

XX Self-Determination Theory

FUNDAMENTAL MOTIVATIONS

What are our fundamental motivations? There are the obvious physical ones: food, shelter, sex. But in addition there is a set of fundamental social motivations, fundamental in the sense that they are almost universal, and that we generally cannot flourish if we fail to achieve them.¹ Although there is much debate over exactly how they should be classified, three command fairly widespread agreement.² The first is a desire for *social acceptance*.³ The second is a desire for *control*: we become depressed and apathetic when we find that we cannot control our environment, either because it is uncontrollable, or because we lack the necessary competence.⁴ The third, which is the one of relevance for us, is a desire for *self-determination*.

DECI & RYAN

The idea of self-determination has been articulated and explored in the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. They write:

Some intentional behaviors, we suggest, are initiated and regulated through choice as an expression of oneself, whereas other intentional behaviors are pressured and coerced by intrapsychic and environmental force and thus do not represent true choice. The former behaviors are characterized by autonomous initiation and regulation and are referred to as self-determined; the latter behaviors are characterized by heteronomous initiation and regulation and are referred to as controlled.⁵

True choice, they go on to say, applies only to actions that involve “an inner endorsement of one’s actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one’s own”. Philosophical readers will be immediately reminded of Frankfurt.⁶ But the idea isn’t quite the same. Frankfurt is concerned with the issue of what it is to endorse, or better, to identify with, one’s *desires*. Deci and Ryan are concerned with the issue of endorsement of one’s *actions*. The two are importantly different; and here we start to see some connections with the topic of coercion. When I am coerced into some wicked act to protect the life of my child, the desire that moves me—the

¹ They are thus plausibly *needs* as well as desires. For a fuller account of the ways in which desires or needs can be fundamental see R. Baumeister and M. Leary, ‘The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation’, *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995) 497–529.

² For an overview see the Introduction to E. T. Higgins and A. Kruglanski (eds) *Motivational Science: Social and Personality Perspectives*, (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2000)

³ See Baumeister and Leary, *op cit*. This is what underpins the mechanism of what Pettit and Brennan call ‘the intangible hand’. See ‘Hands Invisible and Intangible’, *Synthese* 94 (1993) 191–225.

⁴ The former is the basis of Seligman’s notion of Learned Helplessness; the latter, of Bandura’s notion of Self-Efficacy.

⁵ E. Deci and R. Ryan ‘The Support of Autonomy and the Control of Behavior’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55 (1987) 1024–37, at p. 1024. In a footnote to this passage they remark that the distinction should be understood as marking the ends of a continuum, rather than a sharp break. Although they talk here of control coming from environmental force, in fact this seems to be entirely other people.

⁶ Especially of his later writing where, as Scanlon notes, the stress moves to the issue of identification, and away from that of moral responsibility. See ‘Identification and Externality’ in *The Importance of What We Care About*, and ‘The Faintest Passion’ in *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Scanlon’s discussion is in his ‘Reasons and Passions’ in S. Buss and L. Overton (eds.) *Contours of Agency* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2002), pp. 165–83. For a straightforward presentation of exactly what Frankfurt means by identification (i.e. acceptance, rather than endorsement or caring about) see his reply to Watson in that volume at pp. 160–1.

desire for the well being of my child—is certainly one that I endorse; the wicked action is not. It is only in Deci and Ryan’s sense that the action is not my own.

It is tempting to try to give a philosophical analysis of the rather vague notion that Deci and Ryan are after. But care needs to be taken, for the notion is driven by its empirical explanatory value, rather than by an attempt to articulate an existing ordinary language concept. Its explanatory value turns out to be great. Factors that threaten self-determination, such as rewards, threats, deadlines, and even simple evaluation and surveillance, tend to undermine *intrinsic* motivation, i.e. the motivation to go on with the activity even when the pressures are removed. They also undermine interest, enjoyment, and creativity. They tend to lower the trustiness of those exposed to them, increase their aggression, and make them, in turn, more controlling. Even their health suffers.⁷

Intrapersonal factors appear to have similar effects (though this is less well explored). So, for instance, being told that success in a task is an indicator of high IQ makes university students less motivated to go on with that task once they are given the chance to drop it. Even the self-surveillance provided by the presence of a mirror lowers intrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan hypothesize that people can pressure themselves in much the same way as they can be pressured by others, and with much the same consequences. They go so far as to conclude

When behavior is prompted by thoughts such as “I have to ...” or “I should ...” (what we call internally controlling events), the behavior is theorized to be less self-determined than when it is characterized by more autonomy-related thoughts such as “I’d find it valuable to ...” or “I’d be interested in ...” Accordingly, we predict that the qualities associated with external controlling events and with external autonomy-supporting events will also be associated with their intrapsychic counterparts.⁸

Here I do voice some philosophical scepticism. It is very hard to believe that when things matter so much to us that we feel we *have to* act on them—whether this be Luther’s religious commitments or the commitment that a parent has to a child—we will feel a lack of self-determination.⁹ It is not, I suspect, obligation in itself that undermines self-determination; it is rather our belief about the *source* of that obligation.

Clearly much of what is at issue in both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal case has to do with manipulation: we do not like being pushed about, not by others, and not even by our own demanding selves. Behaviour is perceived as more of a threat to self-determination when it is perceived as more manipulative. In this dimension, all rewards are not the same. Those offered for the performance of specific tasks within an experiment do more to undermine intrinsic motivation than those offered for simple participation: subjects perceive the experimenters as doing more to manipulate them.¹⁰

⁷ For a recent set of studies see E. Deci and R. Ryan, *Handbook of Self-Determination Research* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002); for a popular presentation of the approach, see E. Deci, *Why We Do What We Do*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996)

⁸ Deci and Ryan, ‘The Support of Autonomy’ *op. cit.*

⁹ Frankfurt provides a lengthy discussion of this phenomenon, which he terms ‘volitional necessity’. See for instance ‘Rationality and the Unthinkable’ in *The Importance of What We Care About* and ‘On the Necessity of Ideals’ in *Necessity, Volition and Love*.

¹⁰ E. Deci and R. Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985) pp. 72ff.