ABSTRACT. In the following I take issue with the allegation that liberalism must inevitably be guilty of ‘abstract individualism’. I treat Michael Sandel’s well-known claim that there are ‘loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are’ as representative of this widely held view. Specifically, I argue: (i) that Sandel’s account of the manner in which ‘constitutive’ loyalties function as reasons for action presupposes the possibility of there being (what I call) ‘underivable particular obligations’, but that such obligations are, in fact, a logical impossibility; and (ii) that Sandel’s account of the self as necessarily ‘encumbered’ presupposes an account of personal identity which confuses identification with definition, and which is, therefore, fundamentally flawed.

KEY WORDS: abstract individualism, communitarianism, liberalism, Rawls, Sandel

I should like to take issue with the charge that a liberal philosophy must necessarily presuppose a conception of the individual which is overly abstract and, therefore, unrealistic. As the allegation is sometimes expressed, liberalism is flawed by its ‘abstract individualism’. As one among many other examples, we might take Marilyn Friedman’s observation that ‘abstract individualism... underlies some important versions of liberal political theory’. She continues:

Abstract individualism considers individual human beings as social atoms, abstracted from their social contexts, and disregards the role of social relationships and human community in constituting the very identity and nature of individual human beings. Sometimes the individuals of abstract individualism are posited as

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rationally self-interested utility maximisers. Sometimes, also, they are theorised to form communities based fundamentally on competition and conflict among persons vying for scarce resources, communities which represent no deeper social bond than that of instrumental relations based on calculated self-interest. Friedman is outlining what has, by now, become an orthodox, ‘received’ view. However, if she is to any extent taking it for granted that liberalism and ‘abstract individualism’ go hand-in-hand, she can hardly be blamed, as the idea that they do carries the backing of some formidable authorities.

For example, take Alasdair MacIntyre, according to whom ‘the project of modern liberal, individualist, society’ is that of ‘founding a form of social order in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing to genuinely universal, tradition-independent norms’. It is a project MacIntyre faults for being hopelessly quixotic and ahistorical, as well as for postulating a ‘liberal public realm’ within which ‘individuals understand each other and themselves as each possessing his or her own ordered schedule of preferences’ and interact accordingly. In a similar – though by no means identical – manner, Charles Taylor connects liberalism with ‘atomism’, a term he uses ‘loosely to characterise the doctrines of social-contract theory which arose in the seventeenth century, and also successor doctrines which may not have made use of the notion of a social contract but which inherited a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfilment of ends which were primarily individual’. Meanwhile, Michael Sandel is well-known for having argued that liberalism’s ‘deontological ethic’ misleadingly presupposes a conception of the self as ‘unencumbered’. This is to mention only three of the most prominent recent versions of the allegation. It is this general charge which this paper sets out to dispute.

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4 MacIntyre, ibid., p. 338.