Autonomy and Its Burdens

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THIS LECTURE WILL HAVE THREE SECTIONS. IN THE FIRST, I SHALL PUT IN place a way to think about the idea of autonomy, as a characteristic of individual human beings. That will explain the first word in my title. In the second section, I shall talk about a connection between the idea of autonomy and the idea of community, with a view to working towards an account of how autonomy, conceived in the way I am going to consider, can intelligibly be felt as burdensome. That will explain the second part of my title. In the third section, I shall talk briefly about some philosophical tendencies that I think we can understand as mistaken responses to this feeling of a burden.

I

FIRST, THEN, SOME REMARKS TO SKETCH THE IDEA OF AUTONOMY THAT I WANT TO WORK with.

From its derivation, the word "autonomy" should mean something like self-government, being subject to laws that are one's own. And that suggests that the concept of autonomy has its original home in a political context.

Self-government in the most obvious sense is what, say, a formerly subject nation achieves when it liberates itself from an imperial power. Here we already see a connection between the idea of autonomy and an idea of freedom. I want to hold on to the thought that autonomy is a kind of freedom when I move away, as I shall soon, from a political understanding of the concept of autonomy.

But staying, for the moment, in a political context, we can shift from autonomy as an achievement of a nation to autonomy as a characteristic of

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individuals. We can think of self-government, being oneself the source of the laws one is subject to, as a characteristic of individuals who live under democratic political arrangements. This idea, the idea of citizens who give themselves the law, fits most easily in a direct democracy, where legislating is done in an assembly of all the citizens. That is how things are supposed to have been in Periclean Athens. Or we might think of the ideal commonwealth that Rousseau envisages in *On the Social Contract*. And perhaps we can extend the idea of giving oneself the law to political arrangements of a more familiar kind, in which legislating is entrusted to representatives. That would be to exploit the thought that if a person's representative does something, including legislating in particular, and in doing so is acting as that person's representative, we can count the person as vicariously doing it herself.

But the idea of autonomy that I want to work with is not a political idea. Autonomy is self-government, but the idea of government, which is obviously in the first instance a political idea, lends itself easily to metaphorical applications. And the concept of autonomy as self-government, or self-determination, that I want to work with does not need a narrowly political context. Autonomy in the sense in which I want to consider it is the capacity of an individual to determine her thought and action for herself. [Autonomy as "self-determination"]

Here there is still that connection with freedom. Someone who determines the shape of her own life is free in an obvious sense.

I stress that autonomy is a *capacity*. No one is self-determining all the time, but lapses do not show that a person does not have a capacity. Still, the way to understand a capacity is to understand its exercises.

So how should we understand the idea of determining one's thought or action for oneself? I think the best answer starts like this: one is self-determining to the extent that one thinks or acts as one does for reasons that, in thinking or acting as one does, one is responding to as the reasons they are. [Self-determination as responding to reasons as reasons]

Responding to reasons as the reasons they are manifests rationality. Obviously enough, rationality is what separates rational animals from animals that are not rational. That is to invoke a traditional distinction within the animal kingdom. I want to dwell on the traditional distinction for a while, in order to explain what I mean by talking of responding to reasons as the reasons they are.

We can respect the traditional distinction of rational animals from the rest and still acknowledge a sense in which animals that are not rational can respond to reasons. The point is that the responses of animals that are not rational are not responses to reasons as the reasons they are. [non-rational animals respond to reasons]

For instance, animals of many kinds, including animals that are not rational, have fleeing as part of their repertoire of behavior. Consider how prey animals respond to the presence of predators. And fleeing is responding to something that is, in a perfectly good sense, a reason for that response: danger, or at least something the animal that flees responds to as danger. That is not something that just happens to be true about the behavior we call "fleeing." The point captures a feature of the very idea of fleeing. Fleeing is, just as such, behavior in which an animal responds to perceived danger, and perceived danger makes the fleeing response intelligible in a distinctive way. Perceived danger is a reason for the response, not a mere trigger of it.

But responding to danger by fleeing need not be responding to danger as the reason it is, in the sense I want to put in place. It can be, but only when the response comes from a rational animal.

To count as being able to respond to reasons as the reasons they are, one must be able to step back, as it were, from the fact that a certain circumstance, for instance perceived danger, inclines one towards acting in a certain way, for instance towards fleeing, and raise the question whether one *should* act in that way. If one resolves such a question and acts in the light of one's resolution of it, one's acting reflects the capacity that distinguishes rational animals from the rest. Such action exemplifies a capacity for a kind of freedom. This kind of freedom is not found in the lives of creatures that cannot engage in that sort of reflection.

[margin: responding to reasons as reasons requires meta-representation -- i.e. reflection]

The behavior of an animal that is not rational is the immediate outcome of motivational forces that are part of its animal nature. Consider, for instance, an antelope that takes flight when it senses the presence of a lion. What the antelope does is, in a certain sense, not under its control. (Of course the behavior is voluntary, and so in another sense it is under the antelope's control.) Contrast a human being who in my metaphorical sense steps back from a circumstance that tends to elicit a certain behavioral inclination from her. For instance, think of a human being stepping back from a perceived danger, a kind of thing that tends to elicit an inclination to run away in a human being no less than in an antelope. To step back from a circumstance is to contemplate it as a candidate for being a reason to do something, for instance run away. Suppose the person, having stepped back, determines that she should make the circumstance her reason for acting, and acts for that reason. There is then a sense in which what she does is determined by herself. In contrast, the antelope's behavior is determined by forces that naturally operate on it (or perhaps we should say "in it").

When one steps back, it becomes up to one whether to acknowledge, as a reason for acting, a candidate for being a reason for acting that is brought to one's attention by its eliciting a motivational impulse, for instance an impulse to run away. And if one does acknowledge a consideration as a reason for acting in a certain way, it is up to one whether to act in that way, or perhaps to recognize more compelling reasons for doing something else, and do that instead. One might, for instance, accept that a danger one faces is a reason for running away, but determine that there are stronger reasons for standing one's ground. If one decides that the consideration in question—the danger, in the case I am working with—is indeed a sufficient reason for acting, and acts on it, one satisfies the original motivational impulse, the impulse that brought the consideration into one's view as a candidate for being a reason. But in this case what explains one's acting as one does is the consideration that one has determined to make one's reason for acting, not the brute pressure of the motivational impulse, as in the case of animals that are not rational.

The image of stepping back is an image for a distanced orientation towards circumstances that otherwise would have merely induced inclinations to do things. It seems plausible that this distanced orientation becomes a possibility with the acquisition of language. If one can say how things are, one can hold a circumstance with a tendency to influence one's motivations at arm's length, as it were. Describing a circumstance gives one a means to adopt a partly contemplative

[margin: language & meta-representation]

attitude towards it, as opposed to just being practically immersed in it. The ability to frame a circumstance in words puts one in a position to ask oneself whether the circumstance constitutes a reason for doing what it inclines one to do, and if so, whether the reason is enough to act on.

I do not mean to suggest that the acquisition of language is intelligible in advance of this capacity to step back, this capacity to hold circumstances at arm's length—as if language comes first, and brings in its train the ability to adopt a distanced orientation towards one's predicaments. What seems plausible is rather this: the capacity to use language and the capacity to adopt a distanced attitude towards circumstances one finds oneself in are two elements in a bundle of capacities that needs to be understood as a whole.

In the picture I am offering, then, the capacity to respond to reasons as such is associated with language, and it marks a discontinuity in the animal kingdom. Rational animals are animals of a quite special kind. They are animals with *logos*. That Greek word sometimes needs to be translated "language" and sometimes needs to be translated "reason." Here both translations are appropriate at once. The idea of animals with *logos* encapsulates the idea that the class of rational animals coincides with the class of animals with language.

But as I have said, animals that are not rational in the sense of the traditional distinction can be responsive to reasons in a less demanding sense. To stay with the same example, animals that are not rational can without qualification be said to respond to danger, or at least to what they take to be danger, with behavior for which danger, or at least perceived danger, is a reason. So I can insist on the discontinuity between rational animals and other animals—the traditional distinction within the animal kingdom—without needing to play down an important continuity. It is not that rationality, in the sense in which rationality marks the traditional distinction, springs into being out of nothing with the onset of language. The relation between a reason in the full-blown sense and what it is a reason for has intelligible precursors in ways in which perceived environmental circumstances engage with merely animal motivational tendencies: that is, ways in which we can make sense of stretches of the lives of animals without language, animals that are not rational in the demanding sense I am working with.

I have been glossing the idea of responsiveness to reasons as reasons in terms of the idea of stepping back from circumstances in the light of which bits of merely animal behavior, without this distanced orientation, would have been intelligible as responses to reasons in a less demanding sense. Of course I do not mean to imply that that is all there is to be said about responsiveness to reasons as such. What I have described so far is a transfiguration, so to speak, of the kind of practical competence that is operative in coping with the problems and predicaments of merely animal life. And that is obviously not the whole truth about coming to inhabit what Wilfrid Sellars has called "the logical space of reasons."[2]

For one thing, I suggested that the capacity for a distanced attitude towards features of one's environment emerges together with the ability to say how things are. So far I have been focusing on practical reasons, reasons for acting. But the ability to say how things are presupposes responsiveness to theoretical reasons, reasons for believing one thing rather than another. So this brings another

[margin note: necessary but maybe not sufficient condition for space of reasons]

region of the space of reasons into the picture: reasons that appeal to theoretical rationality as opposed to practical rationality. Theoretical rationality, theoretical responsiveness to reasons as reasons, includes, for instance, the ability to weigh evidence.

Moreover, there is of course more to practical rationality than the transformed counterpart to merely animal practical intelligence in terms of which I have introduced the idea. There are also, for instance, ethical reasons. Ethical reasons are distinct from the sort of thing that is responded to by animals that are not rational, and the difference lies along a different dimension from the one I have tried to bring into view with the image of stepping back from circumstances.

One more point about the idea of rationality that I am exploiting in order to put in place a way of thinking about autonomy. What matters for rationality, in the sense I want to exploit, is the *capacity* to step back and assess whether putative reasons warrant action or belief. Rationality may be operative even when the capacity to step back is not being exercised. Responding to a reason as the reason it is, by doing something or forming a belief, does not require that one actually reflects about whether some consideration is a sufficient rational warrant for doing or believing what one does or believes. Sometimes it is enough that one *could* reflect.

Imagine, for instance, someone following a marked trail, who at a crossing of paths goes to the right in response to a signpost that, as we can naturally say, points that way. The person's going to the right may be a rational response to the signpost; it may manifest understanding of the signpost's significance. If that is so, the behavior stands in contrast with, for instance, the outwardly similar reaction of a non-rational animal that has been trained to go to the left or right in conditioned response to objects of certain shapes. Now it would be absurd to say that if going to the right is to be a response to the reason for going to the right constituted by the fact that the signpost points to the right, the person must have stepped back and made an explicit determination that the signpost gives her a reason for going to the right. What is required is that her reason for going to the right is that the signpost points to the right. It must be the fact that the signpost points to the right—a fact about the signpost's significance, not just a fact about its shape—that explains her going to the right. And what shows that that is the explanation may be just that afterwards she can answer the question why she went to the right by saying "There was a signpost pointing to the right." She does not need to have explicitly adverted, at the time, to the reason afforded by the signpost and decided on that basis to go to the right.

The point here is that rationality, in the demanding sense, can be operative in quite unreflective behavior. And similarly, rationality can be operative in quite unreflective belief-formation. I am not recommending a picture in which rationality is operative only when there is the kind of intellectual activity that is naturally described in terms of deciding what to do or what to think.

II

So far I have been sketching a conception of autonomy as rationality. Autonomy is self-government, self-determination. And one is self-determining when one's thinking and acting are determined by reasons that one recognizes

[margin note: non-reflective rational response]

as such. Rational animals have the capacity to appreciate the force of reasons and respond to it. But actually determining oneself is actually exercising that capacity, actually thinking or acting in response to reasons one recognizes as such. That is what it is to be in control of one's own life.

If we approach the idea of autonomy in this way, we are placing the idea in a normative framework. The account of autonomy that I have sketched centers on a normative concept, the concept of the *authority* of reasons: their force, in a natural metaphor I have already used. To exercise autonomy is to subject oneself to the normative force of reasons. That is a self-subjection that is at the same time a self-determination. If one conforms to the authority of a reason that one appreciates as such, one's thought or action is determined by the power in one by virtue of which one is able to recognize that authority and think or act accordingly. And it is in exercising that power that one is truly oneself. I believe this is the content of a striking image that Kant adapts from Rousseau, in which freedom is obedience to a self-legislated law. If one recognizes a consideration as having the authority that belongs to a reason, one recognizes conforming to it not as obedience to a requirement imposed on one from outside, but as precisely what is required for one's thought or action to be one's own. It is oneself who holds oneself to these requirements, not an external power.

Now there is a connection between the idea of individual autonomy, understood in terms of responsiveness to reasons as such, and the idea of belonging to a community. This is going to be the theme of my second section.

I have just mentioned Kant and Rousseau, and I had already mentioned Rousseau in the first section of this lecture. I am going to say a bit more about these thinkers, in order to sketch a historical context for the connection between autonomy and community that I have just alluded to.

In *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau describes an ideal commonwealth in which individual citizens literally give themselves the law. And he represents becoming a citizen as a metaphysical transformation, a transformation in which human individuals become possessors of freedom in a sense that has no conceivable application to ordinary animals. Rousseau's social contract is an imagined institutional context in which, if the institutions he envisages could be realized (something he thinks could happen, if at all, only in highly constrained conditions), individuals would achieve a freedom that would consist in having their action determined by a rational will. That is clearly the core of the conception of autonomy I have been putting in place.

Kant is struck by this conception of freedom as the power of self-legislation, and he rescues a version of it from Rousseau's pessimism about its being realized. In doing that, he detaches the relevant sort of freedom from political arrangements whose possibility of actualization might be an issue, as it is for Rousseau. Kant's kingdom of ends is an institution at most metaphorically — not even notionally, like Rousseau's ideal commonwealth. In Kant, Rousseau's idea of a freedom that would consist in obedience to the results of legislative acts of one's own becomes a vivid metaphor, a way of emphasizing the sense in which conforming one's thought and action to the authority of reasons is the very reverse of abdicating control over one's life to an alien power.

To round off this sketch of a relevant bit of the history of philosophy, let

me introduce Hegel into the picture. Hegel follows Kant in taking a conception of freedom like Rousseau's away from a strictly political setting; like Kant, he does not identify autonomy with citizenship. But in another way Hegel reverts to Rousseau. For Hegel, it is only in an actual, historically realized, social context that we can make sense of the emergence of this metaphysically special kind of being, the autonomous individual.

Now it is a delicate question how exactly we should understand the connection between autonomy and community. After my historical excursus, I can say that this question is central in the interpretation of Hegel's philosophy. I shall come back to Hegel at a couple of points later in the lecture. But meanwhile I am going to pursue the connection between autonomy and community a bit, in order to begin on bringing out the way autonomy can be felt as burdensome.

In the first section of this lecture, I linked the capacity to recognize circumstances as reasons for acting with the capacity to adopt a distanced orientation towards circumstances one finds oneself in. And I suggested that we should understand the capacity for a distanced orientation as part of a package with being initiated into language. So the relevant community is in the first instance a *linguistic* community.

Language came into view, in the bit of my first section that I have just recalled, in connection with only one aspect of what it is to inhabit the space of reasons. I was talking there about how circumstances that elicit animal motivations are transformed into considerations that constitute reasons for acting in a more demanding sense. And I stressed that this is only part of what needs to be said about rationality, in the sense that marks the traditional distinction within the animal kingdom. There are also reasons for belief. And even in the sphere of reasons for acting, that transformation does not make sense of, for instance, ethical reasons.

But the role of language in making that transformation intelligible is a case of something general, something that applies to reasons of all kinds. Human beings are born with a potential for rationality in the demanding sense, a potential for the capacity to respond to reasons as such. But they have that potential raised to actuality by way of being initiated into a conception of what is a reason for what that is, to begin with, simply handed down to them, embodied in a collection of practices they are brought up into. Learning a shared language, which we can conceive as, among other things, a repository of tradition, is central here.

Of course being initiated into a tradition cannot by itself ensure that what someone takes to be reasons really are the reasons they seem to be. Someone may think or act in the light of something that is not really a reason for thinking or acting as she does, because her grasp of what is a reason for what is defective. It may be that the presence of a supposed reason in the conception of reasons she has had handed down to her, or the rational weight it is taken to have in that conception, reflects a mere prejudice that informs the thinking of her community. Suppose, for instance, that someone's conforming her thought or action to a putative reason reflects her believing that race or gender settles a person's proper station in life. In that case what ultimately explains her thought or action is not the force of a reason that she recognizes as such. What we have here is only the illusion of an instance of that. The explanatory weight falls through the supposed

reason to whatever explains her taking it to be a reason. Our explanation of her thought or action comes to rest on how her upbringing was shaped by the hold of prejudice in the community she was brought up into.

This stands in contrast with how we can conceive things as being when someone's upbringing has, as we might say, opened her eyes to the actual layout of the space of reasons. In that case understanding of her thought or action can find firm ground in her recognition of a reason as the reason it is. And if that is so her thought or action reflects her rational self, not just the contingencies of her upbringing.

Of course in this case too we can be interested in the genesis of her conception of reasons. Our interest then is in how she came to be responsive to the genuine reasons she is responsive to. If someone's thought or action is intelligible in terms of her correctly appreciating the rational force of genuine reasons, saying how she came to be capable of such appreciation is a change of explanatory direction, an appendix to an explanation that is complete in its own terms and reveals what it explains as a reflection of the person's own self. Whereas if someone acts or thinks in the light of a defective grasp of the layout of the space of reasons, an understanding of why she sees things as she does is a necessary element in an explanation of her acting or thinking, an explanation that reveals what it explains as reflecting mere contingencies of her formation.

There are limits to how defective a tradition can be, if being initiated into it is to count as acquiring a conception, even a partly wrong conception, of the layout of the space of reasons, and hence an actualization, even only a partial actualization, of the potential for autonomy. If we try to envisage too much error in a conception of what is a reason for what, the attempt undermines itself. It becomes impossible to suppose someone who had such a conception would be sufficiently in touch with reasons to be count as having even a defective grasp of them. Recalling the view of languages as repositories of tradition, we can see that this limit on the possibility of error is a way of approaching the thought that nothing can be *both* recognizable, from within a linguistic practice, as another linguistic practice *and* in some radical way unintelligible from there. Here I have in mind Donald Davidson's argument in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," and Richard Rorty's variation on Davidson's theme in "The World Well Lost."[3]

I am stressing the difference between responding to a genuine reason whose rational force one appreciates and responding to something that merely seems to one to be a reason. Certainly one needs to have the *capacity* to recognize and respond to reasons if something is even to seem to one to be a reason. But one is actually self-determining only if what explains one's thought or action is a genuine reason, recognized by one as such. If what one acts on is something that merely seems to one to be a reason, what ultimately explains one's thought or action is whatever explains its seeming to one to be a reason. One's thought or action is ultimately determined by one's upbringing or one's social milieu or whatever it is that figures in that explanation, and not by oneself.

Given this conception of how the difference matters, it is natural to hanker after a *criterion*, to single out the regions of the space of reasons where one's eyes are open to its true layout, and mark them off from the regions of the space of reasons where the conception one finds oneself with is skewed by prejudice or

other distorting influences. But there is no criterion, if by that we mean some general formula that it might be possible to apply to mark off genuine reasons from impostors. It is incumbent on one to reflect about whether what seem to one to be reasons really are reasons, doing one's best not to be taken in by impostors. And there is no straightforward, as it were mechanical, way to guard against the risk. Any general formula one came up with would itself come within the scope of the obligation to reflect.

Here we can begin to appreciate why we cannot understand autonomy as simply an aspect of membership in a community. Autonomy is a responsibility that sits on individuals. One may be confident that the practices of giving reasons that one has been brought up into correspond to reasons as they really are. Even so, it would be a way of giving up one's autonomy if one equated the question whether something that initially strikes one as a reason really is a reason with the question whether acknowledging it as a reason conforms to the conception of what is a reason for what that is embodied in the practices one has been brought up into. On such a question, "This is how my community thinks," or "This is how I have been brought up to think," is not to the point. One has to resolve *for oneself* the question whether the way one finds oneself inclined to think is the right way to think.

What resources does one have for addressing this question? Only those that one has been equipped with by one's upbringing, along with any previous reflection that has modified one's inherited conception of what is a reason for what. To consider whether the view of some region of the space of reasons that one finds oneself with is skewed, the only thing one can do is to ask oneself whether it coheres with one's view of other regions of the space of reasons, which one must simply trust for the duration of one's reflection about the region that is under reflective scrutiny. In a familiar image, one's possibilities for reflection are those of Neurath's mariner, repairing his vessel, or at least inspecting it for seaworthiness, while it is afloat. One can be confident only that if one has the space of reasons in view at all one cannot be completely wrong about it. (That is the thought I found in Davidson and Rorty.)

In this reflection, one asks oneself, as I said, whether one's conception of a region of the space of reasons coheres with one's conception of other regions of the space of reasons, which for the moment one must simply trust, though their status may come into question later. What coherence amounts to here is the sort of thing it amounts to in disputes in common law, or in constitutional law, where one asks questions on these lines: "Is this decision in the spirit of these previous decisions?" Whether something is in the spirit of something else is not something that can be checked mechanically.

In a famous phrase in his discussion of self-consciousness, Hegel speaks of *I* that is *we* and *we* that is *I*.[4] We can frame the question how individual autonomy is related to membership in a community as a question about how to interpret that idea.

I have been stressing the *I*, the autonomous individual, but it is important not to overbalance in that direction. We should not lose sight of the point I made about how the potential for autonomy is actualized. It is actualized by initiation into a tradition, which is embodied in shared practices, in the first instance

linguistic practices. That can be put, in the terms of Hegel's phrase, by saying that one becomes an *I*, an autonomous subject capable of resolving questions about reasons for oneself, only by becoming one of a *we*. Moreover, it would be wrong to interpret my stress on the autonomous *I* as implying that reflection about whether to commit oneself to an element in the view of the space of reasons one finds oneself with, or to modify it, is a task for a solitary individual. Of course one can and should exploit the wisdom of others. We should not exclude cooperative investigations in which one trusts one's collaborators. And it would be missing the point if one took it that the reflection that is incumbent on one, about whether what strike one as reasons really are reasons, could be satisfactorily resolved by a merely private conviction—as if it would be no problem for what one took to be a resolution if one failed utterly in all attempts to bring other members of the relevant *we* to see the result of one's reflection as a view they should at least respect, if not accept.

But all this leaves in place the fact that autonomy requires one to acknowledge the force of the reasons on which one thinks or acts as the individual *I* who one is, not as an element in a *we*. As I said, to suppose that "This is how *we* think" settles the reflective question would be to abandon one's claim to autonomy. One cannot delegate the task of addressing the reflective question to the accumulated wisdom of one's community. Before one could invoke the wisdom of the community, one would need to satisfy *oneself* that wisdom is indeed what it is.

So this is why autonomy is intelligibly, and indeed rightly, felt as burdensome. The burden of autonomy is the responsibility to reflect *for oneself* about the credentials of putative reasons for thought or action, in full awareness that one cannot rely uncritically on any supposed wisdom that one has merely inherited. If one takes things on trust from others, one is oneself responsible for doing so. So one cannot do so lightly; the condition of belonging to, say, a collaborative scientific investigation is quite special. There is no ultimate ground for confidence that one is right about what is a reason for what, and hence that one is genuinely self-determining in some region of one's life, as opposed to having one's thought or action merely reflect contingencies of one's formation — no ground apart from whatever materials for reflection one can lay hands on for oneself. In one's reflection, one will find certain considerations persuasive. But one must be aware that whether one is right to find them persuasive is itself in principle up for reflective questioning at some other stage in the Neurathian inspection of one's boat. Nothing is immune to reflective scrutiny. In another Hegelian image, everything is fluid.[5]

The burden of autonomy

III

IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE THAT THERE SHOULD BE A TEMPTATION TO AVOID THIS BURDEN OF responsibility, this obligation to try to get things right for oneself. The obligation can be daunting. I have been urging that the scope of one's responsibility includes everything one might appeal to in the course of one's reflection, so that there are no foundations for reflection that are once and for all firm.

Now there are some unsatisfactory tendencies in philosophy that we can understand in the light of this temptation to avoid the burden of responsibility for getting things right. Appreciating how daunting the burden is can help us to

make sense of some things that go wrong in philosophy. I shall end by mentioning three such tendencies.

The first, and I think the least interesting, is a temptation to give up the very idea of getting things right. The burden of the obligation to reflect that comes with autonomy would not sit so heavily on us if we could stop supposing there are right and wrong views about what is a reason for what—if we could suppose that the most a person can aspire to is something she can find satisfying for herself, with no claim to objectivity or universality. The most obvious expression of this way of shirking responsibility is one or another kind of relativism.

The second mode of avoidance of responsibility I want to consider is what Sellars called "the Myth of the Given."

the Myth of the Given

"The Myth of the Given" is Sellars's label for a genre of ways in which philosophy goes astray. In general terms, the Myth of the Given is the idea that things can make themselves available for knowing in a transaction in which the knower is simply passive—a transaction that does not involve, on the side of the knower, capacities for whose proper functioning one is responsible, so that one is called on to reflect about them and improve them if that is what reflection recommends.

The most obvious expression of this idea is in traditional empiricism, in which features of reality are supposed to impress themselves immediately on subjects who need be no more than equipped with functioning sense organs and awake. Sellars himself focuses mainly on the empiricistic version of the Myth.

But in the preamble to his polemic against traditional empiricism, he makes it clear that he does not think the Myth of the Given is exclusively the province of empiricists.[6] Traditional rationalism, for instance, has its own version. In a rationalistic version of the Myth of the Given, it is features of the independently constituted intelligible structure of reality, rather than features of the empirical world, that immediately impress themselves on knowing subjects, not now through the senses but by way of a postulated capacity for insight into that structure. In many ways this is of course very unlike traditional empiricism. But it is like traditional empiricism in that the supposed knowledge-yielding transaction is conceived as drawing on nothing for whose proper functioning the knowing subjects could be supposed to be responsible.

So we can suppose that both these versions of the Myth of the Given, and so both the main tendencies that clash inconclusively in much of modern philosophy, owe at least some of their attractiveness to an intelligible wish to avoid the burden of responsibility.

I am going to have to be even sketchier about the third temptation I want to mention, which is a tendency, in trying to make sense of the *I* that is *we* and the *we* that is *I*, to overbalance in the direction of the *we*. As I acknowledged, one can become an autonomous *I* only by becoming one of a *we*. And as I also acknowledged, aspiring to get things right must be aspiring to a position on which one could in principle win consensus from others, at least on its being worthy of respect, something on which reasonable people can agree to differ, if not on its being correct. But those acknowledgments do not shift the burden of responsibility to the community. And discomfort at the burden of responsibility can encourage a philosophy that implies such a shifting of the burden. This is a

delicate matter. "We are not on our own" is obviously true, and not irrelevant to what, with rhetoric that risks being over the top, we can describe as the reflective predicament. But in the kind of philosophy I mean, a thought like that becomes a false comfort in the face of the burden of responsibility.

This happens in some readings of Hegel. As I said a while ago, Hegel insists on placing the conception of autonomy as self-determination, a conception that he inherits from Kant, in a historically actual social context. The autonomous *I* belongs to a mutually recognitive community. And that strand in Hegel is sometimes read as if its effect is to lighten, for each of us, the burden of responsibility for getting things right, by treating it as borne by the community rather than the individual. That is what I meant by talking about a false comfort.

Against that, I think the point of Hegel's insistence on a social context is exhausted by the thought that self-consciousness is formed in a communal context. And that leaves responsibility for getting things right lying just as heavily as ever on the individual. As I believe Hegel sees things, a mark of a mature modern consciousness—something possible, by all means, only in a communal setting—is a clear-sighted acceptance of one's individual responsibility for seeing to it that one is properly attuned to the layout of the space of reasons.

Let me end by summing up what I have tried to convey in this lecture. One is self-determining when one's thought or action is determined by reasons one recognizes as such. The capacity for self-determination brings with it a special obligation, to do one's best to ensure that the reasons one seems to recognize as such really are reasons. This obligation rests on each of us as individuals. We can disown it only if we are prepared to renounce the capacity for freedom that is our gift as animals of the special kind we belong to. It is a gift that is also a burden, and it is understandable if we are tempted by philosophical moves whose attractiveness lies in their seeming to lessen the burden. But the right attitude to the burden is an open-eyed acceptance. φ

Notes

[1] I gave an earlier version of this as a Renard Lecture at Creighton University in 2009. A yet earlier and much briefer version appears in Riccardo Dottori, ed., *Autonomy of Reason?/Autonomie der Vernunft* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009). I am very grateful to the editorial staff of the *Review* for the invitation to give the Harvard Review of Philosophy Lecture in 2010. I am sorry not to have been able to see to it that this version profited more from the wonderfully lively discussion on the occasion of the lecture.

[2] W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), §36.

[3] "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" is in Davidson's *Enquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); "The World Well Lost" is in Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

[4] G. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶177 (paragraph numbering from A. V. Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)).

[5] See *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶33.

[6] See §1 of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*.