A WORLD OF SOCIAL ATOMS
Elizabeth Wolgast

Introduction, H. Gene Blocker

The study of distributive justice—i.e., how a society allocates its resources to individuals—centers on the debate between the “libertarian” and “egalitarian” liberals. Libertarians uphold the right of individuals to keep and use their own legitimately acquired private property, without interference from the government. Egalitarians believe in the right of every individual to full self-development, which requires that everyone have equal access to “social goods” such as jobs, food, housing, etc.

The libertarian side of the argument relies heavily on the modern notion of individuality, which arose in Europe during the seventeenth century. Yet we human beings have complex feelings about such concepts. We tend to think of ourselves both as individual, independent, autonomous “agents” and as members of social groups (whether our clan, ethnic “nationality,” race, religion, or country). But which is more important—our individuality, or our membership in a group? Does our society exist in order to serve us individuals, or do we individuals exist to serve our society? Put another way, do we make our society, or does our society create us?

Over the course of human history, different cultures have emphasized one of these at the expense of the other, in various ways. Only in Western Europe and North America during the past four hundred years have we seen such an extreme emphasis on the importance of the individual over the group. This emphasis strongly influenced the “social contractarians,” seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers exemplified by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Social contrarians argued that the justification of any government lies in the tacit consent of the governed. Emphasis on the individual over the group is also a key underlying assumption of the modern liberal democratic tradition.

In the selection that follows, Elizabeth Wolgast criticizes this underlying assumption that the individual takes priority over the group. Specifically, she questions whether human beings are really the “social atoms” that some liberal views make them out to be. She also asks whether the assumption of social separateness has led to the problems of alienation and selfishness that
we face today. She traces the history of atomistic accounts of the individual, finding evidence of it in writings from the seventeenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes and modern-day thinkers such as Robert Nozick and John Rawls. Finally, she attempts to show how the atomistic concept has both aided and hindered our attempts to understand ourselves and our society.

Wolgast favors a position often referred to as “communitarianism,” though she herself does not use that term. Communitarians hold that the individual is the product of the society in which he or she is raised. One’s sense of self, Wolgast believes, develops through one’s many interactions with all the different aspects of one’s community—with parents, friends, religious and educational institutions, business associations, political alignments, and so on. It is from these interrelations that one’s sense of values—ultimately, how one thinks of one’s self—derives.

As you read Wolgast, ask yourself whether you agree with her that modern individualism has gone too far in stressing self-focused values of the individual at the expense of values of solidarity, belonging, involvement, and group identity. Do you feel more a part of a group or more apart from any group? Do you feel some combination of the two? Most communities today are a mixture of many different groups—gender, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic, religious, political, educational, and professional. As you grow up in a community, you have to choose not just whether and how much to be a part of that overall community but also which of these subgroups to join and which to avoid. Do you think this a problem for Wolgast; and if so, how do you think she would answer it? How would you answer it?

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We call on the ideas of social atomism when we reason about political and ethical issues, but, perhaps because they are so familiar, we don’t often examine them critically. Here we look at the logic and interconnections of ideas of social atomism and at some of their historical sources.

In the seventeenth century a new fashion in thought appeared, one whose motivation was to challenge traditional authorities in a variety of dimensions. René Descartes, for instance, challenged the church’s claim to authority on matters concerning God, the soul, and the world God presumably made. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke challenged the traditional

grounds given for political authority. In that enlightened time government could not be based on divine right or on natural heredity or paternalism; it needed some more rational basis. David Hume, Thomas Reid, and Immanuel Kant in turn took up the question of the foundation of morality; why should we accept what anyone says about what is right and morally justifiable?

Standing against the old authorities required a secure point, an Archimedean point from which to strike. So it happened that in a variety of fields—science, theology, political theory, morality—such a point was located in the autonomous, unconnected, rational human individual. Starting with this person and his or her inherent abilities, requirements, and values, one got a neutral and detached perspective on any claim to authority. Thus a new kind of moral, political, and epistemological justification came into being, one that derived from the natural, free, rational, and morally autonomous individual. It was an unbinding of the inquiring spirit; it was a new premise for shedding a critical light on old orthodoxies.

Contemporary American social and moral theories and our political arguments bear the mark of this bold anti-authoritarianism. The new ideas of the Enlightenment became unshakable American principles. Nonetheless, new problems followed upon this advance, and we face them still.

Descartes’s anti-authoritarianism appears in his claim that men are equal in their reason. No one is distinguished by intelligence, rather “good sense is of all things in the world the most equally distributed . . . [and] the power of forming a good judgment and distinguishing the true from the false . . . is naturally equal in all men.” One finds it astonishing that an indisputable and not very modest genius should say such a thing if one neglects its importance for the challenge he took up in theology and science. For if all people are alike in their ability to learn and know, and there are no experts, then a person who wants to understand God or the soul or the universe doesn’t need anyone else. We can all figure it out for ourselves.

Along with this intellectual individualism Descartes proposed a method for investigating problems, a method universally applicable to theology, mathematics, physiology, morals, and every other subject. Its use, he proposed, would guarantee that all attainable human knowledge would be within the reach of everyone. . . . Deductive demonstrations require nothing from outside a person, they do not call on a specialized knowledge. . . . This was something new, a do-it-yourself science and theology. Thus in the end it is Descartes’s egalitarianism that provides the power that drives his rational anti-authoritarianism.
Descartes’s English contemporary Thomas Hobbes used the autonomous individual in a very different way—to give a novel justification for government. From the Archimedean point of such individuals Hobbes believed he could justify the existence of government—of any form—in a way that anyone would have to accept. His justification would not appeal to natural, divine, or hereditary right but only to human nature and human rationality. A government comes into existence through a contract, he proposed, a covenant that free and independent individuals make with one another. The resulting government is then a kind of artifact.

Before there was government, Hobbes’s theory said, people managed to exist, but not well and not peacefully. For in that presocial state men separately governed their activities, that is to say, each pursued his own interest and depended entirely upon himself for protection. People in this condition were roughly equal, Hobbes held. . . . Equality of people both mentally and physically, combined with desires and motives of self-interest, yielded competition as a natural way of life, competition that was unrelenting, harsh, deadly. . . . This natural state was consequently barren of the goods of civilization: . . . “no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

In Hobbes’s picture of equal autonomous agents, people can be likened to molecules of gas bouncing around inside a container. Each molecule proceeds independently, is free to go its own way, although it occasionally bumps into others in its path. As molecules have their energy, people are driven by their passions, and their relations with one another reflect both their “love [of] Liberty, and [love of] Dominon over others.” No atom helps or moves aside for another; that wouldn’t make sense. They are a collection of unrelated units. This fundamental picture I call “social atomism,” for it shows society as a simple collection of independent, self-motivated units.

In Hobbes’s view, government is justified as an instrument by which people further their security and thus their self-interest. It is the people’s creation, and its irreplaceable function is to create a state of peace and security in which the human atoms can pursue their interests without fear. That function and that alone justifies government’s existence; therefore it cannot have interests that are not ultimately reducible to the interests of its members. So Hobbes reserved for citizens the right to disobey their government in the face of threats to their lives or security. Insofar as government was a creation of the people who were to live under it, this was a do-it-yourself political theory.
Atomism need not be associated with such a dismal account of human nature as Hobbes’s. Another social atomist of this period, John Locke, held a more generous view. For him people are generally sociable and not naturally at war; only a few create problems. . . . Human nature did not generally need restraint by government, and the value people placed on liberty, property, and political equality needed to be respected by government. Still the autonomous, independent individual is the central motif. . . . Individuals have the power to keep or give away authority over them. Therefore at bottom of political authority is the idea of individual independence and autonomy: the authority one has over oneself. . . .

For Locke a contract is optional rather than a matter of survival, and any number of people may contract with one another to join together while leaving the rest in the state of nature. When they do so contract, they have formed a community. . . .

While Hobbes’s and Locke’s views of men’s nature and the form of government that’s “natural” for them differ, their views of the contract on which government is based are similar. Both see it as being made voluntarily and rationally, out of people’s natural, self-oriented desires and their recognition of their limitations; and should people be thrown into the state of nature again, both see the rational course as being to make another contract of the same kind. Without claiming to represent the historical origins of society, this conception came to have a profound effect on the understanding Americans have of the relation holding between government and citizens.

In the following century another form of atomism was developed by Kant, Hume, Shaftesbury, and Reid: its concern was morality. These philosophers held that the source of moral authority lay in the individual—in one’s conscience, moral sense, or reason. This conception of moral autonomy sets the stage for the proper treatment of others, and it gives force to the idea that political authority must have its moral source in such individuals. For these philosophers, the justification of moral precepts must derive from an individual conceived without the imprint of society. The single individual is the ground of moral principles. This is do-it-yourself moral theory.

Ethical atomism combined with Hobbes’s and Locke’s social atomism supplies some of the most important and characteristic features of American political theory, and the imprint of these ideas is evident and fixed in the Constitution. It is from Hobbes, for example, that we derive the idea that no one should be forced to give evidence against himself and threaten his own security—the essence of the Fifth Amendment. From Locke we have a pic-
nature of man as a solid citizen, conscientious and property-owning, and the right of such citizens to monitor the actions of their government. From him, too, we have emphasis on the sanctity of property. From the ethical atomists we derive the need to respect expressions of conscience, since conscience is tied to moral autonomy; it follows that the authority of government must be qualified by the moral authority of the governed.

Such timeless theoretical foundations give Americans a vocabulary and a framework for discussing social problems, and at the same time they define avenues for addressing such problems. If its implications fail to square with our moral judgment, then—by ethical atomism’s own premise of individual authority—it is subject to serious criticism.

In form, social atomism appears scientific, and its analogues in science are easy to recognize. For we understand what physical compounds are when we know what they’re made of. A wall of bricks is understood as an assemblage of separate bricks. A molecule of water is made up of separable atoms, and to understand what water is you must know about those atoms. Often we talk about compounds in terms of their parts; why not apply the same method to a society? Thus we can understand a society if we know what it’s made of. The resulting theory of society can then claim a truth that is abstracted from historical contexts, can claim the lasting and objective validity of physics or chemistry. It will include the features that a society not only has but must of necessity have. In giving social theory this foundation, Hobbes became one of the founders of political and social “science.”

In contemporary political thought the idea is expressed by Robert Nozick, who says that although the political realm can be “understood” by various means, a nonpolitical explanation is the only means that “promises full understanding.” . . . A complete understanding of the political requires us to begin with the nonpolitical, and Nozick’s starting point, like Hobbes’s and Locke’s, is the single human individual. This is their Archimedean point. . . .

It may seem self-evident that one way to understand a thing is to take it apart, but notice what this idea assumes. It assumes that a part will be a discrete thing with its own nature, and that if we know the component parts, we will understand the whole. But not every compound or complex thing can be understood by this means. Take a machine: it is not just a collection of parts, but a collection of parts assembled in accordance with a particular design and in a particular order. If we have only the assorted parts or a list of them, we may altogether fail to understand how the assembled parts function. We still need a diagram or design, a conception of how the machine works,
maybe an idea of its eventual purpose. Then are the design and purpose parts of the machine? Hardly. But if the machine is not understandable without the design and can’t be assembled without it, how can the machine be understood in terms of parts? Or take a cake: it’s a collection of ingredients, but not ingredients assembled any which way. It needs a method or recipe, or else it can’t be accounted for, putting the same ingredients together at random may yield a disaster. Then is the recipe part of the cake? No. Nonetheless, the cake cannot be understood in terms solely of its parts or ingredients.

Consider the following argument, then. Some things cannot be understood in terms of simple units, units that exist originally in isolation; an understanding even of the parts may depend on their being in an appropriate context and related within a whole. Take part of a flower, a pistil, for instance. What is it? It’s part of a particular flower, with a function in the life of the plant and the generation of new plants, a function in a whole pattern of the plant’s growth and its relation to other things. It is the pistil of that flower, functioning with respect to it; that is what it is. The same problem applies to some parts of machines. Think of finding an odd-looking piece of metal in the road; how does one describe or identify it? Most commonly, perhaps, as a part of some kind of machine, a piece that has a characteristic place and function in various mechanisms. Some fairly standard parts—bolts, screws, wheels—are describable individually because, like atoms and bricks and marbles, they are interchangeable and their functions standardized. But in any case they are identified as things with a certain function in a larger whole. Therefore while an atomistic approach works to explain some things, we can’t assume it will provide an adequate understanding of society, though it will certainly press out a crisp and simple theory.

Among those who have held anti-atomistic views were the ancient Greeks. Aristotle, for instance, believed that a man is a particular individual only in the context of his community. To understand the individual, then, we must begin with the community he or she belongs to. . . . Moreover, without a state, a man is without family, heritage, and home, for these things have reality only within a political community. . . . The community is the right place for a person, and humans need to be seen in that context if we want to understand them.

For Aristotle a person is the legal child of So-and-so, the husband of So-and-so, the father of So-and-so, the owner of such land, the person who trades in such goods, the one who holds such office and votes under such-and-such name. These social properties and relationships define a person.
They do so by referring to other people, some of them closely related, others more distant, others who are fellow citizens, and eventually to the community itself. The individual is nothing without these relationships, has no importance, is nobody; for it is in this framework that he is credited and counts as an individual. The whole makes the part comprehensible.

Not everyone accepts atomism’s assumption that separate units provide understanding of a compound. . . . Such views encourage the suspicion that atomism may not be the only or best way to understand human society. Whether it is even a reasonable one needs reflection as well, for insofar as we take a theory of society seriously, our choice of a model is crucial.

The question of what a society is made up seems to many to have an obvious answer: It’s made up of individual people, as bricks in a wall, as molecules in a substance. What else is there besides individuals?

To explain a community in terms of these units is to imply that people are complete in themselves, that they are self-contained, independent, self-motivated, energized from within—by passions and desires, Hobbes would say. They are complete and real, each in him- or herself, and their autonomy is related to a certain independence. . . .

Starting with these units, we naturally see society as deriving from their individual interests. In its favor is Occam’s razor, which says that you should make only the minimum assumptions, nothing more. Social atomism needs nothing besides the individual units with their individual interests. It needs no glue to bind people together; self-interest will account for the society in what Nozick calls an “invisible hand” explanation, accounting for laws and institutions as the natural result of individual choices. Rationality enters here, for on this account we are rational if we recognize our self-interest and act accordingly. Because it is formed to serve people’s self-interests, government can be seen as just; it represents only what the people chose.

Given the starting point of separate and self-interested individuals, it is clear that those individuals must be equal. They must be equal to satisfy the anti-authoritarian mission of the theory, but also because this analysis is meant to derive a just society from a universal theory of human nature, a theory that represents humans as alike. People’s distinguishing characteristics, the superior talents and skills of some, differences of personality, age, sex, and ability to contribute to the community—all these elements must drop out if the analysis is to work. The atoms must be equal. . . .

Bricks are interchangeable and so are molecules of water; interchangeability goes with our understanding of such units. But in fact people are in
many ways not alike, and then how can it be fair to treat them as interchangeable? . . .

The theoretical role of the interchangeability principle is clear, but its application is not; in particular its application to differences of sex is problematic. How it can be just to treat people alike when their needs and situations differ?

Answers to this question are notoriously involved and difficult. Some people say that justice presupposes equality, but equality doesn’t mean similarity; people can be treated equally but differently. People’s equality is something more general, a matter of meriting equal respect, and not any specific treatment or specific rights. Others have called a prejudice our tendency to characterize any fair arrangement as one of equality. . . .

How can the model’s egalitarianism be squared with a society that accords respect to different kinds of individuals? Perhaps the most ingenious answer is John Rawls’s conception of an “original position” and the “veil of ignorance” that characterizes it. Rawls believes that the basic principles of a fair society can be founded upon a kind of blind egalitarianism, a philosophical starting point at which people are ignorant of their own characteristics and therefore of what would serve their advantage. In this position one would not know one’s sex, financial situation, education, talents, weaknesses, abnormalities. Not to know these things is not to know whether one is in a strong or weak position vis-à-vis others who are parties to the contract. Thus in the original position one will be careful to accept only principles that will not be prejudicial to oneself if one’s real position turns out to be weak. For it is assumed that people will take advantage of one another unless they imagine themselves similarly vulnerable. From this position, Rawls believes, people will come to agree on principles that are fair to everyone.

The original position is a philosophical device whose purpose is to make plausible the adoption of fair principles as people move from an unorganized existence to membership in a community. The resulting community, moreover, is one in which their conflicts of interest are resolved through a commonly accepted conception of justice. What guarantees people’s agreement to a single conception is that each will look at his own position in terms of all the possible positions, which will include those of others as well as his own, and come to a decision that will be both his own and hypothetically that of others.

It is important to distinguish the sense in which Rawls means a person to “put himself in the place of another” and the sense in which a white person, for instance, may “put himself in the place of” a black person when he con-
siders racial issues. The latter projection is an exercise in sympathy with the lot of others. But Rawls’s original position doesn’t depend on sympathy or feeling of humanity. It doesn’t ask the original parties imaginatively to take the point of view of others, projecting sympathy or empathy in the manner of Butler or Shaftesbury while they know that their own positions are secure. On the contrary: to evaluate the justice of a principle, one needs to look at its implications from a self-interested point of view, to consider all possible situations as if they might really be one’s own. Thus self-interest serves to define for Rawls a disinterested point of view; and such a view he considers the key to justice.

Rawls’s derivation of a just state from self-interest is part of a long, ongoing tradition of attempts to derive moral rules or principles of justice from self-interest, of attempts to show that being moral must in some way be reducible to doing what is to one’s benefit. What I attempt here is to understand why such projects seem plausible.

In a container of gas all molecules are free to move where they want. But the freedom they enjoy is to move randomly in space; what does the metaphor mean as applied to human beings? If we ask whether people act freely in a real community, the answer is most certainly no. Most of them, adults and children, act a good deal of the time according to fixed rules and responsibilities, according to promises and needs, not to mention the constraints of laws. What does it mean to say that nonetheless they are free? This remark signifies that we are looking through the grid of the model. Just as one cannot imagine molecules being restricted by invisible bonds, people must be free and independent, for only in this way can they satisfy the features of the model.

Autonomy, Rawls emphasizes, is closely connected with freedom, since everyone needs “equal liberty to pursue whatever plan of life he pleases” within broad limits. . . . But what does this mean for a real human life: from what position does one make his or her long-range plans? Is there an absolute beginning from which all possible life plans can be arrayed? Our real beginnings seem full of influences and training, and our plans change all the time. Is there undue interference with our free choice? And is it really so bad that some plans are frustrated while others fall of their own defects? Making and fulfilling our long-range plans might be crucial for happiness if happiness depended on our plan’s fulfillment, and if we knew at some very early age what would make us happy and what kind of life we wanted. But these are large qualifications.
The autonomy of individuals and their self-interest are connected with the use of contract to explain human connections and institutions. Consider the explanation of marriage as a contract made by two parties for their mutual self-interest. A sensible person has to wonder: a contract for what and concerning what? A contract involves specific conditions, and failure to carry out any one of them breaches the contract. Imagine, then, that a couple at their wedding are making a legally enforceable agreement regarding the exchange of goods or services, some kind of fair agreement based on mutual self-interest. What are the conditions of the contract? Does one promise to love and honor? The first is impossible to promise, the second is demeaning to free, autonomous agents. Other conditions mentioned are to stay together for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health—eventualities as risky as they are vague. And how long does the contract run? Until death. Besides the wonder that any rational being would engage in such a deal, there is the fact that such a contract could not be validly enforced. No performances are specified, no term is mentioned, much is specifically left to chance; how could such a contract be binding? And of course such “contracts” aren’t enforced.

Marriage is a legal relationship, voluntarily entered into, and in that way it is like a contract. But the commitment to weather unknown exigencies is a feature that no contract can tolerate. On the other side, if marriage had to be construed as a contract, one might argue that there would be nothing resembling marriage at all.

The reduction of such human relationships to contracts is forced upon us by a picture, the picture of atomism, and the problems it creates suggest that the picture cannot be right.

Nonetheless, society was also thought to rest on a contract. As Ronald Dworkin observes, the “contract device” is one that “supposes each individual to pursue his own interest and gives each a veto on the collective decision. . . . It is designed to produce the distribution that each individual deems in his own best interest, given his knowledge under [the contract].” Dworkin believes, however, that the relation of man in the state of nature to his role as citizen needs more explication. The claim that a society founded on a contract will be just is not self-evident; other fundamental requirements are needed, in particular the theory of natural rights. Thus he argues that “the deep theory behind the original position . . . must be a theory that is based on the concept of rights that are natural, in the sense that they are not the product of any legislation, or convention, or hypothetical contract.”
My claim is that the “deep theory” here goes even deeper than a theory of natural rights. At bottom is a theory of people’s natural discreteness, and from this theory an account of their relations to one another and to society has somehow to be derived. In that picture society arises only from some individual-based reason. For such creatures communal life has to result from rational self-interest, and even then the adjustments required may be awkward and uncomfortable. . . . In this tradition the individual always was at the center—his freedom to act, to express himself and pursue his interests entail his reluctance to be governed at all. He is at heart an anarchist and accepts government as a necessary evil.

Connected with individual freedom is the importance of competition. Just as molecules in a container bounce around in their competition for space, so the social molecules compete for the satisfaction of their needs and desires. In the state of nature competition was perfectly free but threatening; in a society it can be made orderly and peaceful, and thus it becomes the normal mode of human interaction.

But when this picture is applied to society, anomalies appear. In such a society the elderly and frail must compete with the young and strong, men compete with their childbearing wives, the handicapped compete with the well endowed. Correspondingly, the economy of the community is seen as an n-person game in which each player plays against all others to maximize his advantage. The problems of this picture have not deterred social and economic thinkers from using it, even though it is at center a picture of ruthless egoism and unconcern for others.

Through Hobbes and Locke the political implications of the model profoundly influenced the framers of the Constitution, who sharply appreciated its anti-authoritarian force. They viewed the founding of a new constitutional government as a new beginning, a chance to follow and act out the tenets of the contract theory, and as they were no longer united with England, they could assume the role of a collection of people who could choose and form their government as they wanted. Insofar as all the colonies had to ratify it, the Constitution could be thought of as a voluntary contract among all the people.

Much of the language of the Constitution, and the constitutions of the states, comes from social contract philosophers, especially Locke. The constitution of Virginia states, for example, “that all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot by any compact deprive or divest their posterity: namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring
and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” The Alabama Declaration of Rights declares “that all freemen, when they form a social compact, are equal in rights.” And the Connecticut Declaration of Rights pronounces “that all men, when they form a social compact, are equal in rights, and that no man or set of men are entitled to exclusive public emoluments or privileges from the community.” Sometimes it was the states rather than individuals that were viewed as the independent parties to the contract. But throughout the early American state papers appears language suggesting that a contract is the proper foundation for government.

The model’s claim to be scientific was also an important virtue. The framers did not, however, adopt Hobbes’s materialism and its deterministic consequences. . . . The emphasis on a human’s ability to reason and so to understand himself became associated later with the philosophy of John Locke.

Man was not to be seen only in terms of intellect and animal functions; he also had a moral side. But how could a moral nature be reconciled with the self-interest of atomism? The moral philosophers Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and Anthony Shaftesbury gave answers that showed man as a divided creature, a creature who was on one side moral, and who, regardless of intellect and education, was endowed with a moral sense. . . .

Both Reid and Hutcheson picture a moral egalitarianism, a moral democracy in which each person is competent to make good judgments and to be fully responsible for decisions. This vision had a profound influence on Jefferson, among others. . . .

Although the state is founded on contract, Jefferson believes justice has its source in men’s moral sense. But can these two views be made consistent? The social contract made voluntarily by all parties seems to have implicit justification; it was chosen freely. . . . But if every individual has a moral sense, justice ought to relate to that sense. Both of these conceptions of justice cannot be right. Nonetheless both belong to our tradition, and the tension between social contract theory and a moral view of human nature is reflected in the history of our political theory. It is a conflict that cannot be resolved. . . .

The atomistic model has important virtues. It founds the values of the community on private values; it encourages criticism of government and requires any government to answer to its original justification; it limits government’s powers, as they may threaten to interfere with the needs of atomistic units. It gives us assumptions about the nature of man and the
composition of society to start our reasoning, gives us a common ground in the values of freedom, autonomy, respect, equality, and the sanctity of desires. It thus frames a multitude of important political disputes, holds them together, shapes them, and sheds a clear, unequivocal theoretical light on them.

But it leaves a great deal out, as we have seen. In it one cannot picture human connections or responsibilities. We cannot locate friendliness or sympathy in it any more than we can imagine one molecule or atom moving aside for or assisting another; to do so would make a joke of the model. . . . The atomistic person is an unfortunate myth. . . . On a number of grounds the model needs challenging. A larger picture of human life needs to be considered, one that allows a firmer juncture between the moral and political realms, between the grammar of good and the grammar of justice. Or, what may amount to the same thing, we need to loosen the hold that the atomistic picture has on our thinking, and recognize the importance that theory has on our judgments and our moral condition.