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Political neutrality and the argument from personal autonomy

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POLITICAL NEUTRALITY AND THE ARGUMENT FROM PERSONAL AUTONOMY

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

Political Neutrality and the Argument from Personal Autonomy

by

Robert Bifulco, Jr.

One argument for political neutrality appeals to the value of autonomy. I consider three objections to this argument. First, it appears that this argument is self-defeating in drawing from a controversial conception of the good life. If we distinguish between theoretical and practical levels of political reasoning, however, the initial appearance of paradox disappears. Second, it is unclear whether autonomy plays an essential enough role in the good life to justify making it the goal of the state. Via, an explication of Joseph Raz’s work, I develop a sense in which it is plausible to say that autonomy is essential to the good life in some societies, and that the governments of such societies should pursue the conditions of autonomy. Third, it is unclear whether political neutrality is the best means of securing autonomy. I suggest a reason for believing that it is that draws on a connection between neutrality and the type of culture conducive to personal autonomy.
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CHAPTER 1
Neutrality and Its Relation to Liberalism

Two Purposes of Liberal Theory

Recognizing a liberal state does not seem to be too problematic. It is commonly agreed that a liberal state is one which is committed to most of the following: toleration of different ways of life, freedom of thought and expression, freedom of association, checks against the excessive extension of governmental control over individuals, and equal civil status for all. Given the apparent clarity about what a liberal state is, the task of liberal political philosophy would seem to be a relatively straightforward one of defending the general features of a liberal state; that is, giving reasons why a state with such features is acceptable, or more ambitiously, why such a state is superior to its alternatives. Different liberal theories would be distinguishable simply by the different reasons they give for supporting liberal states. Things, however, are not so simple. People who claim to be supporters of the liberal state, i.e. liberals, can and do disagree over many things other than the reasons for their support. Liberals can disagree about which of the above mentioned features are an essential part of any liberal state, and which are merely associated with some liberal states, and not necessary for those to maintain their status as acceptable or superior. They can also have disagreements about each individual institution: What does toleration entail? To what does freedom of expression apply? When is the extension of government control excessive? What constitutes unequal civil status? Does freedom of association conflict with toleration, or with the norm of equal standing? These are not merely academic disagreements either, they shape policy platforms and different positions on pressing,
emotionally charged issues. In the face of such disagreements liberal philosophical theorists devote much of their energy to formulating principles which define the ideal liberal state, and specifying what such a state demands with regard to political policy and action. Ironically, this task of clarifying what it is to support a liberal state often receives more attention than the justificatory task that initially seemed to be the sole purpose of the liberal theorist.¹

We can distinguish, then, two tasks for liberal political theory. The first task is to clarify what precisely the liberal state consists in. This task involves formulating the normative principles by which an ideally liberal state is organized, and spelling out the implication of these principles for practical policy making issues. The second task of liberal theory is to philosophically defend, or justify, the liberal state. Carrying out this task takes the form of offering reasons why we ought to accept the principles that define a given theory's version of the liberal state, not just as definitive of the liberal state, but as normative guides for shaping the political and social order.

To avoid misunderstanding it should be emphasized that it is not the case that the first task described above is merely descriptive while the second task is the only one that is philosophical, or normative. Defining the liberal state is not an empirical, factual matter determinable merely by examining existing political orders. Rather, the reasons why one thinks that those states roughly identifiable as liberal are justifiable are also going to be reasons for taking certain principles, and certain formulations of those principles, as definitive of the liberal state. Surely, if a theorist takes herself to be supporting liberal institutions, the principles by which she defines the liberal state are going to be ones that she thinks are supported
by the most salient philosophical considerations. We see, then, that the two\(^3\) tasks of liberal theory are closely connected, and consequently are often not addressed one at a time, as separate issues. Nevertheless, it will be useful in figuring how best to understand the neutrality thesis if we distinguish these two tasks.

One note before we proceed. It is clear from what has been said that liberal theories cannot be classified simply by the different reasons they give to support liberal institutions. Liberal theorists can differ in their conceptions of liberal institutions, and the principles they formulate to explicate those conceptions, as well as in the philosophical reasons they appeal to. It is also clear that liberal theories cannot be identified as liberal simply by the institutions and principles they end up supporting. The institutions and principles one theorist would call liberal might be judged illiberal by another. Consequently, we should be suspicious of all reference to things such as "the spirit of liberalism", where this is intended to be one and the same thing for all liberal theorists and theories. Liberal political philosophy is better understood as a discourse among those theorists who more or less agree in that they support those particular states that are commonly recognized as liberal. In attempting to explain why they do and others should support such states, and/or to provide means for a non-radical criticism of those states, these theorists become involved in disputes over how to formulate, systematically arrange and defend the political norms of these states. Those who contribute to one side or another of these disputes are liberal political theorists. The particular arrangements of norms suggested by these theorists are versions of the liberal state. Liberal political philosophy is nothing other than the discussion of the issues raised by these different ideals and disputes.
How to Understand the Neutrality Thesis

One suggestion that has cropped up in the discourse among liberal theorists is that political decisions and arrangements ought to be neutral among different conceptions of the good. This suggestion has become known as the neutrality thesis. It is not clear, however, what exactly this suggestion amounts to. That is, it is not clear what it means for political decisions and arrangements to be neutral among conceptions of the good. One of the things that is unclear is whether the neutrality thesis ought to be taken as a contribution to the clarifying or to the justifying task of liberal theory. Removing this particular confusion will do much to clarify the meaning of political neutrality. First, however, we need to see the source of the confusion.

At least two senses of what it means to remain neutral among conceptions of the good can be distinguished. In the first sense, neutrality would be obtained where the arrangements and decisions of a given state are such that they do not tend to advantage individuals who choose certain ways of life, or disadvantage those who choose others. In that this sense of neutrality is defined in terms of the effects of state action on individuals it is similar to what Charles Larmore has called neutrality of outcome. If we take the neutrality thesis to be asserting a normative principle which demands neutrality of outcome, then it appears that it is a contribution to the clarifying task of liberal theory. That is, the neutrality thesis understood in this way offers a definition of the liberal state; namely, a political arrangement established to secure neutrality of outcome.

However, it is widely held that the above described neutrality of outcome is impossible. It is a generally accepted fact that the decisions
and arrangements of any political authority inevitably benefits some more than others, and that certain courses of life will be made harder by certain decisions and arrangements than they would be in an alternative state. For instance, in a society where the state decides to limit acts of intolerance, and actively protects freedom of expression, members of authoritarian religious sects will find it much harder to carry out what they deem necessary to achieve their goals. Conversely, in a state where members of such sects are permitted to do what they think necessary to preserve their way of life, the actions of those sectarians would most likely cause disadvantages for those whose pursuit of their own conception of the good is perceived as a threat to that sects way of life. In other words the arrangements necessary for pursuing different conceptions of the good without disadvantage are not all mutually compatible. Consequently, in ensuring that some people will not be disadvantaged by their choice to pursue a given conception of the good life, the state will inevitably be placing some others, with a different conception of the good, at a disadvantage.

Most proponents of the neutrality thesis are aware of this problem with the concept of a neutral outcome and have tried to distinguish their own version of the neutrality thesis from versions which involve that concept. This other version of the neutrality thesis has been developed most explicitly by Larmore and Bruce Ackerman. Larmore calls it neutrality of procedure. Neutrality of procedure posits no end-state structure of society as ideal. Nor does it make any reference to the effect of state action on individuals in defining neutrality. Instead neutrality of procedure is conceived as a constraint on political decision making (as Larmore states it) or political conversations (as Ackerman puts it). According to Larmore a
"political decision can count as neutral only if it can be justified without appealing to the presumed intrinsic superiority of any particular conception of the good."⁴ According to Ackerman the Neutrality principle prohibits one from asserting that "his conception of the good is better than that asserted by any of his fellow citizens," in justifying a given political arrangement.⁵

Since this version of the neutrality thesis is presented as a norm for how political arrangements are to be justified, it appears to be a contribution to the justificatory task of liberal theory. Indeed, in his book, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, Ackerman appears to apply the neutrality thesis primarily to justificatory issues. In the book Ackerman concentrates most extensively on two tasks. One is to articulate a system of principles for regulating power conflicts. This part of Ackerman's project appears to constitute his contribution to the clarificatory task of liberal theory. Ackerman's other main objective is to demonstrate that the political system that he articulates can be justified by a self-consistent set of reasons that do not violate the Neutrality principle. Thus, it appears that the neutrality thesis is a principle regulating what type of reasons one can offer to defend a particular conception of the liberal state, rather than a principle which itself defines a particular conception of the liberal state.

Nevertheless, many people, including Ackerman himself and Larmore, still speak of neutrality, even in the procedural sense, as definitive of liberalism and the liberal state.

The specific way in which it distinguishes the public from the private is not the feature most characteristic of political liberalism. Instead, the distinctive liberal notion is that of neutrality of state.⁶

Political liberalism has been the doctrine that . . . the state
should be neutral.\textsuperscript{7}

When others have sought to give liberalism systematic form they have turned to other ideas -- most notably contract or utility -- to serve as their organizing principle. In contrast, I hope to convince you that the idea of constrained conversation [i.e. conversation constrained by the Neutrality principle] provides a far more satisfactory key to the liberal enterprise.\textsuperscript{8}

When others have sought to give liberalism systematic form they have turned to other ideas -- most notably contract or utility -- to serve as their organizing principle. In contrast, I hope to convince you that the idea of constrained conversation [i.e. conversation constrained by the Neutrality principle] provides a far more satisfactory key to the liberal enterprise. It is unclear, then, how we are to take the neutrality thesis. Is it a thesis about what the liberal state is, or about how the liberal state is to be justified?

I accept the arguments that neutrality of outcome is impossible. Consequently, I agree with Larmore and Ackerman that if the neutrality thesis is to have any coherent sense it must be understood as a constraint on political reasoning. However, even though it is a norm concerning political justifications, I believe that the neutrality thesis is best understood as a contribution to the clarifying task, rather than the justifying task of liberal theory. I also believe that although there is some ambiguity in the literature, the proponents of the neutrality thesis do intend it as a claim about what the liberal state is. The task of justifying the liberal state could never be fulfilled merely by showing that it can be defended on the basis of neutral reasons. A neutralist, such as Ackerman, would I think grant that principles and institutions other than the ones that form the content of his theory could be justified if one accepted and was willing to appeal to non-
neutral premises. His claim is that because those other principles cannot be justified by appeal to neutral premises only, they are not valid. What Ackerman needs to show is why neutrally justified political principles are valid, but non-neutrally justified principles are not. Thus, even if we took the neutrality thesis as a claim about how the liberal state should be defended the ultimate justificatory task of liberal theory would still come down to justifying neutrality. Consequently, it is simpler to take the neutrality thesis as the claim that the liberal state is one in which the political arrangements and decisions are not justified or made on the basis of any particular conception of the good, and the statement of this principle and the drawing out of its practical implications as a clarification of what the liberal state is. We can, then, understand the justifying task for those liberal theorists who accept the neutrality thesis to simply be that of defending neutrality.9

I will, then, be taking the neutrality thesis, understood as a constraint on political reasoning, as a contribution to the clarifying task of liberal theory. The investigation in the rest of this paper, on the other hand, should be seen primarily as a contribution to the justifying task of liberal theory. Particularly, this investigation will consider the question of how the neutrality thesis might be philosophically defended or justified. One thing, however, should be made clear from the start. Although I will take the neutrality thesis as a claim about what the liberal state is, when I speak of defending the neutrality thesis, I will not be speaking of attempts to establish that it is the best way to understand the liberal state, as if this were some empirical matter. Rather, by defending the neutrality thesis I mean trying to establish it as an independent normative claim about how the
political order ought to be, regardless of whether or not it is an accurate characterization of existing liberal states.

**Neutrality and The Primacy of Justice**

The neutrality thesis is, then, a normative principle which maintains that political, or governmental, decisions and actions should not be justified by, or undertaken on the grounds of, a particular conception of the good life. This principle certainly excludes as legitimate grounds for governmental actions such claims as:

"heterosexual activities are better than homosexual activities."

"religious devotion is better than godlessness."

"watching pornographic movies is a bad way to spend your time."

It also seems to exclude statements of the following sort:

"a life lived in a certain type of society is happier than lives lived in other societies."

"one cannot flourish, or realize his human capacities, unless these societal conditions are present."

This gives rise to the following question. If these types of statements, especially the latter, are excluded as legitimate reasons for political action, then what type of considerations can serve as a basis for political decisions? If one cannot appeal to particular conception of the good in determining what political actions to take, then to what can one appeal?

Joseph Raz, in his own discussion of political neutrality, suggests two types of appeal that can serve as a basis for a neutral politics. If political decisions are not based on particular conceptions of the good, then they might be based either on the actual wants of individuals, or alternatively, on a particular conception of justice. The first of these two types of neutral politics Raz calls political welfarism. The idea of political welfarism is that
although the state may not aim at securing for individuals the capability or opportunity of achieving the good life (as this is identified by a particular conception of the good), it nonetheless may and ought to aim at securing for individuals the capability or opportunity of satisfying their actual wants. Of course, some maintain that the good life consists in nothing other than the satisfaction of one's actual wants. For preference utilitarians and others who hold such a view, welfarism does not represent a neutral politics, but rather a non-neutral politics based on their own particular conception of the good. However, one might hold that the good life consists in something other than the satisfaction of actual wants, and still advocate political welfarism on the grounds that it offers a way for the state to maintain a neutral stance.12

If we accept the word of former Harvard economist and current U.S. Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, political welfarism is a widely influential form of political decision making.

The prevailing philosophy of policy making in America can be summarized as follows . . . The public good, or "public interest," is best understood as the sum of individual preferences. Society is improved whenever some people's preferences can be satisfied without making other people worse off. Most of the time, private market exchanges suffice for improving society in this way; public policies are appropriate only when - and to the extent that - they can make such improvements more efficiently than the market can. Thus, the central responsibility of public officials, administrators and policy analysts is to determine whether public intervention is warranted, and it so, to choose the policy that leads to the greatest improvements.

These principles are familiar, not because they describe how public policies are actually made in modern America but because they shape the way public policies are typically justified and criticized.13
This evaluative model is often employed without critical awareness of the issues concerning the relation between preference satisfaction and different conceptions of the good life. An indication of how much this "naive" model of political reasoning influences actual policy development is also indicated by Reich:

The ubiquity and robustness of these principles in contemporary America is quite remarkable. They undergrid the position papers that stream out of policy institutes and assorted think tanks. They serve as the basis for memorandums of policy analysts in government and academia, editorials in prominent newspapers and magazines, learned treatises on public policy, court opinions crafted by judges schooled in "law and economics," lobbyists' pleadings and administrative hearings. You hear them even when politicians or administrators talk candidly about what they think they ought (but may not be able) to do. Whenever people who deal in public policy want to be (or to sound) objective and technically rigorous in discussing solutions to public problems, they tend to employ these assumptions - sometimes tacitly, often without further explanation or rationale.

However, whatever the influence of political welfarism in practice, it is not commonly defended in philosophical circles, at least not as a neutral politic. If one maintains that the good life is solely a matter of preference satisfaction, then welfarism becomes quite defensible. However, it siezes to be a version of political neutrality. If, on the other hand, you believe that enabling someone to satisfy his actual wants does not necessarily correspond to enabling her to achieve a good life, then you need to give another reason why satisfying actual wants ought to be the goal of government. Most neutralists, however, have not been concerned with developing a philosophical defensible rationale for political welfarism. Rather the most prominent efforts in neutralist liberal theory have been concerned with developing a particular conception of justice which can
serve as a basis for political deliberation in place of a conception of the good life. For this reason, the remainder of this thesis will be concerned with the second type of neutral politics.

The idea of this second type of neutral politics is to make certain principles of justice, rather than a certain conception of the good life, the ultimate normative guide for political decision making. The immediate problem with this suggestion is that just as there are many different conceptions of the good life, so there are many different principles of justice. Further, different conceptions of justice are intimately linked with different conceptions of the good life, and on many moral views these two concepts cannot be defined independently from each other. The objection, then, is that a politics based on particular principles of justice is in fact not a neutral form of politics. The possibility of this second form of neutral politics depends on being able to separate the conception of justice from particular conceptions of the good life.

Neutralists, such as John Rawls and Bruce Ackerman, have attempted to separate the principles of justice from conceptions of the good life by incorporating neutrality into the conception of justice itself. What both Rawls and Ackerman offer, is a hypothetical thought procedure by which people with different conceptions of the good life can arrive at common principles of justice. These hypothetical procedures serve as vehicles for forging consensus by isolating as grounds for the principles of justice only those features that we share in virtue of being moral agents who form and pursue certain ideas of the good, and by bracketing from consideration the particular differences among the various conceptions of the good life. For Rawls this procedure consists in imagining a group of individuals who know, among other things, that they have certain life plans and moral
commitments, and that certain primary goods are required as a means to achieving most life plans, but who are ignorant of, among other things, both their particular life plan and moral commitments, and their ability relative to others in society to secure the primary goods. The principles that such individuals would agree to have regulate the basic structure of society are, for Rawls, the principles of justice. Similarly, Ackerman asks us to imagine a group of individuals who must determine a set of principles by which a certain all-purpose resource is to be distributed. The principles are to be determined via an open conversation limited by only two constraints, namely that the reasons offered for a certain principle be consistent and that they not depend on a claim that a certain conception of the good life is superior to any other. The claim is that these hypothetical thought procedures yield principles of justice that are themselves neutral between particular conceptions of the good life, and which can be used in place of a particular conception of the good as a basis for a neutral politics.

The type of political neutrality suggested by Rawls and Ackerman makes justice prior to the good in two ways. First, there is the claim that justice can and ought to be defined independently from, and thus prior to, any particular conception of the good life. Second, in making the principles of justice the ultimate basis of political decision making these neutralists are claiming that considerations of justice overrule considerations of the good life in political matters. Thus, along with being made logically independent, or prior, justice is also made normatively prior to the good. It is this particular version of political neutrality, the version which asserts this dual priority of justice, which I will be concerned with in this thesis. Specifically I will be concerned with the
question as to why government ought to base its decisions on neutral principles of justice.
CHAPTER 2:
The Argument from Autonomy

An Undeveloped Argument

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine how the neutrality thesis might be philosophically defended or justified. If we look at the most carefully developed defenses of neutrality current in the literature, we can note that they all take a fundamentally similar strategy. Each ultimately rests on an appeal to a certain kind of moral imperative.

Ronald Dworkin, one of the first theorists to explicitly define liberalism in terms of the neutrality principle,\(^1\) bases his most clearly formulated argument for neutrality on what he calls "the abstract egalitarian thesis."\(^2\) What Dworkin suggests is that all moral conceptions, at least those prevalent in our society, accept the abstract principle that "the interests of the members of the community matter and matter equally", and disagree only over what equal treatment means.\(^3\) This suggestion implies that the subject matter of political morality is precisely treating people as equals, and that a moral political theory is a theory that tells us what counts as treating others as equals and what doesn't. For Dworkin, then, the "abstract egalitarian thesis" is not derived from any conception of the good, but is somehow drawn from the very subject matter of political morality. Indeed, Dworkin says that spelling out what this abstract principle means requires taking a position on what people's interests are,\(^4\) but the principle itself, in its abstract form, is determined prior to the specification of any such position. The rest of Dworkin's defense of neutrality concentrates on establishing that if we take our highest interest to be in living the good life (whatever that might be), then equal treatment of each citizen entails that
basic social goods cannot be distributed so as to disadvantage any citizen because he chooses to pursue a conception of the good life that others judge false.

Just as Dworkin's argument ultimately rests on the principle of equal treatment, so the argument Thomas Nagel makes in "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy" ultimately rests on the principle of impartiality. Nagel appears to base his argument for neutrality on a moral skepticism of sorts. His argument grants that we live in the world believing that certain moral and religious premises are true, and that these premises might have implications for what political actions ought to be taken. However, Nagel claims that we have the capacity to step outside the perspective from which we believe these premises to be true to a less personal perspective. From the less personal perspective we can see that another not standing in our own position might not have good reason to believe what we ourselves believe. However strongly an individual might believe a certain moral or religious premise to be true, from the impersonal standpoint that individual recognizes that the premises must be treated as merely a belief, and not as truth. These premises about our epistemological relation to the world are not, however, the ultimate ground of Nagel's argument for neutrality. The ultimate ground of Nagel's argument is the claim that morality demands that we treat people impartially, and that impartial treatment requires us to take up an impersonal standpoint that considers others as well ourselves. (Of course, Nagel must claim that this moral premise has a different epistemological status then the moral and religious premises discussed above, Namely, he needs to claim that this can be demonstrated or recognized as true from an impersonal standpoint as well as the personal). The premises about our epistemological position are merely meant to
establish that appealing to our particular moral and religious beliefs in making political choices fails to meet the requirements of impartiality. We can see, then, that Nagel's argument begins from a moral imperative, and attempts to show that political choices must be made without appealing to any particular moral ideal, in order to satisfy that moral demand.

In *Patterns of Moral Complexity* Larmore initially gives an argument for neutrality that can be characterized as pragmatic. He argues that in modern, pluralist societies we are obliged to justify our political actions to others either by the fact that they wield enough power to keep us from carrying out political actions if we do not secure their consent, or by the fact that we sympathize with the point of view of others and desire to justify ourselves to them. In so far as we are obliged to justify our political actions to others we are committed to a multi-person, or public, form of deliberation. A normative (but not moral) principle of public deliberation is that whenever there is an unresolved disagreement on a specific point, such as the nature of the good life, one ought to "abstract" one's belief about the point from the conversation, so that agreement can be reached via other considerations. The problem with this argument is that it provides reasons for maintaining a neutral stance only among conceptions of the good held by those who have enough power, or who have the sympathy of those who do. The argument provides no reason for those with a substantial power advantage and no sympathy for opposing views to commit to public deliberation, or the norm of neutrality thereby implied. To remedy this problem Larmore changes the reason for committing to public deliberation. Instead of saying we are *obliged* by the power of others or our own sympathies, he says that we are *obligated* to public deliberation by the substantive moral demand to show everyone
equal respect. Larmore claims that this demand to show everyone equal respect is "morally more substantive than the base idea of rationality, but is not part of any disputed notion of the good." Thus, Larmore's argument is ultimately that procedural neutrality is necessary to satisfy a moral demand which is independent of any particular specification of the good.

Each of these arguments for autonomy similarly appeal to a moral principle conceived of as distinct from any given conception of the good. For this reason they might be called Kantian or deontological defenses. Although none of the leading neutralists rest their case for neutrality on a different kind of argument, other kinds of arguments are often referred to. Among these acknowledged, but undeveloped arguments for autonomy is the argument from the value of individual autonomy. Ackerman does not want to rest his own case for neutrality on any one particular argument, but rather on the fact that there are many views "that will provide a plausible path to neutrality." Nonetheless, one of the several weighty arguments in support of neutrality" that Ackerman speaks of is that which appeals to "a conception of the good that gives central place to autonomous deliberation." More often, though, the argument from personal autonomy is referred to by those who reject it. Larmore distinguishes his own neutral justification of neutrality from a group of non-neutral arguments "which invoke some view of human flourishing that can best be promoted if government maintains a neutral posture."

Among these non-neutral arguments Larmore includes one that appeals to the value of individual autonomy. William Galston and George Sher, both of whom are concerned with rejecting the neutrality thesis altogether, both list the argument from autonomy as one of the arguments for neutrality that they need to refute.
The basic idea being suggested when the argument from the value of autonomy is referred to is that procedural neutrality might be defended as a means of securing or promoting individual autonomy. This is a fundamentally different kind of argument than those of Dworkin, Nagel and Larmore in that it defends neutrality as a means to achieving a certain good, rather than as a requirement of a certain moral imperative. There has not been, however, any sustained attempt to develop this basic idea into a full blown defense of neutrality.13 This thesis is intended as a remedy for this lack. It represents an earnest attempt to elaborate the argument from personal autonomy in a way that can plausibly meet the most pressing objections.

Three Objections

The argument from the value of individual autonomy can be reconstructed roughly as follows:

(1) Individual autonomy is an essential element of the good life. Therefore, (2) The state ought to aim at securing those conditions that individuals need to achieve individual autonomy. (3) Government neutrality is needed to secure the conditions of individual autonomy. [Or alternatively: Of all political arrangements the neutral state is most likely to promote to the highest degree those conditions needed for individual autonomy]. Therefore, (4) Government ought to be neutral.

There are three objections that can be raised against this argument. The first objection is pressed by Larmore who rejects the appeal to individual autonomy because it is not itself neutral with respect to controversial ideals of the good life.14 This objection attacks the strategy of the argument as a whole, and claims that it is self-defeating to defend neutrality non-neutrally. Because this objection questions the strategy of the argument,
the issues it raises has implications not just for the argument from autonomy, but for any attempt to defend neutrality as a means of promoting a certain value or set of values.

The the other two objections are more substantive, in that they challenge the particular claims asserted by the argument from autonomy. One of these objections raises doubts concerning the truth of the first and second premises. The argument is that individual autonomy does not have a sufficiently essential place in the good life to justify the claim that securing the conditions of personal autonomy ought to be the goal of the state. In his own discussion of neutrality Galston raises this type of objection against the argument for neutrality based on individual freedom. The argument for neutrality that Galston addresses is not actually presented as an appeal to individual autonomy, but rather as an argument based on the value of individual freedom.\textsuperscript{15} Galston contends that:

To invade . . . freedom in the name of the real good is to promote the individual's benefit over his or her harm . . . In practice, such invasions can be wrong \textit{in principle} only if the mere fact that the impetus towards the good is external somehow negates the worth of the good end so achieved, that is, only if the consciously willed pursuit of a goal is a necessary condition of the value of attaining it.\textsuperscript{16}

Some would claim that freedom has precisely this relationship to human value.\textsuperscript{17} Galston, however, claims that the proposition that the consciously willed pursuit of a goal is a necessary condition of the value of attaining it "cannot be defended."\textsuperscript{18} Thus, Galston's objection to any argument for neutrality that is based on the value of freedom is that freedom does not play a central enough role in the good life to establish a ban on policies that undermine it. Although, Galston's contentions concern the value and role of individual freedom, clearly similar questions can be raised about the
role autonomy plays in the good life, and whether or not it is essential enough to justify neutrality.

The last objection to the argument from the value of autonomy questions the third premise, i.e. that government neutrality is needed to secure the conditions of autonomy. Joseph Raz, whose work will figure prominently in this thesis, believes that autonomy ought to be the goal of the state, but he draws from that belief support for a non-neutral form of politics. This implies that Raz, at least, does not accept the third premise. An explicit argument against the assertion of neutrality as a means of securing autonomy is developed by Sher.19 Arguments might even be made for the claim, not only that neutrality is not necessary to secure the conditions of individual autonomy, but that a neutral state in fact undermines the possibility of achieving individual autonomy. The seeds of such an argument can be found in Charles Taylor's development of the idea that the government must actively promote certain social conditions to realize the ideal of individually autonomous citizens.20 What is suggested by Taylor's writing is that the government policies necessary to realize the ideals of individual autonomy can only be justified by a non-neutral politics. This last criticism of the argument from autonomy in effect turns the argument against itself. For if indeed a non-neutral politics better serves the achievement of individual autonomy than a neutral politics, then any considerations raised in support of the claim that autonomy ought to be made the goal of the state turn out to be considerations against the principle of neutrality.
The Plan for this Thesis

In the remainder of this thesis I will try to carve out an elaboration of the argument from the value of personal autonomy which can withstand the above mentioned objections. I will do this by devoting a chapter to each of the three objections. In chapter three I will consider whether or not defending neutrality non-neutrally creates a self-defeating paradox. I will argue that in fact it does not, and that this can be clearly seen if we carve out a specific version of the neutrality thesis and carefully distinguish that from similar but different liberal principles. In chapter four I will examine the very suggestive considerations raised by Joseph Raz in his book *The Morality of Freedom*. In this book Raz contends, in the face of considerations raised by those such as Galston, that personal autonomy is indeed an essential element of the good life, and that the ideal liberal state ought to be aimed at securing the conditions of personal autonomy. In this chapter I will examine the conception of personal autonomy and its role in the good human life developed by Raz, and determine whether or not that conception can justify making securing the conditions of individual autonomy the goal of the state. In chapter 5, I will offer reason for believing that a neutral state is the best for securing the conditions of autonomy. Then, in light of the connection I draw between neutrality and autonomy, I will evaluate some of the arguments that might be made against the third premise. My hope is to establish that although the argument from the value of autonomy raises many questions not settled in this thesis, it nonetheless makes a plausible case for neutrality worthy of further consideration.
Chapter 3:  
Can Neutrality Be Defended Non-Neutrally?

The argument from the value of individual autonomy depends on an assertion drawn from a particular conception of the good life. Particularly, it depends on the claim that individual autonomy is essential to living a good life. There is a general worry that any argument for political neutrality that depends, in this way, on a particular conception of the good life is self-defeating. This worry is evidenced by the efforts of each of the leading defenders of neutrality to separate the moral imperative on which their arguments rest from particular conceptions of the good. It can be seen in Ackerman's reluctance to rest his support for Neutrality on any particular argument. And it is explicitly voiced in Larmore's claim that "if liberals are to follow fully the spirit of liberalism, they must also devise a neutral justification of political neutrality." It is, however, simply not true that political neutrality must be neutrally justified. It is not self-defeating nor logically inconsistent to attempt to give a non-neutral defense of neutrality.

Why then does this worry about the coherency of non-neutral defenses of neutrality persist? I think that the persistence of this worry is due to the close association that the neutrality thesis has to other elements of the liberal tradition. Both proponents and critics of the neutrality thesis often discuss neutrality in conjunction with similar but different principles of liberal political philosophy. The result is confusion about what can, but need not be implied by the neutrality thesis. I will address the objection that the argument from individual autonomy is self-defeating via further conceptual clarification of political neutrality, and a spelling out of what
need and need not be implied by an assertion of the neutrality thesis.

One place that conceptual confusion might arise is over the relationship between the neutrality thesis and the conception of the liberal state as a modus vivendi. It might seem that the principle of neutrality demands that the liberal state not be conceived as the realization of any moral ideal, but rather as a modus vivendi. In the first section of this chapter I argue that although it may make sense for someone who views the liberal state as a modus vivendi to defend the neutrality thesis, the state which is constrained by the principle of procedural neutrality can be seen as the realization of a moral ideal. Another place that conceptual confusion can, and most often does, arise is over the relationship between the neutrality thesis and the deontological tradition of liberal political theory. After explicating the notion of deontological liberalism, and spelling out its conceptual connection to neutrality, I will argue that although one might assert the neutrality thesis in a way that does entail deontological liberalism, a version of the neutrality thesis can be specified which does not entail deontological liberalism.

**Neutrality and the Two Faces of Liberalism**

In Chapter One I discussed the neutrality thesis as a particular way of defining the liberal state that has emerged out of the discourse of liberal political philosophy. Along with different ways of defining the liberal state, different ways of trying to defend the liberal state have also emerged from this discourse. These different strategies for defending the liberal state can, on the most general level, be divided into two types, or traditions. The two traditions of defending the liberal state I have in mind are those that Nancy Rosenblum has called the two faces of liberalism. These two
traditions, or faces, of liberalism can be distinguished by the poses they conceive the liberal state to be serving, and consequently, by the type of premises they appeal to in defending the liberal state. One tradition conceives the liberal state as realizing a moral ideal, and thus draws from moral premises to defend it. The other tradition conceives the liberal state as a modus vivendi, and tends to point towards the lessons of history and practical necessities in defending it.

Rosenblum mentions Condorcet in connection with the moral face of liberalism. In fact most of the classical statements of liberalism, including those of Locke, Kant, and Mill, can be placed in this tradition. These liberal theorists have either seen individual freedom as an essential and indispensable condition of the good life, or as something that the precepts of morality demand we respect. They have defended the liberal state either as creating the type of society needed to develop the capacity for individual freedom, or as necessary for ensuring respect for individual freedom. Theorists in this tradition have tended to see liberalism as a moral demand, and as the result of centuries of moral progress.

The other tradition of liberal theory has shied away from making positive claims about the nature of the good or moral life, and instead has argued from premises about basic, undeniable evils. Theorists in this tradition have pointed to the intolerable strife of the Wars of Religion in 16th and 17th century Europe, and the cruelties of repressive states that lack institutionalized protections against arbitrary and excessive uses of power. These “real life” horrors, it is argued, are often the results of attempts to assert particular conceptions of the good life through the political apparatus of the state. Consequently, to protect ourselves from such evils we need a way to separate political matters from matters of
personal morality. The liberal state is conceived as means for institutionalizing this separation of the political and personal, ensuring that the apparatus of the state is not used to assert particular conceptions of the good. Rosenblum mentions James Madison and Thomas Paine in connection with this tradition of liberalism.

Of these two traditions of liberal theory, the neutrality thesis seems to fit much more naturally into that tradition which conceives of the liberal state as a modus vivendi. This is the case for two reasons. The first reason is the similarity between the neutrality thesis and the modus vivendi conception of the liberal state. To see the state as a modus vivendi is to see it as first and foremost a means for eliminating excess strife and cruelty so that people can get on with their lives. One of the main tenets of the pragmatic tradition of liberal theory is that when states undertake the task of bringing its citizens to the realization of a particular moral ideal, it tends to contribute to the amount of strife and cruelty rather than minimizing it. The lesson is that in taking on a larger purpose such a state ends up working against its primary purpose. The liberal state, then, serves as a modus vivendi by self-consciously limiting itself to its primary task, and avoiding the dangers of trying to realize a certain moral ideal. The neutrality thesis is a normative claim that demands from political authorities precisely this type of deliberate self-restraint. Consequently, the neutrality thesis is likely to receive serious consideration from anyone working with a modus vivendi conception of liberalism. Also, a natural way of understanding the demand not to appeal to the superiority of particular conceptions of the good is as a way of ensuring that the state does not counterproductively overstep its proper function.

The second reason one might associate the neutrality thesis with the
pragmatic, modus vivendi tradition of liberal theory is that neutrality seems such an unlikely fit with the other, moral ideal tradition. There seems to be Something paradoxical in putting forth the principle that political decisions ought not appeal to the superiority of particular conceptions of the good or moral life, as part of an ideal political morality. Certainly the decision (judgment, choice) that the neutrality thesis ought to serve as a normative guide for how political decisions are made, and how political and social institutions are shaped, is itself a political decision (judgment, choice). To justify this decision by showing how it is demanded by or serves to promote a particular moral ideal would appear to violate the neutrality thesis. Thus, the neutrality thesis understood as part of a particular moral ideal takes on a self-defeating quality.

Despite these reasons for seeing the neutrality thesis as part of the pragmatic tradition of liberal theory, I want to deny that the neutrality thesis needs to be seen that way. Regardless of how one might be led to consider the neutrality thesis, it is an independent normative claim which can be defended by drawing on the arguments and strategies of either the moral ideal or the pragmatic traditions of liberal theory. To support this claim let us examine more closely the reasons neutrality appears to fit better with only the latter of these traditions.

I do not want to deny that there is an affinity between the conception of the liberal state as a modus vivendi and the neutrality thesis. If we conceive of the liberal state as self-consciously limiting itself so that it is able to carry out its primary functions, then certainly the neutrality thesis at least suggests itself as a potential principle for liberal self-restraint. However, this affinity between modus vivendi liberalism and neutrality is psychological rather than logical. What I mean by this is that although the
neutrality thesis does indeed suggest itself to those working with a modus vivendi conception, it is not entailed by the modus vivendi conception of the liberal state. Nor, and this is the important point for my purpose, does the neutrality thesis necessarily presuppose a modus vivendi conception.

To see the first point we need merely note that resolving to remain neutral between competing conceptions of the good is only one of a number of ways that a public authority might try to limit itself. Some might try to argue that out of these self-constraining policies remaining neutral is not the best way to secure civil peace and minimize cruelty. One might argue that limiting political actions to those that can be neutrally justified demands more than is needed to contain strife and cruelty, and that it would keep political authorities from promoting positive goods in a way that is not incompatible with maintaining order and minimizing cruelty. It is also possible for one to argue that the neutrality principle is an insufficient means for avoiding conflict and oppression. That is one might deny that the main sources of conflict and strife in societies generally, or in a particular society, are attempts to realize a particular conception of the good via the apparatus of the state. Rather the failure of the state to act quickly and decisively to prohibit and punish acts of physical violence might be seen as the main source of such problems. Surely the procedurally neutral state is as susceptible to such inefficiencies, if not more so, than any other state.

The reverse, i.e. that one who accepts the neutrality thesis need not conceive of the liberal state as a modus vivendi, is also true. Here we might distinguish two ways in which the liberal state might be conceived as a modus vivendi. The first is that which we have already laid out: to see the state first and foremost as a means to eliminating strife and cruelty so
that people can get on with their lives. The second reason one might call the state a modus vivendi is if he sees it as creating the means for many different people with different moral points of view to coexist in one political body, contribute equally to the decisions of that body, and still achieve a political consensus. This seems to be what Larmore has in mind when he speaks of the liberal state as a modus vivendi. Of these two senses of a modus vivendi I would place only the first in the pragmatic tradition of defending the liberal state. The second conception of the liberal state as modus vivendi, which I attributed to Larmore, and which might also be drawn from recent articles by John Rawls, is in fact a conception of the liberal state as a moral ideal. This second conception of the liberal state as modus vivendi assumes the claim that a situation in which people are able to maintain different points of view and still be equal participants in the political process is morally preferable. The fact, then, that neutrality has been defended as a means of securing this type of modus vivendi shows that the neutrality thesis does not necessarily presuppose a conception of the state as a modus vivendi in the first sense. Nor, then, does accepting neutrality presuppose the pragmatic traditions shying away from moral premises.

The argument from the value of individual autonomy, however, goes beyond appealing to a very sparse, and somewhat uncontroversial, moral norm such as equal participation. Rather the argument from the value of individual autonomy suggests that the neutrally constrained state can be conceived as realizing a specific view of human flourishing. Larmore insists that his moral ideal of equal respect for, id political participation by, persons with different moral points of view is not a full-fledged conception of the good life, id thus tries to place his defense of neutrality in that
tradition of liberalism which shies away from such robust moral conceptions. Thus, although it is clear that the neutral state can be conceived of as the realization of a moral ideal, it remains unclear whether the principle of neutrality can be conceived of as part of a certain kind of moral ideal. More particularly, it remains unclear whether the neutral state can be defended on the grounds that it promotes the type of society in which a certain conception of human flourishing is realized.

Connection Between Neutrality and Deontology

Procedural neutrality can be defended as the realization of a moral ideal. There are, however, different types of moral ideals. A societal arrangement can be deemed superior on the grounds that it provides the conditions for the best kind of lives or that it makes the most people happy, or alternatively, on the grounds that it satisfies certain moral demands that are determined independently from any particular conception of the good life. An arrangement deemed superior on the latter type of ground is a deontological ideal. In attempting to defend neutrality on the grounds that it is necessary to satisfy demands of equal treatment, impartiality, or equal respect, Dworkin, Nagel and Larmore, are each defending neutrality as the realization of a deontological ideal. The other type of moral ideal is a teleological ideal. If an arrangement is deemed superior because it promotes that which is determined to be worthy according to a particular conception of the good life, then it is a teleological ideal. The argument from the value of autonomy depends on a particular conception of the good, namely, a conception which maintains that autonomy is an essential part of the good life. The argument from the value of autonomy attempts to justify neutrality on the grounds that it best promotes those conditions
necessary for the achievement of individual autonomy. Neutrality is thus defended as a means to realizing a teleological ideal.

Now, the version of the neutrality thesis with which we are most concerned maintains that the arguments and decisions by which a society is governed ought not be justified by appeal to any particular conception of the good life. Rather, governmental decisions are to be justified by an appeal to justice, where justice is defined independently from any particular conception of the good life. This version of the neutrality thesis appears to be saying that political action ought to be guided by a deontological ideal, and not by teleological ideals. This creates a problem for defenses of neutrality such as the argument from the value of individual autonomy. The argument from the value of autonomy maintains that a state ought to remain neutral as a means to realizing a particular teleological ideal. If a state commits to procedural neutrality on such grounds, then it is ultimately a teleological ideal which is guiding its decisions and actions. This, however, is precisely what the principle of neutrality forbids. It seems then that if a principle of neutrality is defended on the basis of a teleological ideal, then it is, in fact, not a principle of neutrality.

It is not surprising, then, that neutrality is closely associated with that strand of liberal political philosophy which conceives the liberal state a deontological ideal. The advantages of defending neutrality as the realization of a deontological ideal are clear. Such a strategy has the virtue of allowing one to assert neutrality as a political ideal which can affirmed as a moral triumph where ever it is obtained, rather than as a mere political expedient which makes the best out of the lamentable fact of pluralism. At the same time a defense from deontological principles seems
to avoid the apparent paradox of appealing to a teleological ideal to justify placing a neutrality constraint on political reasoning.

**Separating Neutrality and Deontology**

What I want to establish in this section is that despite appearances, one can assert the neutrality thesis, i.e. that justification for political decisions ought not appeal to the intrinsic superiority of any controversial conception of the good life, without committing oneself to a deontological political ideal. Clarifying what the neutrality thesis can and does involve and showing how asserting it can be separated from committing to a deontological ideal, will allow us to see that one need not devise a neutral justification of neutrality in order to remain true to the "spirit of liberalism." Since nothing is necessarily wrong with giving non-neutral reasons for neutrality the main attraction of defending neutrality on the basis of a deontological moral ideal will lose much of its strength. The result of this argument will be to reopen the possibility of defending neutrality as part of a teleological ideal.

To clarify exactly what asserting the neutrality thesis involves, and need not involve, it will be useful to introduce the possibility of distinguishing different levels of political reasoning. I suggest that at least two such levels can be usefully distinguished. One level, which we might call theoretical, involves determining the conceptions and principles that ought to regulate, constrain or determine what a political authority does or how society is structured. If neutrality is demanded at this level it seems to be a principle of philosophical methodology. A second level of political reasoning consists in making particular political decisions that accord with the constraints or demands of more general regulative or normative
conceptions. Placing a neutrality constraint on this level of political decision making, is not to put a constraint on how political principles are determined, but rather is itself a political principle. Asserting neutrality on the policy making level amounts to claiming that a legitimate political authority is one that does not choose its policies on the grounds that they promote one particular conception of the good over others. Thus, rather than being a principle of philosophical methodology, neutrality at this level is a principle of political legitimacy.

In their articulations of procedural neutrality, Ackerman and Larmore do not consider the possibility of making such a distinction, and thus seem to assume that neutrality ought to hold at both (all) levels of political reasoning. However, it is possible that prescribing a neutrality constraint at one level does not necessarily entail prescribing it at another. A neutrally constrained theoretical method might not determine principles that demand the exercise of procedural neutrality by political authorities. Conversely, the justification for a neutrality constraint on the policy making level of politics need not rest on a neutrally constrained method. To show that the latter is indeed possible we need to make sense of a political authority or decision maker being committed to a particular conception of the good, restraining himself from using that conception of the good in his political reasoning, and restraining himself in that way for reasons provided by his particular conception of the good. Making sense of such a reasoner would open the possibility of defending the neutrality thesis on the basis of a fulfilled, teleological moral ideal. Can we make sense of such a political decision maker?

Suppose that there is a person who accepts a certain conception of what the ideal society is, and this conception is ultimately based on a conception
of the good life. Part of his conception is that in the ideal society political policies are chosen without appeal to any particular conception of the good life, spoken or unspoken. Consequently, whenever that person makes a decision that affects others politically, or participates in the process of choosing policy, he abstracts all particular conceptions of the good from his deliberations. The problem is the following. If we were to ask this person why he chooses to deliberate in the manner he does he would refer to his particular conception of the ideal society, and the place of neutral decision making in it. That this ideal itself rests on a conception of the good, belies the fact that considerations of a particular conception of the good do enter into his political deliberations. Unless our decision maker's conception of the good society is based on principles of right which are not committed to a particular conception of the good, we would have to say either that his manner of political deliberation harbors contradictions, or that it rests on a deep seated hypocrisy. It is for reasons such as this that Larmore claims that liberalism must be committed to neutrality all the way down, and that neutrality must be defended neutrally.

However, there is actually no contradiction in holding a conception of the ideal society which has as part the idea that policy choices are made only on neutral grounds. This is true whether the particular conception of the ideal society ultimately rests on principles of right or on a conception of the good. Still it appears as if there is something contradictory in letting considerations of a particular conception of the ideal society, drawn from a particular conception of the good, enter into supposedly neutral deliberations. To remove the appearance of contradiction we can make a distinction between two ways in which a premise can enter into deliberations. It can enter in directly as a reason which justifies a particular
policy proposal made in the deliberations. Thus, if we are deliberating over whether or not graduate students in philosophy ought to be given a tax break, and I argue that they should because the philosophical way of life is intrinsically superior and thus ought to be encouraged, then the claim that the philosophical way of life is superior enters directly into the considerations. Now, the premise that a society which makes political decisions on neutral grounds is superior will serve as a direct reason for a particular policy proposal only when the deliberations are over how the polity ought to make policy decisions. When we are deliberating over any other policy issue, such as who should and should not get tax breaks, this premise about the superior society will not serve as a reason for any particular policy proposal. Rather, it enters such deliberations only via being a justifying grounds for the broader policy decision to eliminate certain types of premises from more specific policy deliberations. When a premise enters into deliberations over a given policy issue, let us say deliberations A, only in that it is appealed to in the justification for another policy decision which has implications for deliberations A, then we can say that that premise enters into deliberations A indirectly. If we take the neutrality constraint on policy deliberations to only be prohibiting premises about the good from entering directly into deliberations, and not from entering indirectly in the sense explained above, then there is no contradiction in justifying a neutrality constraint on policy deliberations on the basis of a particular conception of the common good.

Indeed, the decision to adopt the general policy of placing a neutrality constraint on specific policy decisions, will itself not be neutrally justified. However, we need not demand that the general policy to make policy decisions neutrally, apply to the deliberations over that policy decisions
itself. It might seem that it is hypocritical to adopt a given policy about policy deliberations via deliberations that violate that very policy. In fact, however, there need not be anything hypocritical about it. Suppose a political decision maker says the following: “Given my beliefs about the good human life, and certain other considerations, I conclude that the good is best promoted by a political order in which the policies are chosen only on neutral grounds, thus I do not consider any conceptions of the good, including my own, in making a choice of political policy.” Where is the hypocrisy? As long as the person is forthright about his reasons for neutrality, id realizes that even if he does not directly consider his own conception of the good in choosing policy that conception still influences his choice via his decision to consider only neutral reasons, then he is being neither inconsistent nor hypocritical. The neutrality he professes and practices is simply a limited neutrality, which does not go all the way down.

It might be objected that if one commits to this limited version of neutrality on the basis of a particular conception of the good, then one is only committed to neutrality in cases where this serves to promote that good. This, though, is tantamount to not being committed to neutrality at all. However, there can be reasons, ultimately drawn from a particular concept of the good, for taking a prescription as a general moral rule, and even a rule to be strictly followed in all cases. One possible rationale for such rules is that even though there will be exceptional cases where following the rule will not serve the good, there ought to be a presumption in favor of following the rule, perhaps even a unimpeachable presumption, because doing so generally promotes the good and it is hard to determine which cases are exceptions. Now, whether there is a plausible conception
of the good that can be combined with other plausible considerations to support adopting a rule of neutrality is a open question. The point is that someone could consistently maintain neutrality on the policy making level but not on the theoretical level, if indeed he accepted some such conception of the good.

If, then, given the distinction between higher and lower levels of political decision making, we redefine the neutrality thesis such that it places a constraint only on the policy making level of political reasoning, the paradox of defending neutrality on the basis of a teleological ideal is removed. Ackerman, Dworkin, Nagel and Larmore have each failed to recognize the possibility of distinguishing levels of political reasoning, and thus have felt compelled to give a neutral defense of neutrality on the basis of a deontological ideal. Of course a claim such as Larmore's claim that "to follow fully the spirit of liberalism, [one] must also devise a neutral justification of political neutrality," might be taken as asserting that the tradition of liberal political philosophy somehow embodies a commitment not just to policy neutrality but to theoretical neutrality as well. However, as I said in chapter one, the purpose of this thesis is not to determine whether or not the neutrality thesis is the best way to understand liberalism. Rather my purpose is to determine whether or not the neutrality thesis can be defended as a normative political principle, liberal or otherwise, on the basis of individual autonomy. It is indeed paradoxical to defend theoretical neutrality on a particular conception of the good such as one that places value on autonomy. However, if we take the principle of neutrality to apply only to the policy making level of political reasoning, then we have a version of the neutrality thesis which can be defended non-neutrally, as part of a teleological ideal, without paradox.
CHAPTER 4:
Should Individual Autonomy be the Goal of the State?

The first substantive objection to the argument from the value of individual autonomy attacks the move from the first premise to the second premise. The objection maintains that autonomy does not play an essential enough role in the good life to make it the goal of the state. The argument runs as follows. In order to justify the mandate that the state be arranged to secure individual autonomy, it must either be the case that autonomy is the sole element of the good life, or that the value of other elements of the good life cannot be realized in the absence of autonomy. Both of these claims seem implausible, and thus the objection to the first two premises of the argument from autonomy.

One philosopher who maintains that autonomy is an essential element of the good life and that it should be taken as the goal of the state is Joseph Raz. Discussions in Raz’s book, *The Morality of Freedom*, suggest an argument for the claim that autonomy is essential to the good life which implies neither that autonomy is the sole element of the good life nor that it is necessary for the realization of other elements of the good life. What I will do in this chapter is give an explication of Raz’s conceptions of personal autonomy and human value, and of the sense in which Raz takes autonomy to be essential to the good life. Then, granting Raz’s claims about autonomy’s role in the good life, I will try to determine what these claims imply about the proper goals of the state.
Raz’s Conception of Individual Autonomy

In order to understand Raz’s conception of autonomy, we need to present some of the claims he makes concerning the nature of value. In Raz’s suggestive discussion of value he asserts that there are two sources of value for human beings. One source of value creates impersonal, choice independent reasons for action. The other includes the particular, choice dependent commitments that individuals make; that is the projects they take up, the relationships they are involved in and the causes they care about. The first source of values supply general values which give each and every individual reasons to act in certain ways, regardless of the choices or commitments they have made. The second source supplies values for particular individuals who have taken on certain commitments, but not for those who have taken on different commitments. The first source we might call independent value, and the second source we might refer to as the self-creation of value.¹

For Raz independent value is in a certain sense prior to self-created value. Self-created value is the product of an individual’s personal commitments. The projects, relationships and causes with which we are involved are commitments, however, only if we ourselves, see success in them as our goal, that is only if we approve and affirm our involvement with them. This is not a point about the way we come by particular commitments, but rather about the way we hold them. Many of an individual’s commitments will be ones she has drifted into, grown up with, never realized that anyone can fail to have, etc. Nonetheless, only if one in some intentional manner affirms a given involvement can it be a commitment.² Now, we affirm something only where we judge it to be good, and we judge something to be good only where we perceive some
reason why it is good. Thus, Raz argues, our commitments are always based on reasons.³ It is due to this dependence of personal commitments on reasons that independent value must be understood as prior to self-created value.

Certainly, the reason why an individual affirms a given commitment might itself be some other commitment of that individual. In fact given Raz’s assertion that most goals and commitments are nested within complex, hierarchical structures, it will often be the case that an individual affirms a given involvement because it serves or is part of other commitments.⁴ However, Raz argues for two points which together secure the primacy of independent values.

The first point is that if an individual affirms a given involvement on the basis of certain reasons, then he is committed to that involvement to the extent, and only to the extent, that it serves those reasons.⁵ For instance, suppose I commit myself to an exclusive relationship with a certain person on the grounds that: I can enlarge my world by sharing daily activities and tribulations with that person, and that exclusivity is a necessary condition of realizing this shared world. If it turns out that that person does not want, or is unable, even given exclusivity, to share a life with me, then my commitment to an exclusive relationship with that person has no real value for me. The second point Raz argues for is that a person is committed to a given involvement only to the extent that his reasons for committing represent something of actual value.⁶ Or alternatively, a commitment gives rise to real value only if the reasons for committing represent real value. Thus, if in fact enlarging one’s world by sharing a life is something that cannot be judged as having independent value, then my commitment to the exclusive relationship creates nothing of real value for me.
The consequence of accepting these two points is the following. Assume an individual affirms a given involvement, A, on the basis of some other of his commitments, B. He nonetheless, is committed to A only to the extent that: (1) involvement A actually serves commitment B, (2) commitment B actually serves the reasons for its affirmation, and (3) the reasons for the affirmation of B represent the actual independent value the individual perceives them as representing. Thus, all of the value that arises from our commitment to particular projects, relationships, and causes, is ultimately dependent upon there being actual, independent value in those projects, relationships and causes. In this sense, then, independent value is, on Raz's conception, prior to self-created value.

This explanation seems to establish more than the priority of independent value. It seems to make independent value the exclusive source of value. If personal commitments give rise to value only to the extent that they serve real, independent value, then in what sense are commitments a source of value at all? It seems that if the independent value of a given project recommends it as best for us, then we ought to take on that project, and if we do not, then the projects we do take on do not create new values, but rather represent mistaken judgments of value.

There is, however, a place in Raz's value theory for the self-creation of value. According to Raz, "the typical function of commitments is to . . . make indeterminate situations determined." Certainly a given project, relationship or cause cannot create value merely in virtue of being pursued. Only if a project, relationship or cause has independent value can pursuit of it have any worth. However, there are many different projects, relationships and causes which have independent value. Furthermore, Raz argues that many times where there are two or more valuable projects we
have no grounds for judging one as having more or less value. This is not merely to say that we lack the information we need to make an accurate assessment of value, nor is it to say that the relative value of different pursuits is often equal. Rather, it is to say that the value of different pursuits can and often are so different that their relative value cannot be compared. The choice between such options is undetermined by reason. Thus, from the impersonal standpoint we can make the general judgment that commitments to careers in teaching, health care or the legal profession each have positive value for any individual completely independent from the choices, desires or prior commitments of that individual. However, we cannot make a judgment concerning the relative value of these three careers. That is we cannot make a general judgment from an impersonal standpoint that one of these careers is more valuable for every individual. This is the typical indeterminate situation that commitments often serve to determine. We cannot judge that a teaching career is more valuable on the basis of independent value reasons. Nonetheless, we might well be able to judge that given my prior commitment to learning for the sake of learning, and to working, and forming nurturing relationships with young people, that a career in teaching is more valuable for me.

This determining of indeterminate situations is more than merely a matter of making an arbitrary choice among several valuable options. It is not a case of falling back on irrational desire where rational deliberation fails us. Rather my past commitments actually create objective reasons for choosing a teaching career over a medical or legal career. The point might be put this way. Practical deliberation often involves reflecting on one’s past commitments and pursuits. In reflecting on my past I am not merely trying to find out what feels right, nor am I making an arbitrary choice of
what reasons and independent values matter for me; rather, I am reflecting on my personal identity in an attempt to discover which values, in fact, count for me. In this way my commitments actually shape the system of value and reasons which guide my practical deliberation. Raz describes the creation of an individual’s value system, or moral world as follows:

The emerging picture is of an interplay between impersonal, i.e. choice independent reasons which guide choice, which then itself changes the balance of reasons and determines the contours of that person’s well-being by creating new reasons which were not there before.9

With this picture of how value is constituted for an individual, we are now in a better position to understand Raz’s conception of autonomy. In his most general characterization of individual autonomy Raz says the following:

Significantly autonomous agents are part creators of their own moral worlds. Persons who are creators of their own moral worlds have commitments to projects, relationships and causes which affect the kind of life that is for them worth living.10

However, given Raz’s theory of value, the self-creation of values is inevitable. That is to say that in every life, and not merely in autonomous lives, an individual’s personal commitments work to reshape and extend the system of values which serve as the objective, normative guides for that individual’s practical life. As Raz states it:

Self-creation and the creation of values . . . are not uniquely connected with the ideal of personal autonomy. They represent a necessary feature of practical reasoning.11

That one’s moral world is in part shaped by one’s personal commitment is a conceptual point about what value for an individual consists in. However, if that is the case, it is not clear why characterization of autonomous agents as “part creators of their own moral worlds” has any significance.
The significance of being part creator of one’s own moral world comes out in the following more specific characterization of autonomy:

Autonomy is opposed to a life of coerced choices, or of drifting through life without ever exercising one’s capacity to choose. Evidently the autonomous life calls for a certain degree of self-awareness.¹²

What separates the life in which personal autonomy is achieved from other human lives is that in the autonomous life an individual has a certain degree of control over the commitments which transform and extend his own system of practical reasons. In an autonomous life an individual’s personal commitments are self-chosen with some degree of awareness concerning the implications of one’s choices. It is thereby opposed to a life in which one drifts into his commitments without deliberate reflection, and to a life in which things such as a marriage partner, an occupation, and a religion are “forced” on an individual by societal pressures.¹³

The Concept of a Good Life

What Raz wants to claim is that exercising some degree of choice and control over the commitments that transform and extend one’s own moral world is “an essential element of the good life.”¹⁴ In order to evaluate this claim we will need to make some sense of the concept of a good life as Raz intends it. Raz has much to say concerning the concept of the good life. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether all that Raz has to say amounts to an unambiguous, coherent analysis. In what follows I will briefly try to sketch a conception of the good life that draws from some of the actual claims Raz makes, is consistent with most of the things he says, and which is capable of making his claim about autonomy’s role in the good life coherent.
It is clear that when Raz claims that autonomy is essential to a good life he is thinking of a good life in terms of personal well-being. He explicitly formulates the question concerning autonomy's role in the good life as a question about what is needed for individual well-being: "is [autonomy] an essential ingredient of the good life so that anyone's well-being suffers if autonomy is incomplete." And when he fleshes out the meaning of his claim he does so in terms of well-being "for those living in an autonomy-supporting culture . . . well-being depends on their ability to find their place in their environment which includes having what is basically an autonomous life." Raz does not take personal well-being to be the only norm in terms of which a life can be evaluated. He explicitly acknowledges that it offers one way of evaluating a life among others.

This concept captures one crucial evaluation of a person's life: how good or successful it is from his point of view? It is best understood by excluding what does not belong to it. It is not an evaluation of his contribution to the well-being of others, or to culture, or to the ecosystem, etc.

Nonetheless, when he makes the claim that autonomy is essential to a good life it is a connection between autonomy and individual well-being that he has in mind.

Well-being is conceived by Raz in terms of success. "When judging a person's well-being one is judging the success or failure of his life." And more specifically:

the success of a person's life depends on the success of his pursuits and relationships. This depends in part on his success in achieving his goals and in part on the value of those goals.

Each of our individual lives are given their character by the projects, relationships and causes, or more generally what we earlier called the commitments, with which we are involved. These commitments are in turn
given their character and shape by the goals which direct one's actions and thoughts concerning those commitments. To have a commitment that can be characterized as successful most of the goals, or at least most of the more important goals, that define that commitment must be achieved. However, this is not enough to characterize a commitment as successful. The achievement of the goals must itself being something that is worthwhile, that is capable of being judged valuable from what we talked of earlier as an independent standpoint. To the extent that a person's life can be judged successful by these two criteria it is a good life for that individual.

In his discussions concerning well-being Raz is trying to forge a middle ground between subjective theories which make well-being a matter of satisfying preferences or realizing goals, and objective theories which make judgments of well-being depend on judgments of value that are logically independent of the individual's preferences or goals. Raz denies that the achievement of a goal is valuable merely because an individual has that goal. The achievement itself must have value based on something other than the mere fact that it is the individual's goal. However, although this independent value that achievement must have in order to contribute to an individual's well-being will not simply be based on the fact that the achievement is a specific goal of the individual, it will nonetheless be determined in part by the individual's particular commitments. In the last section we described how for Raz each individual's value system, where this designates not merely that individual's judgments about value but the array of values that actually exists for him, is shaped in part by his particular commitments. Given that the value things have for an individual is partially dependent on that individual's particular commitments, the
value achieving a given goal will have for that individual, although not a function of how strongly he wants to realize that particular goal, will be function of how important that goal actually is to him given the complex of his particular commitments.

In the end we can explain Raz's conception of well-being as follows. An individual's commitments to particular pursuits and relationships interact, in the manner described in the previous section, with independent determinants of value to form that individual's system of values. This system of value is objective in that it is rooted in determinants of value that are independent of the individual, and also in that an individual can be mistaken about whether or not a goal is important for him. That is to say that how strongly someone wants a good fulfilled is not necessarily an accurate indication of the actual importance that goal has for him. An individual's value system, is however, partly subjective in that it is transformed by the individual's particular commitments, and therefore is, or can be, unique to that individual. A person's well-being is a function of the extent to which he is successful in realizing the values, or at least the more central values, that form his system of values.

"Abstractly Necessary" v. "Contingently Necessary"

Given that Raz is talking about the good life in the sense of the life that has secured well-being, Raz's claim that autonomy is essential to the good life seems implausible. First, it seems implausible to say that all autonomous lives are successful in the sense just elaborated. To characterize a life as autonomous is to characterize the way its goals and commitments have come to be. It says nothing about what goals have come to be or whether or not they have been achieved. As Raz puts the point
the autonomous life is discerned not by what there is in it, but by how it
came to be." Consequently, we can conceive of a group of lives, all
similarly autonomous, but each different with respect to other things such
as physical health, sociality, pleasure, achievement, virtue and vice. These
other aspects in which the class of autonomous lives differ are very much
relevant to the success of those lives, and therefore to whether it is good in
the sense defined. To say that a person's life lacks laughter, is lonely or is
viscous, gives evidence that the projects and relationships to which that
person has committed either have not been successfully carried out, or are
in fact not valuable. That such commitments may have been deliberately
and reflectively chosen by the individual does not change this assessment.
It seems, then, much more accurate to say that some autonomous lives are
good lives while some are not.

This point might be put another way. The person who is able to
develop the capacity to self-reflectively choose her commitments, and
indeed exercises that capacity, has achieved an autonomous life. However,
if in exercising one's capacity to choose an individual chooses poorly, then
although she will have achieved an autonomous life, she will not have
achieved a successful or good life.

It also seems false to claim that a life must be autonomous to be deemed
on the whole good. A good life depends on the value of the goals one has
and the success one has in achieving those goals. The achievement of
autonomy concerns the way one has come to have the goals she has. It is
unclear why a goal would have to be chosen in a self-aware manner to be
valuable. Surely the value of some goals might be dependent on the way
they are chosen, but just as surely not all goals are so dependent. A similar
point can be made about achieving one's goals. It seems false to say that all
possible valuable pursuits are such that achievement of the goals that define them are dependent on the manner in which one has come to take on those goals. The claim that only autonomous lives are good implies that among all the lives that can be characterized by the achievement of valuable goals there are none that can be characterized as non-autonomous. This would demand that we deny, for instance, that any of the many lives that have been lived in traditional religious communities, are good. This claim seems hard to defend, and at any rate is one that Raz himself would probably not accept.

In order to make his claim that autonomy is essential to a good life plausible it seems that Raz must supply a meaning for this claim that neither implies that all autonomous lives are valuable nor that only autonomous lives are valuable. However, if autonomy is neither sufficient nor necessary for a good life, then in what sense is autonomy “an essential element” of the good life? Raz’s answer to this question is that although we can imagine lives in other, more traditional societies that are non-autonomous yet successful in the sense relevant for calling them good lives, such lives are not possible in contemporary, pluralistic societies. His claim is that in these contemporary, pluralistic societies “there is no choice but to be autonomous: there is no other way to prosper in such a society.”

This claim depends on a distinction between what is a necessary element of the good life in the abstract and what is needed to achieve a good life in the concrete, contingent circumstance of a certain type of society. Such a distinction is justified for Raz by the following explanation. The forms of behavior widely practiced in a given society, including the attitudes, beliefs, folklore, shared metaphors, etc, held by people concerning those forms of behavior, Raz refers to as social forms. The social forms in the
society in which an individual lives limit the type of pursuits and relationships that it is possible for that individual to take up, and thus limit the type of lives that are possible. Now, given a certain set of social forms it may indeed be possible to have a non-autonomous life which is successful. However, the type of social forms required for an individual to flourish without achieving autonomy are not present in every society, and particularly not in contemporary, pluralistic societies. Given the type of social forms that characterize contemporary, pluralistic societies, achieving a life of successful pursuits and relationships demands the exercise of some degree of reflective self-aware control over the nature of one’s pursuits and relationships. In other words although in the abstract we can imagine a non-autonomous life that is successful, given the particular conditions of our society success, and therefore well-being, requires some degree of autonomy.

**Why Autonomy is Essential to the Good Life**

The last three sections were intended to clarify the meaning of Raz’s claim that autonomy is a essential element of the good life. He means that autonomy is contingently necessary for securing well-being. That is in an open, pluralistic society if one is to have a life that can be characterized as successful, one needs to achieve a certain level of control over the commitments that shape one’s moral world. In this section I will address the question of why we should think Raz’s claim is true. In developing an answer to this question I will move even further from Raz’s texts than I already have. The argument I offer in support of Raz’s claim is not made by Raz himself. The remarks Raz offers to motivate his claim are enigmatic. Consequently, determining the relationship between this
argument and the one I am about to offer is a difficult matter. In the end I think considerations similar to the following, lay behind Raz’s own conviction.

Earlier we introduced Raz’s notion of an individual’s moral world. This is the system of values that emerge from the interaction of one’s personal commitments with objective determinants of value. Through this interaction, activities and accomplishments that have an objectively indeterminate value take on a determinate value for a given individual. Now the success or failure of an individual life is a matter of the extent to which one realizes the values that constitute one’s moral world. Given this, it is a necessary condition for evaluating an individual’s life as successful or unsuccessful, and thus good or bad, that that individual have particular commitments. If an individual has no real commitments to any projects or relationships, then his moral world remains largely indeterminate, and consequently there are no determinate values for him to realize or fail to realize. In the absence of commitments, the notions of success or failure, and thus Raz’s conception of well-being are, in a real sense, no longer applicable. Such a life has lost an evaluative dimension that it might otherwise have had.

As formulated this point appears overstated. The value activities have for individuals prior to the particular commitments they take up is not completely indeterminate. As we have said certain activities can be judged as having value for an individual from an impersonal standpoint. What is undetermined until an individual becomes committed is the relative value of different, independently valuable activities. Thus, it seems that a life can be judged as more or less valuable for the individual even in the absence of personal commitments. A life that involves activities that have independent
value is more valuable and one that lacks such activities is less valuable. This would be true if it were possible for an individual to become involved in a valuable activity or relationship without committing to it. But this is not possible. Although we can say that the activity of being a doctor has some indeterminate amount of value for any individual who undertakes it, unless one takes on the goals of a doctor, struggles to realize those goals and establishes some personal stake in them, that is unless one commits to being a doctor, one has not in fact undertaken the activity of being a doctor. Or at least he has not undertaken the activity of being a doctor in the form in which it is valuable. Now, there is a sense in which the life of an individual who lacks commitments is a failure. That individual fails to realize value that he might otherwise have. However, there is another sense in which the values his life might have realized, never really have come into existence for him, a sense in which he has not lost anything that is valuable for him. My point, then, remains. The person without substantial commitments lives in a mostly indeterminate moral world, and thus in a real sense his life loses an evaluative dimension it might have had.

My claim is that in contemporary, pluralistic society an individual cannot form real commitments, and thus give his moral world adequate determinateness, without self-reflectively choosing and building such commitments. Consequently, in these societies the achievement and exercise of autonomy is a necessary condition for having the type of life that can be evaluated in terms of success and well-being. Part of this claim is that while in contemporary, pluralistic societies autonomy is needed to form real commitments, and therefore to secure a determinate moral world, in more traditional, authority based societies it is not. The question is why is autonomy needed in the one type of society and not in the other?
Answering these questions will go a long way towards justifying my claim about the necessity of autonomy in contemporary society.

A traditional, authority based society can be characterized by three features. One, individuals in the society exercise little choice over what activities and relationships make-up their lives. In such societies whether and who one marries, what occupation one takes up, where one lives and other such things are often determined by one’s parents or some other authority within the society. Second, matters such as the character of one’s marriage relationship, or the nature of work, are largely determined by sets of relatively specific customs, attitudes and expectations commonly shared in the society. Third, because each of one’s major activities and relationships carries with it a specific set of customs, attitudes and expectations they tend to stand in well-determined relationships to one another. As a result each activity or relationship has a well-determined significance in a life as a whole. A consequence of these features of a traditional society is that merely by obeying authority, following custom and adopting the shared attitudes and expectations of the society one becomes involved in activities and relationships that can be characterized by relatively richly structured sets of goals, and which have a fairly specific significance in one’s life as a whole. But to have activities and relationships of this sort is to have real commitments, and hence, a determinate moral world.

In contemporary, pluralistic societies whether and who one marries, what one does for a living, and where one lives are not determined by any authority, but are left to the choice or inclination of the individual. Further, the set of shared customs, attitudes and expectations concerning matters such as marriage, friendship, religion or work are much less
extensive than in traditional society. Consequently, the nature of one's marriage, to take a specific example, is left for the individual to work out with his or her partner, and may or may not involve specific gender roles, child-rearing activities, expectations of fidelity, sexual intimacy, or the ideal of permanent attachment. Finally, since what activities and relationships an individual becomes involved in, and also the nature of those activities themselves, are largely undetermined by societal convention, the way in which one's activities are related to one another is largely undetermined.

The consequence of living in a society of this kind are these. There is largely no authority to obey, and no shared set of customs to follow or attitudes to adopt. Certainly one might obey one's parents wishes in selecting a spouse, career or place to live. But without a live culture in which certain customs are commonly practiced and attitudes commonly communicated one cannot maintain the rich and subtle habits that characterized one's parents' marriage and approach to work. At least not without undertaking a reflective, deliberate effort to do so. The absence of shared customs and attitudes does not imply that an individual must reflectively consider what character he wants his marriage to have, or what significance work should have in his life, and deliberately choose among the many possibilities open to him. However, if he fails to do so his activities and associations with other people will not constitute significant projects and relationships that can be characterized by richly structured goals. For instance, it seems that there are many married couples in contemporary, pluralistic societies, that never reflectively consider what they ought to expect from and give to each other, or what attitudes they should have towards each other and their marriage. Instead, many couples
seem to unreflectively drift into certain habits and attitudes that allow them to avoid constant arguments, and frustrations. In this sense their association is a kind of modus vivendi that is in no real sense a result of deliberate, reflective choice. Nor, however, does such a marriage constitute a relationship with a hierarchy of goals that one is struggling to achieve and in terms of which one can evaluate particular actions and thoughts. In other words, such a marriage does not serve as a commitment which gives one’s actions significance or one’s moral world a determinate shape.

My argument for the claim that autonomy is needed to have a life that can be characterized in terms of well-being and success is this. Achieving well-being or success, as we have described these, is a matter of realizing the values of one’s particular moral world. Consequently, it is a condition for having a life that can be characterized as successful that one have a determinate moral world. In societies characterized by highly specified common forms of behavior, that is in traditional societies, a determinate moral world is, so to speak, provided by the society. That is to say that by merely following custom and becoming habituated to the common societal forms of behaving and thinking, one becomes committed to a structured set of goals, and consequently, comes to live in a determinate moral world. In contemporary, pluralistic societies, however, a determinate moral world is not provided by the society; the fabric of shared customs, attitudes and expectations is too loosely woven to provide a determinate moral life. It is nevertheless possible for an individual is such a society to create for herself a determinate set of values. By reflecting on what kind of marriage, career, friendships, etc., that one wants to have, and undertaking deliberate efforts to realize the habits of action and thought needed to create and
maintain these, one takes on commitments that give a determinate shape to one’s moral world. In the absence of this reflective self-shaping of one’s moral world, life in an autonomous society loses that dimension of significance on the basis of which it can be evaluated as a success or failure.24

**Individual Autonomy as a Political Goal**

The following position has emerged from my considerations of Raz’s discussion of autonomy and its role in the good life. Personal autonomy is a matter of reflecting on the character and significance of one’s activities and associations, choosing what character and significance you want these to have, and maintaining an effort to realize what you have chosen. In this way one exercises a high degree of control over what matters or has value in one’s own life. The autonomous person in this sense is part creator of his own moral world. In societies that lack certain features, being able to create personal commitments through reflection and choice, and to maintain those commitments through sustained effort, is the only way one can acquire a determinate set of values in terms of which one’s life can be judged a success or failure. In such societies a life loses that dimension which allows one to evaluate it as good or bad for the individual, unless that dimension is created and maintained through the exercise of autonomy. In that exercising autonomy is necessary to have a life that can be evaluated as good or bad for the individual, it will necessarily be an element in any life that we characterize as good. In this sense, autonomy is an essential element in any good life. The question that remains is whether its being essential to the good life in this sense justifies taking autonomy to be the goal of the state.
To answer this question it will be helpful to clarify what is and is not implied by our interpretation of Raz's claim. First, it does not imply that autonomy is the sole element of the good life, or that the exercise of autonomy is sufficient condition for a good life. Reflectively considering the nature of one's own activities, choosing the type of activities one wants and maintaining the effort to realize such activities is how one creates personal commitments in contemporary society. Exercising autonomy, however, does not guarantee that the commitments one chooses will be valuable, or that one will be able to successfully realize the goals that characterize those commitments. I might decide that being a distinguished philosophy professor at a top university is important for me. If being a professor at a top university is not in fact a valuable project, is a project that involves goals that I can not achieve, or conflicts excessively with other commitments I have taken up, then, although I may be exercising autonomy in pursuing tenure at Harvard, I will not have lived a life that is good for me. The truth of my earlier claim that individuals who exercise reflective choice concerning the nature of their practical lives can choose poorly, and thus lead unsuccessful lives, has not been effected by the arguments I have presented in this chapter.

The explanation of autonomy's role in the good life that has been developed, does, however, seem to imply that autonomy is necessary for the realization of other elements of the good life. However, in so far as this is entailed by the claims made in this chapter, this claim takes on a very different significance than it usually has. Usually the claim that autonomy is necessary for the realization of other elements of the good life is intended in a way that assumes that activities or states of affairs which can be characterized independently from the life and commitments of the agent
can be given a determinate value. Activities or states characterizable in this way and possessing positive determinate value are taken to be elements for a good life. The claim is, then, that although these activities or states have a positive determinate value it is only potential value. If the agent does not autonomously enter into these activities, but is rather forced into them, or just goes through the motions without appreciating their value, then the potential value of the activity is not actualized. Understood in this way the claim does seem implausible, and this implausibility is the basis of the objection with which we started this chapter. However, given the considerations raised in this chapter the claim that autonomy is necessary for the realization of other elements of the good life takes on a new meaning. If Raz is right, then activities described independently of the life and commitments of the agents do not have a determinate value such that they can be said to be elements of the good life for any particular individual. The only genuinely general elements of the good life are: (1) success in achieving the goals which characterize ones commitments, and (2) having valuable commitments. Obviously, if one’s life lacks real commitments, then these elements of the good life cannot be realized. The argument presented in this chapter is that in contemporary, pluralistic society one can only create and maintain real commitments through the exercise of autonomy. Consequently, the exercise of autonomy is a necessary condition for realizing the other elements of the good life.

At the beginning of this chapter I said that Raz’s discussions suggest an argument for the essential role of autonomy in the good life which depends neither on the claim that autonomy is the sole element of the good life nor on the claim that it is necessary for the realization of other elements of the good life. We can see that the argument drawn from Raz does not, in fact,
imply the former claim and in so far as it implies the latter claim it recasts its usual meaning. Which brings us back to the initial question of this section. Granting that autonomy is necessary for a good life in the sense we have carved out, does this justify taking individual autonomy to be the goal of the state?

If we take the purpose of the state to be that of bringing about conditions that make it easier for members of the state to secure a good life, then our case seems strong. If the states function is to make the good life easier, then it must at least make it possible. Consequently, if autonomy is necessary for having a life that can be characterized as good, then the state is committed to providing for autonomy. Further, if no other elements of the good life can be realized in the absence of autonomy, then providing for the conditions of autonomy must take priority over any other goal of the state. In the end I think this argument for making individual autonomy the highest priority of the state works. However, there is a serious problem which needs to be noted.

The claim that the purpose of the state is to make it easier to secure the good life has a certain intuitive appeal. The claim can be and has been challenged, but given its normal meaning it seems eminently defensible. However, in the considerations raised in this chapter the term, “the good life”, has taken on a specific meaning which hardly captures most of what that term normally includes. “The good life” for which autonomy is necessary amounts to achieving success in commitments that can be judged from an independent standpoint to be valuable. Given this very specific sense of “the good life”, the claim that the purpose of the state is to make securing the good life easier loses much of its initial, intuitive appeal. Not that this claim, in its newly specified sense, is not defensible. The point is
that the new claim is far from obvious; it would take a lot of argument to justify it. I cannot offer the needed arguments here. I can merely offer the bald claim that I find it to be a plausible claim, and note that more work needs to be done.
Chapter 5:
Does the Value of Individual Autonomy Recommend Political Neutrality?

In the first chapter I defined the neutrality thesis, and characterized its relationship to liberal political philosophy generally, as well as to some particular traditional liberal doctrines. Since then I have been trying to elaborate a plausible version of one particular defense of the neutrality thesis, namely the argument from the value of individual autonomy. I have responded to the general objection that non-neutral justifications of neutrality are self-defeating. The way I conceive it, the argument from the value of autonomy is indeed non-neutral, but I contend that there is no logical contradiction or paradox in trying to develop a non-neutral justification of neutrality. In the last chapter I explicated a conception of human value and of personal autonomy, drawn from the work of Joseph Raz, which I believe makes plausible the first two premises of the argument; namely, (1) that autonomy is an essential element of the good life, and that consequently (2) the government is committed to securing the conditions of autonomy for its citizens. The last premise needed to make the argument from the value of autonomy work is that government neutrality is either necessary, or in some way the best means, for securing the conditions of autonomy.

Clearly a neutral form of politics will be better for promoting autonomous lives than many non-neutral forms of politics. The question is will a neutral politics be better than all forms of non-neutral politics. Particularly, will a neutral form of politics be better than a politics which bases arguments and decisions on a conception of the good, which
recognizes the role autonomy plays in a good life. Such a non-neutral politics would seem to have two advantages. First, it would make it easier to justify the policies needed to secure the societal conditions most conducive to the development and exercise of autonomy by allowing policy arguments to appeal directly to the value of autonomy. Second, it would allow the government, where it would not be incompatible with securing the conditions of autonomy, to adopt measures discouraging those activities which, even if autonomously chosen, cannot contribute positively to a good life. This presumably would help individuals exercise their autonomy more wisely and thus increase their chances of having successful lives. Given these two advantages, especially the first, there is a strong prima facia case that neutrality is in fact not the best means of promoting autonomy.

What needs to be shown is that non-neutral politics pose a threat to the development and exercise of autonomy merely in virtue of being non-neutral, and regardless of the conception of the good on which they are based. Further, it needs to be shown that the threat that non-neutral politics pose to autonomy is serious enough to outweigh the above mentioned advantages of a non-neutral politics which places proper import on the exercise of autonomy. These two tasks are difficult to fulfill, and in the end I am not sure that they can be fulfilled. Nevertheless, I will raise some considerations on which a case might be made. First, I will say a few words about the type of society which is most conducive to the development and exercise of autonomy. Then, focusing on a particular feature of an autonomy-conducive society, I will argue that a neutral form of politics contributes to that feature while a non-neutral politics undermines it. In the third section I will consider the form of politics
which Raz believes is recommended by the value of autonomy. I will ask: one, whether that form of politics threatens autonomy in the way I suggest non-neutral politics do, and two, whether it is a genuinely non-neutral form of politics. In the fourth section I will consider whether or not the contribution neutrality makes to creating an autonomy-conducive society outweighs the advantages of allowing direct appeal to the value of autonomy. Finally, I will offer my own assessment of the arguments made in this chapter, and of whether or not the value of autonomy recommends neutrality.

The Conditions of Autonomy

The first thing to note is that autonomy, as it was conceived in the last chapter, is a positive achievement. Being autonomous is not merely a matter of being free from the coercive or manipulative influence of others. Rather being autonomous is a matter of having a life that can be characterized in a certain way; namely a life in which you have a degree a control over the character of your activities and associations, and the goal that define those. More specifically the autonomous person is one who reflects on the character of his own activities and relationships, chooses what he wants those activities and relationships to be like, and maintains his effort to realize the type of activities he has chosen. Consequently, in addition to requiring freedom from coercion, autonomy requires the development of certain capacities, particularly those involved in reflection, deliberation and sustaining purposeful effort. In that the exercise of autonomy requires the development of certain capacities, and not merely negative freedom, it is a positive achievement.
Raz does not miss this point. Consequently, he includes what he refers to as appropriate “mental abilities” or “inner capacities”, as well as “independence” or “freedom from coercion” among the conditions of autonomy. Raz also identifies a third condition necessary for autonomy which he refers to as “an adequate range of options.” His idea seems to be that even if a person has developed the appropriate inner capacities, and is free from the coercion of others, if there are not real and valuable alternative courses of life which are possible for that person, she will not come to exercise autonomy. For Raz then:

The conditions of autonomy are complex and consist of three distinct components: appropriate mental abilities, an adequate range of options, and independence.¹

Taking Raz’s account of the conditions of autonomy we can note that two of the conditions, freedom from coercion and an adequate range of options, are closely related to those societal conditions which make autonomy necessary for the good life. If we recall autonomy is necessary in certain societies because these societies fail to provide for individuals a determinate moral world, which is necessary for having the type of life that can be characterized as good or bad for the individual. But it is due precisely to pluralism, i.e. the presence of a variety of life forms, and a culturally entrenched unwillingness to maintain a general acceptance of common behaviors and attitudes, that these societies are unable to provide a determinate moral world. Thus, the societal conditions which make autonomy necessary, also seem to provide two of the three conditions for autonomy: a range of life forms among which to exercise one’s choice, and freedom from coercion. The government of such a society will, then, primarily concern itself with the remaining condition of autonomy, i.e.
ensuring that individuals develop the inner capacities which will enable them to achieve autonomy.

What inner capacities does the achievement of autonomy require? Raz offers this list:

Some of these include cognitive capacities, such as the power to absorb, remember and use information, reasoning abilities, and the like. Others concern one’s emotional and imaginative make-up. Still others concern health, and physical abilities and skills. Finally, there are character traits essential or helpful for a life of autonomy. They include stability, loyalty and the ability to form personal attachments and to maintain intimate relationships.²

It is not entirely clear why Raz includes what he does as requirements for autonomy. Parts of the list are obvious. For instance, the power to absorb and remember information and imagination are rudimentary requirements for the type of reflection autonomy involves. Other items, such as certain physical abilities, are more puzzling. However, having identified the maintenance of efforts to realize the type of activities and relationships one has chosen as part of autonomy, the inclusion of stability, loyalty, etc. on Raz’s list should not be completely surprising. More generally Raz’s suggestion that autonomy requires more than just rudimentary cognitive capacities seems right. Character traits such as the ability to delay gratification or an over dependence on the approval of others are serious impediments to the achievement of autonomy. Other character traits such as “stability, loyalty and the ability to form personal attachments and to maintain intimate relationships” might also be required. In any event, it seems that a range of cognitive abilities and character traits similar to those listed by Raz are indeed required, or at least helpful, for the achievement of autonomy.
Some individuals will develop these inner capacities in any society, or at least in any autonomy-supporting society (defined in terms of the other two conditions of autonomy). Nevertheless, in some societies more individuals will be likely to develop the inner capacities required for autonomy than in others. Societies which are most conducive to the development of these capacities will, I suggest, include each of the following features.

*Economic prosperity and greater equality*. The single greatest environmental impediment to the development of most valuable human capacities is poverty. These impediments are compounded in societies where the poverty of some is juxtaposed to the opulence of others. There is no reason to think that poverty does not impede the development of the capacities required for autonomy as well. The poor health conditions, material want, overcrowding, and psychological stresses that are part and parcel of poverty threaten the development of an individuals cognitive capacities, fosters emotional insecurities, stunts the imagination, and tends to undermine personal (especially family) relationships. When poverty persists in a society of general prosperity the above effects are compounded by a sense of inferiority and resentment, distorting one’s judgments of value and making it difficult for an individual to recognize his own worth. All this surely undermines one’s ability to achieve autonomy.

*Pervasive educational/intellectual activities*. Raz says that autonomy “contrasts with a life of no choices, or of drifting through life without ever exercising one’s capacity to choose.” Thus “the autonomous life calls for a certain degree of self-awareness.”³ Shaping one’s own moral world involves choosing one’s commitments and activities in light of some amount of reflection on the significance of such commitments and activities for one’s life as a whole. A society conducive to individual self-reflection
requires institutions and associations through which intellectual activity can be stimulated, maintained and deepened. Such institutions include not only schools which develop reflective skills, but museums, political parties, newspapers, publishing houses, etc. These institutions and the activities they sustain should not only exist, but be regarded with some esteem in the society.

_A culture of toleration and respect_. This feature of an autonomy-conducive society is nicely captured by Charles Taylor:

How could successive generations discover what it is to be an autonomous agent, to have one's own way of feeling, of acting, of expression, which cannot be simply derived from authoritative models? This is an identity, a way of understanding themselves, which men are not born with. They have to acquire it . . . But how can they acquire it unless it is implicit in at least some of their common practices, in the ways that they recognize and treat each other in their common life (for instance, in the acknowledgment of certain rights), or in the manner in which they deliberate with or address each other, or engage in economic exchange. Or in some mode of public recognition of individuality. . . .

Taylor's point is that a person needs a sense first of all that she is a being capable of reflecting on the significance of her own activities, and making choices based on that reflection; and second, that one's own individual life matters, that the choices one makes do have significance, that the exercise of one's own capacity for self-reflection and self-determination are important. This sense of one's self as a self-determining agent whose choices matter is developed and maintained through certain social interactions and cultural practices. Minimally, social and cultural practices characterized by respect and equal treatment. Thus, a society in which a shopkeeper is expected to treat all his customer's the same regardless of status, or in which political organizations allow every individual to vote as
a right rather than a privilege, is more conducive to autonomy than a society that lacks such customs.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. Other features might be added. My claim is merely that any society with a claim to being most conducive to autonomy will include at least these features.

The Connection Between Neutrality and Autonomy

The argument for neutrality draws on the third feature of an autonomy conducive society listed above, i.e. a culture of toleration and respect. I accepted Taylor’s suggestion that the identity of an autonomous agent needs to be transmitted through certain common practices or some mode of public recognition. These common practices or modes of recognition are needed for two reasons: so that more individuals can come to see themselves as creators of their own moral worlds and so that more individuals can develop a sense of self-worth, i.e. a sense that one’s own choices matter. The connection between neutrality and autonomy is this. The common acceptance of a neutrality constraint on political argument and government action, itself represents a common practice, or mode of public recognition, through which the identity of individuals as autonomous agents can be transmitted. A government, or more broadly a political culture, in which appeals to particular conceptions of the good life are conspicuously absent from policy deliberations, or in which such appeals are commonly rebutted as illegitimate, communicates a message that decisions about what type of life is good is not a government matter but rather an individual matter. When a law maker refrains from considering his own conception of the good life in casting his vote in the assembly hall,
or when a newspaper editorial rejects an argument because it depends on
non-neutral claims, there is public recognition that certain practical reasons
one person might have, might not be reasons for another, and ipso facto,
recognition that individuals are capable of shaping their own moral worlds.
In short a neutral form of politics constitutes a common practice which
recognizes that the moral world of each individual can and should be
shaped by that individual, and not the government.

We see, then, that government neutrality can form an integral part of a
culture of respect, contributing both to its emergence and maintenance. It
might also be argued that non-neutral governments can undermine a
culture of respect. Consider the types of policies that distinguish a non-
neutral from a neutral state: prohibiting by threat of punishment, or
discouraging through taxation, activities deemed detrimental to the
achievement of the good life; offering tax subsidies or other incentives so
as to encourage ways of life deemed good; undertaking an advertising
campaign to "get" people to make certain choices in their personal lives;
creating certain institutions and social forms with the idea of making one
way of life easier to choose than another. What each of these types of
policy have in common is that they represent attempts to manipulate the
reasons and motivations individuals have for acting so as to cause them to
make certain choices and come to hold certain views about the good life.
For those who do not share the judgments of value upon which such non-
neutral policies are based this government manipulation of their reasons
for acting, not only directly reduces the amount of control they have over
their own moral world, but also communicates a message that they are not
as capable of making their own value judgments, thereby undermining
their sense of self-worth. More generally, a political culture in which the
government is viewed as a vehicle of manipulation undermines the notion that individuals can and should be the creators of their own moral worlds.

A neutral form of politics, then, contributes directly to a culture of respect while a non-neutral government directly undermines it. It is, I think, easy to underestimate the effect a neutral or non-neutral government can have on how individuals in society see themselves. However, we must also be careful not to overestimate the effects. It is too strong to say that government neutrality is necessary either to create or to maintain a culture of respect and the identity of individuals as autonomous agents. Whether or not there exists an adequate culture of respect is a matter of how many individuals are likely to develop the identity and sense of self-worth which autonomy requires. My argument has only been that a neutral form of government can directly contribute to the development of these, while a non-neutral politics can undermine their development. However, an environment of respect and toleration might be sufficiently secured by other practices and modes of recognition such that no more individuals would come to develop the required sense of self if neutrality was adopted, and no fewer would because of the adoption of non-neutral politics.

Nevertheless, in allowing non-neutral justifications of government policies the state is giving up one way it has of contributing to a culture of respect, and at the same time sanctions societal attitudes which can undermine the development of the type of identity and sense of self-worth individuals need to achieve autonomy. Given this connection between neutrality and the conditions of autonomy we can say that, other things being equal, a neutral form of politics is more likely to secure an autonomy-conducive society than a non-neutral form of politics. It remains to be seen if other things are in fact equal.7
Raz on Autonomy and Politics

But is it true, even given ceteris paribus conditions, that a neutral form of politics is most likely to secure an autonomy-conducive society? One might object that although neutrality certainly does contribute to a culture of respect it is not the only form of politics that does so, and although some non-neutral forms of politics pose a potential threat to a culture of respect surely not all do. Raz, for instance, claims that a politics based on a reinterpreted version of the harm principle would be most likely to secure autonomy. More specifically, Raz suggests that the form of politics recommended by his conception of the good life is one which demands that decision makers refrain from coercing individuals except where coercion is needed to secure greater autonomy. It might be argued that by consistently choosing to limit the use of coercion in this way, a government would be showing adequate respect for the value of individual choice. Further, by explicitly appealing to the value of autonomy it would foster the identity of individuals as autonomous agents in a way a neutral politics would not. It seems, then, that this form of politics retains the advantages of a non-neutral politics: (1) allowing policies which promote autonomy to be justified by direct appeal to the value of autonomy; and (2) allowing the government to adopt non-coercive measures aimed at encouraging individuals to exercise autonomy wisely. While, at the same time, it contributes to, rather than undermines a culture of toleration and respect.

The first question to raise is whether the second advantage listed above, allowing government to encourage valuable choices, can in fact be achieved without undermining the culture of respect. The argument is that by limiting the measures used to encourage good choices, and to discourage
bad ones, to those that are non-coercive communicates respect for individual choice, and therefore is adequate for maintaining a culture of respect. Jeremy Waldron, for one, questions whether the distinction between coercive and non-coercive measures can do the work Raz needs it to. Although we might be able to give a rough and ready classification of coercive and non-coercive government actions, Waldron raises reasons for doubting that the effects of the latter are significantly different than the former. It seems that Waldron is right. What all policies aimed at "getting" people to make certain choices have in common is that they represent attempts to manipulate the reasons and motivations individuals have for acting. This is true as much for non-coercive policies as coercive ones. And, it is a political culture in which the government is viewed as a vehicle of manipulation which tends to undermine the culture of respect needed for autonomy. Thus, limiting attempts to control individual choices to non-coercive means does not avoid posing a threat to autonomy.

Given these considerations one is tempted to suggest a form of politics which prohibits not only coercive government action, but rather all government action, except where it is needed to secure the conditions of an autonomy conducive society. Surely limiting all attempts to control individual activity to those needed to secure the conditions of autonomy, adequately respects the identity of individuals as autonomous agents. Yet at the same time such a politic retains the advantage of appealing directly to the value of autonomy to justify the policies needed to secure its conditions.

Before assessing the effect of this type of politics on the culture of respect we might raise the question of whether this is indeed a non-neutral form of politics. Unlike the politic recommended by Raz, this form of politics does not allow the claim that a policy will influence individuals to
lead better lives as a justification for that policy. In that this type of justification is not allowed, Raz’s conception of the good life, or anyone else’s for that matter, is being kept from entering directly into policy deliberations. In a sense the goal of securing the conditions of autonomy has been separated out from Raz’s conception of the good life and established as an independent norm for guiding political decision making. Nevertheless, this norm for guiding political decision making depends on a particular conception of the good life in a way that Rawls’ principles of justice do not. We might take the demand to realize the conditions of autonomy as a principle of justice; however, it is a principle of justice which is not defined or derived independently from any conception of the good life as are, for instance, Rawls’ two principles. The neutral aspects of this type of politics cannot be denied, and it is significant that it is in virtue of its neutral aspects that this form of politic can claim to contribute to a culture of respect. In the end, however, this form of politics is different than the form of neutrality we defined in the first chapter and which I am concerned with defending in this thesis.

Does, then, limiting attempts to control individual activity to instances where it is needed to secure the conditions of autonomy adequately respect individuals as autonomous agents? It almost seems silly to deny that it would. What is less silly is to assert that a politic based on a neutral conception of justice, such as Rawls’, can do more to foster a culture of toleration and respect than the form of politics we are currently considering. I would like to suggest a reason for believing that this true.

In contemporary, pluralistic societies there exist a large diversity of projects and commitments. Given this the practical/moral experiences of people will vary from individual to individual. The argument of this paper
has been that political institutions in such a society should be arranged, not to eliminate such diversity, but rather to make that diversity into a virtue. (This, I claimed, can be done if the political institutions adequately secure conditions for the development and exercise of autonomy). In any event, given the diversity in this type of society, it is unlikely that any theory of the good, including one along the lines suggested by Raz, will be able to gain a consensus. Thus, there will be many individuals who may or may not have lives that can be interpreted as autonomous, but who in either case will not themselves recognize the value of autonomy or the necessary role it plays in the good life.

The question is this: given a lack of consensus about the value of autonomy, what message is carried by the practice of appealing to the value of autonomy to justify policy? The unavoidable implication of anyone who makes such an argument is that, “I know better about the of the good life.” Such a claim may be true; indeed the argument of this thesis supposes that it is true. Nonetheless, the common practice of making such arguments is not one that communicates the image that each individual is capable of exercising his or her own judgment in practical affairs. Thus, a politics based on appeals to the value of autonomy, at best, serves as an ambiguous means of fostering the identity of individuals as autonomous agents.

Neutrality, by comparison, communicates the following message. “We as a people, cannot agree on the nature of the good life. Consequently we ought to search out principles for guiding political action that we can all live with, despite our differences of opinion concerning the nature of the good life.” Such a message implies that each individual’s own judgments are competent, fostering the attitude that each individual can rely on his or her own reflections and decisions concerning practical matters. Neutrality,
then, seems to be a much less ambiguous means of fostering the identity of individuals as autonomous agents. Thus we can still maintain that neutrality is the best means of fostering what I have labeled a culture of toleration and respect. It does seem, then, that other things being equal a neutral form of politics is most likely to secure an autonomy-conducive society.\(^{10}\)

**The Taylor Objection**

In an article on social atomism Charles Taylor articulates the thesis, already drawn upon in this chapter, that the autonomous, self-determining individual requires a certain kind of social matrix.\(^ {11}\) Above I listed what I take to be the most salient features of an autonomy conducive social matrix. One of the features on this list, namely a culture of toleration and respect, provided a reason for preferring a neutral over a non-neutral form of politics. The argument is that a neutral politics contributes while a non-neutral politics detracts from a culture of respect. However, it might be that the other features of an autonomy conducive society provide reasons for rejecting neutrality. The reason for rejecting neutrality would be that the other features of an autonomy conducive society (prosperity, equality, high levels of intellectual activity, a certain kind of education), and perhaps even the culture of respect itself, require the support of government policies which can only be justified by an appeal to the value of autonomy itself. This objection to neutrality is suggested, if not actually made by Taylor, and seems also to contribute partly to Raz's own rejection of neutrality.\(^ {12}\)

In evaluating this objection the first question to ask is whether or not it is likely that the government policies needed to support an autonomy
conducive society could be justified by a neutral form of political argument. Although I do not intend to offer a definite answer to this question I would like to suggest reasons for believing that a neutral political framework would allow justification of the needed policies.

As I have said, the form of neutral politics I am most interested in is that which takes principles of justice instead of a conception of the good as the ultimate normative guides for decision making. The form of politics suggested in Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* can be taken as a paradigm for this form of neutrality. Rawls suggests a politics guided by principles drawn not from a controversial conception of the good, but rather from a hypothetical choice situation in which all citizens are situated fairly. Thus, he takes a conception of fairness rather than a conception of the good as the basis for policy decisions. The principles Rawls draws from his hypothetical choice situation, and more specifically the "difference principle", demands the elimination of all social and economic inequalities except those which play a necessary part in a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged. Indeed many neutral conceptions of justice similarly emphasis equality. Thus, it seems that a neutral framework can and most likely would provide justification for the pursuit of economic prosperity and equality.

Justifying support for the arts, intellectual activities, and the kind of education required for autonomy in a neutral framework is a bit more problematic. It seems that it would be difficult to defend policies promoting these things without appealing to their place in a good life? Nevertheless, it can be argued that the government policies needed to support the intellectual activity and education required for autonomy would be justifiable in the Rawlsian framework. The needed policies might be
justified under the difference principle by reference to the primary goods. On Rawls' conception of justice as fairness what is to be distributed according to his principles are primary goods. These are "goods that normally have use whatever a person's rational plan of life;"15 "things ... a rational man wants whatever else he wants."16 Being desirable regardless of one's particular conception of the good, these goods can be considered neutral. Rawls routinely lists the primary goods in the broad categories of rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth.17 However, he also explicitly includes intelligence, imagination and self-respect as primary goods,18 and indicates that he considers the power "to enjoy the culture of (one's) society and to take part in its affairs"19 to be a specific good falling under the heading of "powers and opportunities."

Many of the educational and cultural policies required to maintain an autonomy-conducive society might be justified by the demand to improve the condition of the least well off with respect to intelligence, imagination, ability to enjoy and participate in one's culture, and a sense of self-worth. If indeed each of these are primary goods, and thus desirable no matter what one's particular conception of a good life, as Rawls' perhaps mistakenly conceives them, then indeed this would constitute a neutral justification. Other neutral justifications for government support of the arts, intellectual activity or certain kinds of education might be drawn from the demand for equal liberty or the need for social stability.

However, this may not be enough. It may well be that most of the policies needed to secure an autonomy conducive society would be justifiable in a neutral state. However, it is possible that a few, or even just one, needed policy will not be neutrally justifiable. Further, given that political neutrality may not be needed to maintain a culture of respect, it
might be that the failure to enact a needed policy is more damaging, in terms of the number of individuals likely to achieve autonomy, than a non-neutral political framework. How much a certain policy will effect the ability of individuals to achieve autonomy, how much a neutral or a non-neutral politics will effect the same, and whether or not a certain policy can be neutrally justified are all questions which depend largely on contingent matters. Given this it seems that it would be better if political decision makers were allowed to fully and directly consider the effects particular policies would have on autonomy in the particular context.

This problem was anticipated in chapter 3. There we raised the point that if one commits to neutrality as a means of securing a particular good, then he is only committed to neutrality in cases where this serves to promote that good. If in a particular case of legislative deliberation the decision that would most promote autonomy cannot be neutrally justified, than the value of autonomy would seem to demand that we suspend the neutrality constraint on political deliberation. However, neutrality which is suspended whenever considerations of a certain good demands it is not neutrality at all. In chapter 3, I said that there can be reasons why a prescription intended as a means to a certain good might best be taken as a general moral rule, and even a rule to be strictly followed in all cases. The considerations raised in this chapter, do I think, supply us with a reason for taking neutrality as a general rule despite the possibility of particular instances where it will hinder the cause of autonomy.20

The argument just made is that the political decision maker who is allowed to pursue the conditions of autonomy unconstrained by considerations of neutrality will be in the best possible position to choose the policies that are needed, given the contingencies of particular policy
contexts, to secure the conditions of autonomy. This, however, is not necessarily so. If the contingencies of a particular policy context suggest that an adequate culture of respect is the autonomy-related good in greatest need of support, a non-neutral government is not in the best position to respond. It has closed off perhaps the best means it has of contributing to the creation or maintenance of a culture of respect, namely taking a neutral stance towards conceptions of the good life. It is not as if it can adopt a neutral stance temporarily, with a proviso that it be dropped should educational reforms be needed later. For as we said a neutrality that can be dropped in light of the demands of a certain good is not neutrality at all. A neutral government, on the other hand, will be doing all it can to foster a culture of respect, and can also be expected to allow for the policies needed to promote the other conditions of autonomy. Some needed policies might be defeated given a neutrality constraint on political deliberations. However, given that we do have reason to expect most of the needed policy to be neutrally justifiable, it seems a neutral politics provides the best framework for responding to the contingencies surrounding the creation and maintenance of an autonomy conducive society.

My Own Assessment

The considerations raised in this chapter support this conclusion: a neutral form of politics provides the framework for policy and legislative deliberations which is most likely to foster the societal conditions individuals need to develop and exercise autonomy. And, if it is in fact not the optimal means for securing the conditions of autonomy, the form of politics that is optimal will be one which incorporates neutral aspects. This is perhaps not as strong a conclusion as we could have hoped to establish.
One might have hoped to have shown that political neutrality is necessary for securing the conditions of autonomy. But this claim cannot be sustained. Consequently, we must admit that some forms of non-neutral politics might adequately serve to secure the conditions of autonomy, especially where a culture of toleration and respect is solidly grounded in non-political customs and practices. Nevertheless, we can at least claim that a neutral form of politics does serve the cause of autonomy quite well, and that considerations of the conditions of autonomy do give us reason for taking a neutral stance.

The conclusion of this chapter is weaker than one might have hoped in another way. This is due to the quasi-empirical nature of the claims on which my argument rests. These claims, particularly those concerning the societal conditions in which autonomy is most likely to develop, the effects neutral and non-neutral policies have on the self-perceptions of individuals in the society, and finally, the likelihood of certain educational/cultural policies being agreed to in a neutrally constrained deliberative context, all demand empirical evidence, which of course, I have not even begun to offer. This reliance on quasi-empirical, and even genuinely empirical, claims is regrettable in that it renders the conclusion of my arguments highly conjectural. On the other hand, given the way I have framed the issue, this reliance on quasi-empirical claims is unavoidable. As I have set it up, the decision to adopt neutrality is itself a policy decision aimed at securing an independently defined conception of the good society. It is a policy decision concerning how policies decisions are to be deliberated. As such the effects of neutrality on the psyches and behavior of individuals is the crucial issue.
The conclusion of this chapter is, then, weak in that it does not come out unequivocally against non-neutral politics, and also in that it relies heavily on conjecture. My hope was that this chapter could successfully continue the efforts of the earlier chapters to establish that the argument from autonomy cannot be easily dismissed. The purpose of this thesis has been to show that the claims made in the argument from autonomy retain a fair degree of plausibility even after the most noted objections to them are considered. I think this chapter is the least successful in this regard. In the end I am not confident in maintaining that political neutrality is the best means of securing the conditions of personal autonomy.
Notes

Chapter 1: Neutrality and Its Relation to Liberalism

1. For a prime example of this focus on clarification see Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism" in A Matter of Principle (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 181-203. See also William Galston, Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Galston’s book concentrates on explaining what liberalism is. Although he offers many arguments for why his is a better understanding of liberalism, he brackets most questions about whether the liberal state is justified.


4. Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity, p. 44.


7. Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity, p. 43.

8. Ackerman, Social Justice in the Liberal State, p. 10.

9. This does not mean that the defense of neutrality itself cannot be neutral. One might give reasons for not basing political decisions on controversial conceptions of the good that themselves avoid commitment to such conceptions, in which case the neutral state would be neutrally justified. However, in considering whether or not the state should be
procedurally neutral, both neutral and non-neutral reasons are in play, so to speak. Consequently, although it might be neutral reasons that are most decisive in determining whether or not the state ought to be neutral, the mere fact that those reasons are neutral will not give them any extra weight. This issue of defending neutrality non-neutrally is examined more closely in chapter 3.


14. This approach to political economics has come under philosophical scrutiny in recent years, and much of this scrutiny focuses on questions concerning how actual preferences are to be determined, and the relation between actual preference satisfaction and the good life. Some of the leaders in this examination of political economics have come from the ranks of the economists themselves, perhaps most prominently Amartya Sen.


16. Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, and Ackerman in *Justice in the Liberal State*.

Chapter 2: The Argument from Autonomy


and an elaboration of the notion that all moral theories accept this principle.


10. Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, p. 11.


13. Of those who refer to the argument from the value of autonomy, Sher is the only one who devotes more than one or two paragraphs to considering it. Indeed, Sher devotes a whole chapter. However, Sher is concerned primarily with developing the argument so that he can advance his own objection to it. An attempt to develop another version of this argument which might be able to meet current objections should, then, still be profitable.


15. Galston, *Liberal Purposes*, pp. 86-7. Galston defines individual freedom as “pursuing my purposes, doing what I want, with a minimum of interference.” This is not what autonomy is usually taken to be. However,
the point he makes about freedom and what role it needs to play in the good life to ground neutrality, might similarly be advanced against autonomy. For a discussion of the conceptual relation between autonomy and freedom see Sher, *Beyond Neutrality*, ch. 4. In that chapter Sher makes the same point about autonomy that Galston makes about freedom.


17. For instance Will Kymlicka defends the claim that “no life goes better by being led from the outside according to values the person doesn’t endorse. My life only goes better if I’m leading it from the inside according to my beliefs about value.” Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 21.


19. Sher, *Beyond Neutrality*, ch. 4. One of the intuitions behind the claim that neutrality is needed to secure the conditions of autonomy is that non-neutral government action undermines autonomy by forcing or inducing individuals to take up certain activities or goals that they would not choose otherwise. Sher grants that non-neutral government action “coerces” individuals in this way, but argues that the move from this truth to the claim that non-neutral policies undermine autonomy overlooks the fact that forcing or inducing an individual to take up a certain activity or goal that he has not autonomously chosen can in the course of time lead that person to an autonomous choice of that goal or activity.


**Chapter 3: Can Neutrality Be Defended Non-Neutrally?**

1. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p. 53 (italics are his own).

2. Sandel uses the term deontological liberalism to refer to a conception whose core thesis is:
   
   society, being composed of a plurality of persons, each with his own aims and interests, and conceptions of the good, is best arranged when it is governed by principles that do not
themselves presuppose any particular conception of the good, but rather that they conform to the concept of right, a moral category given prior to the good and independent of it. See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 1. Here, I am using the term to refer to those political philosophies that conceive the liberal state as a deontological ideal. An explication of what it is to conceive the state as a deontological ideal is given later in this chapter.

3. Rosenblum, “Introduction” to *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 5-6. The first three paragraphs of this section of my paper, concerned with explaining the two types of liberal theory, draw heavily from Rosenblum’s discussion on these pages, but does vary from it at points.


7. In a recent article Peter de Marneffe makes a distinction between levels of neutrality that is similar to my distinction between theoretical neutrality and policy making neutrality. Although I think his idea of the lower level neutrality might be slightly different than my own, he suggests that neutrality on the theoretical level does not support neutrality on the policy level. I will claim that neutrality on the policy level need not be supported by neutrality on the theoretical level. See Peter de Marneffe, “Liberalism, Liberty, and Neutrality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19, 3 (Summer 1990): 253-74.

8. Rawls points towards the possibility of distinguishing levels of political reasoning with his notion of a 4-stage sequence. However, Rawls seems to conceive his own project to be one of developing a political/social ideal which is neutral all-the-way-down. Thus he advocates neutrality at the theoretical stage as well as the constitutional and legislative stages. However, his notion of reflective equilibrium, and the idea that his theory makes the most sense of our moral experience (which may or may not include experience of what is good as well as what is right) points towards
yet another level of reasoning which grounds Rawls’ advocacy of neutrality. For Rawls conception of the 4-stage sequence see Rawls, A Theory of Justice, sect. 31. For his notion of reflective equilibrium see Rawls, A Theory of Justice, pp. 20f, 48-51, 120, 432, 434, 579, and also Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory of Acceptance in Ethics” Journal of Philosophy 76,5 (1979): 256-82.

Chapter 4: Should Individual Autonomy Be the Goal of the State?

1. In his initial discussions of value, and particularly personal well-being, Raz emphasizes the self created source of values. See especially, The Morality of Freedom, pp. 288-94 and 305-07. However, in ch. 12, section 3 entitled “Goals and Reasons,” and again in ch. 14, section 2 entitled “Autonomy and Value” it is clear that Raz conceives of an independent source of value as well, see pp. 294-300 and 378-90.

2. Raz, The Morality of Freedom, p. 292. Raz’s discussion here concerns the concept of a “goal,” but I think the point can be made in terms of commitments.

3. Raz, The Morality of Freedom, p. 300. Again the argument he gives concerns “goals,” but the same argument can be made in terms of commitments.

4. For the “nestedness” of goals, see The Morality of Freedom, pp. 292-294.


8. Raz develops this notion of the incomparability of values in terms of incommensurability. In ch. 13 of The Morality of Freedom he suggests more formal definitions of incommensurability, compares it to other notions such as rough equality and argues for his claim that the value of different pursuits are incommensurable, i.e. undetermined by reason.


13. Raz’s account of autonomy is quite complex and subtle, and this brief statement is far from a full explication. I am only elaborating Raz’s conception to the extent necessary to discuss the points I want to make. For a better discussion of Raz’s conception which places it in relation to similar ideas in the literature, see Jeremy Waldron, “Autonomy and Perfectionism in Raz’s Morality of Freedom” *Southern California Law Review* 62, 1 (1989): 1103-14.


24. This argument for the claim that autonomy is a necessary condition of having a successful life in contemporary, pluralistic societies, seems to share some premises with arguments made in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), see especially chs. 17 & 18. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre tries to show how the conventional, authoritarian aspects of non-liberal societies provide conditions which make objective moral evaluations of particular actions and lives possible. I similarly argue that certain features of traditional societies provide for individuals a determinate set of values, in terms of which the evaluation of individual lives as successful or unsuccessful is made possible. Where my argument diverges from MacIntyre’s is that he takes the conventional, authoritarian aspects of non-liberal society to be
necessary conditions for sustaining practical lives that can be evaluated in terms of certain moral concepts. I, on the other hand, denied that a traditional society was needed to have the type of life that could be evaluated as successful or unsuccessful. My claim was that although non-traditional societies do not by themselves provide individuals with an adequately determined set of values in terms of which their lives can be evaluated as successful or unsuccessful, such a determinate set of values can be secured through the exercise of self-reflective choice. Communitarians, such as MacIntyre, would probably deny that an individual can, through his own efforts, create and maintain a moral world for himself without the support of widely shared societal conventions and attitudes. If this type of communitarian claim is right, then the argument I have offered for making autonomy the goal of the state fails.

Whether or not the achievement of autonomy is sufficient to provide individuals with a determinate moral world I want to leave as an open question. I believe the claim that it is, is at least as plausible as the communitarian claim that a liberal society lacks the conditions needed to sustain evaluatively meaningful lives. However, I am not in any position to substantiate this belief. I merely want to note this as a crucial issue of contention between Raz-type liberals and MacIntyre-type communitarians, and admit what I take to be a substantial vulnerability in the argument of this section. Certainly not the only one.

Chapter 5: Does the Value of Individual Autonomy Recommend Political Neutrality?

7. This is merely a reformulation of the issue raised at the beginning of the chapter: Do the advantages of neutrality with respect to autonomy, or more generally Raz’s conception of the good life, outweigh the advantages of a non-neutral politics directed by that conception of the good life. This issue will be addressed in the fourth section of this chapter, “The Taylor Objection”.


10. At this point the argument of this chapter begins to echo the arguments for neutrality made by Dworkin, Larmore, and Nagel, which were described in chapter 2. Thus, this is probably the best place to note the crucial difference between my argument and those of Dworkin, et al. Their arguments follow this form: (1) neutrality is needed to show adequate respect to all individuals, (2) showing adequate respect to all is a moral demand, (3) therefore, neutrality. My argument follows a different form: (1a) neutrality is needed to show adequate respect; (2a) showing adequate respect helps foster the conditions of autonomy, (3a) autonomy is essential to having a good life, (4a) therefore, neutrality. (2) is meant as a claim about morality which is independent of substantive accounts of value. (2a) and (3a), by contrast, connect premise one to the conclusion via substantive considerations about the good life.


12. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, ch. 15, esp. pp. 412-424. It might be noted that of the three philosophers cited in chapter 2 as objecting to the last premise of the argument from autonomy only two are dealt with in this chapter. Conspicuously absent from this chapter is a response to Professor Sher’s argument against the claim that neutrality is the best form of government for securing autonomy. The reason for this omission is that I am not quite sure how the considerations of the last chapter affect Sher’s argument. Sher is apparently working with a different conception of autonomy, and I suspect that his argument makes assumptions about the nature of value that are at odds with the theory of value elaborated in chapter 4. It would be worthwhile to work out how Sher’s discussion of
the argument from autonomy bears on this one, and vice-versa. However, I have chosen to address only those considerations that can be presented as direct objections to the argument I present in this chapter.


20. See pp. 34-5 above. The possible rationale I gave for taking a good based prescription as a moral rule was the well known one that appeal to our inability to know when the rule shouldn’t be followed. The rationale that follows is, I think, different than this. It is one which is made uniquely available by the specific grounds on which I have defended neutrality as a means of securing autonomy.
Works Cited


