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Autonomy and the Self

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Autonomy and the Self

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Foreword

The initial idea for this volume grew out of a conference entitled "Norms and Persons – Freedom, Commitment and the Self," which we organized in Konstanz, Germany, in 2008. Based on the illuminating and inspiring discussions there, it quickly became clear to us that, in future work, we wanted to focus more on the complex relationship between personal autonomy and the notion of the self. This finally led to the idea of editing a volume on the topic, bringing together internationally renowned scholars and a number of aspiring young researchers.

First and foremost, we would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to all the contributors to this volume for their unwavering willingness to participate in this project—putting together a volume such as this indeed always takes longer than initially expected—and for providing us with such insightful and thought-provoking papers.

We would also especially like to thank Gottfried Seebaß, research project leader of the project "Normativity and Freedom" within the Konstanz Collaborative Research Centre "Norm and Symbol," which was funded by the "Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft," for his encouragement to edit the volume in the first place and for his continuous support during the entire editing process.

Furthermore, we would like to thank Nancy Kühler for meticulously taking care of the language editing of all the papers by non-native speakers and also the Konstanz Collaborative Research Centre "Norm and Symbol" for kindly funding this language editing.

During the final stages of the publication process, we also had the good fortune to benefit from the great support that the Centre for Advanced Study in Bioethics at Münster, Germany, provided us. Aside from voicing gratitude for the helpful remarks and suggestions given to us by numerous members of the Centre, we would especially like to thank Konstantin Schnieder for his invaluable help in creating the index for the volume.

Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to Ingrid van Laarhoven and all the other people at Springer Science + Business Media who were involved in this project for their keen interest, right from the start, in publicizing this volume and for their kind and enduring support during the whole publication process.

Münster and Konstanz   Michael Kühler and Nadja Jelinek
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Introduction

Michael Kühler and Nadja Jelinek

Autonomy is generally held in high esteem. It serves as one of the central concepts in many philosophical debates, e.g. on understanding ourselves as persons, on how to conceptualize morality, on the legitimization of political norms and practices as well as on questions in biomedical ethics. In all such debates, the concept of autonomy is invoked either to formulate a certain constitutive moment of the subject in question or to function at least as an essential justificatory criterion, i.e. as a value to be respected when it comes to assessing a position's plausibility and validity.[1]

Derived from the Greek *autós* ("self") and *nomos* ("law" or "rule"), the term "autonomy" was first used to describe Greek city states exerting their own laws. The general idea, which has not changed since then, is that the subject in question, in one way or another, "governs itself." Accordingly, the idea of *personal autonomy* is that a person "governs herself," i.e. that, independent of unwanted internal and external influences, she decides and acts according to her own convictions, values, desires, and such. Of course, this all too short explanation gives rise to more questions rather than providing an answer. For what exactly is meant by the idea of convictions, values, or desires being a person's *own* and which influences endanger autonomy and why?

After the discussion following Harry G. Frankfurt's seminal paper "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,"[2] autonomy is nowadays explained mainly by pointing to a person's capacity to reflect and endorse or disapprove of her (first order) desires on a higher (second order) level and to form a volition in line with an approved desire which moves her to act accordingly. It is, of course, highly disputed whether Frankfurt's hierarchical model of desires and volitions and his later specification of "volitional necessities" are the most plausible way to spell out this capacity in detail.[3] In this respect, Frankfurt's line of thought is one of the main

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[1] For a general overview of the various strands of the discussion on (personal) autonomy, see Christman (1989), Taylor (2005), Christman and Anderson (2005), Buss (2008), and Christman (2009).

[2] Frankfurt (1971).

[3] For an overview of the discussion on Frankfurt's approach, see Frankfurt (1988, 1999) as well as Betzler and Guckes (2000) and Buss and Overton (2002).

focal points of the contributions in this volume as well, and we will come back to this in a minute.

For the moment, however, as rough and preliminary as this short explanation of autonomy as "self-government" may be, it provides one with a basic idea while also pointing to the central topic addressed in this volume, namely the relationship between autonomy and the self. For, especially in the explanation of personal autonomy as "self-government," the notion of "self" usually implies more than a simple statement that the person being governed is the same as the one doing the governing: the notion of the self also takes up the aforementioned idea of convictions, values, desires, and the like as being a person's *own*. In order to be autonomous, one therefore has to decide and act, or, more broadly, to live in general, according to motives that can count as expressions of one's *self*, i.e. of *who one is (or wants to be)*.[4] The notion of autonomy thus leads to the notion of *authenticity*. Accordingly, a person can be judged autonomous if her decisions, actions, or life in general can be interpreted as the authentic expression of who this person (basically) is. That, however, leads to even more trouble because of the highly controversial question of how to spell out in detail the notion of the self and the idea of who a person (really) is.

Moreover, a special problem seems to arise with regard to the widespread idea that a major part of one's self is formed through the acquirement of social norms and values. For, how exactly should the idea be analyzed that the norms and values a person identifies herself with or commits herself to are (truly) hers if the norms or values in question ultimately have to be traced back to some sort of social setting or social relation, i.e. if they have to be understood as being a genuine part of the social sphere and thus *external* to the person?

In order to shed some preliminary light on the notions of autonomy and the self, as well as their possible relationships, and in order to map the conceptual terrain of the subsequent discussion in this volume, we will, in the following, begin with a brief sketch of approaches to the self relevant for the topic at hand. In this respect, we distinguish roughly between subjectivist, social-relational, and narrative accounts of the self (section "The self" of this introduction). Secondly, we will address the question of possible relationships between autonomy and the self by highlighting two respective theses which not only mark the two most vividly opposing viewpoints but also, in a way, mirror the two main aspects of approaching the notion of the self. We have dubbed the one thesis *existential cum libertarian thesis* and the other *authenticity via essential nature thesis* (section "Autonomy and the Self" of this introduction). Although these designations may sound a bit exaggerated, they prove to be helpful in outlining the extreme positions of the conceptual terrain in which intermediary propositions are brought forward and in which the various aspects mentioned in the contributions of this volume can be pinpointed and assessed.

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[4] The best way of stating the problem at hand, i.e. whether in terms of "who one is" or in terms of "who one wants to be" is, of course, a matter of controversy, for each of the formulations already seems to endorse a different view implicitly. This will become clearer in the course of the introduction. See also Christman (2009).

Moreover (and still in section "Autonomy and the Self"), we will take a closer look at internal and external aspects of autonomy and the self and examine the relevance that limitations of a person's freedom may have on her self and autonomy. Finally, in section "Overview of Contributions" of this introduction, we will provide an overview of the three parts of this volume along with brief summaries of each contribution.

The Self

For the topic at hand, approaches to explaining the notion of the self, when the term is used to answer the question *who a person is*, can be roughly divided into (1) subjectivist accounts, pointing to subjective or individual traits of the person in question; (2) social-relational accounts, pointing to a person's social involvement and social interdependencies; and (3) narrative accounts, highlighting a constructivist approach by way of viewing the self as nothing other than what is created anew each time a story is told about who a person is.

Subjectivist Accounts of the Self

Existential Account

When starting from scratch to explain subjectivist approaches to the self, it seems fitting to begin with an existential account. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre explains the notion of *authenticity*, which is mentioned above as a central component in describing autonomy, in terms of existential freedom.[5] Put briefly, the basic idea is that, in Sartre's view, being authentic means acknowledging existential freedom as the primary mode of existence as a human being and taking responsibility for being unavoidably forced to choose one's attitude toward how to live one's life in every single action. Ultimately, this implies that one is always able to define and redefine one's self anew through one's actions; hence Sartre's slogan "existence precedes essence," i.e. existential freedom precedes the self.

However, it would be a misunderstanding to assume that existential freedom with regard to the constitution of one's self amounts to the idea of "anything goes" or that there are no boundaries at all in willfully defining one's self. Sartre explicitly acknowledges the twofold constitution of one's self. He distinguishes between

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[5] See Sartre (1943), esp. part 4, ch. 1. For a first overview of Sartre's work and existentialism in general, see Crowell (2010) and Flynn (2011). In this volume, see especially Gottfried Seebaß's contribution for a line of thought sympathizing with the general idea of existential or libertarian freedom. For an opposing position regarding the question of how to understand the main concepts involved on a basic level, see Barbara Merker's contribution.

facticity and *transcendence*. The term *facticity* designates the factors of a person's self that can be attributed from a third person point of view, e.g. one's bodily properties, social integration, psychological traits, or individual history. Moreover, these factors are given from the beginning and, for the most part, cannot simply be altered at will.[6]

The term *transcendence*, on the other hand, highlights the role of the first person point of view. For it is one's (existential) *practical* capacity to adopt not only a third person perspective toward oneself, i.e. recognizing something *about* one's self, but rather also to adopt an *engaged first person stance* toward these traits of facticity. The question is thus a practical one of whether I *choose* to endorse or disapprove of these traits, thereby *making them my own* or disavowing them. Accordingly, one's *authentic self* comprises only those traits of facticity that one has made *one's own* from the practical first person point of view of transcendence.

Because we are constantly able to pose ourselves this practical question and, in answering it, to take a different stance toward the traits of facticity in question, we are constantly able to define and redefine our authentic self. This is then what existential freedom basically amounts to: our *ongoing capacity*, in the above sense, *to choose who we want to be*.

Moreover, the choice incorporated in taking a stance toward traits of facticity functions as the foundation of one's values and normative bindings as well. Nothing is of value or of normative binding for a person if she has not constituted that value or normative binding by way of choosing it to be *hers* first.[7] Hence, the idea of identifying with, or committing oneself to, certain norms or values has to be understood in terms of existential freedom as well, which means that there are no given criteria to guide any choice except that they themselves be chosen and thereby be made one's own. The choice incorporated in existential freedom is thus (always) a *radical choice*. Hence, one's authentic self is ultimately constituted—shaped and reshaped—by one's ongoing radical choices.

Essential Nature Account

In contrast to the existential account, the second line of subjectivist accounts of the self denies the famous Sartrean dictum according to which "existence precedes essence." Instead, it presupposes that, not only from the third but also from the first person point of view, there are factors which essentially determine a person's self and which are not freely chosen and cannot simply be altered at will. The theory in question, which we call an *essential nature account*, therefore claims that the essential nature of a person is *not chosen* by the person herself but *given*. In this connection,

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[6] Especially bodily properties have rarely been given much thought in recent philosophical discussions of the self and of personal autonomy. In this volume, however, see especially Diana Tietjens Meyers' contribution for addressing the topic.

[7] For a generally sympathetic line of thought regarding the role of choosing one's personal projects, see Monika Betzler's contribution in this volume.

though, it is of great importance that the person in question *identifies* herself with the relevant characteristics. Otherwise, there would be no difference between the essential nature of the self and overwhelming external forces.

The most prominent proponent of an essential nature account nowadays is Harry G. Frankfurt.[8] The key concepts of his theory are "*caring*," "*volitional necessities*," and "*unthinkability*."[9] A person's *caring* about something is defined by Frankfurt as her *taking* the object in question to be *important*.[10] "Caring" is thereby defined as an essentially *volitional* attitude which can, but does not have to, be accompanied by feelings, emotions, and value judgments. For Frankfurt, a person's self is thus essentially defined in volitional terms.[11]

Following the line of thought of an essential nature account, what a person cares about is *not* a matter of decision. This claim is underpinned by the fact that we do indeed sometimes decide to care about something or to stop caring about something respectively, but then become aware that our decision does not have any influence on the matter—it remains perfectly ineffective.[12] So what we care about has to be regarded as *given*, not as *chosen*—at least in many and important cases. This is why Frankfurt talks about "*volitional necessities*" in this context. For a person who is subject to a volitional necessity, some options of decision and action become *unthinkable*, i.e. she cannot consider them as *real options* for herself.[13]

The term "volitional necessities" refers to the will of a person in two respects. Firstly, volitional necessities *bind* the will, i.e. the relevant will cannot be any different. Secondly, however, volitional necessities are themselves *wanted*, i.e. the person in question does not want to want anything else.[14] This endorsement is of crucial importance, for it guarantees that volitional necessities really represent the essential nature of the person in question. Without this additional criterion, volitional necessities would become inseparable from overwhelming external forces, like addiction, for example, which the person in question regards as alien. This also explains in which respect some decisions and actions become *unthinkable* for the person in question. She neither can nor wants to want to decide and act accordingly.

Based on this rough sketch of Frankfurt's theory, the main *systematical difference* between the two subjectivist accounts of the self presented here can be identified as follows. Although both accounts have *in common* that they assume at least *some* factors of the self which are given and both require that a person has to *make them*

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[8] For an overview of the relevant discussion, see Betzler and Guckes (2000), Buss and Overton (2002), Korsgaard (2006), Bratman (2006), and Dan-Cohen (2006). In this volume, see especially the contributions of John Davenport, Nadja Jelinek, and John Christman.

[9] Cf. Frankfurt (1982, 1988a, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1999a, 2004, 2006a, b).

[10] Cf. Frankfurt (1982), 80ff. More exactly, he claims that "caring" and "taking important" have the same *extension* although they differ in their *intensions*. For this point, cf. Frankfurt (1999a), 155f.

[11] Cf. Frankfurt (1993, 1994, 1999a, 2004).

[12] Cf. Frankfurt (1982, 1992).

[13] Cf. Frankfurt (1982, 1988a, 1993).

[14] Cf. Frankfurt (1988a, 1993, 1999a).

her own by endorsing it, they *differ* profoundly with regard to the *kind* and the *degree* of the factors referred to as *given* as well as to the role *decisions* play in the process of defining oneself. The *existential account* presupposes givenness or "facticity" only from the *third* person point of view and assumes freedom of choice from the *first* person point of view in order to constitute one's authentic self by radical choice. The *essential nature account*, on the other hand, claims that a person is confronted with the fact that she *cannot help but care* about certain things, which means that she can merely *discover* her already *given* essential nature—but cannot alter it at will. Thus, givenness or "facticity" can also be found with regard to the first person point of view. The accompanying idea that a person also has to endorse her caring so that it really becomes her own does not contradict this claim. For volitional necessities cannot simply be changed by refusing to endorse them. On the contrary, trying to refuse one's caring about something is either unthinkable for the person as a real option in the first place, or it leads to ambivalence within the person's self,[15] at the very least, which may even shatter the person's self on the whole.

Social-Relational Accounts of the Self

In contrast to subjectivist accounts of the self, a group of accounts which can be subsumed under the label of *social-relational accounts of the self* emphasizes the *dependence* of the self's genesis and continued existence upon *social* and *cultural context*. Theories of this kind usually go back to the seminal works of the American social behaviorist George Herbert Mead, who developed his theory of social interaction during the first few decades of the twentieth century.[16] Before we roughly sketch Mead's account, however, we will first take a quick look at Charles Taylor's theory of articulation of the self.[17] This theory suggests itself as a starting point because Taylor explicitly follows Frankfurt's earlier, hierarchical account of the will.[18] Yet he supplements it with his distinction between weak and strong evaluations concerning one's first order desires, on the one hand, and his concept of articulation, on the other hand. Both supplements are tied to social-relational aspects.

   Taylor regards a person's self as a product of *articulation.* This term of art indeed presupposes certain given psychological states and attitudes, like desires, motivations, inclinations, feelings, and emotions. These are, however, not yet identical with a

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[15] In this volume, see especially Sabine A. Döring's contribution, which focuses on the role played by our emotions and the phenomenon of weakness of will in this regard.

[16] See Mead (1910a, b, 1912, 1913, 1925, 1934).

[17] Cf. Taylor (1977a, b, 1979a, 1985c, 1989, 1991, 1994). For a monographic account and discussion of Taylor's theory, see Rosa (1998). Other examples of proponents of social-relational approaches are Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Ernst Tugendhat, and Axel Honneth; cf. Berger and Luckmann (1966), Tugendhat (1979), ch. 11 and 12, and Honneth (1992).

[18] See Frankfurt (1971).