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Review of Willful Liberalism: Voluntarism and Individuality in Political Theory and Practice

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Willful Liberalism: Voluntarism and Individuality in Political Theory and Practice. By Richard E. Flathman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. 232p. \$31.50 cloth, \$13.95 paper.

This is an elegant and studied little volume, rather more difficult than it lets on. Flathman wants to argue that liberals are sorely in need of a more robust understanding of the will and individuality than they now possess, that they (or we) should be enthusiastically embracing what might seem to be some tendentious commitments about the partial but inescapable opacity of other selves. He does so by working through a large number of texts and authors—some only contentiously called liberal (Hobbes); others not conceivably liberal (William of Ockham, Augustine, Nietzsche); and still others not obviously interested in anything narrowly political at all (Wittgenstein, William James). The exegeses, sometimes dense and always deft, are aimed at excavating and reclaiming that robust understanding we allegedly lack. So they are not in the first instance intended for, say, Hobbes scholars or James scholars.

Flathman does not quite explain his impatience with reigning liberal theories. I take it his sense is that there is too much sweet reasonableness, too much of a community dedicated to shared principles of justice and public debate. But this vision is not just an implausible attempt to fashion society as a learned graduate seminar. It is also a bit soporific; and one would have to worry that the individuals composing it were bland, colorless, interchangeable. Or so, I conjecture, Flathman thinks.

That may make it sound as if Flathman thinks that individualism (or "individuality") is somehow the opposite of being socially situated (and surely many recent antiliberals write that way). What emerges from Flathman's juggling of these notions (under titles like "Individuality and Plurality, Sociality and Politicality," "Sociality, Individuality, Plurality, and Politics," etc.) is a sharp riposte to any such misbegotten notion. Flathman may want to celebrate partially opaque individuals with eccentrically strong wills; but he realizes full well that only in certain kinds of communities or social orders can such individuals emerge in the first place. Readers who still believe that liberalism is somehow a presociological or antisocial doctrine would be well advised to dwell on this strand of his argument.

There is something mildly paradoxical about the structure of Flathman's position. Think of a theory as a web of beliefs and leave it an open question (an "empirical question," as they say in the trade) how densely tangled together the strands of the web are and whether some parts of the web are relatively independent of others. Hence arises an antinomy such that while theories of individuality must be independent enough that we can imagine lifting them from Ockham and inserting them into liberalism, they must not be so independent that they are just freely spinning gears stuck on the side of the real conceptual machinery (or else inserting them will not matter).

There is, indeed, logical room for that. But at the very least, one would like to hear more about what "appropriating" or "inserting" these commitments into liberalism would mean. Nor, presumably, is a liberal (or any) web of beliefs, built like a Motorola color television, so that we might just snap out the old defective module labeled "views of self and society" and insert the new one. Presumably, that is, inserting these commitments will somehow change the rest of liberalism if only by putting other liberal commitments in a new context. But Flathman does not take up the constructive task of even sketching what our new and improved liberalism will look like in any serious detail.

I do not mean to catalog the failings of Flathman's book, but to suggest how much it opens up for us, how much further work along these lines might be done. In a debate as viciously repetitive as that between liberals and their critics, the act of putting a quirky, talented, provocative sketch on the table is remarkable.

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