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Narrative Self-Understanding and Relational Autonomy

Comments on Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera, "Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves, and Autonomy" and Andrea C. Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy"

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i. Narrative Identity

Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera's discussion of narrative integration and identity takes up a wide range of issues. It advances objections against Galen Strawson's critique of narrative identity and defends both the claim that some narrative conception of identity can capture descriptively the ways in which human agents experience and make sense of their lives and also the claim that some form of narrative self-interpretation is required for a fulfilling, well-lived life. In defending these claims, Mackenzie and Poltera appeal, in part, to Elyn Saks's autobiographical account of her long, on-going struggle with schizophrenia and the significance of this struggle for her self-understanding (Saks 2007). According to the authors,

> Saks's self-authored case study of the Episodic self-experience caused by schizophrenic delusions is highly instructive in showing first, why self-experience, if it is to be coherent, necessarily involves having a sense of diachronic connection between one's past, present, and future, and second, why the capacity to integrate one's experience into a self-narrative is necessary for a flourishing life (38-9).

In turn, Mackenzie and Poltera draw upon the fragmented character of Saks's experience of her agency to criticize Marya Schechtman's account (Schechtman 1996; 2007) of the sorts of narrative that can constitute a personal self. In particular, they argue that the illness narrative that Saks must employ to make sense of her periodically dissociated experience contravenes the coherence requirements that Schechtman regards as essential for narrative self-constitution. By Mackenzie and Poltera's lights, such an illness narrative serves an indispensable sense-making function, notwithstanding its disintegrative implications, if agents such as Saks are to achieve and sustain a temporally-extended sense of their identity as persons. Mackenzie and Poltera draw upon relational theories of autonomy to attempt to explain how a schizophrenic like Saks can achieve sufficient narrative identity to be capable of episodic autonomy while continuing to suffer diminished global autonomy in virtue of her psychological malady. They see this conclusion as underscoring the importance of forging a clear distinction between identity achieved through narrative self-understanding and various sorts of personal autonomy.

While there is much with which to agree in Mackenzie and Poltera's discussion – namely, that Strawson's account of the

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Episodic self is ultimately incoherent, and that personal identity must be disentangled carefully from personal autonomy – I have a number of concerns, as well, about their position. For reasons of space, I limit my comments to three issues.

First, like many narrative theorists of personal identity, Mackenzie and Poltera emphasize that "on the narrative view, the continuity of a person's life over time is constituted by the person herself, through the exercise of her agency and via an ongoing process of narrative self-interpretation . . ." (33-4). They regard selfhood as "an achievement of agency" (38). Yet, if the agency to which they refer is the agency of some personal entity, then who or what is the entity that constructs a narrative self-interpretation and, in so doing, brings into being diachronically extended, rationally intelligible selfhood? Notwithstanding the authors' description of narrative self-constitution as the activity of the person herself, there are good reasons to think that the agent whose activity constitutes the self cannot be the very self who is constituted through narrative interpretation. It would seem that the agent must exist and be capable of self-reflective activity prior to the emergence of a personal self. If that is so, what can serve the role of agent in the achievement of narrative self-constitution? Mackenzie and Poltera do not say. Moreover, their tendency to describe a person's constitution as a self with an identity over time as the product of that very person's own action does more to highlight the difficulty than to resolve it. One way to seek to avoid this conundrum would be to reduce the agential source of narrative identity to some sub-agential motive(s), perhaps on analogy to David Velleman's proposal that the desire to act in accordance with reasons can itself play the functional role of the agent when a person acts (2000). Nothing in Mackenzie and Poltera's position suggests, however, that they would have any inclination to move down such a reductionist path.

A second concern involves Mackenzie and Poltera's account of the role that illness narratives (cf. Kleinman 1988; Phillips 2003) can play in making self-understanding possible for persons, like Saks, who wrestle with psychological conditions that periodically debilitate or disorganize their capacities for lucid practical reasoning and rational conduct. Mackenzie and Poltera highlight Saks's contention that she had to come to treat her psychotic delusions as part of her identity in order to be able to regard her medical treatment as an authentic choice, as an intelligible step toward establishing and protecting her sense of self (40, 48). The authors then infer from the self-constituting value of Saks's illness narrative that Schechtman's theory must be overly restrictive, for that theory would seem to preclude the incorporation of Saks's dissociative states into a coherent narrative interpretation of her identity.

This move is perplexing on multiple grounds. It is not clear what exactly is meant by saying that Saks "accepted that her illness is part of who she is" (45), or that she had, in some sense, to regard her illness in this manner in order to embrace her treatment as a step toward composing or sustaining her self. It would seem to be enough for Saks to concede that she was afflicted with a serious condition and that treating that condition, while psychologically destabilizing and physically consuming in the short run, would give her the best chance of regaining and securing her powers of rational agency and sense of selfhood in the long run. Moreover, if Saks were to acknowledge her illness in this way, then her subsequent narrative self-understanding would seem to conform to Schechtman's reality constraint. The reality constraint holds that a self-constituting narrative cannot, among other things, involve grossly delusional beliefs. Thus, I am perplexed both by Mackenzie and Poltera's understanding of illness narratives and by their claim that Saks's self-understanding serves as a clear counterexample to Schechtman's reality constraint.

More fundamentally, I am not persuaded by the authors' efforts to eschew the "story-telling" elements of many narrative accounts of identity in order to escape Strawson's objections (34-5), or by their attempt to weaken the coherence requirements on self-narratives in order to accommodate the fragmentary, conflictual, or alienating qualities of Saks's experience of her self (47). Without some such elements of coherent story or tale, diachronic modes of self-understanding or sense-making simply cannot be expected to comprise narratives in any meaningful sense. I worry that Mackenzie and Poltera's attempts to rescue narrative conceptions of identity can succeed, if at all, only by abandoning their distinctively narrative character. This is a problem, I should add, only for those who are committed, as I am not, to a narrative framework for analyzing the character of selfhood and personal identity over time.

ii. Relational Autonomy

I turn now to Andrea Westlund's important discussion of the relational character of personal autonomy. Westlund addresses a central cluster of issues in the literature on relational autonomy. She attempts to show that a sound account of some necessary conditions of autonomy can constitutively incorporate a relational dimension that addresses many feminist interests in autonomy without entailing any substantive normative commitments. In so doing, she aims to rebut John Christman's claim that constitutively relational theories of autonomy necessarily entail an unpalatable perfectionism about the good (Christman 2004). Westlund argues that one necessary condition of autonomy in choice and action is both formal, or content-neutral, and also genuinely relational. This condition consists in a person's having "the disposition to hold [herself] answerable to external critical perspectives on [her] action-guiding commitments" (28). That is, a person's ability to be self-governing in the practical reasoning that leads her to act depends, at least in part, on her having "a disposition for dialogical answerability," an openness "to engagement with the critical perspectives of others" (35).

In the main, I support the general approach that Westlund uses to elucidate the relational, or dialogical, character of autonomous agency. Like Westlund, I believe that an agent's autonomy turns, in part, on her attitude toward aspects of her answerability in the face of potential criticisms of her motives or actions; and I concur with Westlund and Christman that perfectionism about the good presents a serious pitfall in a serviceable conception of personal autonomy. My thinking departs from Westlund's, however, on the matter of whether avoiding perfectionism requires espousing a purely formal account that is free of substantive normative commitments.

Note, first, that Westlund's proposed condition of autonomy appears itself to entail some substantive normative commitment in its actual realization. To hold oneself answerable, in any concrete situation, is to hold oneself to an expectation that one answer for one's choices or actions; it is to apply to oneself a standard that calls for one to answer potential criticisms (under certain conditions). Hence, to act autonomously in any actual circumstance is, by Westlund's own account, to be disposed to apply in that situation some normative expectation to oneself. And this is not a purely formal expectation; such expectations are often matters for substantive evaluative disagreement.

Even if Westlund's account could manage to elude this particular substantive commitment, I would argue that other normative commitments also lie submerged in attitudes that are preconditions for agents' holding themselves answerable to others' criticism. As I have argued elsewhere (for instance, in the papers of mine that Westlund cites), agents may have diminished autonomy because they fail to regard themselves as sufficiently competent to answer for their conduct or as worthy of taking the position of potential answerers. These

ways of treating our own agential status are precursors to answerability; we can treat ourselves as competent and worthy to take the position of answerers without being disposed to hold ourselves fully answerable. Westlund is correct when she observes that the states of self-regard I have described do not appear to be content-neutral (37). This is why I consider my view to offer a substantive conception, albeit a weakly substantive one.

However, it is unclear to me why the substantive commitments implicit in persons' attitudes toward their own competence and worthiness to speak for their actions bring in tow an objectionable perfectionism, as Westlund alleges (36-7). It is not the case that my weakly substantive conception entails that autonomous agents must embrace a liberal, egalitarian conception of their self-worth. The conception I propose leaves plenty of room for non-liberal views of self-worth. Nor does it preclude autonomous engagement in non-ideal personal relations, as strongly substantive accounts do (cf. Oshana 1998; 2003).

My proposed conception also does not commit us to specific practices of justification, a commitment that Westlund rightly thinks a good theory of autonomy should avoid (38-9). Westlund's discussion of the reasons why autonomous agents need not face an obligation to cite reasons for all of their actions, in all circumstances, on demand, is valuable in this regard (39-40). Yet notice that Westlund's treatment of some of the conditions for the legitimacy of critical challenges to persons' actions brings to light the fact that the disposition to hold ourselves answerable carries with it an implicit, substantive commitment to norms of legitimate challenge. In this respect, Westlund's theory cannot remain wholly neutral on the character of the applicable justificatory practices.

Notwithstanding these concerns about Westlund's position, her paper makes valuable advances in the literature on relational autonomy and feminist social philosophy. It repays close study. Moreover, both Mackenzie and Poltera's treatment of narrative identity and Westlund's discussion of relational autonomy underscore, in very different ways, the value of distinguishing carefully between practical identity and sufficient conditions for personal autonomy. These authors appreciate well that the literature on relational autonomy has done much to show that agents' reflective endorsement of their effective motives may fall short of guaranteeing personal autonomy. These articles also suggest, again in different ways, that autonomous agency need not arise from coherently constituted or authentic selfhood.

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