contexts are composed only of individuals.[5]

On The Individual

The claim that individuals adopt their beliefs and decide on their actions against social backgrounds might seem more or less obviously true. We adopt the beliefs we do during a process of socialisation in which the traditions of our community invariably influence us, and we act in a world where the actions of others already have created patterns of behaviour and institutions we can not ignore. Few people would deny the empirical claim that as a matter of fact the beliefs and actions of individuals usually are informed by their social contexts. In contrast, many people would deny the philosophical claim that as a matter of principle the beliefs and actions of individuals can not but be informed by their social contexts. Whereas the empirical claim states only that as a contingent fact people are embedded in social contexts, the philosophical claim states that we can not conceive of anyone ever holding a belief or deciding on an action apart from in a social context. The logic, or grammar, of our concept of a person implies individuals exist only in social contexts; individuals never can make themselves entirely according to their choosing.[6] The contentious nature of this claim appears in its exclusion of a view widely regarded as the core of agency theory and liberalism; namely, the very possibility of our conceiving of individuals, even as a group, coming before society. No matter how far we push our concepts back, we can not reach a state of nature, a realm

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[4] The difficulty of deciding questions of interpretation is indicated by S. Caney, "Liberalism and Communitarianism: A Misconceived Debate", POLITICAL STUDIES, 40 (1992), 273-289.

[5] Because our interest is in the philosophical, conceptual relationship between the individual and society, our account of their mutual dependence differs in kind from those of social scientists who have constructed more empirical theories of their entwinement: eg. A. Giddens, THE CONSTITUTION OF SOCIETY: OUTLINE OF THE THEORY OF STRUCTURATION, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984).

[6] Perhaps this is what communitarians are getting at when they characterise their work as "philosophical anthropology" – cf. M. Sandel, LIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 50 – although their critics rightly have noted a degree of confusion here – cf. Caney, "Liberalism and Communitarianism".

of pure reason, an existential freedom, or a space behind a veil of ignorance, where individuals operate outside of, and so unaffected by, particular social contexts. It is the contentious, philosophical claim we will defend.[7] We can not make conceptual sense of an individual acting except in terms of their holding a set of beliefs, and we can not make sense of their holding a set of beliefs except in terms of their doing so against a social background, so the grammar of our concepts implies individuals always must be embedded in particular, social contexts.

There is nothing especially controversial about the idea that we can conceive of an individual acting only in terms of their holding a set of beliefs. The standard philosophical analysis of actions unpacks them by reference to the desires and beliefs of actors: for example, if we want to explain why John went into the pub, we might say he wanted to talk to his brother and he believed his brother was in the pub. Individuals act as they do for reasons of their own, so if we are to conceive of their acting, we must conceive of their having reasons for acting, and if we are to conceive of their having reasons for acting, we must assume they have a set of beliefs in which something can count as a reason for acting. Again, an individual who acts must be capable of holding reasons for doing so which make sense to them, and reasons can make sense only in the context of a set of beliefs, so an individual who acts must hold a set of beliefs.

The idea that we can not conceive of an individual holding a set of beliefs except in terms of their doing so against a social background is much more controversial. Nonetheless, it follows inexorably from an acceptance of semantic holism; that is, the claim we can ascribe truth-conditions to individual sentences only if we locate them in a wider web of theories. Although semantic holism is a premise of our argument, this is not the place to defend it at any length because doing so would require a major detour from our main theme. Instead, it must suffice to note that the vast majority of philosophers now accept holism. Indeed, holism constitutes a meeting point for many of the most important developments in modern, analytical philosophy, including the rejection of pure observation by philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn, the analysis of meaning and interpretation by philosophers of knowledge such as W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson, and, to a lesser extent, the analysis of intentions and beliefs by philosophers of mind such as David Lewis.[8] Crucially, if our observations

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[7] Here we side with structuralists in their rejection of the existential freedom preached by J-P. Sartre, BEING AND NOTHINGNESS: AN ESSAY ON PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY, trans. H. Barnes, (London, Methuen & Co., 1957); and with communitarians in their rejection of the disembodied subjects behind the veil of ignorance in J. Rawls, A Theory of Justice, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972); and with them both in their concern to relate their opposition to Sartre and Rawls to a general critique of a tradition of liberal individualism deriving from Kant's ideal of pure reason and Hobbes and Locke's use of a state of nature.

[8] T. Kuhn, THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970); W. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in From a Logical Point of View, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 20-46; D. Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984); and D. Lewis, "Radical Interpretation", in Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 108-118.

are not pure, if they embody theoretical assumptions, then what observations would show a proposition to be true or false must depend on its theoretical context (semantic meanings must be holistic), so properly to explicate a proposition someone holds true we must refer to its theoretical context (beliefs must be holistic). Once we reject the logical empiricist idea that at some level our observations are given to us devoid of all theoretical content, we have little alternative but to adopt holism.

The important point for our purpose is: holism implies our concept of an individual holding a set of beliefs only makes sense if we assume they do so against a social background. Because individuals can not have pure observations, they necessarily construe their observations in terms of a prior set of theories, so they can not reach beliefs through observations except in the context of a prior set of theories. Individuals reach the beliefs they do through their experiences, but they can not have experiences except in a theoretical context, so they can not come to hold the beliefs they do except against the background of a theoretical context. Thus, we can not conceive of individuals coming to hold sets of beliefs unless we take them to have done so, at least initially, in the context of a set of theories already made available to them by their community. Holism implies our concept of an individual holding a set of beliefs presupposes they reached their beliefs against a social background. The only way anyone could make sense of the idea of someone coming to hold a set of beliefs outside of a social context would be to assume they had done so through their experiences alone, that is, their experiences understood as pure observations. But holism shows this is conceptually impossible. Experiences can generate beliefs only where there already exists a prior set of beliefs through which to construct the experiences. Our experiences can lead us to beliefs only because we already have access to theories through the heritage of our community. The grammar of our concepts shows individuals necessarily arrive at their sets of beliefs by way of their participation in the traditions of their communities.

Semantic holism implies we can not conceive of individuals holding beliefs apart from against a social background. Moreover, because we can not conceive of individuals acting apart from in the light of their beliefs, we also can not conceive of individuals acting apart from against a social background. In this way, semantic holism undermines common interpretations of things such as a realm of pure reason, a space behind a veil of ignorance, a state of nature, and existential freedom. Semantic holism implies the very idea of individuals holding beliefs presupposes they came to do so against a prior social background, and this excludes the very possibility of individuals coming before society. No matter how far we push our concepts back, we can not properly make sense of the idea of individuals holding beliefs, and so acting, outside of, and so unaffected by, particular social contexts. Our concepts imply individuals always form their beliefs, and so perform their actions, under the sway of particular social structures. Thus, we can not make sense of a realm of pure reason, or a space behind a veil of ignorance, where individuals arrive inexorably at such and such beliefs because they are liberated from the su-

perstitions foisted on them by society, or the biases created by knowledge of their particular social contexts. Individuals can not adopt beliefs through their individual reasoning alone outside of the allegedly corrupting effects of society. Likewise, we can not make sense of the idea of a state of nature in which individuals exist outside of society, or an existential freedom where individuals exist unaffected by society. If individuals exist, they must act on beliefs they must have adopted under the influence of a social context.

Let us describe the belief that we can conceive of individuals existing, reasoning, and acting, outside particular social contexts as a belief in autonomy. We have found a belief in autonomy to be mistaken. Individuals are not autonomous beings capable of governing their own lives unaffected by external social forces. Of course, they might be able to obey self-imposed dictates of reason, but the reason by which they decide to adopt the dictates they do necessarily will be a particular reason influenced by a particular social background, not a pure or universal reason. Our concept of an individual is a concept of an individual embedded within society. However, none of this suggests the individual is an illusion, or a mere function of a social structure; a rejection of autonomy does not entail a rejection of agency understood as the ability of people to adopt beliefs, and to decide to act, for reasons of their own.

Although individuals always reach their beliefs against a social background, they still can have reasons of their own (reasons deriving from their set of beliefs) for adopting beliefs that go beyond, and so transform, this background. Individuals necessarily arrive at their beliefs through the heritage of their community, but this does not imply their beliefs are given by their community: the fact that they start out from within a given social context does not establish they can not then adjust this context. On the contrary, individuals are agents who are capable of extending and modifying the heritage of the community into which they are born: they can reflect on the social structures they inherit, and they can elect to act in novel ways which in sum might transform their community beyond all recognition. For example, imagine Mr Victorian is born into a community governed by a belief in a wages-fund according to which if workers combine in an attempt to increase their wages beyond a natural, near-subsistence level, they will not only fail, but also bring doom on their own heads in the form of unemployment. Because the community is governed by this belief, trade unions are condemned roundly, and the government of the day has no difficulty defending legislation making it difficult for workers to combine. Next imagine he reads a number of articles by social statisticians, and thereby concludes the emergence of trade unions in certain sectors of the economy actually has been accompanied by rising wages. He reaches this conclusion not on the basis of a universal reason or pure experience, but because the statistics count as a reason for doing so within his existing set of beliefs, including, say, a belief that the inductive use of statistics provides a better basis for a science of economics than does a deductive method. In this way, Mr Victorian might come to modify the heritage of his community by rejecting the wages-fund doctrine.

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Moreover, if a sufficient number of his contemporaries came to modify their intellectual heritage in a similar way, the community as a whole would come to look more favourably on trade unions, and this might facilitate legislative reform making it easier for workers to combine. The fact that we are not autonomous beings is quite compatible with the fact that we are agents who reflect on our beliefs and actions and adjust them for reasons of our own.

ON SOCIETY

Although our rejection of autonomy accords with a structuralist and communitarian emphasis on the importance of society over the individual, a defence of human agency excludes a view widely regarded as the core of structuralism and communitarianism.[9] If individuals are agents who modify their beliefs and decide to perform novel actions for reasons of their own, then the way social structures develop, the form they take, must be a result of the undetermined agency of individuals, not the internal logic of social structures.[10] Social contexts must be as much a product of individuals as individuals are of social contexts.

Structuralists and communitarians often claim the nature of individuals derives from their social contexts. But this claim fails to distinguish between three different conceptions of the relationship of the individual to society. First, the social context might INFLUENCE individuals but the nature of its influence might preclude our identifying limits to the forms their individuality can take. Second, the social context might RESTRICT individuals by establishing identifiable limits to the forms their individuality can take. Third, the social context might DECIDE the nature of individuals, not just setting limits to their individuality, but actually determining every detail, no matter how small, of their particular natures. We will find the social context can neither decide nor restrict either the beliefs individuals adopt or the actions they decide to perform.

There is nothing especially controversial about the idea that social contexts do not decide the nature of individuals. Critics often complain an over-emphasis on so-

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[9] Here we distance ourselves from the structuralists' rejection of authors in favour of epistemes in M. Foucault, "What is an Author?", in LANGUAGE, COUNTER-MEMORY, PRACTICE: SELECTED ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS, trans. D. Bouchard & S. Sherry, ed. & intro. D. Bouchard, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 113-138; and M. Foucault, THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE, trans. A Sheridan Smith, (New York, Pantheon Books, 1972); and from the communitarian view of individuals as constituted by their communities in Sandel, LIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE.

[10] This partial defence of the metaphysics of liberal individualism contrasts with two popular responses to communitarianism. The first emphasises the extent to which the metaphysics of liberal individualism can sustain aspects of a communitarian politics: eg. W. Kymlicka, LIBERALISM, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989). The second argues we should adopt a liberal politics irrespective of our metaphysics: eg. C. Larmore, PATTERNS OF MORAL COMPLEXITY, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987). Neither of these responses has as its main focus that metaphysical critique of liberal individualism which is the crux of communitarianism in so far as the communitarians themselves recognise it does not lead straightforwardly to a particular politics: cf. Taylor, "Cross-Purposes".

ciety precludes an adequate account of change, and this is indeed so if the claim being criticised is that social contexts decide the nature of individuals. Social contexts change over time, and we can not explain this change unless we allow for individuals altering the social contexts they inherit by adopting novel beliefs and electing to act in novel ways. Social contexts are products of the past and contemporary beliefs and actions of individuals, so if they decided the future beliefs and actions of individuals, we would have a closed circle ruling out the very possibility of change. Imagine the totality of beliefs and actions at work within a society is such and such, so the social context is as it is; because the social context arises out of the beliefs and actions, it can not alter unless they do, but if it decides their nature, they can not alter unless it does; we would have a closed circle in which nothing ever could change. Besides, we can not accept social contexts decide the nature of individuals because we can not individuate the beliefs and actions of individuals by reference to social contexts alone. Different people adopt different beliefs and decide to act differently against the background of the same social structure, so there must be an undecided space in front of these social structures where people can adopt this belief or that belief, and decide to perform this action or that action. The social context can not decide the nature of the individual because there is an undecided aspect to the beliefs individuals come to hold, and the actions they elect to make; we can not specify each and every detail of their nature in terms of their social context. It is not enough for structuralists and communitarians to suggest some beliefs and actions are common to everyone who exists in a given social context: it is not enough because this leaves other beliefs and actions which are not decided by the social context; it is not enough because this implies social contexts restrict, but do not decide, the nature of individuals.[11]

The idea that social contexts do not restrict either the beliefs individuals adopt or the actions they attempt to perform is much more controversial. Nonetheless, this idea follows inexorably from the impossibility of our ever identifying a limit to the beliefs an individual conceivably can come to hold, and so the actions an individual conceivably can attempt. If social contexts restrict the individual, they impose limits on what beliefs and choices can be adopted. Here we can not allow that such limits exist unless we can recognise them if they do; we can not recognise them if they do unless we can have criteria for distinguishing necessary limits individuals can not cross because of the effect of a social context from conditional limits individuals simply happen not yet to have crossed; and we can not have such criteria if, as a matter of principle, we can not identify any such necessary limit. Thus, we can prove social contexts do not

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[11] See M. Foucault, THE ORDER OF THINGS: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES, (London, Tavistock Publications, 1970). Here Foucault shows – or rather purports to show – everyone in a given episteme has ideas in common. This does not allow him to conclude – as he seems to think – the ideas of individuals are mere products of epistemes. If there is an undecided space in front of the episteme, we must refer to individuals to explain how they fill this space.

restrict the beliefs and choices of individuals by showing that we never could identify a necessary limit to the beliefs individuals can come to adopt.

Imagine we can identify necessary limits imposed by social contexts on the beliefs individuals can adopt. Because the social contexts impose these limits, they can not be natural limits transcending all contexts, as is the natural limit to how fast I can run. What is more, because we can identify these limits, we can describe them to individuals within the relevant social context, so, assuming they can understand us, they can come to recognise these limits, and so understand the sorts of beliefs they can not adopt. But because they can recognise these limits, and because these limits can not be natural limits, therefore, they can transcend these limits, so these limits can not really be limits at all. Because they can understand the sorts of beliefs these limits preclude, and because there can not be any natural restriction preventing them from holding these beliefs, therefore, they can adopt these beliefs, so these beliefs can not be beliefs they can not come to hold. For example, if we can recognise that such and such a community of monarchists can not possibly form a republic because of the social context, we can explain the nature of a republic to them, so they can become republicans, and, if enough of them in sufficiently powerful positions do become republicans, they then can found a republic.

There are two features of our argument which seem to need defending. The first is the apparent proviso that we can describe a limit to the people it effects only if we are their contemporaries. This appears to leave open the possibility of social contexts imposing limits we can recognise as such only after they cease to operate. Actually, this proviso does not apply because our argument concerns the conceptual, not empirical, pre-conditions of limits. Any limit would have to be one we could not recognise. Here our argument takes the form of a thought-experiment: if we imagine someone who is aware of the limit entering into the relevant context, this person can describe the limit to the relevant individuals at which point it ceases to be a limit for the reasons given. The fact that we envisage the limit being transcended in this way shows it is a contingent, not a necessary, limit. After all, if it was a necessary limit imposed by the social context, we would be able to envisage people transcending it only after the social context had changed so as to stop it operating. It is possible a critic might complain that the social context changes as soon as someone who is aware of the limit arrives on the scene. But this will not do. It will not do because it extends the social context to include people's awareness or lack of awareness of the purported limit. Thus, it makes the purported limit a mere description of the facts. It replaces the claim 'people can not come to believe X because of the social context' with the claim 'people can not come to believe X for so long as they do not believe X', and this latter claim really is not very illuminating.

The second feature of our argument which seems to need defending is the assumption that the individuals who a limit effects can understand our account of it. Once again, although the possibility of translation between radically different sets

of beliefs is a premise of our argument, this is not the place to defend it at any length because doing so would require a major detour from our main theme. Instead, it must suffice to note we have no reason to assume people can not translate between sets of beliefs no matter how different they are. When the individuals concerned first approach our account of the limit, they might not have the requisite concepts to understand us, but surely they will share some concepts with us, and surely they can use these concepts as a point of entry into our worldview, so surely they eventually can come to understand us.[12] Indeed, if they did not share some of our concepts, we would not share any of their concepts, so we would be unable to translate their beliefs into our terms, so we would have been unable to identify any limits on the beliefs they could adopt in the first place.[13]

We can not identify any limits social contexts set to the nature of individuals. If we could do so, we could describe these limits to these individuals who then could transgress these limits in a way which would show they were not limits at all. Moreover, because there is no possibility of our ever identifying a restriction imposed by a social context on the beliefs individuals can adopt or the actions they can decide to perform, we must conclude the very idea of such a restriction rests on a conceptual confusion. Social structures only ever influence, as opposed to decide or restrict, the nature of individuals. This means social structures must be products of the undetermined agency of individuals. The way social structures develop clearly depends on the performances of individuals; thus, because the performances of individuals are not determined by them, they can not govern their own development. Again, social structures can not be self-contained systems because they depend on the beliefs and actions of individuals, and they do not decide the nature of these beliefs and actions.

Although the nature of an individual is not restricted, let alone decided, by the social context, individuals are not autonomous beings who govern their own lives unaffected by external social forces. Individuals remain embedded within particular communities. They develop and modify their beliefs in ways that are neither given nor bounded by their social location, but this does not imply they reach the beliefs they do as a result of pure experience or pure reason unaffected by their social location. The fact that individuals can adjust the beliefs found in their community does not establish that they do not start out from the beliefs found in their community. On the contrary, individuals can exercise their agency only against a particular social background; they can have reasons of their own for modifying their beliefs or deciding to act in novel ways only because they inherit a set of beliefs within which

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[12] For a defence of this argument see M. Bevir, "Objectivity in History", HISTORY AND THEORY, (forthcoming).

[13] On the dependence of translation on some shared beliefs see W.V.O. Quine, WORD AND OBJECT, (Cambridge, Mass., Massachussets Institute of Technology Press, 1960); and Davidson, INQUIRIES INTO TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION.

something can count as a reason. For example, when Mr Victorian renounces the wages-fund doctrine, he does so because an interpretation of certain statistics gives him a reason to do so, and this happens only because he already has a set of beliefs which allows him to interpret the statistics in this way and treat this interpretation as authoritative. He can modify his beliefs only because he has a set of beliefs which make a conclusion based on statistics a reason to reject an economic theory. His action rests on a set of inherited beliefs including, say, the beliefs that social statistics are reliable and the inductive sciences provide a powerful model for the study of economics. Of course, these beliefs might be the result of a process in which he modified an earlier set of beliefs by reflecting on them, but the initial set of beliefs that enabled the process to get going must have been one he inherited from his community.

THE MYTH OF ORIGIN

We have discovered that the relationship of the individual to society is one of mutual dependence: individuals necessarily adopt their beliefs, and decide on their actions, against the background of, and so influenced by, their social context; but social contexts do not decide or restrict the performances of individuals, so they arise out of the performances of individuals. There appears to be an obvious objection to the idea that the individual and society are mutually dependent in this way. If individuals can exist only against the background of a social context, and if social contexts can arise only out of the beliefs and actions of individuals, then it appears neither individuals nor social contexts ever could have come into being. Individuals could not have come into being because they could do so only against the background of a social context, and yet no social context could exist prior to individuals. Likewise, social contexts could not have come into being because they could do so only as a result of individuals holding beliefs and performing actions, and yet individuals could not do these things prior to the existence of a social context. It appears there must have been a moment of origin.

To rebut this objection to our position, we must explore the nature of sorites terms. The sorites paradox arises because we can start from true premises, follow a series of apparently valid arguments (arguments affirming the antecedent), and yet arrive at a false conclusion. For instance, someone with one more hair on their head than a bald person presumably is also bald. Thus, if X is bald, X' who has one more hair than X is bald, so X" who has one more hair than X' is bald, so X"' who has one more hair than X" is bald, and so on, in a way which will enable us eventually to show any particular person to be bald no matter how hairy they are. Although the semantic importance of sorites terms remains a moot point, their paradoxical nature clearly derives from their being vague predicates we can not specify precisely the circumstances in which we rightly may describe something using a sorites term. For example, we can not say exactly what constitutes baldness. Moreover, we can unpack this notion of a vague predicate in terms of the existence

of borderline cases: we are uncertain whether or not we legitimately may describe a borderline case using a sorites term even when we have perfect knowledge of the nature of the case. For example, there are some people we would be uncertain whether or not to call bald even if we knew exactly how many hairs were on their head. The existence of these borderline cases means we can not accept without some qualification statements such as 'someone with one more hair on their head than a bald person is themselves bald.' Crucially, this means we can not talk of moments of origin in relation to sorites terms. For instance, imagine Peter has gone bald during the last five years. Today, at time T, he is entirely bald. Does this mean that at time T' when he had one more hair than he does now he was also bald, and at time T'' when he had one more hair than at time T' he was also bald, and so on? If we accepted it did without qualification, we would have to conclude Peter was bald five years ago which is false EX HYPOTHESI. The problem is that because bald is a sorites term, we can not pinpoint a precise moment when Peter went bald. We can say only that during the last five years Peter has passed through a number of borderline states such that he was hairy then, but he is bald now. Peter's being bald had no moment of origin.

How does this analysis of sorites terms advance our discussion of the relationship between the individual and society? 'Individual' and 'society' are akin to sorites terms in a way which undermines the need for a moment of origin, and thereby the objection to our argument outlined above. The theory of evolution suggests 'an individual' might be a vague predicate because humans evolved from creatures that were a bit less human-like and so on. More importantly, we definitely can not say exactly what constitutes holding beliefs, and, because our concept of an action relies on our concept of belief as well as desire, we therefore can not say exactly what constitutes performing an action. The holding of beliefs does not become a reality at a definite point on the spectrum of cases running from, say, purposive behaviour without language, through the use of single words, and the use of whole sentences tied to particular nouns, to basic forms of abstract theorising. Numerous borderline cases separate those cases in which beliefs clearly are not held from those cases in which beliefs clearly are held. Similarly, 'a social context' or 'an inherited tradition' does not become a reality at a definite point on the spectrum of cases running from, say, birds who migrate along established routes, through chimpanzees who cooperate to capture monkeys in a particular way, and a family of hunter-gathers who follow the rains, to a tribe who always plant their crops at a particular time of year. Crucially, because both 'an individual' and 'a social context' are vague predicates, we can not talk of a moment of origin when individuals came into existence as people who hold beliefs and perform actions, or when social contexts came into existence as traditions and practices which people inherit from their communities. Thus, we can say both individuals necessarily exist against the background of a particular social context, and social contexts necessarily arise out of the performances of individuals. The logic of our concepts shows individuals

and social contexts came into being together, not successively. Our concept of an individual depends on our concept of a social context, and our concept of a social context depends on our concept of an individual. We can not make sense of one without the other.

We can make much the same point slightly differently. Our argument concerns the logical implications of concepts. The ideas of an individual and a society which inform our current moral, political, social, and historical discourses are mutually dependent – each only makes sense given the presence of the other. The grammar of our concepts compels us both to make sense of individuals in terms of their social context and to make sense of social contexts in terms of the performances of individuals. It presents us with a cycle in which people arrive at their belief and decide to act as they do against a social background which in turn derives from people holding the beliefs they do and acting as they do. Thus, if someone wanted to undertake some sort of investigation into the origins of this cycle, they would have to develop a different set of concepts from those which currently operate in our moral, political, social, and historical discourses. Of course, if they did so successfully, the set of concepts they developed then might effect our existing set of concepts, though it also might not do so.[14] At least for the moment, however, we are left with a view of the individual and society as mutually dependent.

IMPLICATIONS

To conclude, we can make some very brief and tentative comments about what implications our general understanding of the relationship between the individual and society has for the particular issues of, first, the rival merits of explanations in terms of social structures and explanations in terms of agency, and, second, the relative claims of the community and the individual as objects of value. However, we should remember that no such general understanding can resolve these particular issues, so there will be a very real sense in which the implications we mention will leave most of the hard work of social and moral philosophy still to be done.

Let us start with the implications of our argument for the philosophy of history and the social sciences. The mutual dependence of the individual and society, understood in the way we have described, suggests the following forms of explanation are the most appropriate. First, we should explain why individuals adopt the beliefs they do, and so act as they do, by reference to the decisions they make against the background of, and so influenced by, particular social structures. Second, we should explain the existence of social structures, and so their effect, by reference to

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[14] This is what is right in Foucault's suggestion that a change of episteme might lead to "man" (our concept of an individual) being "erased": Foucault, THE ORDER OF THINGS, p. 387. However, to allow Foucault this much is neither to accept our existing set of concepts is arbitrary, and so our view of the relationship of the individual to society irrational, nor that we have any reason to think a change of episteme immanent, and so to endorse his apocalyptic tone.

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the way the beliefs and actions of individuals coalesce to create norms, patterns of behaviour, institutions, and the like. Purely structural or contextual explanations always will be insufficient because the way in which societies develop depends not just on the internal mechanisms of social structures, but also on the performances individuals make in the spaces in front of these structures. Similarly, explanations in terms of the allegedly existential freedom of the individual always will be insufficient because the performances individuals make depend not on their pure experiences and pure deliberations, but on the ways in which they experience things and deliberate on them against the background of particular social structures.

Our account of the forms of explanation appropriate to the humanities and social sciences has implications for the debate on the legitimacy of Foucault's poststructuralist use of the concept of power. Foucault argues individuals are products of regimes of power, conceived as decentred social structures; power exists throughout society in innumerable micro-situations which together form a regime of power which decides how individuals are constituted as subjects. The ubiquity of regimes of power implies the enlightenment ideal of liberating individuals from social systems is an illusion. Thus, Foucault's history of prisons traces the changing nature of power from the widespread use of public torture through the reforms of the enlightenment to the emergence of a system based on surveillance and regulation. The ideals of the enlightenment did not liberate the individual; they merely inaugurated a more subtle, but equally repressive, regime of power.[15] In contrast, we have found that although the influence of social contexts is ubiquitous, there is always a space for individuals to exercise their agency, so individuals play a positive role in constructing themselves as subjects. Thus, the ideal of the enlightenment is not merely illusory. We can try to organise our social arrangements so as to improve the quality of the space in which individuals exercise their agency. How we might do this is a proper topic for social philosophy.

Let us turn now to the implications of our argument for moral and political philosophy. These implications must remain on somewhat shaky ground because of the difficulties of moving from any view of what is the case to a conclusion about what ought to be the case. Nonetheless, we can proceed provisionally on the assumption that something such as a rich life is a moral good, so an understanding of the nature of a rich life has implications for our moral views. The mutual dependence of the individual and society, understood in the way we have described, suggests something like the following values. First, because agents can adopt beliefs and undertake actions for reasons of their own, we should not neglect the individuality that arises from their doing so. Second, because individuals can exercise their agency

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[15] See particularly M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power", afterward to H. Drefus & P. Rainbow, MICHEL FOUCAULT: BEYOND STRUCTURALISM AND HERMENEUTICS, (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1982), pp. 208-226; and M. Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. A. Sheridan Smith, (London, Tavistock Publications, 1977).

only against a social background, we should value social structures where this background is as rich as possible, providing them with a wide range of opportunities and resources.

Our adherence to these values has implications for the debate on the relationship of individual rights, the common good, and human flourishing. Because we value individuality, we will attempt to protect features of human life we especially value from undue social influences such as restrictive legislation. One way to mark the protected status of these features of human life is to designate them as rights: individuals have rights to various liberties and powers because this enables them to develop their individuality. There can not be natural, pre-social rights because individuals exist only in social contexts; individuals exist as rights-bearers only against particular social backgrounds. However, societies can grant rights to individuals because of the importance of certain liberties and powers to human flourishing; society can postulate rights to protect the vital interests of individuals, their freedom from certain restraints, their equal access to certain opportunities, and their need for a certain standard of welfare.[16] Moreover, because a rich social background is something different individuals have in common, it provides the basis for an account of the common good. The members of a society exist in a relationship of mutual dependence because each has their being within a context composed of the others, and this suggests each has an interest in the collective well-being of the others: each depends on the others, so each benefits from the others flourishing. Here we can unpack the idea of others flourishing in terms of their developing their individuality against a rich social background. The promotion of their individuality depends on society postulating rights to protect their freedoms, opportunities, and welfare, so each member of a society has an interest in the defence of the rights of the other members of the society.[17] We can try to promote human flourishing by devising a system of rights as part of a rich social background which constitutes a common good. How we might do this is a proper topic for political philosophy.

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[16] The classic defence of a closely related view of rights is T. H. Green, "Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation", in THE WORKS OF THOMAS HILL GREEN, 3 Vols., ed. R. Nettleship, (London, Longmans, 1885-1888), Vol. 2: Philosophical Works.

[17] Green defended a closely related view of the common good: see T. H. Green, PROLEGOMENA TO ETHICS, ed. A. Bradley, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1884).