

# Philosophical Analysis of Personal Identity and Liberal Political Theory.

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## Abstract

Conceptions of political identity are closely related to the conception of personal identity. Rawls's metaphysical conception of the person, known as abstract individualism, faced several objections or criticisms on two bases as claimed by critics – its metaphysical nature and inconsistency with the features most salient in persons. Liberalism's commitment to individualism is also taken to be normative. Besides some perfectionists, the criticism of liberals' abstract individualism comes from communitarians like Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Their common criticism is against the liberal view that an individual or person exists independently of any social context or circumstance. The communitarians oppose the liberals' view – 'priority of rights over the good' based on the social constitution thesis. In contrast, the perfectionists claim the role of government in fostering a fully autonomous moral person. Catherine G. Campbell defends Rawlsian political identity from objections that it relies on either personhood individualism or identity individualism. Rawls's conception of the person has been considered vulnerable to communitarian criticism. Communitarians have objected to Rawls's conception of the person due to his use of the original position and the political conception of the person. Critics have taken the original position to be objectionable on metaphysical grounds for various reasons. Norman Daniels, Amy Gutmann, Steven Lukes, Terry Hall, and Richard Rorty have their own criticisms against Rawls's metaphysical conception of a person or abstract individualism. Critics' argument against Rawls's original position can be summarised as follows: The original position is metaphysical, devoid of social circumstances or conditions. Campbell aims to show that one can accept a Rawlsian conception of political identity without committing oneself to any objectionable metaphysical views. Campbell presents a metaphysical view of persons that clarifies what it means for personhood or personal identity to be constituted by social circumstances. Critics have argued that Rawls's political conception of the person commits him to a particular view of persons due to his commitment to the priority of the right. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel argues that Rawls is committed to a view of persons as metaphysically independent of their ends. Rawls's commitment to unencumbered selves, according to Sandel, is rooted in Rawls's commitment to the priority of the right. According to Campbell, the charge that Rawls's original position or the political conception of the person relies on personhood individualism and identity individualism is common. As per Campbell, Sandel's arguments fail to provide a clear account of the metaphysical view to which Rawls is supposed to be committed or what the alternative, more plausible view, is supposed to be. Similarly, the normative objections consist primarily in the charge that Rawls's political conception of the person is normatively deficient without explaining why that is the case. Campbell has claimed that there is a difference between persons and selves, or what is constitutive of being a person as opposed to an agent, or what constitutes personhood versus citizenship, and so on.

**Key Words:** Metaphysical, normative, abstract, individualism, liberals, communitarians, social constitution thesis.

## Introduction

Conceptions of political identity are closely related to the conception of personal identity. In *Persons, Identity, and Political Theory*, Catherine G. Campbell asserted that Rawls's political conception of person has faced several objections due to its metaphysical nature and inconsistency with the features most salient in persons. The metaphysical view that the critics considered unacceptable is *abstract individualism*. The problem, as Campbell explains below, is both metaphysical and normative.

### **Metaphysical Individualism**

According to Campbell (2014), "Abstract individualism is generally taken to be a metaphysical conception of persons" (p. 20). For example, Jagger (1983) claimed that a person's *essential characteristics* are given independently of *social context*. Human individuals are ontologically prior to society, basic constituents out of which social groups are composed. Their essential characteristics, needs, interests, capacities, and desires are given independently of their social context (see Jagger, 1983, p. 29).

Campbell (2014) noted, "In short, the two notions of "essential" features are, first, the features that are essential to personhood and, second, the features that are essential to persons' identities" (p. 20). Campbell used the term 'personhood' to refer to the set of features, capacities, or properties that are essential to being a person. In some cases, Campbell considered 'human nature' as 'personhood.' Human nature has been defined as "a quality or group of qualities belonging to all and only humans" (Schneewind 1995, p. 341). *Personhood* is defined as the set of qualities that underwrite beings' moral status as having rights (Johnson, 1995, p. 513).

Campbell calls the view that relies on the first notion of essential features "personhood individualism" and the second "identity individualism." As Campbell has written:

According to personhood individualism, there are some features that an organism must have to be a person and those features are independent of any social context. The second view, which I call "identity individualism," is the view that the features that are essential to each person's identity are independent of any social context. (Campbell, 2014, pp. 20-21)

Campbell defends Rawlsian political identity from objections that it relies on either personhood individualism or identity individualism.

### **Normative Individualism**

According to Campbell (2014), "Liberalism's commitment to individualism is also taken to be

normative" (p. 21). For example, Nancy Rosenblum claims that "in some cases abstract individualism is prescriptive; it is a normative concept of the person that values and promotes impersonal relations" (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 161). She writes, "Abstract individualism is meant to serve a particular kind of sociability" (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 162). Kymlicka argues that liberalism has been rejected by communitarians, socialists, and feminists alike due to its excessive 'individualism' or 'atomism' for ignoring our *embeddedness* or *situatedness* in various social roles and communal relationships (Kymlicka, 1988a, p. 181). The idea is that, as a normative view, Campbell (2014) claimed that "the liberal individualist view of persons is unacceptable because it promotes only "impersonal" relations. Moreover, the fact that liberalism promotes only individualistic relations has negative consequences for society" (p. 21).

### **Liberals, Communitarians, and Individualism**

According to Campbell (2014), "Although perfectionists and communitarians have similar concerns about the nature of persons and the proper aims of government, objections to the liberal conception of political identity come primarily from communitarians" (p. 21). Kymlicka explains two main types of communitarian criticisms of liberalism. The first, coming from Sandel, is that "liberals exaggerate our capacity to distance and abstract ourselves from [our] social relationships, and hence exaggerate our capacity for, and the value of, individual choice" (Kymlicka, 1989, p. 1).

The second type of objection comes from Charles Taylor; this objection is that liberals fail to appreciate that our capacity for choice "can only be developed and exercised in a certain kind of social and cultural context" (Kymlicka, 1989, p. 2). Objections from the likes of Sandel and Taylor must be taken seriously by liberal political theorists. Campbell defends Rawls, the liberal torchbearer, from their objections.

According to Campbell (2014), "The view that persons are socially constituted, and objections to Rawlsian political identity on the grounds that it is inconsistent with that view, have been labelled Communitarian" (p. 22). Communitarians commonly believe a viable political theory must be based on social circumstances (see Campbell, 2014, p. 22). Besides the communitarians, this intuition is similarly claimed by feminists and multi-culturists. For example, Kwame Appiah says, "One needn't be a card-carrying communitarian to accept that these considerations aren't without substance. . ." (Appiah, 2005, p. 47). According to

communitarians, persons are “partially constituted by their community” (Campbell, 2014, p. 23).

Sandel claims that the debate between liberals and communitarians is rooted in different views of selves. Sandel says communitarians object to the liberal view that a person can be characterized independently of their particularities (Sandel, 1984, pp. 5-6). Sandel offers the central claim of the communitarians – persons’ identities are fixed by their social circumstances. MacIntyre also argues that persons’ identities are not independent of their roles and what is valuable in persons’ lives is not chosen but is a product of their social circumstances (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 220). MacIntyre claims that his view contrasts with the “modern individualist” view – I am what I choose to be (Campbell, 2014, p. 23).

MacIntyre claims that social features partially define individuals’ identities (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 220). The idea seems to be that persons’ lives and identities are like narratives in that they are intrinsically tied to their social circumstances and histories (see Whitebrook, 2001). Moreover, even when persons are rejecting socially-given ends, they are expressing them.

Campbell (2014) has partly endorsed MacIntyre’s view – conception of a person as socially constituted. Sandel explains that the conception of persons as socially constituted underwrites the communitarian criticism of modern liberalism (Sandel, 1984, p. 5). We can see that objections to normative individualism are both metaphysical and normative. As per Campbell, Sandel’s view is that liberals are committed to a false metaphysical conception of persons. Taylor claims that “the free individual or autonomous moral agent can only achieve and maintain his identity in a certain type of culture. . .” (Taylor, 1985, p. 205). His view is that man’s moral autonomy is the product of a political culture (Taylor, 1985, p. 198). According to Taylor, this fact about persons makes it the case that people must be concerned not merely about themselves but also their society (see Taylor, 1985, p. 207).

The social constitution thesis is about personal identity – the thesis that persons depend on society to develop their identities– in fully developed, morally autonomous persons. Taylor objects to liberalism because of its purported commitment to the view Campbell called “Personhood individualism” (see Campbell, 2014, Chapter 4). Taylor argues that the social constitution thesis and the facts about personhood and personal identity have normative implications for political theory – the conclusion that

government ought to promote a common good (see Campbell, 2014, p. 25).

Taylor’s communitarian position opposes the liberal view–priority of the right over the good (see Campbell, 2014, p. 26). The ethic central to a liberal society is an ethic of the right rather than the good (see Taylor, 1989, p. 164). According to Campbell (2014), “Liberals’ commitment to the priority of the right supports their claim that the government should be neutral so that everyone can pursue his or her own conception of what is intrinsically valuable” (Campbell, 2014, p. 26). Those who endorse negative liberty give the right priority; those who endorse positive liberty give priority to the good.

According to Campbell (2014), “Liberals argue that the priority of the right is merely a normative thesis; it is a claim about how governments should treat persons. Liberals claim that the normative thesis need not be supported by a metaphysical theory of persons” (p. 26). However, Taylor and other communitarians argue that the priority of the right relies on a theory of personal identity. Like Sandel, Taylor argues that *individualism* or *atomism* is a metaphysical theory of personal identity and that metaphysical theory is the reason liberals support the priority of the right (see Taylor, 1985, p. 189). Taylor argues that the priority of the right only seems plausible if it is paired with an atomistic theory of personal identity. Perfectionist theory says that the government has an obligation to foster the conditions required for a person to develop into a fully autonomous person (Campbell, 2014, p. 27). Similarly, Taylor claims that, at the bottom, communitarians’ concern is with the relation certain human capacities have to social conditions (see Taylor, 1985, p. 209).

Campbell explained Taylor’s arguments for (i) the social constitution thesis, the thesis that persons’ identities are partially constituted by their social circumstances, and (ii) his theory of personal identity, which leads him to accept the social constitution thesis (see Campbell, 2014, Chapter 4). Campbell explained Taylor’s argument that (i) and (ii) support the claim that political theories cannot be wholly independent of metaphysical commitments regarding personal identity (see Campbell, 2014, Chapter 6). These arguments provide needed substance to communitarian arguments against liberal theories. Thus far, Campbell has been explaining liberalism alongside communitarian and perfectionist objections to it on the grounds of its purported commitment to metaphysical or normative individualism, which also links up with Rawls in particular.

### *Communitarian Objections to Rawls*

According to Campbell (2014), "Rawls certainly appears to accept the political elements of liberalism. For example, the first, and lexically prior, of his two principles of justice is the principle of equal liberty" (p. 28). According to it, "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Campbell, 2014, p. 28). Campbell has further argued that critics of Rawls's abstract individualism are not on his principles of justice but rather the ways he argues for those principles, viz. via the "the original position" and "political conception of the person," which is taken to commit him to particular views of personhood or personal identity.

Rawls's conception of the person has been considered vulnerable to communitarian criticism. For example, it has been claimed that "Rawls's notion of the self as antecedently individuated excludes any understanding of the relation between the self and its ends. . ." (Mulhall & Swift, 1996, pp. 51-52). Communitarians have objected to Rawls's conception of the person due to his use of the original position and the political conception of the person.

### *Objections to the Original Position*

According to Campbell (2014), "Rawls's use of the original position has been taken to commit him to abstract individualism" (p. 28). As per Campbell (2014), the original position is a hypothetical decision procedure where a person or an individual behind the *Veil of Ignorance* chooses a list of principles to govern her society. Such an abstract individual has caused critics to accuse Rawls of being committed to abstract individualism. Rawls himself says that the description of the parties in the original position may tempt us to think that a metaphysical doctrine of the person is presupposed (Rawls, 1985, pp. 239-240, 1996, p. 29).

According to Campbell (2014), "Critics have taken the original position to be objectionable on metaphysical grounds for a variety of reasons. For example, critics have charged that the original position is flawed because it makes individuation of the agents in the original position impossible" (p. 29). This is because "they are identical as agents of choice. . . their capacity to choose exhausts their identity" (Hall, 1994, p. 84). Several critics claim that the original position does rely on *some* metaphysical conception in its construction, if not abstract individualism in particular. For example, Norman Daniels claims that there are several "background" theories Rawls uses to justify the construction of the original position, one of which

is a "theory of the person." He claims the original position "will not be acceptable if competing theories of the person . . . are preferable to the [theory] Rawls advances" (Daniels, 1979, p. 261). Amy Gutmann claims that the characterization of Rawlsian liberalism as independent of metaphysics is misleading. She writes, "Although Rawlsian justice does not presuppose only one metaphysical view, it is not compatible with all such views" (Gutmann, 1985, p. 313). She claims that "Rawls must admit this much metaphysics—that we are not radically situated selves. . ." (Gutmann, 1985, p. 314). The notion of "radically situated selves" is not entirely clear.

Campbell (2014) clarifies that Steven Lukes objects to Rawls's abstract individualism – the idea that individuals' features are given independently of social context. Lukes says this notion of the abstract individual has been "revived in our own day in the work of John Rawls" (Lukes, 1973, p. 75). Another critic of Rawls is Terry Hall, who claims that Rawls is committed to a conception of the self as essentially autonomous, and this view is not political but metaphysical (Hall, 1994, p. 79). According to Campbell (2014), "Given Hall's claim that Rawls's commitment is ontological, he clearly claims that Rawls is committed to a metaphysical conception of persons" (p. 30) because, as he sees it, Rawls is committed to the view that persons' identities are independent of their particularities.

Richard Rorty also argues that Rawls is committed to abstract individualism. Rorty claims that Rawls's conception of the moral agent is given by his account of the individual in the original position, who can "distinguish herself from her talents and interests and views about the good" (Rorty, 1985, p. 217). Rorty thinks that Rawls relies on a conception of the person that has a "substrate behind the attributes" (Rorty, 1985, p. 217). Campbell (2014) noted, "Rorty thinks that Rawls is committed to a conception of persons as having an essential nature that is independent of social context and shared by everyone" (p. 30). Thus, Rorty takes Rawls to ascribe to personhood individualism.

Others have argued that Rawls relies on "either personhood individualism or identity individualism to justify the details of the construction of the decision procedure" (Campbell, 2014, p. 30). Critics' argument against Rawls's original position can be summarised as: Original position is metaphysical, devoid of social circumstances or conditions.

### *Objections to the Political Conception of the Person*

The political conception of the person that Rawls appeals to in his later work is closely related to the conception of the person in the original position. He claims that the political conception of the person was “drawn on in setting up the original position” (Rawls, 1996, p. 29). Rawls claims that the political conception of the person characterized the features of persons as having the rights and capacities required to participate in political life (Campbell, 2014, p. 31).

Campbell (2014) noted, “Rawls claims that the conception is derived from ideas that are latent in our political culture, in particular, the ideas that people are free and equal and that society is a fair system of cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 31). To characterize persons as free and equal, Rawls endows them with two “moral powers,” which are the “capacity for an effective sense of justice,” and “the capacity to form, to revise, and rationally pursue a conception of the good” (Rawls, 1996, p. 93). He also claims that the political conception of the person is motivated by “two highest-order interests to realize and exercise these powers” (Rawls, 1996, p. 93).

Campbell (2014) added that Rawls is supposed to be committed to *normative individualism* due to his use of the political conception of the person in his later works. Sandel writes that, after *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls does not defend “the Kantian conception of the person as a moral ideal, he argues that liberalism as he conceives it does not depend on that conception of the person after all” (Sandel, 1998, p. 189). Sandel argues that Rawls was, indeed, committed to the Kantian conception (persons as having identities that are independent of social circumstances) in *Theory*, and that this commitment haunts Rawls’s later work, albeit in a more limited way.

According to Campbell (2014), “Rawls claims that the political conception of the person is strictly normative, and that it does not rely on a metaphysical conception of personal identity” (p. 32). Rawls’s use of the political conception of the person does not ward off all Sandel’s objections. Sandel argues that the political conception of the person “closely parallels the Kantian conception of the person with the important difference that its scope is limited to our public identity, our identity as citizens” (Sandel, 1998, p. 192, quoting Rawls, 1996, p. 30).

While Sandel is correct that Rawls’s political conception of the person does rely on a distinction between personal identity and political identity, Campbell argues that Rawls does not intend—nor does he need—the political conception of the person to be supported by a metaphysical view. Campbell aims to support

Rawls’s claim that “a conception of the person in a political view, for example, the conception of citizens as free and equal persons, need not involve, so I believe, questions of philosophical psychology or a metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self” (Rawls, 1985, pp. 230–231). Rawls claims that the political conception of the person, like the original position, need not be based on a metaphysical conception of personhood or personal identity. Campbell aims to show that “one can accept a Rawlsian conception of political identity without thereby committing oneself to any objectionable metaphysical views” (Campbell, 2014, p. 32).

Sandel’s objection to Rawls’s political conception of the person is that it is committed to the false view of persons as unencumbered selves and that it is normatively deficient due to Rawls’s commitment to the priority of right. However, Campbell (2014) states that Sandel does not clearly state his objection. As per Campbell (2014), Rawls’s conception of a person faces objections and is conceptually incoherent as it is inconsistent with the “fact” that persons are constituted by their social circumstances. Campbell (2014) stated, “Critics have claimed that the political conception of the person is untenable on the grounds that persons’ conceptions of what is intrinsically valuable are not *chosen*, but are gained from society and a part of their very identities” (p. 33).

According to Campbell (2014), “Normative objections purport to show that we have normative reasons not to adopt the political conception of the person” (p. 33). This sort of objection leads to some questions, such as:

Why should we adopt the standpoint of the political conception of the person in the first place? Why should our political identities not express the moral and religious and communal convictions we affirm in our personal lives? Why insist on the separation between our identity as citizens and our identity as moral persons more broadly conceived? Why, in deliberating about justice, should we set aside the moral judgments that inform the rest of our lives? (Sandel, 1998, p. 193)

Campbell (2014) noted, “Since we do not view ourselves as fitting Rawls’s political conception of the person, it is unclear why we would want to adopt that conception” (p. 33). Moreover, it seems false that such an alien point of view is the right one for justifying political theories. Campbell (2014, p. 33) noted that Sandel is not alone in thinking that the disconnect between the political conception of the person and our ordinary conception of ourselves could be problematic. For

example, Alisa Carse claims that, metaphysical issues aside, “Clearly, we do want the moral point of view to be a point of view we can in principle take. We want our conception of the moral subject to hook up in some way with our conception of ourselves” (Carse, 1994, p. 196). This claim is echoed by communitarians, who argue that the liberal point of view fails in this respect. These arguments are subtle.

***Priority of the Right and Objections to the Political Conception of the Person***

According to Campbell (2014), “Critics argue that Rawls’s political conception of the person commits him to a particular view of persons due to his commitment to the priority of the right” (p. 34). As per Campbell, the objection to the priority of the right is the starting point for communitarian objections to Rawls’s political conception of the person. Rawls explicitly states that social unity and allegiance of citizens to their common institutions are based on their acceptance of a political conception of justice to regulate the basic structure of society, and the concept of justice is prior to the concept of goodness. Thus, Rawls emphasized the priority of the right over the good (see Rawls, 1985, pp. 249–250). For the sake of simplicity, we can take “the right” to be a conception of justice because, as Rawls mentions, “the just falls under the right” (Campbell, 2014, p. 34).

Regarding Rawls’s commitment to the priority of the right, Kymlicka responded that critics argued that this is liberalism’s foundational flaw. The desire to prioritize the right over the good reflects unattractive or incoherent assumptions about human interests and the human community (Kymlicka, 1988b, p. 173, 1989, p. 21). The idea is that, for Rawls, the priority of the right is a normative position that requires a particular conception of persons. As we have seen, this conception is sometimes taken to be strictly normative, and, in other cases, it is taken to be both normative and metaphysical. This latter view, that the priority of the right is both normative and metaphysical, is argued for by Sandel.

In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, “Sandel argues that Rawls is committed to a view of persons as metaphysically independent of their ends” (Campbell, 2014, p. 34). As per Campbell (2014), Rawls’s commitment to unencumbered selves, according to Sandel, is rooted in his commitment to the priority of the right, and this leads to Rawls’s political conception of the person committed to personhood individualism and identity individualism. Sandel and other critics have objected to Rawls’s political conception of the person due to his deeper commitment to the unencumbered self.

Campbell (2014) suggested that “the charge that Rawls’s original position or the political conception of the person relies on personhood individualism and identity individualism is common (p. 35). Interestingly, arguments supporting these charges are rare. Campbell (2014) noted, “Indeed, the only philosopher I know of who has actually argued for these claims is Sandel” (p. 35). Campbell (2014) shared that “his arguments fail to provide a clear account of the metaphysical view to which Rawls is supposed to be committed or what the alternative, more plausible view, is supposed to be” (p. 35). Similarly, the normative objections consist primarily in the charge that Rawls’s political conception of the person is normatively deficient without explaining why that is the case.

Campbell has summarised Taylor’s view of personal identity as follows:

Taylor’s positive view of personal identity, the “practical-moral” conception, emerges in his criticism of the types of view that are often attributed to Rawls. Given that the views Taylor criticizes are like those that Sandel and others attribute to Rawls, looking at Taylor’s discussion helps to clarify both (i) Sandel’s conception of personal identity, and (ii) why someone who accepts it would object to Rawls. (Campbell, 2014, p. 35)

Taylor’s account of persons provides a more explicit account of how to understand Sandel’s idea of the encumbered self (see Campbell, 2014, Chapter 4).

***Conclusion:***

Campbell (2014) stated that an explicit definition of ‘metaphysical’ is hard to come by in this literature. Jean Hampton argues that Rawls gives us no precise definition of what he means by metaphysical (Hampton, 1989, p. 794). Carse suggests that a metaphysical conception of the individual person is a conception of the essential features of individual persons or selves as such (Carse, 1994, p. 203). Similarly, in all discussions regarding conceptions of persons, personal identity, the nature of selves, human nature, and so on, one rarely finds a clear statement of what these terms actually mean. Campbell (2014, p. 35) noted that there is a difference between persons and selves, or what is constitutive of being a person as opposed to an agent, or what constitutes personhood versus citizenship, and so on. Liberalism’s critics and adherents alike discuss theories of human nature, conceptions of persons, and personal identity interchangeably as if these

theories all give an account of the same phenomena. While it is likely that the theories are related, they are distinct. Among writers on this topic, Unger is unusual in offering the following speculative account of how to understand these terms, theories, and their relation. Unger's view is that the notion of men in their relationship with nature, to others, and to themselves conceived in terms of quality is known as human nature or humanity, while when we think of it as a substance or subject, we call it the self or individual person. The self is the personification of mankind to the extent individuals share common attributes, including similar relations to the species (Unger, 1975, p. 193). Campbell (2014, Chapters 4, 5, 6) shows the implausibility of many objections to Rawls's original position and the political conception of the person. The debate between liberals and communitarians is not one, but two. There is a metaphysical debate and a normative debate. The first is concerned with personal identity and the second concerns political principles. Communitarians, like Taylor, argue that these two debates are related: certain political principles cannot plausibly be combined with certain metaphysical theories of personal identity. Rawls, on the other hand, argues that the plausibility of his political principles is independent of his theory of personal identity. Sandel argues that Rawls's argument from the original position commits him to both metaphysical conceptions of person (identity individualism and personhood individualism). Sandel also argues that Rawls's normative individualism, due to his commitment to the priority of the right, implicitly relies on a false metaphysical view of personal identity. While much of the communitarian literature takes issue with the liberal commitment to the priority of the right, Campbell explained that the priority of the right is irrelevant. Campbell (2014, Chapter 5) elaborated the rest of the way toward refuting these objections is found in the clarification of the original position.

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