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Autonomy and its limits in 'the good society'

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Abstract

In arguably his two major works, published more than a century ago, the social psychologist and co-founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Graham Wallas, argued first *against* utilitarian intellectualism for it being excessively reductionist in the face of complex human psychology, but then *for* a form of intellectualism to instil in people the reasoning abilities required for a large industrialised *Great Society* to also become a 'Good Society'. In this essay, I share Wallas's concern for over-intellectualising human motivation and at the same time believing that an intellectualism of sorts is needed for a social organisation that is tolerable for all. Specifically, I argue that the psychological affects that lie deep within human cognition may have evolved for good reason, and that even in the modern world it is not possible to determine when and where these tendencies lead people astray from their own personal desires. As such, individual autonomy over their choices and behaviours ought to be respected when people impose no substantive harms on others. However, in circumstances where autonomous actions cause substantive external harms, it may often be appropriate to intervene to curtail them. In short, we are faced with the delicate balancing of autonomy and harm when attempting to protect liberty for all. I conclude that in order to arrive at an appropriate balance, we might usefully turn to the writings of Joseph Raz, who intimated that the characteristics of autonomy are to extend people's opportunities, to improve their agentic capabilities, and to protect them from coercion and manipulation. Raz's arguments, I contend, offer up a framework for the Good Society, redux.

Keywords Agency · Autonomy · Freedom · Liberalism · Raz · Wallas

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1 Graham Wallas's (anti-) intellectualism

More than a century ago, the social psychologist Graham Wallas wrote two largely forgotten yet quite insightful books.[1] In the preface to the second of those books, *The Great Society*, in addressing his mentee, Walter Lippmann, Wallas (1914, p.v) wrote that: "Now that the book is finished, I can see, more clearly than I could while I was writing it, what it is about, and in particular what its relation is to my *Human Nature in Politics* (1908/2010). I may, therefore, say briefly that the earlier book … turned into an argument against nineteenth century intellectualism and that this book … has turned, at times, into an argument against certain forms of twentieth century anti-intellectualism."[2]

At first glance, one might conclude that Wallas was highlighting a contradiction across his works. In his earlier book (*Human Nature in Politics*), which addressed the issue, challenges and actions of representative government, he was critical of Benthamite utilitarianism, which he saw as the dominant intellectual paradigm of his time and place (Wallas, 1908/2010). He critiqued, for instance, the notion that our decisions are driven by selecting actions based on a precise calculation of the pleasure and/or pain of their likely outcomes, and wrote that: "We are apt to assume that every action is the result of an intellectual process, by which a man first thinks of some end which he desires, and then calculates the means by which that end can be attained… If…a man were followed through one ordinary day, without his knowing it, by a cinematographic camera and a phonograph, and if all his acts and sayings were reproduced before him next day, he would be astonished to find how few of them were the result of a deliberate search for the means of attaining ends" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.21–22).[3] Moreover, he wrote that: "… as a complete science of politics Benthamism is no longer possible. Pleasure and pain are indeed facts about human nature, but they are not the only facts which are important to the politician.

[1] Graham Wallas (1858–1932) was an early member of the Fabian Society, an elected member of the London School Board (from 1894), and a co-founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science. He was later a Professor in Political Science at the University of London (of which the LSE was then a part). His interests sat firmly within what is now known as behavioural public policy and behavioural public administration. Although he was a Fabian socialist (until 1904), he demonstrated strong liberal sympathies over most of his career and left the Fabian Society due to their support of tariff policy. Wallas was also an important mentor to the great liberal journalist and scholar, Walter Lippmann. For in-depth studies of Wallas's life and career, see Qualter (1980) and Wiener (1971).

[2] When Wallas writes that he was critical of intellectualism in his earlier book (*Human Nature in Politics*), he appears to be referring to narrow forms of rationalism – in particular, those relating to the hedonic calculus – that were then prominent. He saw it as unrealistic to believe that people reason as such. To remain consistent with him, this is also how I define intellectualism in this essay. Incidentally, more than twenty years after Wallas published *The Great Society*, Lippmann published *The Good Society*, which was in some ways a response to and extension of Wallas's earlier book (Lippmann, 1937/2017).

[3] One may contend that people *ought* to decide following such an outcomes assessment even if, in practice, they invariably do not. We will leave the normative-descriptive discrepancy to one side for now, but for the record Wallas believed that it is better to base policy on how people *do* behave, rather than on assumptions of how they *should* behave. As a further aside, Wallas's 'cinematographic camera and phonograph' image brings to mind the day reconstruction method, favoured by many modern psychologists and economists as a means by which to elicit measures of subjective satisfaction (see Kahneman, 2011, Chap. 37).

The Benthamites, by straining the meaning of words, tried to classify such motives as instinctive impulse, ancient tradition, habit, or personal and racial idiosyncrasy as being forms of pleasure and pain. But they failed; and the search for a basis of valid political reasoning has to begin again, among a generation more conscious than were Bentham and his disciples of the complexity of the problem, and less confident of absolute success" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.23).[4,5]

Wallas (1908/2010) thus warned against the intellectualist tendency to reduce human behaviour to particular narrow ends. He maintained that instincts, emotions and impulses are complex drivers of our behaviours that evolved from our reactions to our environments.[6] He recognised quite forcefully that modern society had changed so much from the circumstances in which the instincts had evolved that the latter may often cause us to diverge from our own best interests, and in his later work wrote that "… intellectual and emotional nature was evolved in contact with the restrictive environment of the primitive world… [humans] have not yet learnt, if ever they will, either to educate in each generation their faculties to fit their environment, or to change their environment so as to fit their faculties" (Wallas, 1914, p.144).[7] However, one may retort that when and where a person's emotive forces are incongruent with their environment cannot be discerned by a third party. As a corollary of this argument, Wallas poured scorn on the notion held by many ancient and modern scholars that emotion and reason can be disentangled in the study of human behaviour, noting that: "Any one who watches the working of his own mind will find that it is by no means easy to trace [the] sharp distinctions between various mental states,

[4] On an individual level, it would seem highly questionable to abandon any personal project that does not adhere to some kind of utilitarian calculation. By abandoning personal projects, a person would alienate themselves from their own actions, convictions and identity, which may often be more important to them than the consequences of those projects (see Raz, 1986).

[5] It ought to be noted that Wallas greatly admired Bentham. Indeed, his biographer, Wiener (1971, p.9), claimed that while Wallas was an undergraduate he joined the ranks of the 'last utilitarians' at Oxford. However, his admiration was focussed on Bentham's scientific and psychological *approach* to social reform – in his understanding of society through the lens of human behaviour. Also, like Bentham, Wallas believed that philosophy was useless unless it served as a guide to practical politics. However, as suggested above, he was highly critical of the *content* of Bentham's utilitarianism, considering it too reductive – too intellectualist in the sense of it imposing the assumption that humans are essentially calculative pleasure/pain automatons – to reflect the complexity of human nature. Although, to Wallas, rational calculation was one characteristic that underpinned human behaviour, it was only one of many, with impulses and emotions also being key. Wallas remained throughout his life antipathetic to monist theories of human behaviour, which was part of the reason why he also rejected Marxism. See Dold (this issue), Rizzo (this issue) and Dragos Aligica and Boettke (this issue) for further critical discussions of outcomes-based monist theories and support for value pluralism.

[6] "Impulse, it is now agreed, has an evolutionary history of its own earlier than the history of those intellectual processes by which it is often directed and modified. Our inherited organisation inclines us to re-act in certain ways to certain stimuli because such reactions have been useful in the past in preserving our species" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.22).

[7] Modern day behavioural paternalists could, in principle, use this quote to support their contention that people's automatic choices can be legitimately influenced by a reshaping of their environments by policy makers eager to achieve particular outcomes, but given that he never entirely lost faith in people's ability to reason my sense is that although Wallas was supportive of using the emotions in order to provoke people to think it is unlikely that he would have endorsed the notion that the State use emotions to manipulate people's behaviours *instead of* motivating them to think.

which seem so obvious when they are set out in little books on psychology. The mind of man is like a harp, all of whose strings throb together; so that emotion, impulse, inference, and the special kind of inference called reasoning, are often simultaneous and intermingled aspects of a single mental experience" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.53).[8]

Wallas was also of the view that the passions often provoke thought. For instance, "Men will not take up the 'intolerable disease of thought' unless their feelings are first stirred, and the strength of the idea of Science has been that it does touch men's feelings, and draws motive power for thought from the passions of reverence, of curiosity, and of limitless hope" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.92). On the flipside, Wallas believed that reason could sometimes beneficially contain the passions, noting that "a very simple course on the well-ascertained facts of psychology would, if patiently taught, be quite intelligible to any children of thirteen or fourteen who had received some small preliminary training in scientific method … A town child, again, lives nowadays in the constant presence of the psychological art of advertisement, and could easily be made to understand the reason why, when he is sent to get a bar of soap, he feels inclined to get that which is most widely advertised" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.93).[9] However, as illustrated by the quotation at the end of the previous paragraph, the important point to note is that he remained sceptical of the notion that instincts, emotions (etc.) can be, or ought to be, entirely tamed.

In *Human Nature in Politics*, Wallas wrote that he wanted more psychology and empirical evaluation in political science and policy analysis (hence, as noted, his liking for Bentham's general mindset). "I have argued", he wrote, "that the efficiency of political science, its power, that is to say, of forecasting the results of political causes, is likely to increase. I based my argument on two facts, firstly, that modern psychology offers us a conception of human nature much truer, though more complex, than that which is associated with the traditional English political philosophy; and secondly, that, thinkers are already beginning to use in their discussions and inquiries quantitative rather than merely qualitative words and methods, and are able therefore both to state their problems more fully and to answer them with a greater approximation to accuracy" (Wallas, 1908/2010, p.84). Thus, in common with many economists of his era, he called for testable, and tested, hypotheses in the social sciences.

In the wake of his 1908 book, Wallas felt that his association with anti-intellectualism had been taken too far. He had expressed some scepticism about the merits of democracy, believing that people's natural psychology was insufficient to rely on

[8] Wallas recognised that instinctive and 'intelligent' dispositions do not form a single continuum; that fear, for example, is different from curiosity. But he maintained that it is not possible to demarcate them into entirely separate influences on human behaviour and decision making (i.e. in essence, that these dispositions – a term he used to combine emotions and reason – interact with each other in influencing us). The liberal scholar Raz (1986) made a similar point but in relation to moral judgements, noting that "It is generally admitted that certain judgments should be accompanied by appropriate emotional responses. Feelings of gratitude, resentment, anger, regret, guilt, and many others, play an important role in sound moral lives … [there is an] intimate connection between judgment and feeling in various areas of morality" (Raz, 1986, p.405).

[9] Wallas's view in this regard was prescient in that it resembles aspects of the boosting approach in contemporary behavioural public policy (e.g. see Hertwig, 2017). His thoughts align with the idea that people's 'agentic capabilities' can be enhanced; for discussions of agentic capability see Dold (this issue) and Hargreaves Heap (this issue).

them to create the Good Society merely via the extension of voting rights. As noted by Qualter (1980, p.96), "[Wallas] had shown how the optimistic democratic theory of the nineteenth century had been vitiated by excessive rationalism, by the failure to recognise the part played in human behaviour by easily exploited and manipulated and semi-conscious emotional forces".[10] Hence Wallas's belief that social organisation ought to be informed by a realistic view of men's instincts and reason (i.e. their dispositions), to direct society towards ends that would in some sense satisfy most people. However, he wanted to modify rather than dismiss the extent to which one ought to have faith in human reasoning. For Wallas, as aforementioned, reason and instinct are intertwined, and thus one could not definitively conclude that any complex pattern of behaviour is unintellectual. Wallas was (perhaps implicitly) motivated to write *The Great Society* to correct the impression of excessive anti-intellectualism – i.e. an excessive belief that humans are incapable of reasoning – in his earlier tract (Wallas, 1914).

Throughout his life, Wallas was critical of extreme laissez-faire forms of liberal capitalism – for its tendency to create power and wealth inequities where the "individual liberty of the masters meant the slavery of the men" (Qualter, 1980, p.37), and where the lower classes were left with a sense of undeserved misfortune (Wiener, 1971).[11] As a young man, this led him to call for the bourgeoise to be rendered ineffective by progressive taxation, the nationalisation of key industries, and community control over all aspects of economic life, a set of beliefs that cohered with his, at that time, fellow Fabians (whose convictions only strengthened over time). However, Wallas later left the Fabians due to their support for tariff policy (as noted earlier), but also due to their focus on the mechanics of administrative detail and their underappreciation of the importance of culture and psychology in policy design.[12] Wallas was, in essence, sympathetic to interventionist (or radical or evangelical) liberalism, in which individuals have rights but that these rights come with the burden of social obligations (i.e. with the expectation that individuals will cooperate with their fellow citizens).

Wallas (1914) published *The Great Society*, which dealt with general social organisation rather than representative government, six years after his previous work.

[10] In summarising Wallas's view on propaganda, Qualter (1980, p.93) wrote that: "Although men commonly attempt to intellectualise their responses, to explain their behaviour in logical terms, the initial attitude on which the response is founded is, almost always, an emotional reaction to the primary associations of the stimulus." Wallas was quite aware that commercial advertisers manipulate people's emotions, which he viewed as bad enough, but when politicians do it – which some of course did and do– he believed that they undermine democracy itself. Moreover, as noted earlier, since men have to live and act in societies and since they can be motivated by all sorts of emotional prompting, Wallas believed that it is the business of social psychology to discover the general conditions under which men are likely to act more, rather than less, wisely. He was, however, vague on the substance of these conditions.

[11] Others, including Choi and Storr (this issue), contend that the competitive market is the best means by which to alleviate poverty.

[12] Wallas was initially drawn to the Fabians due to their reforming inclinations and due to what he saw as the intellectual stagnation of late nineteenth century liberalism. He believed that the Fabians had assumed the task that the liberals had shirked, but he later felt more comfortable with interventionist liberals such as Hubert Henderson and John Maynard Keynes than with the stalwarts of the Fabian movement. Towards the end of his life, Wallas, like Sidney and Beatrice Webb, may have taken a sharp turn to the left, but my interest in this essay is in his pre-dotage body of work (see Wiener, 1971, pp.191–193).

In the later book, Wallas wrote that with knowledge and effort, people could better control their instincts through reasoning, and that they would learn to be more cooperative (as opposed to having collectivism forced upon them). He believed that they would experience greater liberty through the mechanism of voluntary collective action than through the competitive forces of the market, bringing to mind the works of de Tocqueville (1835/1998) and, more recently, Ostrom (1990). As an elected member of the London School Board, it is unsurprising that Wallas saw the potential for elementary education as a means by which reasoning abilities could be improved, to stimulate, as he saw important, children's desire for the qualities that make life worth living (and to serve as a moralising and civilising force).[13] Education was, Wallas thought, in essence an aspect of positive liberty, which was, for him, just as important as freedom from restraint in helping people to secure the good life.

Beyond education but returning to the perils of laissez-faire, Wallas also saw that in order for a large industrialised *Great Society* to become a Good Society, the liberties of some who would otherwise exploit their privileges need to be constrained to protect general liberty for all, an outlook that aligns with that of some of the great liberal thinkers, including Locke (1689/2016) and Mill (1859/1969).[14] This, according to Qualter (1980), was the defining ethos of Wallas's lifetime work, and underpinned his critique of the laissez-faire liberalism that had dominated the nineteenth century and his support for a more interventionist form of liberalism. Moreover, there is validity to his assertion that human emotions and instincts should not be downplayed in policy formation, and that it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to delineate emotion from reason. He was also correct to suggest that the tendency for people to be led by their emotions can be exploited by those who have a desire to manipulate, that knowledge and effort can strengthen human reasoning ability, but that the emotions are an essential part of what it means to be human and that the circumstances where they cause people to err cannot easily be identified. Although Wallas is largely forgotten and although, as noted, he was somewhat vague on policy prescription, his general ideas and thoughts remain relevant to the contemporary public policy discourse. For the remainder of this essay, I will take up some of the themes that Wallas identified and will propose how they might offer food for thought for the Good Society, redux.

[13] In modern parlance, we might say that Wallas saw education as a means of improving people's agentic capabilities (noted earlier), and with greater knowledge and effort the outcome he assumed that people would strive for– and the outcome he thought they ought to strive for – was something akin to Aristotle's notion of eudemonia (i.e. fulfilment, harmony, dignity and individual worth). Incidentally, the London School Board was the first directly elected body to cover the whole of London and was responsible for various aspects of elementary education following the introduction of a universal education system in 1870. In 1902, the Board was replaced by local education authorities.

[14] Wallas's use of the term, the *Great Society*, is not to be confused with Friedrich Hayek's use of the same term. By *Great Society*, Wallas was referring to the large, complex industrial societies of his day. I have taken the term 'Good Society' from Lippmann's (1937/2017) book to refer to a society that is tolerable to all, or almost all, of its' citizenry ('The Great Society and the Good Society' is also the title of Chap. 5 in Qualter's (1980) biography of Wallas). Hayek's notion of a Great Society was, for him, a liberal, open society, based upon mutual civility among its members (Hayek, 1973), which is what Wallas also desired. What Hayek meant by a Great Society was more in tune with the term, a Good Society, used in this essay.

2 The legitimacy of instinct

As was intimated by Wallas, it is often the case that people cannot clearly articulate the reasonings behind their choices, decisions and behaviours – that these are simply a manifestation of who they are, and often perhaps of who they implicitly want to be.[15] Optimisation consequentialists, including Benthamite utilitarians, claim that a consideration of the relative expected outcomes of our decisions so as to identify those which might reap the most benefit in this regard will determine what we do, or at least what we ought to do, but that is often not the case. Indeed, that we choose that which maximises our welfare is sometimes a logical impossibility, or at least would involve a calculation too complex for most humans to process because the decision itself alters the future conditions – conditions over which we often have no concrete a priori experience – from which welfare might be realised.

A related point, made by many scholars, is that for most of our decisions, our desires are antecedent to any consideration of outcomes, rather than the weighing of outcomes being the driver of our desires. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, albeit from a teleological perspective, postulated that although people experience delight in achieving a desired end, they do not seek the end in order to get pleasure from it. Rather, the pleasure derives from the achievement, irrespective of what the end is (see Hirschfeld, 2018). From a Thomistic perspective, the "… pursuit of goods, then, is the material on which we exercise that excellence. That is to say, while a life filled with goods is desirable, our truest happiness lies in the agency we exercise in obtaining them" (Hirschfeld, 2018, p.108).[16]

Seven centuries later, Bertrand Russell more directly challenged the notion that outcomes maximisation, or more specifically hedonic utility (which, as discussed, had been Wallas's main bone of contention with utilitarianism), drives human decision making when he wrote that: "… if what is meant is that, when I desire anything, I desire it because of the pleasure that it will give me, that is usually untrue. When I am hungry I desire food, and so long as my hunger persists food will give me pleasure. But the hunger, which is a desire, comes first; the pleasure is a consequence of the desire. I do not deny that there are occasions when there is a direct desire for pleasure.

[15] Conversely, there are those, including Frank Knight and James Buchanan, who contend that our unconsidered behaviours are not a manifestation of who we want to be; rather, that we are 'artifactual humans' in that we reflect on who we wish to become and want to be 'better' than what we are (see Buchanan, 1979; Knight, 1921; Lewis & Dold, 2020; for a discussion in this issue, see Hargreaves Heap). As we have seen, Wallas also believed that people have the ability to improve their reasoning capacities and to consequently improve their lives, and it is plausible that this may indeed be the case for many people (even if it may actually be their impulses as much as their reasoning that is driving them forwards). But it is also plausible that many others are more accepting of themselves as they are.

[16] Hirschfeld (2018) uses this notion to critique the perception, often (mis)attributed to neoclassical economics, that money ought to be pursued as an end in itself. Although she contends that money can instrumentally help people to achieve many of their desires, if it is treated as an end in itself it leads to a covetousness that cannot be satiated. According to Hirschfeld, a Thomistic account requires that our appetites are at rest when our desires have been met, but if the accumulation of money is what is desired, our appetites will never be fulfilled. However, this point is tangential to my main argument here, which is that satisfaction may be achieved principally through the pursuit and realisation of a desire, rather than through the experience of the desire itself, and thus the expectation of the satisfaction that the experience of the desire itself can give to us, even if it is or can be calculated, is often not a principal driver of our decisions.

If you have decided to devote a free evening to the theatre, you will choose the theatre that you think will give you the most pleasure. But the actions thus determined by the direct desire for pleasure are exceptional and unimportant. Everybody's main activities are determined by desires which are anterior to the calculation of pleasures and pain … Anything whatever may be an object of desire; a masochist may desire his own pain. The masochist, no doubt, derives pleasure from the pain that he has desired, but the pleasure is because of the desire, not vice versa' (Russell, 1946/1996, p.745).[17] If Russell (et al.) was right in his claim that most desires are antecedent to outcomes considerations, then how can we conclude that these largely instinctive processes are definitively erroneous?[18] They presumably often evolved to aid our survival as a species.

One should not conclude, though, that instinctive responses are limited to basic desires such as hunger and that outside of those they do not stand up to deliberative scrutiny. Rather, as intimated earlier, the instinctive responses may often reflect the person who we want to be, and the type of society in which we wish to live.[19] Consider, for example, the rule of rescue, which typically implies that humans are driven to protect those who are in severe and immediate peril, a rule that is strengthened if we can identify with those at risk (e.g. see Jonsen, 1986).[20] Stark examples of the rule of rescue prompting a strong and widespread human reaction can be observed following media reports of miners and children trapped down mines or wells, those in danger of being lost at sea, captive hostages (etc.), but such concerns seem at odds with the values that are often placed on life and health by policy makers in pursuit of a rational, reasoned, purely outcomes-based use of public resources.

Authors of transport safety evaluations, for instance, attempt to place monetary values on a statistical life (or life-year), and health economists have developed instruments that purport to derive cardinal numerical indices for varying health states (which are in turn used as core inputs in the calculation of so-called quality-adjusted life-years, or QALYs, a health-specific form of utility). Assuming that one has faith in the validity of these methods (in itself, a strong assumption), the intention behind their use is to discern the maximum amount of money – often but not exclusively from public resources – that ought to be spent on saving a life or generating an improvement in health status for a defined population. Yet these resource commitments – perhaps an estimated £1–5 million to save a life and £30,000-150,000 for each additional QALY gained (depending on study design, sample, location etc.) – may run counter to the common desire to rescue people who are in immediate peril,

[17] Raz (1986, p.344) made a similar point to Russell's when he wrote that "… the fact that we care about one thing rather than another determines to a considerable degree what is in our interest and what is not. Therefore we cannot rank options by their contributions to our well-being. The conditions are determined by our choices, and therefore they can guide our choices only to a limited extent. In large measure the direction is the other way: our choices determine our well-being."

[18] Strictly speaking, Russell, like Wallas, was critiquing the Benthamite preoccupation with pleasure/pain as the relevant outcome domain, but the argument can be generalised to more broadly defined measures of welfare.

[19] Remember Raz's contention that feeling is an inseparable driver of morality.

[20] Charities are of course well aware of the power of identifiability, which is why they tend to provide pictures and details of individuals in their information and fundraising campaigns.

where resource constraints tend to be afforded a lower priority. Of course, one might reasonably contend, particularly when resources are limited, that our reactions and responses to those in peril should be more reasoned, but it is difficult to conclude that the rule of rescue as a basic human instinct – as a symptom and signal of our personal and common humanity – is entirely misplaced.[21]

The rule of rescue is a response to how we, as citizens, might choose to act towards others, but much of the discussion about the potentially distorting effects of emotions focusses on how we tend to act towards ourselves. Returning to the instincts, impulses and emotions that were Wallas's (1908) concern, which are at one with the psychological heuristics that modern behavioural paternalists believe can cause people to automatically choose and behave in conflict with their more reasoned decisions, we can examine the assumption that these affects cause us to err.[22] As intimated earlier in this essay, there is a long history of questioning whether the instincts necessarily cause errors in individual decision making to the extent that behavioural paternalists appear to believe, given that these instincts may have often evolved for good reason. To reiterate, even if we believe, as Wallas did, that modern societies are quite different from the circumstances that prevailed during the time in which the psychological affects evolved, it is difficult to discern exactly when these phenomena are leading contemporary humans away from their fundamental desires. This difficulty is faced by those who are themselves subject to these affects (i.e. all of us, frequently) in terms of their desires for their *own* lives. It is therefore almost impossible for one party (i.e. a policy maker) to decide with any degree of authority that the instincts, impulses and emotions of *another party* are causing that person to choose or behave contrary to their own interests and desires.[23]

Take, for example, the oft purported claim that people are saving insufficiently for their retirements. It is typically assumed that this issue is a paternalistic concern (i.e. that people, due to psychological biases that cause them to focus too much on the present, are harming themselves), rather than it being one principally causing intergenerational externalities (i.e. that the future young will have to cross-subsidise the future old). That insufficient savings for retirement tends to be presented as a

[21] It is possible that our sensitivity towards those with whom we identify evolved from the fact that modern humans resided in small groups for much of their existence, where each person literally did know, and were reliant and relied upon by, most other members of their group. It may be contended that in contemporary societies, where each of us know a relatively small proportion of the 'whole', our decisions regarding resource allocation ought to be more rational than they are even if we are emotionally prompted into feeling that we know those who are in peril, but there remains the danger that curbing our sense of identifiability may dull our humanity, with detrimental effects.

[22] There are a great many affects and heuristics. Examples of affects are so-called present bias, loss aversion and probability weighting, and examples of heuristics include anchoring, representativeness and confirmation. For an introduction to the policy use of these psychological phenomena, see Oliver (2017).

[23] These assertions assume that those otherwise targeted for behavioural change possess a sufficient level of competence over their decisions (i.e. those that Mill (1859/1969) wrote are in the maturity of their faculties), which excludes children and many who are in some sense mentally compromised (e.g. schizophrenics who are considered to pose a danger to themselves). Other parties can of course attempt to educate and inform people about the possible implications of their choices and behaviours, but the implications that are of importance to each person ought to be left in the hands of that person. That is, their autonomy ought to be respected and protected, which renders as illegitimate any paternalistic manipulative or coercive measures.

self-evident problem serves to justify instruments of manipulation and even coercion (e.g. see Thaler & Benartzi, 2004; Conly, 2012). Yet manipulation and coercion in this domain are associated with potentially damaging unintended consequences, and yet more damaging intentional infringements on freedom and autonomy.

For instance, manipulating or coercing people into particular pension plans may reduce their incentive to search for plans that better serve their desires, or may lead to reductions in their spending during times when they desire to spend more. Some people may have considered all of the implications of spending versus saving in the present and have decided that they wish to enjoy life in the moment (by travelling and other leisure activities, for example), while others – perhaps millions of people even in wealthy countries – in the absence of assistance, genuinely cannot afford further reductions in their current disposable incomes without slipping into deepening poverty. This is not to conclude that policy makers ought to do nothing about perceived insufficient savings. For instance, they could endeavour to educate people about the implications of low savings for retirement and attempt to improve financial literacy within the population, all while preserving individual autonomy. Moreover, policy makers could introduce measures that incentivise an improvement in the quality, range and transparency of pension savings plans, and can regulate against unacceptable manipulations by pension plan providers.[24] It is unlikely that manipulating or coercing citizens on the basis of assuming that others know that the psychological affects are moving them away from their 'true' desires is conducive to a Good Society.

However, Wallas (1914) was also right to emphasise that those who aspire to govern a Good Society cannot allow people's emotive and instinctive motivations to run wild, because one person's untamed impulses may impose great harms on others.[25] To repeat, in order to maintain a 'tolerable' society, some freedoms have to be constrained, and discerning when and where to regulate appropriately in this manner is a crucial endeavour.[26]

3 The good society, redux

Given that people have multifarious intra- and interpersonal desires in and across their own lives, they cannot be manipulated or coerced towards a universal 'standard' that would suit everyone. As noted by Raz (1986, p.108), "Unlike illiberal states,

[24] A more profound yet more difficult way in which policy makers might ensure that significant segments of the population increase their long-term savings rates may be to alleviate poverty.

[25] Wallas was concerned that the emotions that drive people often damage relations not only within but also between Great Societies. For instance, on the eve of the First World War, he wrote: "If one looks from the forces which bear upon that relation between states without which world-industry and world-commerce cannot exist, one sees there too that the 'Realpolitiker', the men who claim to voice in England or in Germany the living human passions, stand not for European unity but for European disruption" (Wallas, 1914, pp.11–12).

[26] Lewis (2023), in commenting on Hayek's body of work, similarly contends that although Hayek came to believe that our evolved psychological characteristics are there for a reason (and thus ought to be respected), 'creationist' structures (e.g. market regulations) are needed in order to ensure that our instincts better serve society, which is a line of thought consistent with that expressed by Wallas, albeit with Wallas being more circumspect about the market being the appropriate mechanism for these purposes.

which regard it as a primary function of the state to see to the moral character of society, liberal states shun such activities. They reject the idea that the state has a right to impose a conception of the good on its inhabitants, and this self-restraint forms the foundation of political liberty under liberal regimes."[27] He went on to state that "The live-and-let-live picture leads us away from political welfarism and toward the suggestion that the state's concern is with the provision of adequate means for individuals to pursue their own ideals of the good. This may be justified by invoking the value of autonomy, i.e. the view that the fact that a person controls aspects of his life, and determines their shape, gives his life value" (Raz, 1986, p.144). In a liberal society, a premium is placed on individual autonomy so that, within constraints and given the right institutions, people can go their own way. But what are the conditions of autonomy?

Returning to Raz, "The conditions of autonomy are complex and consist of three distinct components: appropriate mental abilities, an adequate range of options, and independence… If a person is to be maker or author of his own life then he must have the mental abilities to form intentions of a sufficiently complex kind, and plan their execution. These include minimum rationality, the ability to comprehend the means required to realize his goals, the mental faculties necessary to plan actions, etc. For a person to enjoy an autonomous life he must actually use these faculties to choose what life to have. There must in other words be adequate options available for him to choose from. Finally, his choice must be free from coercion and manipulation by others, he must be independent" (Raz, 1986, pp.372−73).[28] These three conditions – i.e. ensuring and, it might be suggested, improving agentic capabilities, widening the opportunity set, and maintaining freedom from manipulation and coercion – are, I concur and contend, necessary (but not necessarily sufficient) foundational (but still in practice largely aspirational) conditions for the Good Society.

As aforementioned, in a liberal society – over and above securing the core liberal values of protecting life and property – one has to at least consider constraining the freedoms of those who would otherwise manipulate or coerce. Thus, those aiming to create or protect the liberal vision of the Good Society must shine a spotlight on negative liberty, but they must also shine a spotlight on positive liberty.[29] Raz suggested similarly, writing that "Governments are subject to autonomy-based duties to provide the conditions

[27] This quote implies that Raz focussed his critique on the coercive State, but he did not distinguish greatly between coercion and manipulation. "Manipulation, unlike coercion," he maintained, "does not interfere with a person's options. Instead it perverts the way that person reaches decisions, forms preferences or adopts goals" (Raz, 1986, pp.377–378). But "Manipulating people… interferes with their autonomy, and does so in much the same way and to the same degree, as coercing them. Resort to manipulation should be subject to the same condition as resort to coercion. Both can be justified only to prevent harm [to others]" (Raz, 1986, p.420). Incidentally, Wallas, like Raz to some extent (see footnote 28), remained a moraliser, who believed that people would ideally strive for that which gave their lives meaning. I am not so concerned with what people pursue, so long as the conditions are such that they can best pursue whatever they want (subject to them not unduly harming others).

[28] Raz does not believe that autonomy requires an unrestricted range of options – only a range of options that can be considered in some sense valuable. In this sense, like Wallas, he is a liberal perfectionist. I thank Jonathan Wolff for drawing my attention to this point.

[29] See Hargreaves Heap (this issue) for a discussion of how institutions might balance negative and positive freedoms, in part in relation to Mill's harm principle.

of autonomy for people who lack them. … if the government has a duty to promote the autonomy of people the harm principle allows it to use coercion both in order to stop people from actions which would diminish people's autonomy and in order to force them to take actions which are required to improve people's options and opportunities. … a government whose responsibility is to promote the autonomy of its citizens is entitled to redistribute resources, to provide public goods and to engage in the provision of other services on a compulsory basis" (Raz, 1986, pp.415–417). In these quotes, Raz is arguing that a government that takes autonomy seriously ought to create the conditions and provide the services that facilitate the pursuit of people's personal desires.

What might these services be? This question brings to mind Sen's capability theory.[30] Although Sen intimates that access to some level of health care, education, nutrition and shelter (among other things) are reasonable capabilities that a whole population should enjoy, he is careful to avoid stating definitively what the capability set ought to be, contending that it should be decided through some form of public discussion, presumably to avoid the charge that he is paternalistically imposing his own view on others as to what matters in human life. One could criticise Sen for his silence on the exact format such a public forum might take, but one might also contend that this falls outside the bounds of his expertise. It is for political scientists to design a mechanism to elicit the set of capabilities that the public or their representatives deem appropriate. Irrespective of the composition of the capability set, however, Sen maintains that respect for autonomy is a non-negotiable tenet of his approach.

Autonomy appears to be preserved at three points in Sen's theory (see Sen, 2006). First, as noted, he refuses to impose the capability set himself, and insists that this must be decided freely through some form of public agreement. That is, people must accept and agree that they have reasons to value the capabilities that are chosen as the foci of public policy. Second, although Sen's framework is consequentialist, a major objective of the capabilities is that they are meant to support autonomous lives, in tune with John Stuart Mill's (and Wallas's) view that a basic level of education is liberty-enhancing (Mill, 1859/1969). Third, since a capability set that is agreed upon by the majority will almost inevitably fail to command the support of a minority (indeed, the majority may not agree with *all* components of the capability set), no-one is to be compelled to take advantage of all that is on offer. They are to be viewed as opportunities, with people remaining free to go their own way as they wish.

This being said, as noted above, Sen's approach, like Mill's and Wallas's, is consequentialist, and he sees autonomy as a part of wellbeing.[31] Sugden (2006) took issue with Sen's framework by seeing little possibility of *collective* (i.e. universal) agreement on what is ultimately valuable in human life.[32] If capabilities are placed entirely within a consequentialist framework (i.e. if capabilities, or rather the functionings they facilitate, are outcomes that are desired in and of themselves), Sugden's concern

[30] Sen has, of course, written widely and extensively on this topic, but, for a single source, see Sen (1999).

[31] Much as Mill took liberty to be part of a broad definition of utility.

[32] Sugden maintains that not everyone will accept a public agreement on 'reasons to value' as *their* values, and would discover that some of the things that *they* value are absent from the capability set. Presumably, Sen's retort would be that people remain free to pursue anything outside of the formal capability set. For a third party's perspective on the debate between Sen and Sugden, see Qizilbash (2006, 2011).

is reasonable. However, if capabilities are considered as facilitators of autonomy – i.e. as prerequisites for people to be competent authors of their own lives – then some form of collective judgment on what improves competency in this respect is perhaps necessary. This is essentially the second point of autonomy in Sen's capability approach mentioned above.[33] However, unlike Sen, one may in this respect propose a contractarian rather than a consequentialist vision, because, as maintained earlier in this essay, people's desires are often antecedent to any consideration of consequences. In short, rather than seeing autonomy as part of wellbeing, wellbeing can be viewed as one possible component of autonomy.[34]

It is nevertheless relevant to consider both Sen's – and indeed Sugden's – thoughts in the quest to outline a conceptual framework for the Good Society. Sugden (2018), by arguing for a larger opportunity set, places a strong emphasis on what is essentially also Raz's contention that autonomy requires an adequate range of options from which individuals can choose, albeit with Raz placing a stronger emphasis than Sugden on restricting options to those that are 'valued'. But Sugden downplays the concern that autonomy requires sufficient agentic capability, which may in part be achieved via Sen's capabilities. Both Sugden are Sen are opposed to coercion, but Sugden, at least, is wary of arguments that call for the mitigation of manipulation (see Lyons and Sugden, forthcoming; Sugden, 2018). For me, the Good Society will be autonomy driven, and to that end it will facilitate those people who wish to increase, through mutually beneficial cooperation, the opportunities available to themselves and their fellow citizens, an end that Wallas hoped would be achieved by enhancing the reasoning abilities of the citizenry. It will also provide those services that are deemed foundational, via public discussion, to people's pursuit of their desires in life, whatever their personal desires may be. But it will also recognise that there will be instances where some people's autonomous actions, if left unchecked, can impose unacceptable harms on others, and thus need to be constrained.[35] In a nutshell, the Good Society will be a manifestation of the conditions of autonomy as postulated by Joseph Raz.

4 Conclusion

Wallas's writings remain relevant for contemporary audiences in that there is validity in the argument that human instincts, impulses, emotions and psychological affects ought to be respected in policy design and that efforts to manipulate people should be

[33] Note again that this is also the view that Mill expressed with respect to education – i.e. that education can improve people's capacity to be the authors of their own lives (figuratively, and for some even literally, speaking).

[34] Buchanan (2005, p.57) expressed similar sentiments. He wrote that to pay "… attention to any aggregative value scale … conceals the uniqueness of the liberal order in achieving the objective of individual liberty. … by so doing, we shift our own focus to that game rather than to our own, which we as classical liberals must learn to play, and on our own terms, as well as get others involved. Happily, a few modern classical liberals are indeed beginning to redraw the playing fields as they introduce comparative league tables that place emphasis on measuring liberty."

[35] For a critique and a discussion of how I have proposed that harms ought to be mitigated through the lens of behavioural public policy, see Sugden (this issue).

countered. I have also argued in this essay that we ought to question the notion that these instincts (etc.) should be directly corrected by third parties.[36] Given that people have multifarious desires, many of which we may never understand, we simply do not know whether, when or where their psychologies are leading them astray. Since these affects presumably often evolved for good reason, we must be cautious of dismissing them, and over the domain of human behaviours and decisions that impose no substantive harms on others, protect and nurture individual autonomy.[37]

Yet if left entirely unrestrained, some people will act on impulses that cause substantive harms to others. Consequently, resonating with Mill's (1859/1969) harm principle, in a Good Society we need to decide where the limits of allowable harms lie. When harms are evident, there are trade-offs to be made with autonomy, and we cannot avoid issues of morality. Government intervention to protect lives, (general) liberty, property and other interests, to resolve disputes and keep order according to broadly accepted rules, laws and principles becomes necessary, and deciding on what constraints on liberty are required in order to protect liberty for all is a heavy but necessary burden. Many contemporary societies appear to be moving away from these ideals. Too much liberty is sometimes afforded to the actions of those who impose great harms on large numbers of people, and yet, at the same time, Western liberal values in many areas of life and in many places are being eroded, both from within and without. The writings and reading of the classical liberal scholars and their contemporary descendants are as relevant and as needed today as they have ever been.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

[36] As I have intimated in this essay, this is not to say that people may to some extent subdue their emotional responses on their own volition in perfectly reasonable ways if their sense of agency – through, example, educational opportunities – is enhanced. Wallas would concur.

[37] For a discussion of how evolutionary arguments can be used to justify liberal institutions, see Lehto (this issue).

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