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## › **Autonomy and the Self**

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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 bio-medical 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 essential justificatory criterion, i.e. as a value to be respected when it comes to assess a position's plausibility and validity.<sup>2</sup>

Deriving 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 she decides and acts according to her own convictions, values, desires and such like and independent of unwanted internal and external influences. Of course, this all too short explanation very well gives rise to more questions 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?

Following the subsequent discussion of Harry G. Frankfurt's seminal paper "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,"<sup>3</sup> nowadays autonomy is mainly explained 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

1 This text is an abridged version of our introduction to the volume *Autonomy and the Self*; Dordrecht: Springer, forthcoming.

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

3 Frankfurt 1971.

desires and volitions, and his later specification of “volitional necessities,” is the most plausible way to spell out this capacity in detail.<sup>4</sup> Yet Frankfurt’s line of thought still functions as one of the main focal points in current debate.

As rough and preliminary as this short explanation of autonomy as “self-government” may be, it provides one with a basic enough idea and also points to a central topic which has to be addressed, namely the relationship between autonomy and the self. For, especially in explaining personal autonomy as “self-government,” usually more is implied by the notion of “self” than a simple statement that the person being governed is the same as the one doing the governing. Instead, the notion of the self takes up the aforementioned idea of convictions, values, desires and the like being a person’s *own*. In order to be autonomous, therefore, one 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)*.<sup>5</sup> 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 authentic expression of who this person (basically) is. However, that leads to even more trouble because it is highly controversial how to spell out the notion of the self and the idea of who a person (really) is in detail.

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 such 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 genuinely part of the social sphere and thus being *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 discussion, in the following we will firstly give 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 I). 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 dubbed the two theses *existential cum libertarian thesis*, on the one hand, and *authenticity via essential nature thesis*, on the other hand (section II). Although they 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 various aspects can be pinpointed and assessed. Moreover (and still in section II), we will take a closer look at internal and external aspects of autonomy and the self and examine the bearing limitations of a person’s freedom may have on her self and autonomy.

## I The self

As mentioned above, approaches to explaining the notion of the self, when the term is used to answer the question *who a person is*, can, for the topic at hand, roughly be divided into

4 For an overview of the discussion on Frankfurt’s approach see Frankfurt 1988 and 1999 as well as Betzler/Guckes 2000 and Buss/Overton 2002.

5 It is, of course, a matter of controversy how to put the problem at hand best, i.e. either in terms of “who one is” or in terms of “who one wants to be.” For in each formulation a different view seems to be implicitly endorsed already. This will become more clear in the course of this introduction. See also Christman 2009.

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*, mentioned above as a central component in describing autonomy, in terms of existential freedom.<sup>6</sup> Put roughly, the basic idea is that being authentic, in Sartre's view, means to acknowledge existential freedom as the primary mode of existence as a human being and to take 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 re-define 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 that the constitution of one's self is twofold. He distinguishes between *facticity* and *transcendence*. The term *facticity* points to those 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 initially given and, for the most part, cannot simply be altered at will.

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 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 to 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 foundation of one's values and normative bindings as well. Nothing is of value or of normative binding for a person if she hasn't constituted that value or normative binding by way of choosing it to be *hers* first. 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 unless these criteria are chosen themselves and thereby being made one's own. The choice incorporated in existential freedom is thus (always)

6 See Sartre 1943, esp. part 4, ch. 1. For a first overview of Sartre's work and existentialism in general, see Flynn 2010 and Crowell 2010.

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, 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.<sup>7</sup> The key concepts of his theory are “*caring*,” “*volitional necessities*” and “*unthinkability*.”<sup>8</sup> A person's *caring* about something is defined by Frankfurt as her *taking* the object in question *important*.<sup>9</sup> “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.<sup>10</sup>

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 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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, for example, addiction, 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.

7 For an overview of the relevant discussion see Buss/Overton 2002, Betzler/Guckes 2000, Korsgaard 2006, Bratman 2006 and Dan-Cohen 2006.

8 Cf. Frankfurt 1982, 1988a, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1999a, 2004, 2006a, and 2006b.

9 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.

10 Cf. Frankfurt 1993, 1994, 1999a and 2004.

11 Cf. Frankfurt 1982 and 1992.

12 Cf. Frankfurt 1982, 1988a and 1993.

13 Cf. Frankfurt 1988a, 1993 and 1999a,

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 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 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 becomes really 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, 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 American social behaviorist George Herbert Mead who developed his theory of social interaction during the first few decades of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Taylor's theory suggests itself as a starting point because he explicitly follows Frankfurt's earlier, hierarchical account of the will.<sup>16</sup> 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*.<sup>17</sup> 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 person's self, and this for at least two reasons. Firstly, all these psychological attitudes and states mentioned do not yet provide a person with a fully fleshed out identity, but are often still vague and inchoate. Therefore, they have to be *articulated*, i.e. the person in question has to *interpret*, and thereby finally *constitute*, them in a certain way. If she feels, for example, a vague feeling of being attracted to

14 See Mead 1910a, 1910b, 1912, 1913, 1925 and 1934.

15 Other proponents of social-relational approaches are, for example, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Axel Honneth and Ernst Tugendhat; cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966, Honneth 1992 and Tugendhat 1979, ch. 11 and 12.

16 See Frankfurt 1971.

17 Cf. Taylor 1977a, 1977b, 1979a, 1985c, 1989, 1991 and 1994. For a monographic account and discussion of Taylor's theory, see Rosa 1998.

another person she has to find out and concretize what kind of feeling she is experiencing: Did she fall in love with the other person, does she simply like her as a trusted friend or does she perhaps experience a kind of admiration for the other person's moral superiority?<sup>18</sup> In answering these questions and interpreting her feeling in some way or other, society and culture begin to come into play. For interpretation requires language, and often not only ordinary everyday language but terms and concepts which are highly specific to certain societies and cultures. Therefore, we rely on socially conveyed concepts in order to be able to define ourselves.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, the question of who we *want* to be matters for Taylor, too. We do not have to take all mental attitudes simply as given, but we can take an evaluative stance toward them. This characteristically takes the shape of *strong evaluations*, which can roughly be defined as value judgments. At this point, social and cultural factors become relevant once more. For in order to evaluate our various desires and emotions we are again in need of appropriate *vocabulary*, which now means that we are in need of *value conceptions*. These, however, alike linguistic tools for articulation, can once again be acquired only through social and cultural interaction.

Yet up until now the claim that the self's genesis as well as continued existence depend on social and cultural relations is still rather weak. What was claimed so far is only that culture and society have to provide certain tools, i.e. the necessary concepts. This fact, however, leaves still undetermined which concept a person applies to which characteristics of herself. It could still be entirely up to her how exactly to articulate her self in terms, at least partially, of strong evaluations within the conceptual framework provided by culture and society. Of course, this is not all proponents of the social-relational account want to claim. According to them, the forming of the self does not only require certain conceptual tools, but above all the *praxis* of social interaction. This claim holds both for the self's genesis as well as for its continued existence.

With regard to this last claim, the authors in question basically rely on Mead's model of social interaction. Its main thesis is that we acquire and maintain our self by social interaction, i.e., more exactly, by internalizing the way other persons react to us, including their expectations as to how we should be and behave. According to Mead, these reactions are bundled in the attitude of the "generalized other," which, dubbed as "*Me*," becomes an integral part of a person's self. The other central part is referred to by Mead as "*I*." It is characterized as the individualistic and spontaneous instance of the self. More exactly, the "*I*" is an instance of individual reaction to the "generalized other," which is in turn present in the "*Me*," and it is spontaneous in terms of its being entirely open and uncertain even to the person herself until it has taken place.<sup>21</sup>

Following this line of thought, the process of forming and maintaining one's self can be seen as continued dialogue between "*I*" and "*Me*," i.e. between the spontaneous parts of one's self and society's expectations toward one.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, proponents of the social-relational account which are inspired by Mead's theory hold that the self is essentially dialogical.<sup>23</sup> They see the relation between "*Me*" and "*I*" as a process of negotiating or even as some kind of struggle.<sup>24</sup> With regard to the latter, a person has to struggle between the demands and expectations

18 Cf. Taylor 1977b.

19 Cf. Taylor 1985c and 1989.

20 Cf. Taylor 1977a.

21 Cf. Mead 1934, 175ff.

22 Notice, however, that this is only a rough sketch of Mead's account which is actually much more complicated.

23 Cf. Taylor 1991 and 1994 and Honneth 1992.

24 Especially Honneth highlights a „struggle for recognition“ in this context.

society places on her—the “Me”—and her own stance toward these expectations based on her spontaneous and creative potential—the “I.” Seen this way, social relations do not only provide the substratum from which individual selves are built, but they also, at least partially, determine how far a person can go in dissociating herself from social claims and expectations. The reason for this is that, according to the social-relational account, selves break down if they are not, at least to some degree, acknowledged by others within their social environment.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, successful or “healthy” individual departures from actual social demands and expectations can only happen by appealing to alternative social structures and values, either stemming from other cultures or by way of anticipating possible future social orders.<sup>26</sup>

### **Narrative accounts of the self**

In contrast to the approaches to the self mentioned so far, a narrative account holds that it is misleading to assume we could have direct access to features of the self, be they subjective (regardless whether from a third or even first person point of view) or social-relational. Instead, the features attributed to the self have to be regarded as *conceptualizations* and thus as *construed*. Hence, in approaching the notion of the self, firstly, we have to acknowledge that it is necessarily a linguistic construction. Secondly, narrative accounts hold that this construction is done in form of narratives. Put simply, a person’s self is nothing but the story which is told about who she is.

Paul Ricoeur is one of the main proponents of such a narrative account,<sup>27</sup> and his outline of what the notion of narrative identity amounts to proves to be especially helpful for the task at hand in this introduction.<sup>28</sup> In distinguishing between *sameness (idem)* and *self (ipse)* and addressing the fundamental dialectic relationship between the two, Ricoeur indeed aims at illuminating the problem of personal identity as a whole with the help of a narrative account. However, for all intents and purposes here, it is sufficient to concentrate on Ricoeur’s narrative approach to the self or “ipseity,” which is precisely intended to answer the question who a person is.

The starting point for Ricoeur is that, to get to know who a person is, we intuitively tend to tell a story of her life. This even holds for the person herself. It is thus the identity of the story that serves as the first cornerstone on the way to the person’s self. The crucial point in this step is that single aspects of a story gain their meaning only in relation to each other and the story as a whole. Hence, in order to make sense of individual aspects in one’s life we need to tell a story in which these aspects are put in some form of meaningful order, i.e. in which different aspects are construed as relevant for one another and for the story as a whole.

At this point, it is helpful to distinguish between stronger and weaker versions of narrativity. As especially Galen Strawson has pointed out, putting aspects of one’s life in a meaningful

25 Cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966 and Taylor 1991.

26 Cf. Taylor 1991, ch. 4.

27 See Ricoeur 1987, 1991 and 1992, esp. the sixth study. Other prominent proponents include Alasdair MacIntyre 1984, esp. ch. 15, and Charles Taylor 1977b and 1989, esp. part 1, ch. 2. For an illuminating, albeit brief glimpse at the role narrative approaches play within the discussion of personal identity, see Shoemaker 2008, section 2.3. For a broader and illuminating discussion, see Henning 2009. For a first overview of Ricoeur’s work, see Dauenhauer 2008.

28 For the following, cf. Ricoeur 1987 in particular.



order does not necessarily mean to tell a canonized form of story.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, weaker versions of narrative accounts only hold that single aspects of a person's life have to be put in *some* form of meaningful order and interrelation, whereas the question of whether this needs to be done in form of canonized storytelling is left open. Stronger versions of narrative accounts, like Ricoeur's, however, emphasize the need for canonized forms of storytelling which, in turn, points to the need for including a social-relational framework into approaches to explaining the self. For canonized forms of storytelling obviously depend upon a social framework.

Accordingly, Ricoeur goes on to argue that life stories have to be construed in terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The identity of a story is then conveyed to the story's main character whose identity functions as the second cornerstone of Ricoeur's account. What has to be achieved in storytelling is *concordance* or coherence. This means that those aspects of the main character's "life" which are interpreted as discordances or contingencies regarding the kind of story told have to be incorporated plausibly as well. For this, one needs a fitting *configuration* of the story which is able to provide concordance or coherence on the whole. This configuration then also constitutes a concordant as well as dynamic identity of the story's main character.

The third and last cornerstone of Ricoeur's approach consists in the identification of the (real) person with the main character of the story told. In this regard, the person engages in a game of imaginatively varying the specific storytelling and thereby also the main character's identity with which to identify. Moreover, insofar as the person is always aware of varying the storytelling and of the question of identification, Ricoeur argues that the person can gain new knowledge or a new awareness of herself. For these different possible interpretations are thus also a kind of active self-interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Following Ricoeur, this finally shows that a person's self is essentially nothing but a specific construed variation of a concordant story with its main character for the person to identify herself with.

## II Autonomy and the self

### Existential cum libertarian thesis

The first thesis to describe the relationship between autonomy and the self, which we dubbed *existential cum libertarian thesis*, is a direct continuation of the existential account of the constitution of the self. Acting *autonomously* then basically means that one acts only on those motives that one has made *one's own* from the practical first person point of view of transcendence as sketched above, i.e. that one has radically chosen to incorporate in one's authentic self.

It is helpful at this point to sketch Sartre's view on action or "doing" in a bit more detail.<sup>31</sup> He notes firstly the traditional idea of actions being *intentional*, i.e. that actions comprise and *end* to be *intentionally* realized by the agent. This distinguishes actions from mere behavior. The end to be pursued by an action has in turn to be understood as something which is *not* (yet) the case—hence Sartre's emphasis on "nothingness" in this regard—and which springs solely from

29 Cf. Strawson 2004, 439ff. Generally, Strawson dismisses narrative approaches to the notion of the self as either misleading or plain false. He distinguishes between a *psychological Narrativity thesis* and an *ethical Narrativity thesis*, whereas the former is to be understood as an empirical and descriptive thesis about how we actually understand ourselves as persons, and the latter as amounting to a normative thesis on how we should live our lives. Strawson then opposes both of them.

30 In this respect, see also Taylor 1977b.

31 For the following, see again Sartre 1943, esp. part IV, ch. 1.

the agent's practical first person point of view of transcendence. Therefore, no factual state of the world can give rise to action unless the agent has taken an evaluative stance toward it first, thereby actively evaluating it as something to be changed. Existential freedom thus serves once again as the crucial foundational component.

Furthermore, Sartre notes that actions comprise "causes" and "motives," whereas this English translation of Sartre's terminology might cause some confusion. Unlike our usual understanding in a deterministic setting of cause and effect, Sartre uses the term "cause" to express the *reasons* for an action, i.e. what can justify it as well as explain it on a rational level. With the term "motives," Sartre has the *subjective psychological facts* in mind, i.e. desires, emotions or passions, which actually move one to act and which, ironically, we would now rather call psychological causes. Matters of translation notwithstanding, Sartre points to two well acknowledged aspects in current action theory: *reasons* and *motivational causes*. However, with regard to the existential framework, even reasons and motivational causes obtain their meaning for autonomy and the self only on the basis of existential freedom. For something to be a reason *for me* and a motivational cause to be *my own*, I must first have conferred value to different aspects of the situation through radical choice, thereby making these aspects significant as reasons for me, and I must have taken an *engaged* stance toward my motivational causes to make them my own.

The existential account of action sketched so far also has a bearing on the notion of the will. For Sartre, it is not the will that is the unique or primary manifestation of freedom, at least as long as one understands the will as a psychological trait which is also accessible from a third person point of view. Rather, in order to be able to constitute a person's *own* ends to be pursued in action, the will has to be located within the notion of transcendence and thus has to be understood as a genuine practical stance implying the first person point of view. Hence, only as one's exercise of existential freedom can the will and voluntary acts be regarded as authentic and autonomous.

At this point, at the latest, existential autonomy can be complemented with libertarian positions on free will, especially with ideas of agent-causation.<sup>32</sup> For it has to be the agent in the existential sense who has to choose radically and thereby constitute his ends, values and ultimately his authentic self, i.e. who he is.

A libertarian position on freedom generally states that we must be able to choose between different options equally open, or at least more or less accessible, to us on an ontological level, i.e. in one and the same situation. Libertarian freedom is thus incompatible with determinism which precisely denies the possibility of more than one continuation in one and the same situation.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, when combining existential freedom and a libertarian approach, we must be able to choose radically between different stances open to us in one and the same situation and be able to adopt one of them based on our choice.

In assuming a libertarian view on freedom of the will in combination with Sartre's notion of existential freedom underlying every one of our actions, as described above, the general idea of the *existential cum libertarian thesis* is thus that, insofar as we are able to choose radically between different stances toward traits of facticity in every action, i.e. to choose radically which

32 For a first overview of theories of free will, see O'Connor 2008, and for the idea of agent causation in this regard, see Clarke 2008, esp. section 3.

33 In this regard, Sartre sees the confrontation of determinism with freedom of the will or spontaneity as misleading, as long as the will is understood within a psychological framework of facticity, i.e. as being seen from a third person point of view. Cf. Sartre 1943, 563f. and 567–571.

of them to make our own and incorporate them in our authentic self, we are able to constitute our self in every action anew. Hence, we are, in this sense, autonomous with regard to the constitution of our (authentic) self because we are the ones shaping and reshaping it based on our radical choices.

To be sure, as noted above, we are not able to rearrange our self completely at will. We cannot, for example, change the past and what we have done. What we can do, however, following the *existential cum libertarian thesis*, is to choose radically and continually anew with which of our previous traits and actions we still want to identify ourselves, i.e. which stance we want to take on them, thereby incorporating or disavowing them within our newly constituted authentic self. This holds for our identification with social norms, values or roles as well. For we (in the sense of Mead's "I") are equally free to choose radically with which of them we want to identify or commit ourselves to, thereby either incorporating them in our authentic self or disavowing them. Analogously, with regard to a narrative approach to the self, we are not only the author of our "life story" but we are also the ones who have to ask themselves whether we want to identify ourselves with a story's main character. For no one else can adopt our own respective first person point of view of transcendence as implied by the existential framework. In this respect, personal autonomy concerning the constitution of one's self comprises one's existential freedom to construe one's authentic self narratively as well. In summary, the *existential cum libertarian thesis* holds that we are, in the sense described above, indeed, autonomous in choosing our (authentic) self, i.e. in choosing who we want to be.

### **Authenticity via essential nature thesis**

The second thesis, dubbed *authenticity via essential nature thesis*, rejects the ideas of existential freedom and radical choice and puts the relationship between autonomy and the self exactly the other way around. It is, therefore, not autonomy leading, through radical choice, to authenticity, but, on the contrary, autonomy *presupposing* authenticity in terms of a given authentic self. The most prominent proponent of the *authenticity via essential nature thesis* during the last few decades is Harry G. Frankfurt.<sup>34</sup> His theory of autonomy can be regarded as the consequence of his theory of volitional necessities. Another important author in this field, besides Frankfurt, is Charles Taylor.<sup>35</sup> In the following the argumentations of these two authors against the *existential cum libertarian thesis* and in favor of the *authenticity via essential nature thesis* shall be presented a little closer.

Frankfurt's argumentation against a libertarian conception of the self runs as follows. According to the *existential cum libertarian thesis* we are able to choose (radically) what shapes our self, which in Frankfurt's terms would amount to what we fundamentally care about. For Frankfurt, however, such radical choice is incompatible with personal autonomy.<sup>36</sup> He argues that a state in which no limitation to the human will exists would lead to severe disorientation on the side of the person concerning the question what to choose at all. Moreover, in cases where antecedent commitments and therefore a more or less clearly defined "self" already exist, the necessity of evaluating and ranking an overwhelming magnitude of alternative possibilities would inevitably lead to the dissolution of existent bonds. The agent is in danger of losing

34 See Frankfurt 1982, 1988a, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1999a, 2004, 2006a and 2006b.

35 See esp. Taylor 1977a.

36 Cf. Frankfurt 1988a and 1993.

sight of his own interests, preferences, and priorities.<sup>37</sup> That is one of the reasons why Frankfurt defends an essential nature account of the self as described above. We need *criteria* which make a choice *authentic*, i.e. really our own, by securing that our choices really correspond with our true nature. In a state of absolute freedom of the will, however, one would have to choose these criteria as well, i.e. one's own essential nature would have to be created by free choice. Yet for such a choice we would need criteria, too, in order to secure that the chosen nature is really and essentially our own.<sup>38</sup>

According to this line of criticism, proponents of radical decisionist accounts, like the defenders of the *existential cum libertarian thesis*, are thus faced with a dilemma. Their account either leads into an infinite regress or persons are never able to decide and act authentically. Choosing the first horn would mean to go back *ad infinitum* while looking for valid criteria, whereas choosing the second horn would mean to give up the claim that there can be something like real authenticity. For (radical) choices which are made under existentialist conditions can only have a *provisional* and *arbitrary* character and can therefore never be a person's own.<sup>39</sup> In this case, one is then either bound to deny also the possibility that there actually *are* autonomous people or to revise the concept of personal autonomy so that authenticity is no longer a necessary condition. As none of these options is very attractive, the *existential cum libertarian thesis* is rejected and the *authenticity via essential nature thesis* is put forward instead.

Taylor's objections against the *existential cum libertarian thesis* roughly run the same line. His critique, however, goes still further than Frankfurt's. Where Frankfurt only claims that we cannot decide *authentically* within the existential cum libertarian account, Taylor denies that this account provides room for something like a choice at all. According to him, a choice always has to be based on reasons. Yet theories of radical choice do not allow for the relevant choice being based on reasons. For then the choice would not be a *radical* one any more.<sup>40</sup> Hence, according to Taylor, proponents of the *existential cum libertarian thesis* face a dilemma which is of an even more fundamental kind than that identified by Frankfurt. Something can either be radical or it can be a choice, but never both. Taylor's conclusion is, therefore, that the theory of radical choice, which lies at the heart of the *existential cum libertarian thesis*, is deeply inconsistent in itself.<sup>41</sup>

How then does the alternative look like? According to Frankfurt, a person is autonomous if and only if she can decide and act in accordance with her true essential nature, i.e. in accordance with the volitional necessities which define her self. Only then are her decisions *authentic*. Taylor's proposal is quite similar. According to him, autonomy is identical with actual self-realization.<sup>42</sup> However, the two authors seem to differ with regard to the question of the metaphysical conditions of their theories and the role the person herself plays concerning the definition of her fundamental commitments.

According to Frankfurt, defining one's commitments is merely a matter of discovery. We find them by getting to know what we most deeply care about.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to this, Taylor assumes that the mental attitudes we can discover within ourselves are still inchoate and therefore

37 Cf. Frankfurt 1988a, 177f.

38 Cf. Frankfurt 1993, 109f.

39 Cf. Frankfurt 1993, 110.

40 Cf. Taylor 1977a, section II.

41 Cf. Taylor 1977a, section II, esp. 31ff.

42 Cf. Taylor 1979.

43 Cf. Frankfurt 1982.

have to be articulated. Only then is it possible to accomplish a definite fundamental commitment. Yet articulation entails an evaluative dimension, which in turn relies on language. In order to articulate one's own inchoate attitudes one is thus in need of appropriate concepts. At this point, however, a certain degree of openness comes into play. For it is always possible to ask whether one has articulated one's fundamental attitudes really in the most appropriate way. In this regard, we can gain new insight, for example, by reflecting our articulations and becoming aware of the fact that, until now, we did not really understand our fundamental attitudes and therefore interpreted them in a distorting way. Dialogue with others may lead us to new insight as well, and sometimes also to new concepts for our articulations.<sup>44</sup> Hence, it is, at least in principle, always possible to revise one's articulations—Taylor even recommends a „stance of openness“ toward them.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in comparison to Frankfurt's account, Taylor clearly ascribes the person in question a more active role. For a person has not only simply to *discover* what she cares about, but actually *takes an active part* in the process of generating her fundamental commitments, albeit within a certain social and cultural framework which might even include objective moral evaluations. Even so, the fact that there are cases in which one has to choose, during a process of re-evaluation, between two or more possibilities of fundamental articulations suggests that Taylor might presuppose a certain degree of ontological openness or even libertarian freedom, whereas Frankfurt's purely subjectivist account of a given self clearly gets along fine without these assumptions. In fact, Frankfurt famously denies that the principle of alternative possibilities, and therefore ontological openness, matters at all.<sup>46</sup>

### Internal vs. external aspects of autonomy and the self

Up to this point, the aspects taken to be essential for the constitution of a person's self and of her autonomy, when formulating either the *existential cum libertarian thesis* or the *authenticity via essential nature thesis*, are primarily *internal* to the person. However, as noted already, the objection has been raised that both the self and personal autonomy hinge at least partially on social, i.e. *external*, factors, like one's social and cultural upbringing, social attributions of (moral) responsibility, interpersonal reactive attitudes, shared narrative constructions of an agent's self or normative practices of social and political self-justification.

The strongest proposition with regard to the role of external factors defends the view that even a person's identity and stable self over time depends on external factors, and especially on attributions of responsibility. Given the wide range of complexities concerning the relationship between external and internal factors of an agent's autonomy and self, in the following we can only give a short glimpse on some of the most prominent tensions between social attributions and individually preferred self-conceptions.

Theories concerning the relation between the self and personal autonomy which emphasize the relevance of external aspects often are immediate continuations of *social-relational* and in some cases also of *narrative* accounts of the self. Firstly, it is relatively easy to show the importance of both internal *and* external factors concerning the *authenticity via essential nature thesis*. External factors, like social attributions in general, are seen here as essentially contributing to the formation and maintenance of a person's essential nature. In contrast to this, external fac-

44 Cf. Taylor 1977a, 39ff.

45 Cf. Taylor 1977a, 40f.

46 See Frankfurt 1969.

tors seem to play at most a marginal role with regard to the *existential cum libertarian thesis*, as corresponding accounts presuppose that we are able to choose our self freely and individually. Consequently, these accounts reject the idea that any claims or ascriptions coming from society play an important systematic role for the constitution of either the self or personal autonomy. Even proponents of the *existential cum libertarian thesis*, however, have to admit that persons who shape their self by radical choice are socialized beings, equipped with the social norms and values they have internalized during childhood. To be sure, once they have acquired the ability to reflect critically on these norms and values they can immediately reject them. Yet even then it remains dubitable if a person will ever be able to dissociate herself entirely from each and every social—and that is external—influence.

As was said with regard to social-relational accounts of the self, the forming and sustaining of the self as basis for personal autonomy depends in various ways on social and cultural conditions, and especially on the practice of social interaction. That a self can be formed and maintained this way is, however, not sufficient for the actual existence of personal autonomy. In fact, autonomy has to be *exercised*.<sup>47</sup> Yet exercising one's capability of autonomy is also taken to presuppose both external and internal factors.

Concerning the *forming* of a self capable of autonomy, especially the question of *education* is of great importance. Very young children still lack a self which is necessary for autonomy. They do not yet have the required *inherent* qualities like, for example, rationality, the capability of critical reflection and the ability to perceive themselves as subjects existing over time. Accordingly, education can be seen as a project the aim of which is to cultivate these *internal* features by *external* means, that is, for example, by telling the child about right and wrong, by encouraging those of his or her strivings which are beneficial for becoming an autonomous subject and by preventing developments which would endanger this aim. So whether the process of developing a stable self can take place successfully depends not only on internal factors, i.e. in the dispositions of the child, but to a great extent also on an appropriate education. At this point, however, we step into an area of tension. For, on the one hand, education is necessary for the development of the child's internal characteristics and also his or her ability to decide and to act in accordance with them. On the other hand, education always also means paternalism and heteronomy. Therefore, education is a delicate matter in the context of personal autonomy. The question is, then, how far paternalism in education may go. There seems to be a clash between the means of education and its aims. The question is thus how these (seemingly) opposing tendencies of education can be reconciled.

Furthermore, we depend on external social factors not only during childhood. Where the *maintenance* of one's self is concerned, even as adults we at least partially rely on the attitudes other people take toward us.<sup>48</sup> A stable self does not only hinge on internal characteristics but on external factors as well. Socialization is an open-ended process. According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *primary* socialization—the forming of the self during childhood—is followed by a *secondary* socialization. A person's self relies on social contexts throughout the whole span of the person's existence.<sup>49</sup> As was already the case with the *forming* of one's self, we are immediately confronted with tensions in this realm, too. There are, however, some differences. *Firstly*, there already *exists* a "self" when secondary socialization takes place, whereas

47 For this point cf. especially Taylor 1979b.

48 See in this respect Berger/Luckmann 1966, Honneth 1992, Taylor 1979a, 1985c, 1989, 1991, and 1994.

49 Cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966.

during childhood this self *has yet to be formed*. Secondly, and resulting from this fact, the process of socialization takes place differently. During childhood, the attitudes of the “generalized other” are simply *internalized*, at least by small children who still lack the competency for critical reflection. As adults, however, we normally *are* able to call social claims and expectations into question. Secondary socialization therefore does not simply mean the internalization of external attitudes, but comes closer to a *bargaining*.<sup>50</sup> The adult individual has to steer a middle course between two possible situations which would endanger the stability and integrity of his or her self. On the one hand, he or she must not submit to each and every social pressure, for this would mean the end of his or her integrity. On the other hand, the stability of his or her self relies on social recognition. Yet societies typically grant this recognition only to those of their members who, at least to a certain degree, share their values and submit to their norms. This problem typically extends into the political realm as well. For possible clashes can arise between identity ascriptions made by different social groups. Individuals who are exposed to conflicting social ascriptions, i.e. to conflicts that may even stem only from competing external factors, thus run the risk of losing their integrity. Especially a conflict between primary and secondary socialization can have devastating consequences. In the worst case, an individual will be unable to maintain a stable and integral self at all. Secondary socialization can thus be seen as a lifelong process of bargaining for one’s identity.

In this bargaining process, external and internal factors of the self have to be reconciled in a way which is able to solve the manifold problems deriving from the tensions brought forth by the dependency on both factors in order to maintain not only a stable and integral self but also one’s personal autonomy. Accordingly, regarding the question of how to maintain one’s personal autonomy, one roughly has to face the same tensions as noted above. Especially ascriptivist accounts of personal autonomy, according to which being a self capable of autonomy is essentially a matter of being treated as a responsible subject by one’s fellows, have to face the challenge of avoiding arbitrariness. For, obviously, there *are* also internal factors, like rationality, the ability to reflect critically, the capability to postpone less important short-term desires in favor of long-term aims one really cares about and so on, that play an important role in ensuring that ascriptions of personal autonomy are adequate or justified. To *deny* a person, who *has* these characteristics, the ascription of responsibility and personal autonomy would thus be an act of sheer arbitrariness. Hence, aside from the *second person’s* point of view, the *first person’s* point of view also matters crucially.

Still, in order *actually to exercise* one’s autonomy persons firstly have to rely on social recognition in order to be able to form and sustain a self *capable* of being autonomous. As in the case of the process of maintaining a stable self, one continually has to undertake a balancing act when it comes to actualizing one’s self *authentically* in order to preserve one’s autonomy. Accordingly, exercising one’s autonomy depends on a social infrastructure which provides one with the possibility to live authentically. Yet access to this possibility also has its costs. Societies set limits to their members’ possibilities to act and live authentically, and in many cases subjects break down under social pressure. Therefore, an individual person has to negotiate her way between exaggerated conformity to social norms and values, on the one hand, and her becoming excluded from society because of overly individualistic ambitions, on the other hand.

Following this line of thought, the main question is then how the relation of internal and external components should look like concerning the maintenance of an autonomous self

50 Cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966 and Honneth 1992.

within secondary socialization. From what was said above, it becomes evident that we need an appropriate social “infrastructure” in order to develop and maintain a stable and integral authentic self as well as in order to actualize our personal autonomy. Unsurprisingly, it is highly contentious what exactly may count as an “appropriate” social infrastructure—the debate between liberals and communitarians being just one example in this respect. At least on a general level, however, it can be said that a certain amount of openness and tolerance is required within society, even though it remains controversial to which degree.<sup>51</sup>

### **Autonomy, the self, and limited freedom**

Finally, in discussing the relationship between autonomy and the self and mapping the terrain confined by the *existential cum libertarian thesis*, on the one hand, and the *authenticity via essential nature thesis*, on the other hand, a further aspect should be taken into account, namely the bearing possible limitations or hindrances of freely “realizing” one’s authentic self have on one’s autonomy and, in turn, on one’s self. Usually, it is assumed that a person can act according to what she authentically and autonomously wishes to do. For being autonomous, as noted at the beginning, is basically understood just as the capacity to act or, more general to live, without unwanted hindrances.

However, sometimes a person might lack the kind of freedom necessary to realize what she (autonomously) decided to do. Especially in cases when one identifies with certain norms or values, situations can arise in which one is simply not able to live up to them. Given the familiar principle that “ought implies can,” the question arises what bearing norms or values have on a person’s autonomy and self if these norms or values prove to be unrealizable, at least in the situation in question.

Moreover, the complementary case has to be taken into account if one’s (stable) self proves itself to be a hindrance to achieve certain, autonomously chosen, goals. For not only the familiar subjectivist question mentioned previously arises, whether one can (autonomously) change or transform one’s self in order to be able to pursue certain goals so far incompatible or at least in conflict with one’s present self, but also a social-relational question comes up whether others acknowledge or recognize a person’s action (or even intention) as valid due to their view on the person’s self, thereby preventing the action from succeeding in the first place in cases where recognition of others is a necessary success condition. Think, for example, of the familiar “Look who’s talking!” reply when being blamed.

51 Cf. Taylor 1979a, 1985c, 1991 and 1994.



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