

The Dialectical Contrarianism of Richard Flathman

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When I was one of Richard Flathman's graduate students in the early 2000s, I found reading his books frustrating. They were like especially erudite issues of the *New Yorker*, full of thoughtful reflections that never quite settled any of the issues they so ably illuminated and pondered. At the same time, I was intrigued by his persona (I don't think I knew him well enough to have gotten to know his personality). At a time when indoor smoking was banned at Johns Hopkins, he had somehow finagled an exception, and his office was a stygian cave of books, papers, cardigans, and smoke. He was a curmudgeonly presence in the department, always ready with a sarcastic aside or a bemused snort at pomposity (though with students he was unfailingly encouraging and generous).

As I read more of his work, I thought I saw the same man there, someone who at core wanted to be left the hell alone to read and think—that is, to pursue his own “felicity” (a frequently used word borrowed from Hobbes) in his own way. And there clearly is this side to Flathman's work, for example in his powerful defense of individuality against the claims of community, and his fondness for Michael Oakeshott's *societas* (an association of people who recognize that cooperation will best allow them to pursue their different, individual aims) rather than *universitas* (an association of people who cooperate to pursue an aim they hold in common). At the same time, I came to see the cantankerous side of his persona as being rooted in contrarianism, on beautiful display in his work on Hobbes, in which he gleefully argues against virtually everyone else that far from being an advocate of absolute power, Hobbes is really a critic of absolutism who is slyly demonstrating to us the impossibility of precisely what he appears to be championing:

Hobbes was, as we might put it ... a pretty smart fellow. If it is obvious to us...that the gimcrack contraption that he calls Leviathan could have little effective authority and even less power over its subjects, it might not be unreasonable to assume that he wanted it that way.¹

But that strong streak of individualism—by Flathman's own description, nearly strong enough to make him an anarchist²—went hand-in-hand with an insistence that one's identity is possible only in relation to the identities of others, and that the condition of possibility of individuality is participation in society. Indeed, we might read Flathman's interpretation of Hobbes as being less about the exercise of sovereignty than about the possibility of radical individualism. The sovereign of the standard reading of Hobbes is in the best possible situation for an individual: he gets all of the benefits of social cooperation without having to accept any of the compromises. He alone is able to pursue his felicity utterly unhindered, indeed aided by his subjects. That is the best possible life for the side of Flathman that was a cranky individualist. But it's all an illusion. The protean quality of language in particular makes absolute power impossible. The sovereign can only rule effectively by issuing laws whose language is sufficiently clear as to elicit the desired outcome. But language is too slippery, too multivalent, and ultimately too social a thing for one will to be able to command it in this way: “Words being necessary to the formulation and promulgation of laws, all words being subject to ambiguity and the multiplication of words therefore compounding the ambiguity, the legislator's prospects of achieving perspicuity in laws

are less than bright."³ Even the sovereign's most Orwellian power, the right to determine the meanings of words, evaporates when we realize that meaning is determined socially, since meaning cannot merely be given but must also be accepted, and thus language is inevitably at least partially democratic. The sovereign must conceive and express himself in language that he has inherited and shares with others, and thus his apparently radical individuality is ultimately rooted in a profound sociality that can only partially be controlled or directed.

It was characteristic of his thinking that where others saw a danger of power crushing individuality, Flathman saw openings and ambiguities—not exactly sites of resistance, but more like *aporias* that showed that the project of domination could not fully be put into practice. Some of that hopefulness came from the work of Wittgenstein, whose contextualist theory of language suggests that meaning emerges only socially (hence the impossibility of a private language), and that it is therefore always plural and mobile (hence the need for the metaphor of family resemblance to explain the difficulty of defining words precisely). In later work, Flathman drew on related ideas from Nietzsche and Foucault, and here, too, he continued to argue that where some saw a danger of domination, for example in Foucault's description of subjectification, there were always interstices and flexibilities that left room for the possibility of individuality. Here is how Flathman summarizes this line of thinking in 2003's *Freedom and Its Conditions*:

It is the presence of attempts to constrain me—or the existence of forces constraining me—from doing that which I want to do, preventing me from accomplishing the purposes that I have set for myself, that, existentially and perhaps semantically, perhaps phenomenologically, perhaps ontologically, are necessary to the question of freedom arising and hence being answered negatively or positively. On this latter view, strongly suggested by Nietzsche and Foucault, and earlier by ... Sextus Empiricus and especially Montaigne, discipline and freedom, so far from being antithetical, are not only imbricated but mutually dependent.⁴

What gives Flathman's contrarianism its dialectical quality is that he happily criticizes all of the available theoretical positions as being inadequate and internally contradictory, and, having left himself no position to take, sets up camp in the battlefield and takes upon himself the task of keeping the combatants fighting. Radical individualism is incoherent because it denies the ways in which identity is shaped by its participation in collectivity, but radical collectivism is incoherent both because it threatens to destroy the individuality that is the basis of real collective activity, and also because collectivity is always more plural and unruly than would-be authoritarians realize. The interesting work is not in defending individuality against collectivity, or collectivity against individuality, but in trying to show that the two can only exist in tension with each other, and in trying to clarify what a workable, more-or-less stable stalemate might look like.

In trying to understand what form such a stalemate might take, Flathman drew on the work of Oakeshott and Arendt. I recall from a seminar discussion of Arendt's conception of action that Flathman repeatedly drew our attention to the apparent paradox that one can only be a fully articulated individual by acting in the public eye, that one cannot even know oneself in isolation. Yet because the public eye is always potentially homogenizing, he favored Oakeshott's *societas* model of social cooperation, while acknowledging that the participants will inevitably hypostatize collective goals: we aren't just a society in which an individual may pursue his or her

own interests, but rather we are a society committed to enabling such things (and in so understanding ourselves, we undermine that very project). He was also much taken with Oakeshott's idea of adverbial obligations, which are rules that we voluntarily impose upon ourselves to achieve a particular style of social cooperation. In *Reflections of a Would-Be Anarchist* Flathman advocates that we adopt adverbial *virtús*, ways of living that allow us to pursue our individuality in ways consistent with preserving social cooperation.⁵ He both praised and practiced Oakeshott's ideal of liberal education as a training in a tradition of thought, not to seek for ready-made answers but to develop a vocabulary and set of concepts within which one might work and think. And it seems to me that Flathman was especially interested in Oakeshott's distinction between a true individual—someone who lived in society, but on his or her own terms, in pursuit of his or her idiosyncratic goals— and an individual manqué—someone who, out of fear or lack of imagination, had become submerged in society and whose goals and aspirations have been provided pre-packaged. This highlights an important ethical dimension to Flathman's thought: that although there was always the possibility of remaining an individual, one has to grasp that possibility and pursue it, or accept being swallowed.

Ultimately, although Flathman's contrarianism was of a piece with that ethical desire to seize the possibility of individuality by poking a stick in the eye of soi-disant authorities, it sprang from sources much deeper in his character than that. Thus we find him opening a 1970 essay on "Obligation, Ideals, and Ability" by writing: "It has been a favorite project of students of politics to take the life out of their subject matter."⁶ And we find him paying his intellectual debts, in the Acknowledgements of *Willful Liberalism*, thus: "I have not been able to respond adequately to all of Sid Maskit's objections to my appropriation of Hobbes, but I will get even with him for that."⁷ Flathman took as much pleasure in poking his friends as he did his enemies.

The old joke has it that a liberal is a man who won't take his own side in an argument, and Richard Flathman was that kind of liberal: he defended individuality against social domination, social cooperation against individualist absurdity, and constant engagement against the desire to find some stable resolution at the cost of intellectual honesty, insisting rather that we remain "perpetually *en voyage*."⁸ I shall miss him, and I can only hope that he will find some way to get back at me for saddling his memory with a label as pompous as "dialectical contrarianism."

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Notes

¹ Richard E. Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, Individuality and Chastened Politics* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), 9.

[2.](#) *Reflections of a Would-Be Anarchist* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xvi.

[3.](#) *Willful Liberalism: Voluntarism and Individuality in Political Theory and Practice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 43.

[4.](#) *Freedom and Its Conditions* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

[5.](#) See *Reflections*, esp. Chs. 3 and 4.

[6.](#) "Obligation, Ideals, and Ability," in *Nomos XII: Political and Legal Obligation*, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (New York: Atherton Press, 1970), 89.

[7.](#) *Willful Liberalism*, ix.

[8.](#) *Toward a Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 32, quoting Oakeshott.