Autonomy and Abstraction

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One important synonym for self-determination is autonomy. In this paper, I present an interpretation of autonomy based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. In particular, I develop an ethical and political account of autonomy that entails a responsibility to recognize and evaluate the contingent abstractions, or defining characteristics, of the societies to which we belong. In the first part of this paper, I discuss the metaphysical features of Whitehead's conception of autonomy. For Whitehead, autonomy refers to "actual occasions," which are self-caused despite being conditioned by the past. In the second part, I apply this account of autonomy to human beings in order to explicate its ethical implications. While human beings are not different in kind from other "societies" of actual occasions, according to Whitehead, I argue that we epitomize the features of autonomy applicable to every actual occasion. The intensification of these features in human beings discloses another feature of autonomy, namely, responsibility. In the third part, I contrast Whitehead's conception of autonomy with the liberal conception. This is an important contrast, since autonomy is a cornerstone of liberal political theory. In particular, I highlight the role of autonomy in John Rawls's political liberalism. This contrast allows me to explicate more precisely the relation between autonomy and responsibility. Finally, while there are important affinities between Whiteheadian and liberal conceptions of autonomy, I conclude that Whitehead's conception is not entirely reducible to liberal terms.

I. Autonomy in Whitehead's Metaphysics

I will admit from the beginning that autonomy is not a frequent term in Whitehead's lexicon.[1] In fact, there is only one chapter in *Process and Reality* (namely, Part III, chapter 3), and really throughout any of his work, where this term is explicitly employed with any conceptual significance.[2] Nonetheless, the way in which Whitehead describes autonomy in this chapter indicates that the concept has a central place in his work. In this chapter, he equates autonomy with self-causation, self-determination, and self-constitution. I could also add another synonym – namely, self-formation – to this list, though it is not mentioned in this chapter. Unlike the word "autonomy," these concepts recur throughout his work. I point to these synonyms because their frequency and importance in Whitehead's work provide us an initial glimpse of the importance of autonomy to Whitehead.

Of course, this initial glimpse does not tell us exactly what autonomy means for Whitehead, so I will begin by explicating the role of autonomy in his metaphysics. For Whitehead, the world is composed of "actual entities," or "actual occasions." Actual occasions are like quanta of experience. These occasions are the final agents of reality (cf. PR 18). An actual occasion is a "concrescence," or a "growing together," of "prehensions," or feelings or experiences, of its immediate past. This means that actual occasions are constituted by their relations to the world. Every occasion begins as a relation or reaction to its past. In this sense, it must conform to the past, at least at first. But this reaction to the past does not imply determination. The past is a condition, not a determination (cf. PR 108). The necessity of reacting to the past requires self-determination on the part of the actual occasion. According to

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[1] Perhaps for this reason autonomy is not often discussed in Whitehead scholarship. An important exception is the final part of Jorge Luis Nobo's *Whitehead's Metaphysics of Extension and Solidarity*.

[2] *Process and Reality*, 244-255. I will use the following abbreviations for Whitehead's works: AI for *Adventures of Ideas*, FR for *Function of Reason*, MT for *Modes of Thought*, and PR for *Process and Reality*.

Whitehead, every actual occasion is "the autonomous master of its own concrescence" (PR 245). An actual occasion determines for itself how it will react to its given world. Because it is more than a passive recipient, it is to some extent "causa sui."

Regarding this self-creation, Whitehead writes, "In its self-creation the actual entity is guided by its ideal of itself as individual satisfaction and as transcendent creator" (PR 85). The ideal that guides the actual occasion, which Whitehead mentions here, refers to the way in which each actual entity responds to its immediate past. Whitehead often refers to this ideal as a final cause, or a subjective aim. In its initial stages, the actual occasion is confronted with certain indeterminate, or incompatible, ways of responding to its past (cf. MT 54). There are mutually exclusive possibilities for how it can react. The ideal, or subjective aim, expresses a particular solution or determinate outcome to this indeterminacy. Self-creation is transcendent because the actual occasion is not reducible to or determined by the world out of which it emerges. However, this transcendence is not absolute. Self-creation is momentary and fleeting. Every actual occasion "perishes." The term "satisfaction" refers to this perishing, or moment of completion. Having completed its self-creation, the actual occasion becomes an object for future occasions.

While strictly speaking every actual occasion is autonomous, because every occasion is self-created, autonomy is often negligible. It does not always make a noticeable difference. Many occasions are repetitions. They merely conform to their immediate past. While there is still some novelty here, insofar as every occasion is unique (that is, no two moments are ever completely identical), autonomy truly enters the picture with a tangible or noticeable degree of novelty (PR 245, 255). As I will discuss below, autonomy becomes especially relevant with human beings because of our capacity for novelty. For now, though, it is important to note that every actual occasion is an expression of autonomy in microcosm.

There are a number of difficulties that follow from what Whitehead's conception of actual occasions as self-creative. I will discuss two problems that I find to be especially relevant to a Whiteheadian conception of autonomy. First, it has recently been objected that change is impossible if an actual occasion is constituted by its relations to, or prehensions of, the world.[3] Secondly, one might object that the self-causation of an actual occasion is not possible because there is, at the beginning of its process of self-creation, no self to create itself. As we can see, both of these problems relate to the possibility of self-causation, or self-determination, and therefore have implications for the account of autonomy being developed here.

Let's begin with the first. How is novelty possible if an actual occasion is defined by its relations to, or prehensions of, the world? In other words, if an actual occasion just is some particular grouping or arrangement of its relations to the world, then it might seem that an occasion would be exhausted by those relations. It could not add anything new to the world. Nothing could ever happen. Ultimately, this is a misguided objection because it fails to account for *how* an actual occasion relates to the world. As Whitehead says, "*how* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes what that actual entity is….Its 'being' is constituted by its 'becoming'" (PR 23). While it is true that we can define an actual occasion in terms of its prehensions, or its experience of or relation to the world, we must also notice that every occasion makes a decision about the world – really, an actual occasion is its decision.[4] An occasion must make a decision about the world because it cannot incorporate everything in its world into a coherent experience. "Such exclusions belong to the finitude of circumstance," Whitehead claims (MT 54). This is easier to see with conscious experience. I can look at the page in front of me or I can look at some part of the room, but I cannot do both. I make a choice, thereby excluding other

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[3] This objection has been raised on numerous occasions by Graham Harman. See, for example, his "Whitehead and Schools Z, Y, and Z."

[4] This point has been raised by Steven Shaviro, in response to Harman. See "The Actual Volcano," 39.

possibilities of experience. Without such decisions, experience would not be possible. This holds not only for conscious experience but also for all occasions of experience, or actual occasions.

There is a further difficulty here, insofar as it is not immediately clear how these decisions are possible. Where does this capacity to choose come from? Whitehead often speaks of a "creative urge" or "appetition" (cf. AI 192, PR 32). As an answer to our question, we might then say that there is some sort of underlying creative power that is manifested in the self-creation of actual occasions. On this point, we should recall that Whitehead names his metaphysical ultimate "creativity" (PR 21). Accordingly, we might say that it is simply in the nature of things that this creative urge is perpetually re-expressed in the present. As I will discuss below, this solution is not as frivolous as it might seem. However, in order to understand this answer, we first have to address the second problem, which I noted above.

I will restate it: How is self-causation possible if there is no self that underlies or precedes this causation? Actual occasions do not endure through time. They perish as soon as they become fully concrete or fully determinate. But before they can reach this final point of determination or concretion, they begin as prehensions of their immediate past. Yet, and this is the problem, there is no occasion or subject there to prehend this past. What, then, generates or causes this prehending subject? Of course, an actual occasion *is* its decisions about the world – its being is constituted by its becoming, so this question is another way of asking how this decision is possible.

At this point, some Whiteheadians may note that I have not yet mentioned God. To talk about Whitehead's metaphysics without reference to his peculiar use of this concept is probably impossible. And I will admit that for the current problem God is highly relevant. In fact, the account of autonomy I have given requires God for its completion. I mentioned that each actual

occasion is guided by an ideal or subjective aim. This aim is initially supplied by God. For Whitehead, God is an actual entity like other actual entities, except that God is the locus of all ideas or possibilities. Before going any further in Whitehead's philosophical theology, we should recall the initial stages of concrescence. Every process of concrescence begins at an impasse (PR 244). Each actual occasion is confronted by incompatible possibilities for how it will respond to its immediate past. What was lacking in my earlier account is that an occasion's awareness of these possibilities cannot be derived from the mere experience of its past. The past is what it is. My ideas or concepts are derivative of my physical feelings. Whitehead follows Hume on this point. But an idea implicates other relevant or related ideas. If I were a painter, for example, my experience of a particular shade of blue might provoke me to imagine other shades.[5] Whitehead contends that the ability to conceive of ideas that are not given by the immediate past takes place through a prehension of God, who – as an actual entity – is as much a part of an occasion's world as the past occasions it experiences. This awareness of ideas provides the occasion with the chance for novelty but this chance also entails incompatible but relevant possibilities. This provides a more complete picture of how an actual occasion appropriates the ideal, or subjective aim, that guides its concrescence.

However, this should not suggest that God determines how the actual occasion will become. Whitehead describes the initial aim as a "gradation" of relevant possibilities (PR 244). The actual occasion is ultimately responsible for the determination of its experience. Of course, this does not solve the problem of how an actual occasion can come into being. Even if we grant

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[5] I use this example intentionally, as a reference to Hume's famous missing shade of blue problem, which was of particular interest to Whitehead. Hume argues that if we were given a color spectrum with a missing shade we would be able to have the idea of the missing shade, even without an impression of it. This is the only exception he gives to his rule that ideas derive from impressions. Early in the development of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead thought that this capacity for conceiving of relevant ideas was far more widespread than Hume imagined. However, he later revised his position by arguing that we only have access to such ideas through a "hybrid physical prehension" of God (cf. PR 246-47). On this point, see Lewis Ford's *The Emergence of Whitehead's Metaphysics*, 235-238.

God this role of supplying the initial aim, or the range of possibilities, it is still not clear why there is any actual occasion to which God could supply this aim.

Isabelle Stengers discusses this problem in *Thinking with Whitehead*. She introduces the term "induction" to express the way in which God's offering of an initial aim generates an occasion of experience.[6] Stengers chooses this term for two reasons: first, as an expression of passage between heterogeneous elements (as in the relationship of electricity and a conductor) and, secondly, for its evocation of hypnotic induction. This second connation is particularly fruitful. Stengers writes that hypnotized subjects only seem, for example, "to raise their arm against their will," as if they were responding to an order.[7] However, according to Stengers, hypnotizers are not ultimately responsible for the actions of the hypnotized subject. Instead, they make suggestions or indicate a possible path. At the same time, induction allows something new to happen, which is beyond the control of both the hypnotizer and the subject prior to her induction. Similarly, God is not responsible for the coming into being of a novel actual occasion. Instead, God's suggestion, or initial aim, makes possible something that is out of God's control.

I would add to Stengers's reading that we must emphasize the role of the past as much as we emphasize the role of God. Whitehead claims that "perishing is the initiation of becoming. How the past perishes is how the future becomes" (AI 238). Perishing occasions necessitate that there be a future (AI 193). Accordingly, I will appropriate this term "induction" to refer to the relation between the past and the present, between former or "perished" actual occasions and new or becoming occasions. Of course, Whitehead often speaks of the initial phase of concrescence in terms of efficient causation (cf. PR 245). In this sense, the past causes the present. But I find "induction" superior to causation in this case, because there is, in the initial

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[6] *Thinking with Whitehead*, 461ff.
[7] Ibid., 462.

moments of becoming, nothing for the past to act on. How, then, might the past induce the present? While we tend to think of the past as complete or finished, and Whitehead acknowledges this by referring to becoming in terms of "perpetual perishing," Whitehead nonetheless grants the past some form of residual activity. He writes, "The initial phase of each fresh occasion represents the issue of a struggle within the past for objective existence beyond itself" (AI 198). The past objects.[8] It insists. It calls for a response.

However, this attempt to explain the induction of the present on the basis of the insistence of the past, or even on basis of the initial aim offered by God, is insufficient. The past may demand to be felt, but why should this demand necessitate a response? Objections often fall on deaf ears. Moreover, the appeal to the power of the past might only defer the problem, insofar as the past is composed of perished or completed actual occasions. That is, the problem I am raising about the becoming of actual occasions in the present also applies to past occasions. This would seem to lead to an infinite regress: the possibility of the present referred to the past and the possibility of the past referred to a more distant past, and so on. Of course, Whitehead might be quite comfortable with an infinite regress in this case (it would come down to the question of whether there has always been something rather than nothing).

Beyond that kind of speculation, however, I can make one further suggestion by invoking Whitehead's empiricism. Whitehead writes that we must "appeal to the self-evidence of experience" (MT 112). If I appeal to experience, what can I say about this problem? My experience is not a mere instant. It stretches from a response to the immediate past to an anticipation of the immediate future. This is the "specious present," a concept that certainly influenced Whitehead (cf. MT 89). However, the appeal to experience in this case can only

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[8] I am indebted to Roland Faber for pointing out this sense of "object." I should also note that Brian Henning, following Nobo and Jude Jones, discusses the past in similar terms (see *The Ethics of Creativity*, 54).

describe what happens. It does not explain, or say why, a new occasion comes about. Yet, I would suggest that this inability to say why discloses something important about the nature of experience. If we really want to say, as Whitehead does, that every actual occasion is something novel, then we cannot say why it comes about.

This goes back to what I said earlier about creativity as ultimate. If it is ultimate, we cannot get behind it to some deeper reality that would explain it. But creativity is not a substance that exists independently of actual occasions. It is only ever manifested in the becoming of occasions. One might object that this is basically magic.[9] And Whitehead does refer to it as "the miracle of creation" (PR 85). But what is the alternative? We might revert to an ontology of enduring substances with latent capacities or potencies. Or we might say, more generally, that everything that happens in the world is the actualization of potentiality. Of course, Whitehead is a thinker of actuality and potentiality. There are no new ideas or possibilities in his universe. In fact, he labels ideas "*eternal* objects." Along with the past, eternal objects are conditions of concrescence. Nonetheless, these conditions cannot tell us why an actual occasion comes into being. If we wish to maintain that every occasion is novel, that it is an event (cf. PR 73), then I think this conclusion is unavoidable. Relatedly, we cannot determine in advance how an actual occasion will respond to the past. This goes back to the first objection I considered. There is something irreducible and unpredictable about an occasion's decision.[10] This is an essential part of what it means for an actual occasion to be autonomous.

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[9] Harman makes this objection in "Whitehead and Schools Z, Y, and Z," 246.

[10] In response to Harman, Shaviro emphasizes this unpredictability. See "The Actual Volcano," 39. Of course, it must be admitted that empirical sciences make predictions about events in nature all the time. However, this does not impugn Whitehead's point. Many occasions will have negligible novelty and will merely conform to the past. Moreover, Whitehead views the laws of nature as the products of actual occasions within societies. He suggests that this explains why these laws are often statistical or probabilistic, as opposed to deterministic (cf. PR 90-92).

However, it bears repeating that the irreducibility of an actual occasion is not the only condition of Whiteheadian autonomy. As we have seen, the power of the past and God's initial aim are necessary conditions of an actual occasion. This means that heteronomy is a condition of autonomy. In this case, autonomy looks like a sort of balancing act of the irreducible and the conditioned. Yet, this would reduce autonomy to conditioned freedom. But autonomy is a more specific concept than freedom, even though they are often equated. The element that sets autonomy apart from freedom is the ability to act in accordance with a guiding ideal or aim.[11] This aim conditions freedom. The occasion shapes for itself how it will act freely. Though I mentioned it above, I have not yet emphasized this aspect of autonomy because I have limited myself to individual actual occasions. However, the importance of giving oneself a guiding ideal becomes more palpable when we talk about certain societies of actual occasions, or groupings of occasions with histories and defining characteristics. This brings me to the topic of the next section.

II. Autonomy and Persons

In the previous section, I discussed autonomy in terms of individual actual occasions. However, since I am concerned with developing an ethical and political account of autonomy on the basis of Whitehead's metaphysics, I now need to refine my account in order to apply it to human beings. Autonomy is a term usually applied to persons, especially in ethics and politics. Of course, for Whitehead, there is no difference in kind between the actual occasions that constitute human beings and those that constitute the non-human world. This is evident in his account of personality.

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[11] This is not a distinction with which Whitehead was familiar, but it is useful to make it here in order to bring Whitehead into conversation with accounts of autonomy in political and moral philosophy.

"Personal order" is a technical term for Whitehead and is not limited to human beings. It has two features (PR 34-35). First, it must be a "society," that is, a group of occasions that exhibit a defining characteristic or common form. Secondly, it is "serially" ordered, meaning that the society exhibits "a single line of inheritance" of that society's defining characteristic. In other words, personal order refers to an enduring object. This would apply to much of the non-human world, even to much of the inorganic world.

With the concept of life, we come closer to the personality of human beings. According to Whitehead, life is not a defining characteristic of those organisms to which we attribute it. He writes:

> Life is a bid for freedom: an enduring entity binds any one of its occasions to the line of its ancestry. The doctrine of the enduring soul with its permanent characteristics is exactly the irrelevant answer to the problem which life presents. That problem is, How can there be originality? And the answer explains how the soul need be no more original than a stone (PR 104).

Life names originality or novelty and cannot be explained in terms of enduring substances or permanent characteristics. Of course, we attribute life to organisms, which are societies with defining characteristics. And, in some cases, we attribute personality to such organisms. Whitehead applies the term "living person" to these cases (PR 107). As a combination of life and personal order, a living person "canalizes" the originality of life within the order of a society. Moreover, a living person inherits the conceptual activity of the predecessors belonging to its personal order. For example, I am immediately aware of what I was just thinking. Again, I should note that this designation is not unique to human beings.

We might be tempted to say that reason sets human beings apart. It is worth noting on this point that one of the most influential theories of autonomy arises out of Kant's treatment of practical reason. Moreover, one of Whitehead's definitions of reason suggests a form of practical

reason.[12] He writes that reason's function is "to constitute, emphasize, and criticize the final causes and strength of aims directed towards them" (FR 26). However, Whitehead does not limit reason to human beings. For Whitehead, reason has much more in common with a universal Logos than with a human faculty.[13]

While all of these features – social order, life or novelty, and reason – may not be unique to human beings, they are epitomized by us. Moreover, these features parallel and epitomize the three features of autonomy that I discussed earlier. The social order of our bodies, for example, epitomizes the immediate conditions of our experience. Life epitomizes the irreducibility of novelty. Finally, reason epitomizes the ability to form and criticize the ideals that guide our lives.

I will focus on novelty for a moment. While there may be no difference in kind between human and non-human occasions of experience, there is a noticeable difference in degree when it comes to our capacity for novelty. Whitehead writes, "When we come to mankind, nature seems to have burst through another of its boundaries….The conceptual entertainment of unrealized possibility becomes a major factor in human mentality. In this way outrageous novelty is introduced" (MT 26). An increased capacity for novelty is joined by an increased capacity for abstraction. We saw earlier that every process of concrescence, every actual occasion, is a selection of, or a decision about, its actual world. Every selection is an abstraction (cf. MT 123). With the development of consciousness among more complex species, this ability to abstract becomes more intense: "The growth of consciousness is the uprise of abstractions. It is the growth of emphasis. The totality is characterized by a selection from its details. That selection claims attention, enjoyment, action, and purpose, all relative to itself" (MT 123). In looking here

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[12] While Whitehead draws a distinction between speculative reason and practical reason, this distinction does not map onto to Kant's distinction between pure and practical reason (cf. FR 37-38).

[13] Interestingly, though, Whitehead refers to the "Divine Eros" where we might expect him to refer to a Divine Logos (cf. AI 277, 295).

rather than there, in making this choice rather than that, I make decisions about the world that necessarily leave something out. Attention emphasizes, but it also excludes. Our experience of the forms or defining characteristics of enduring objects, for example, is an abstraction from the actual occasions that constitute these objects.

"Abstraction" does not mean "illusory." Abstractions are real and efficacious. Decisions are abstractions, or a selective perspective on the past. The past itself was a determination of the abstractions that come to condition our lives or decisions. Moreover, our decisions bequeath abstractions to the future. They are something the future will have to deal with. If these abstractions are repeated enough, they become defining characteristics. A "society" – and for now I mean this term in Whitehead's technical sense – is a group of actual occasions with such a defining characteristic. This defining characteristic, that which makes the society what it is, must be continually reaffirmed by the future occasions in order for this defining characteristic to endure. Moreover, every society belongs to a larger environment, with its own defining characteristics and these characteristics condition the experience of occasions within this environment. The laws of nature would be an example. Yet, even these – Whitehead contends – are abstractions from the activity of actual occasions (cf. PR 90-92).

While we do not have control over many of the defining characteristics or abstractions that condition our lives, human beings – as a species – have had and continue to have incredible control over their environments. As individuals, we often have some say in what ideals guide our lives, or how our lives are structured. This is evident in many of our habits and value-commitments, for example. Put simply, the ends we pursue order our lives. Of course, we belong to a larger environment, just like any other society of actual occasions. This means that the ends we pursue are in part conditioned by the societies to which we belong – and here I mean

"society" in both its technical and in its more common sense. It is with this point that reason, as the ability to form and criticize the ends we form for ourselves, is especially relevant to this account of autonomy.

Of course, the ability to form and criticize ends might seem like an obvious feature of our lives, so what does the Whiteheadian account add? If we see the defining characteristics, or the abstractions, that condition our lives as the result of decisions, we emphasize the contingency of these abstractions. Of course, the past is necessary insofar as we cannot change what happened. But Whitehead often encourages us to envision the past in terms of what might have been and what may be (cf. MT 98). Often, the defining characteristics of our lives seem all too rigid. For example, I live in a democracy, but it is not always clear that I have much say in the formation of laws. I cannot claim that the recognition of abstractions as contingent will necessarily obviate these cases of rigidity. At the very least, though, the recognition of contingency has a genealogical and critical function. The recognition that any given order is contingent opens that order to critique or evaluation. Of course, Whitehead is not alone in the genealogical critique of social contingencies. Rousseau's *Second Discourse* and Nietzsche's *Genealogy* are notable examples. But, for Whitehead, contingency is much more pervasive, insofar as it is not unique to human social order.

I will admit, though, that there are many aspects of our lives that we would not want to change, even if we could. One might object, then, that the recognition of contingency undermines such commitments. (It's worth mentioning here that this is a charge that is often leveled against liberal individualism.) For my part, though, the recognition of contingency entails an alternative consequence, namely, responsibility. Because actual occasions determine themselves, they are ultimately responsible for what they are or what they become (PR 88,

255).[14] Strictly speaking, this is not unique to human beings. However, since we are capable of recognizing the contingency of abstractions, the sense of responsibility is heightened for us. We can recognize that the stance we take toward inherited abstractions has consequences for the future. For this reason, when we recognize the contingency of what we inherit, we are responsible for its evaluation. I would contend therefore that the recognition of contingency entails the responsibility to evaluate inherited abstractions, to consider their worth for present and future occasions of experience.

I will return to this notion of responsibility when I discuss in greater detail the moral aspect of Whitehead's account of autonomy, but for now I want to contrast the conception I have developed with the liberal conception, as this is the most influential conception operating in moral and political philosophy.

III. Autonomy and Liberalism

Liberalism is an ambiguous term and has been theorized in many distinct ways, but the conception of citizens as autonomous, or self-governing, is certainly a central feature of liberalism. For this reason, any attempt to develop a political or ethical account of autonomy must be contrasted, in some measure, to the liberal conception. But just as liberalism has distinct variations, so do liberal accounts of autonomy. For my purposes today, I will concentrate primarily on the political liberalism of John Rawls, whose work is perhaps the most prominent expression of modern liberalism. A brief look at his use of autonomy will help situate Whitehead's conception with respect to that of liberalism.[15]

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[14] Whitehead also notes that the capacity for self-determination is the root of irresponsibility (AI 195).

[15] In *Process Philosophy and Political Ideology*, Randall C. Morris explores in great detail Whitehead's relationship to liberalism (as well as Charles Hartshorne's). He seeks to show how Whitehead's modern liberal ideological commitments are reflected in his philosophy. Morris claims to employ the term "ideology" positively. That is, the demonstration of an ideological influence on Whitehead's metaphysics does not necessarily impugn the truth-value of that metaphysics. While I think Morris's book is a valuable study, I disagree with some of his characterizations of this project. For example, he claims that Whitehead's "metaphysics supplies through its universal and ostensibly

Liberalism affirms the priority of the right, or justice, over the good. This means that the basic principles that should structure our political institutions are framed independently of any particular conception of the good, such as moral, philosophical or religious doctrines.[16] This is especially true for Rawls, who proposes a form of liberalism that is political, not ethical or moral. Fundamental to political liberalism is the recognition of "the fact of pluralism."[17] Rawls believes that a plurality of conceptions of the good is a permanent feature of modern democracies. Accordingly, the formation of basic political principles must take this pluralism into account. Rawls's aim, then, is to arrive at a political conception of justice that could be affirmed or accepted by citizens on the basis of their conceptions of the good. This is what he calls an "overlapping consensus."

Rawls's account of autonomy is crucial to this aim. For Rawls, autonomy is one of the assumptions we must make about persons or citizens in order to we arrive at and legitimate basic or fundamental political principles. Specifically, autonomy refers to what he calls our two moral powers. The first is our "capacity to form, to revise, and to pursue a conception of the good, and to deliberate in accordance with it."[18] The other is our capacity for a sense of justice, or "the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from the public conception of justice."[19] We can see, then, that autonomy is fundamental to Rawls's project. A political conception of justice must be affirmed by citizens – and this requires the second moral power – who have a conception of the good – which requires the first moral power.

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neutral principles a foundation for a modern liberal ideology" (18). However, it is not clear to me that Whitehead's principles are "ostensibly neutral," nor that his values are "theoretically disguised," as Morris claims (19). Whitehead may not be a political philosopher, but his values are often quite explicit.
[16] *Political Liberalism*, 173ff.
[17] Ibid., 35f. Rawls in fact restricts this to "reasonable pluralism." For an account of this qualification, see 36-37, 58-60.
[18] Ibid., 72.
[19] Ibid., 19.

Of course, Rawls famously claims that his conception of the person is political not metaphysical.[20] This would also apply to his conception of autonomy. What he means by this is that in order to arrive at a political conception of justice suited to the pluralistic societies in which we (citizens or residents of modern democracies) live he must utilize a conception of the person that avoids philosophical or religious controversies. His conception of the person, he claims, is non-controversial. Even if he is making metaphysical presuppositions, Rawls notes, these are general enough to avoid any such controversies. That's debatable. But my aim here is not demonstrate Rawls's underlying metaphysical commitments, if he has any. Instead, I want to show that Whitehead's conception of autonomy – at least in the way I have applied it to persons – has some important affinities with the (Rawlsian) liberal conception. (Though I will also suggest some ways in which Whiteheadian autonomy might oblige us to go a little farther than the liberal conception.)

Returning to Rawls and bracketing the question of metaphysics, one might immediately object that – unlike Whitehead's – Rawls's conception of autonomy, and of persons, is non-relational. For Whitehead, as we saw earlier, actual occasions are constituted, in part, by their relations to the world and therefore the autonomy of these occasions is conditioned by these relations. Admittedly, the objection is often raised against Rawls that his conception of the person fails to recognize the importance of social and historical conditions.[21] We are members of communities much more than we are individual or independent selves and our aims and values are formed within these communities. By this account, Rawls's conception of the person gives priority to a self that is removed from the fundamentally constitutive conditions of human life.

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[20] "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," 403-404n22.

[21] A prominent instance of this objection was raised by Michael Sandel in his *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Rawls responds to Sandel, though only briefly, in *Political Liberalism*, 27.

I think, however, that Rawls can accommodate this objection. First, his conception of the person is intentionally abstract. It is a representational device, utilized to determine principles of justice that will shape our basic political institutions. However, Rawls claims – in response to this objection – that this abstract or representational conception of the person has no ontological priority.[22] He also notes that our conceptions of the good are "specified by certain definite final ends, attachments, and loyalties to particular persons and institutions, and interpreted in the light of some comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine."[23] This is not to say that Rawls's conception of the person is above revision. His formulation of our capacity to form a conception of the good, for example, may need to be revised in order to articulate more clearly how social and historical conditions structure our identities.[24] Nonetheless, Rawls would still maintain that we are able to revise, or even reject, our conceptions of the good. Without this ability, we would not be autonomous.

I can frame this in the terms of this paper. Our ends and aims are conditioned by the defining characteristics of the societies that constitute us and to which we belong. At the same time, insofar as autonomous actual occasions are ultimately responsible for these defining characteristics, these characteristics or abstractions are not necessary. As I said earlier, the Whitehead conception of autonomy encourages us to see abstractions in terms of contingency. They are open to revision or criticism. This reformulation brings the Rawlsian conception of autonomy much closer to the Whiteheadian conception, at least when we limit ourselves to the domain of human beings. On this reading, it would seem that there is a clear affinity between Whitehead and liberalism on the topic of autonomy

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[22] *Political Liberalism*, 27.
[23] Ibid., 74.
[24] This is part of the project of John Christman's *The Politics of Persons*, cf. 118.

However, this affinity is not absolute. In addition to the question of metaphysics, there are certain features that follow from Whitehead's conception of autonomy that might separate Whitehead from the (Rawlsian) liberal conception. One way to demonstrate this is by taking a closer look at Whitehead's account of rationality. Whitehead identifies rationality with the recovery of "concrete reality." We saw earlier that consciousness necessitates abstraction. By emphasizing, it excludes. Yet, for Whitehead, "the process of rationalization" is a return to that from which we abstract: "This process is the recognition of essential connection within the apparent isolation of abstracted details. Thus rationalization is the reverse of abstraction, so far as abstraction can be reversed within the area of consciousness" (MT 124). Abstraction is a selection or a choice about the way in which we inherit the immediate past. But the past is composed of other occasions of experience. This means that abstraction excludes other occasions of experience. Rationality aims at the recovery of the excluded.

Whitehead refers to this process of rationalization as an ideal: "rationalization is the partial fulfillment of the ideal to recover concrete reality within the disjunction of abstraction" (MT 124). I think "ideal" is meant here in two ways. First, the recovery of concrete reality is ideal because it can never be fully accomplished. As I have insisted throughout this paper, experience is inevitably selective. As an experience, the attempt to recover what is lost can only ever be another such selection. This is not to suggest that these attempts are futile, only that they must remain incomplete. Secondly, "ideal" suggests something that we should pursue. In this sense, the ideal to recover concrete reality is moral or ethical (cf. PR 15). On this point, I need to add to my earlier discussion of responsibility.

I argued that the recognition of the contingency of inherited abstractions entails the responsibility to evaluate, or take a stance toward, these abstractions. This account of rationality

further clarifies this responsibility. That is, a criterion of this evaluation will be a consideration of what these abstractions exclude. (The legal definition of citizenship might be an example of an abstraction that would call for such an evaluation.) Since rationality aims to recover that which is obscured, or lost, because of abstraction, it encourages us to discover what (or who) is not recognized by inherited abstractions, what evades them, and what could have been or could still be if it were not for these abstractions. Furthermore, if I am correct to include responsibility within the conception of autonomy that I have developed, then this conception would include this ideal of rationality, at least insofar as it applies to persons. This would mean that to be autonomous, at least for human beings, would require us to recover the concrete, or that which is excluded by abstraction.

I should note that this regard for what is excluded would not be the only criterion of evaluation. According to Whitehead, every occasion of experience is a value experience. An actual occasion is an evaluation of the past, insofar as it makes some determinate selection of the past, but it also has value for itself. Experience is fundamentally valuable or worthy. He contends, therefore, that "[w]e have no right to deface the value experience which is the vey essence of the universe" (MT 111). Accordingly, our responsibility to that which is excluded by our abstractions is a responsibility to promote the value experience of the excluded. Moreover, for Whitehead, there is a sort of aesthetic telos to the universe, which aims at intensity and variety (cf. AI 201).[25] In this case, the promotion of value experience and the evaluation of inherited abstractions would need to be directed by this aim at intensity and variety.

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[25] See Henning's *The Ethics of Creativity* for a discussion of the fundamental importance of aesthetics to Whitehead's metaphysics.

With this expanded account of responsibility, I move into the territory of moral autonomy, as opposed to personal autonomy.[26] Personal autonomy is a political conception, while moral autonomy refers to both our political and social lives. Moral autonomy designates a particular mode of life. The ideal or responsibility that I have incorporated into Whitehead's conception of autonomy suggests that this conception is moral.

Rawls, however, wants to avoid a moral conception of autonomy. As we saw earlier, his political liberalism affirms the priority of the right over the good. That is, no particular conception of the good can determine a society's basic principles of justice. This does not necessarily imply that Whitehead's conception of autonomy is illiberal. There are many forms of liberalism. A notable distinction within liberalism is between comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism. Unlike Rawls's political liberalism, which allows for a plurality of conceptions of the good, comprehensive liberalism understands liberal values in moral terms. These values are themselves a conception of the good. In its strongest form, comprehensive liberalism maintains that the state should promote such a conception over other conceptions of the good.

Insofar as Whitehead promotes a moral conception of autonomy, he might seem to have more in common with comprehensive liberalism. Nonetheless, I am not sure how far we should go with this comparison. As I discussed above, one of Rawls's central concerns is with the fact of pluralism. We find ourselves in a world with competing ways of life, or with different comprehensive doctrines. Rawls attempts to avoid any conception of justice that would require imposing one particular conception of the good life.

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[26] For Rawls's account of this distinction, see *Political Liberalism*, xlii-xliii, 77-80. In "Moral Autonomy and Personal Autonomy," Jeremy Waldron argues that there is a closer relationship between the two forms of autonomy than liberalism admits.

Whitehead, too, would affirm a similar form of pluralism. On numerous occasions, Whitehead warns against the dangers of over-moralization. He writes, "There is not just one ideal 'order' which all actual entities should attain and fail to attain. In each case there is an ideal peculiar to each particular actual entity….The notion of one ideal arises from the disastrous overmoralization of thought under the influence of fanaticism, or pedantry" (PR 84, cf. AI 119). If we read this passage in terms of the ways in which human beings order their lives, which would include their conceptions of the good, then we cannot so easily align Whitehead with comprehensive liberalism. In this vein, Whitehead praises tolerance as an "homage to the abundance of inexhaustible novelty which is awaiting the future, and to the complexity of accomplished fact which exceeds our stretch of insight" (AI 52). Tolerance, or the acceptance of diverse ways of life, is a promotion of novelty.

What does this mean for the moral conception of autonomy that I have described? On the one hand, my account of autonomy suggests a particular ideal, or a particular conception of the good. It prescribes how we should live, namely, by evaluating and taking responsibility for inherited abstractions. Yet, as we have just seen, Whitehead would criticize any attempt to impose a single way of life or a single moral ideal. In this case, I would suggest two alternative interpretations of my account of Whiteheadian autonomy. First, it may be the case that this ideal is only a suggestion. It would only to apply to some, as many would not choose to live in accordance with such an ideal. Alternatively, this ideal may be general enough to apply to many ways of life or many conceptions of the good. This would suggest that we should incorporate pluralism into the very ideal of autonomy. That is, the ideal itself is pluralistic. In this case, the recovery of concrete reality would be a promotion of pluralism and the responsibility to evaluate inherited abstractions would be a critique of those characteristics of society that inhibit pluralism.

I think this is the more consistent reading of Whitehead. Furthermore, as both moral and pluralistic, this ideal of autonomy suggests an alternative to the distinction between comprehensive liberalism, which favors a particular conception of the good, and Rawls's political liberalism, which abstains from any such conception. Therefore, while the comparison to liberalism yields important affinities, this final point suggests that a Whiteheadian conception of autonomy is not reducible to liberal terms.

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