

Liberal Democratic Theory and the Situated Individual

Monique Lanoix

In classical liberal theory, the political individual is conceptualized as a rational, autonomous being. Historically, this concept was used to exclude women, people of colour, and other marginalized individuals from the political community. It was argued that they could not participate because they lacked certain qualities, such as rationality. These qualities were, by definition, constitutive of the concept of the political individual. In order to gain suffrage these persons had to convince the political community that they too possessed the qualities needed to be considered members.

A challenge to a political theory does not necessarily imply that the key concepts inherent to the theory will also be questioned. The battles of abolitionists and suffragettes in the 19th century did not involve a reassessment of the concept of the individual, rather, their purpose was to prove that the ideal of the rational, autonomous individual was truly universal, that is, applicable to more than just white males.

The connection between justice and the individual is an implicit one. When we speak of principles of justice there is an underlying assumption that these principles are applicable to a particular type of individual. When principles of justice were challenged, the concept of the individual implicit in such principles often was not critically assessed. This has changed recently with the communitarian and feminist critiques of liberal democratic theory.

Feminist critiques are particularly interesting because they criticize traditional theory for excluding the experiences of women and other marginalized groups. Thus the strength of their critique comes from the relevance of the individual's context. Feminist critiques of the abstract individual call into question the validity, from both moral and epistemological bases, of abstracting certain features of the individual. They claim that what is deemed to be a harmless abstraction, a neutral etching away of an individual's contingencies, has biased political theory in favour of individuals that more closely approximate the abstract ideal.

In this paper I examine the concept of the individual as posited by Benhabib in *Critique, Norm and Utopia* and especially in *Situating the Self*. In the first part of the paper, I outline her critique of the concept of the individual as a universal ideal devoid of all contingencies. I also examine her proposal for a concept of the individual as generalized and concrete other. In the second part, I explore the possibilities of such a proposal for liberal democratic theory. Although Benhabib states that her proposal is critical and not normative, I believe it can yield some valuable insights which will have normative implications for liberal theory.

The Situated Individual

An attack on the individual or the subject can be construed as a serious attack on modernity in general. If the individual, as "an abstract site of moral and ethical status and rights," is no longer a paradigm, the danger of questioning this privileged site might imply that we must either get rid of the site completely or rehabilitate the concept. In the first case, if we relinquish the concept of the individual we must also lose the concept of rights and duties. In the second, by situating the individual we may lean towards a conservative ideal and make only certain individuals, albeit situated, the privileged site of rights and duties. We must decide whether we want to abandon the concept of the individual completely or rethink the individual carefully.

Benhabib claims that the concept of the individual should not be forgone; rather, it needs to be rehabilitated. She believes that the individual as an ideal is useful: an ideal which is universally applicable confirms the rights of all members of a political community. According to Benhabib, the concept of the individual as understood by classical liberal theory and classical moral theory excludes some important aspects of the concept of the individual. Yet her critique of the individual is susceptible to some of the possible shortcomings implied by theorizing the role of social context.

Benhabib is searching to rehabilitate some of Hegel's and the Frankfurt School's insights on the subject. As she argues in *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, the critique of modern self-consciousness is possible through the structure of human intersubjectivity as developed by Hegel (Benhabib, 1986: 44). Hegel's ideas on intersubjectivity as well as Marx's valorisation of productive labour have been important tools in questioning the cartesian legacy of the reflective ego. Yet according to Benhabib, although one gains some insights from Hegel's and Marx's ideas on the subject, such a view is bound to fail for two reasons.

The first reason why the subject as "animal laborans" must fail is that there is more to the individual than just isolated activity; to use such a concept of the individual can only lead to a reductionist view of society. The second reason is normative. Such a concept cannot explain "the nature and causes of conflict faced by late-capitalist societies;" thinking of the individual in these terms "leads to the politics of collective singularity" (Benhabib, 1986: 346-347).

This last point is important because it shows how the concept of the individual has implications for a theory of society. Benhabib claims that society should be viewed as a plurality. This is defined as a place where ideas are discussed, where a common perspective can be created because many individuals must share a space. She borrows from Arendt the idea that a "plurality is the condition of embodied beings born of others like themselves" (Benhabib,

1986: 140-141).

If the concept of the labouring subject fails, its reflective counterpart also is doomed. Throughout modernity the concept of the subject always has been thought of as detached from others. The problem with such views is that the subject is not isolated. Following Habermas, Benhabib posits the self as a fundamentally interactive one. Such an individual has "the discursive ability to enter into processes of argumentation and to entertain the standpoint of others" (Benhabib, 1986: 346). By having such interactive qualities, the individual is intrinsically intersubjective.

A theory of the subject begins to emerge in *Critique, Norm and Utopia*. From a perspective critical of the Frankfurt School's achievements to considerations about the individual interacting with her/his community, Benhabib turns to the individual implicit in moral theory.

In *Situating the Self*, Benhabib examines the self in moral theory. Classical moral theory uses a concept of the individual which is considered universally applicable. This is what Benhabib, among others, refers to as the "generalized" other. This ideal ensures that a moral theory is universalistic and that individuals are not discriminated against because of their particularities. The same can be said about a political theory that uses a concept of the "generalized other."

Benhabib's main criticism of classical moral theory is that the restriction of the moral point of view to the perspective of the "generalized other" is wrong. Taken alone this perspective leads to the exclusion of marginalized individuals' experiences. Benhabib's criticism arises from epistemic considerations. An individual cannot judge properly and cannot sympathise if s/he does not have access to the other's context. The universalistic point of view needs to be completed by what she terms "the standpoint of the concrete other" (Benhabib, 1992). This standpoint "requires us to view each other and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution" (Benhabib, 1992).

According to Benhabib, these two ways of seeing the individual can also be applied to political theory. Her

proposal is regulative: the principles acquired from a universalizable point of view must be assessed by applying them to a particular situation. This does not imply that such a view only has practical implications. The concept of the individual should be two-faceted and each facet plays an important theoretical role.

Benhabib's model is based on Habermas' discourse ethics, but unlike his model, Benhabib posits that individuals would not try to reach "a consensus" but rather "an understanding." Benhabib feels that the latter term captures better the goal of communicative ethics. A consensus would mean that individuals must enter into a rigid agreement about what constitutes "the general interest." She does not believe a consensus can or should be reached. First of all she claims that consent alone cannot be a criterion for anything. Second, she argues that we cannot postulate a "generalizable interest." This negates the plurality of society and puts the emphasis on the results rather than on the procedure. Such a system would entail something like Rawls' principles of justice where a system is fixed by the individuals entering into contract. Since such a contract draws on principles of justice which are supposed to be universally applicable, if a particular instance of injustice arises, these universally valid rules must be challenged and may not be changed easily.

Rather, Benhabib sees consensus as a normatively regulative ideal but not a goal in itself. Thus consensus would be something worth striving for, but it need not be reached. Instead individuals involved in negotiations would try to understand each others' points of view. There would be room for progress as individuals involved in the process came to an agreement, but agreement would always be contingent.

Benhabib argues that we need to think of the individual in more than one way. Her concept of the individual is two-faceted: concrete and generalized. The concrete individual can act as check on principles of justice, and the generalized concept is used to regulate our discussion.

By proposing such a structure Benhabib accomplishes two things. First she situates the self "more decisively in

contexts of gender and community," and second, because her concept insists, "upon the discursive power of individuals to challenge such situatedness in the name of universalistic principles, future identities and as yet undiscovered communities," she gives individuals the means to act upon their environment (Benhabib, 1992: 8). Therefore, she attempts to avoid one pitfall of more conservative communitarian views, which is to locate the individual so precisely in a context that the individual can never leave the particular context behind without changing her/his status as individual.

Critique Of The Abstract Individual

One question arising from Benhabib's proposal is: why must the concept of the individual be rethought? To answer this question it will be useful to examine the concept of the abstract individual.

Abstraction is a useful conceptual tool. The purpose of an abstraction is to eliminate nonessential particularities. Ideally, the end result is a concept of the individual which is universally applicable. But this has not prevented injustices. Certain individuals were kept out of the political community, in part because they did not conform to the concept of the individual.

No abstraction is neutral. From a political perspective, some traits will be considered important, such as rationality, and others unimportant, such as physical appearance. One goal of a particular political theory is to conceptualize the individual such that only those traits which are deemed essential are recognized. My purpose here is to discuss briefly why the concept of the abstract individual is problematic. I focus on the concept of the individual used by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* and subsequent writings.

The individual in classical and contemporary liberal theory is radically autonomous. This means that all her/his relationships are contingent. I claim that it is not reflective of the individuals inhabiting a political community; this concept

can only lead to the perpetration of injustice. Benhabib argues that from an epistemic point of view it is incoherent to postulate a disembodied self reflecting on principles of justice. Without any context to judge from, such an epistemic subject can only fall into error (Benhabib, 1992: 158-170). Benhabib's criticism is mainly aimed at Rawls' device of the veil of ignorance.

Rawls does postulate individuals behind a veil of ignorance and these individuals will formulate principles of justice. But Rawls also has a normative concept of the person. These two ideas are different. I believe Benhabib's criticism holds for individuals behind the veil of ignorance. The principles formulated behind a veil of ignorance must be so general that they prove to be useless.

My criticism of Rawls has to do with his normative concept of the person rather than the device of the veil of ignorance. Rawls clarifies his concept of the person in "Justice as Fairness" and *Political Liberalism*. Persons have two moral powers: "a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good" (Rawls, 1993: 18).

This concept of the person is echoed in Rawls' definition of society.

[A] society satisfying the principles of justice as fairness comes as close as a society can to being a voluntary scheme, for it meets the principles which free and equal persons would assent to under circumstances that are fair. In this sense its members are autonomous and the obligations they recognize self-imposed.

The individual is a site of responsibility, but responsibility that is freely chosen.

The problem with such a concept stems from imagining the individual as radically autonomous. As seen in Rawls' formulation of the person, an autonomous individual only has contingent relationships. Traditional theory fears that conceptualizing the individual as caring for someone or being in a relationship will affect her/his impartiality and autonomy.¹ Instead of thinking of the individual as radically

autonomous in the sense of having responsibilities which are only freely chosen, however, it would be more fruitful to think of an autonomous individual as a person with a "capacity to adopt a universalistic standpoint and to act on that basis" (Benhabib, 1992: 346). This definition does not preclude individuals from having relationships which are not contingent.

A political theory based on the concept of a radically autonomous individual can account for rights but not for needs or obligations. Yet all citizens start their lives from a position of dependency. Rawls explicitly acknowledges that individuals are born into society but then pays no further attention to the implications. I claim that this has philosophical implications. Individuals who must take care of others cannot be viewed as individuals who have freely chosen their relationships.

The responsibilities devolving from the private sphere, such as parenting, are not "freely chosen." It is important to clarify what "freely chosen" implies. From a viewpoint of deciding whether to become a parent or not, individuals can be said to have a choice. But some people must become parents if society is to continue. In the sense that society relies on the parenting activities of the private sphere, parenting cannot be a freely chosen activity. It is a necessary activity for someone. The public sphere may take parenting activities for granted, but it relies on them to provide future citizens. If it were not for the parenting activities of the private sphere, there would be no need for a public sphere.

The public sphere does not recognize this "need" of parenting activities. This is due in part to the concept of the individual implicit in liberal theory. The consequence is that parenting individuals who enter a society where responsibilities are understood to be freely chosen will be at a disadvantage.

Fair equality of opportunity is seen in Rawls' system as fair equality between individuals who choose their responsibilities. Individuals with parenting responsibilities will not be able to shed these when they are required to act as if their responsibilities were freely chosen. Parents will

either have to delegate their responsibilities to others or simply assume a lesser role in the public sphere. In the first case, individuals who are more fortunate may be able to purchase the help of a caretaker and will have a definite advantage over others who cannot do the same. In the second case, they will suffer the consequences of a society that sees them as having to put up with inconveniences because they have “freely” decided to become parents.

It can be countered that such problems are of a pragmatic nature. Society can always be made to compensate parents. But I claim that the problem is deeper than that. First, there is always a notion that parents will be put at a disadvantage in the public sphere and thus need “compensation” by society. I question the rationale when it should be obvious that the public sphere would not exist were it not for the private sphere. Second, it seems absurd to postulate a public sphere where the main relationship between individuals is that of resolving conflict of interest. There is an ontological element which seems to be forgotten: individuals are interactive beings who cannot function alone.

Implications For Liberal Theory

In classical liberal theory, individuals are thought to flourish if they are left alone. Rawls does think that a society that is altruistic would be preferable, but he does not want to postulate such individuals at the outset because he wants his concept of the person to be reflective of reality. All individuals may not be altruistic but they do need each other. There should be a middle ground between imagining the individual as altruistic or as completely detached.

Liberal theory is at a loss when it tries to account for needs. For example, gestures of benevolence are taken to devolve from the private sphere. O'Neill argues in *Constructions of Reasons* that “[human agents] need the [care and attention of others] not merely for some arbitrary purpose but as conditions of becoming and remaining agents” (O'Neill, 1989: 230). Rights may be important, but

liberal theory has forgotten about obligation. To view obligation as playing an important role in a political theory is compatible with the view that individuals are interactive and may sometimes be dependent on one another.

I believe that Benhabib's proposal can help us theorize obligation. By conceptualizing individuals as intersubjective, we admit that individuals may need others. My proposal is to use Benhabib's model in the following manner: instead of thinking of the individual as radically autonomous we should think of the individual as relational. Such an individual can be readily thought of as either a “generalized” or a “concrete” other.

The concept of the relational individual admits an implicit intersubjectivity. If the individual is thought of as relational then s/he will be seen to have certain relationships which are not contingent. Her/his movements in the public spheres will not be assumed to be unconstrained. The individual is understood to have certain obligations which are necessary to the functioning of the public sphere.

The radically autonomous individual is no longer the paradigm of the citizen. A relational individual can inhabit both the private and the public spheres. The main impact of such a view of the individual will be on the relation between the public and the private spheres. There is an explicit acknowledgement that the private and public spheres are intertwined and that the public sphere relies on activities of the private sphere. The boundaries between each sphere need not be rigidly set and should be rethought.

Conclusion

In *The Normative Grounds of Social Criticism*, Baynes criticizes Habermas' communicative ethics proposal for being too abstract even though it has fewer ties to tradition (Baynes, 1992: 151). This same criticism can be applied to a system based on Benhabib's model of the individual. Benhabib's proposal may allow individuals to be more critical, but it does not give indications as to the procedure

that could be taken to delineate an understanding. At least Rawls' proposal puts forward two concrete principles of justice. Thus if Benhabib's proposal is to be taken seriously, certain concepts have to be clarified on a theoretical and pragmatic level. What constitutes an understanding must be defined. Benhabib's idea of understanding is similar to the idea of consensus. The differences will need to be clarified. If we think of an understanding as a process, can we still achieve an arrangement that protects individuals' rights? We must ask whether an understanding can be theorized without endorsing relativism.

I suggest that this is possible because the individual as relational being can be thought of as "generalized other." This can be used as a normative concept. Thus we are constrained to base our discussion of the norm of respect and equality for all individuals.

An abstract individual can only be postulated as universal; by definition it cannot be contextualized. Conceptualizing the individual as relational can be either a generalized or a concrete other. It can be used both as a norm and as a critical tool. This also means that individuals are recognized as interactive social beings and that they might require the help and care of others. This, I believe, truly reflects an important ontological aspect of the individual. Anything less has excised a crucial feature of our humanity.

Notes

¹ See Diana T. Meyers' refutation of this view in "The socialized Individual and Individual Autonomy: An Intersection between Philosophy and Psychology," *Women and Moral Theory*, Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers, eds., 137-153.

Works Cited

- Baynes, Kenneth. 1992. *The Normative Grounds of Social Criticism: Kant, Rawls, and Habermas*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1986. *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1992. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Kittay, Eva Feder and Meyers, Diana T., eds. 1987. *Women and Moral Theory*. Rowan and Littlefield.
- Meyers, Diana T. 1987. "The Socialized Individual and Individual Autonomy: An Intersection Between Philosophy and Psychology." *Women and Moral Theory*. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers, eds. Rowan and Littlefield: 137-153.
- O'Neill, Onóra. 1989. *Constructions of Reason: Explorations in Kant's Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1985. "Justice As Fairness Political not Metaphysical." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14.3.
- Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.