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Comments on Westlund and Mackenzie and Poltera

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

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These two penetrating and insightful articles explore important issues concerning the nature of the self, the inter-subjective and social nature of persons, and the relation between autonomy and value commitment. Of particular interest to social theorists who focus on gender and race will be the way in which models of the self and autonomy sketched here attempt to capture the full variety of modes of social being and avoid the traditionally parochial conceptions of the self-governing "man" that marked much philosophy and political theory in the past. In general, I am largely in agreement with the main claims developed in the papers, but

want to raise some issues that might further the discussion about these important issues.

Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera mount a powerful response to Galen Strawson's rejection of narrative conceptions of the self. The response is largely motivated by a discussion of a person - "Saks" - who exhibits a lack of just the kind of narrative coherence in her life and experiences that narrative theorists say is necessary for a unified self. The pathological nature of her existence, they argue, illustrates how this lack undercuts her ability to sustain a unified life as an agent. I find little to quibble with here, though I do want to raise some questions that might point to a promising further development of the authors' views.

First, is it really clear that the source of the pathology for Saks is a lack of specifically *diachronic* coherence? This person also suffers rather severely from synchronic fragmentation, especially evident when she describes the lack of a "filter" channeling her various thoughts and sensations into a unified, self-oriented, schema. Strawson might be able to reply here that while Saks lacks a coherent self and a flourishing life because of a lack of a unified self, it is not *temporal* continuity of the sort required by narrative views that she is clearly missing. She would be just as disoriented if her memories and attachments to her past self were fairly well ordered. To bolster such a response, Strawson could also point out the various ancillary symptoms she experiences as candidates for the source of her (self-oriented) problems.

Second, Mackenzie and Poltera interpret the narrative criterion of self-constitution as a flexible standard (more flexible than Schechtman interprets it, they claim). They say, rightly in my view, that the narrativity in question need not take on the structure of a traditional story to mark the coherence of a unified sense of self. Indeed, they insist that we should loosen the coherence requirements on self-constituting

narratives to take better account of (quoting Gallagher) the “equivocations, contradictions and struggles that find expression within an individual’s life” (47). This seems right, but then, what *does* make a sequence of experiences a narrative in the end, as opposed, say, to a simple and unconnected series? The authors claim that the sequence must be susceptible to “integration” by the self-reflecting agent; but what makes such a sequence capable of being integrated?

Consider a dream sequence: my own dreams make a kind of emotional sense, even if the scenes they involve shift incomprehensibly (“...then the field I was in turned into a cemetery and I was attending my grandmother’s funeral but was inappropriately dressed...”). Such sequences, especially when heard by a person other than the dreamer, make no sense as a narrative at all, but the dreamer, especially during the dream, sees them as strangely intelligible (sometimes, at least). If our lives were like dreams, would they count as integrated? If not, what would make them so?

I raise these questions as a person who has relied on a loose understanding of narrativity in my own work on models of the self and who has admittedly also not specified what level or kind of coherence must attach to narratives to have them count as such (Christman 2009). David Velleman has utilized the notion of “intelligibility” in describing this kind of coherence (Velleman 2005), but again, we need a non-circular conception of intelligibility that will do the proper work in distinguishing the minimally unified life of a self from the disoriented and dissociated experiences of, for example, a schizophrenic.

What is also valuable about Mackenzie and Poltera’s analysis, however, is their claim that narrativity functions differently in conceptions of the *self* than it might in conceptions of autonomy. This allows the former idea to maintain a kind of flexibility that makes room for idiosyncratic life paths as well

as subject positions that may themselves be structured by pathologies and discontinuities. Autonomy, on the other hand, requires a temporally extended self-narrative but also involves socio-relational components that reflect the ways that selves “are shaped by complex, intersecting social determinants and [which] are constituted in the context of interpersonal relationships” (48). They are careful, however, not to claim overly specific social relations as required for autonomy since, in keeping with their openness to the varieties of selves and life paths just mentioned, they avoid cementing particular (and contentious) personal relations as the only ones that autonomous persons can engage in. This is a theme that leads us to consideration of Andrea Westlund’s work.

The central aim of Westlund’s paper is to argue that autonomy can be understood as constitutively relational in ways that capture feminist suspicions of the alleged acceptance of subservience by some women but which not problematically perfectionist in ways that most liberal (and other) political outlooks strive to avoid. Specifically, she adds the condition of “answerability” that marks the autonomous person’s ability to respond to others adequately in defense of her commitments. This, Westlund claims, establishes an interpersonal (relational) element to autonomy that at once explains why subservient choices often indicate a lack of self-government but which does not do so merely by imposing a perfectionist ideal onto the requirements of autonomy.

Westlund’s approach exhibits an attempt to walk the thin line between purely procedural or content-neutral accounts of autonomy, where no mention is made in the conditions of self-government of any particular desire, value, or characteristic the agent might have, and accounts that rule out, as *per se* heteronomous, self-subordinating and subservient lifestyles. Indeed, this is an issue that theorists of autonomy have been tossing about for a while now. But this

is more than merely an internecine debate, for it strikes at the heart of moral philosophy in the Enlightenment tradition; it points to the question of whether our conception of the person (in particular the self-governing, reasonable person) precedes our conception of the good life, indeed of moral values in general. The challenge is to distinguish the capacity for moral *choice* (for example, to form and judge conceptions of the good) from what some claim as moral *knowledge*, namely the ability to understand the truth about moral values. The Kantian tradition of moral philosophy, and the attendant liberalism in political theory that grows out of it, insists that moral truth cannot be specified independently of practical reason. Hence, we cannot specify the truth about morality and the good life before fully grasping how a reasonable, self-governing agent is structured and functions in the first place. (Of course, those that resist these Kantian impulses may well reject any such separation between the right and the good.)

Also in the background of these debates is the now generally shared distrust (if not outright rejection) of the individualist commitments of this Enlightenment tradition, where the conception of the person and practical reason attaches fundamentally to individual persons without necessary reference to the social constituents of their identities. This distrust has emerged from many quarters, not the least important of which is feminism, where focus on the inter-relatedness of many lives (or some parts of all our lives) served to illuminate and emphasize relations of care, affective connection, and inter-dependence that marked women's traditional social roles (and, as such, tended to be ignored or denigrated).

I mention these broader themes in order to contextualize Westlund's project, as well as to underscore its importance. As we noted, Westlund claims that the best way to capture the relational character of autonomy, and so achieve these

broader aims, is to add a condition of "answerability", according to which one has the "disposition to hold oneself answerable to external critical perspectives on one's action-guiding commitments" (28).¹ This captures what she calls a condition of "self-responsibility" (35).

One question we might ask about such a condition concerns how best to understand what truly motivates including it. For I can imagine two different sets of considerations that might justify adding such a requirement, but one of these sets of considerations does not, in the end, amount to an inter-personal condition, and the other is not clearly justified in ways Westlund would find congenial. In the first case, one could require that one be disposed to answer for one's value commitments for quasi-epistemic reasons, namely that being responsive to reasons and objections we might consider further solidifies the basis or foundation of our values. That is, insofar as we are disposed to defend ourselves and our values in the face of criticism, to that extent we have good reason to hold them (and are not simply in their grip). But notice, establishing such a foundational basis for our commitments could be accomplished by answering to a *machine* if it were cleverly programmed to ask the right questions of us, so as to ensure that we have thought through our commitments properly. If the purpose of answerability is quasi-epistemic in this way, nothing necessarily follows about inter-*personal* relations; what matters is that we engage in inner dialogue in order to ward off skepticism and further anchor our commitments for good reasons.

In most of her discussion of this condition, however, Westlund appears to reject this understanding of her position, especially since she discusses the conditions of "appropriateness" of others' asking questions of us (presumably other real persons). She also claims that self-governance in her sense "requires more than one perspective to be in play" (36). But she notes also that this dialogue can be

“imagined” and hence wholly internal: “the critics for whom the agent answers may sometimes inhabit her own moral imagination rather than her real social environment” (36). But this suggests that it is serving this more purely instrumental role, and hence not requiring (necessarily) anything in particular about the way we relate to each other as people.

On the other hand, Westlund may reject this quasi-epistemic reading of her claim. She might do this by insisting that social relations matter for autonomy, not for the role they play in better supporting our convictions, but in order to understand when we are truly self-governing, specifically making sure we are not merely “in the grip of a desire” in devoting ourselves to particular (especially subservient) values. But if this is the approach that is intended, it is more difficult to see how the model maintains its content neutrality, since the grounds for requiring this disposition relate to an ideal of social relations, an ideal about which reasonable, reflective people disagree.

But Westlund would surely object here that it is her whole point to show that certain types of relations effectively disable a person from distinguishing those values that she sincerely holds and those that are merely driving her by way of fear, closed-mindedness, or unquestioning obedience. Here I would say that I am happy to agree to this claim, except that I would say that the responsiveness she adds as a relational condition of autonomy concerns a person’s *competence* regarding self-government and not conditions of *authenticity*. The latter category of conditions involves what it means for a person’s values to be her own in the proper sense. But it is not authenticity that is disrupted when a person lacks the disposition to answer for her commitments. For after the kind of questioning and responsiveness Westlund demands, the person may well come back to the same values she began with – they were “hers” all along. The capacity she lacks is the

ability to sift properly through the reasons available to her for having any values at all, not which ones are really her own.

Why does this issue of classification matter? It is because liberal anti-perfectionism (or, actually, any political approach for which respect for radical *difference* is central) is concerned to keep separate accounts of what it means to have the capacity to accept, follow and perhaps revise a set of values from accounts of what such values should be. Confusing the latter aim with the conditions of the former is (or can be) dangerously inimical to the acceptance of deep pluralism of world views as a permanent fact of modern social life. Understanding the answerability condition as an element of competence allows Westlund to maintain her anti-perfectionist credentials by arguing that it is not (what many observers would label) “subservience” *itself* which is ruled out here, since the question of what counts as (unacceptable) subservience is something about which, in principle, autonomous people can differ. Rather, it is any set of relations that prevents a person from developing a sense of herself, her values, and her place in the social matrix in which she exists.

Such a classification of the self-responsibility condition would also further bolster Westlund’s response to the charge that her view overly valorizes interpersonal responsiveness (illustrated by the case of “Betty”). For Westlund is rightly sensitive to the fact that some individuals are not overly disposed to defend their commitments to others in every situation, and she defends a context-sensitive understanding of what kinds of questioning might be appropriate for (autonomous) agents to be ready to face. This stance on her part could then be defended as a view about what adequate reflective choice amounts to – a basic competence – not what holding authentic values means.

However, this move re-raises my earlier concern, for then it is clear that the *relational* nature of the account is derivative:

interpersonal relatedness of a particular sort is a constitutive element of autonomy only insofar as such relations are required for adequate reflective acceptance of one's values. I then am less sure that Westlund can claim, as she does, that her account of autonomy as self-responsibility "demands ...attention to caring relations in which the capacity for autonomy is developed and sustained" (42). That may be true of many or most people, but it depends, for it will not be true of those who can answer for their values perfectly well without attending to any particular social relations with other actual individuals.

Be this as it may, the context-sensitivity that Westlund insists upon is very much in keeping with the attention to pluralism and difference that anti-perfectionism underscores, a perspective that she and I share. It is also a general perspective that fits very well with Mackenzie and Poltera's insistence that narrative coherence for autonomous selves requires different things for different (sorts of) people. This attention to the radical and multi-dimensional *differences* in identities, self-understandings and social connectedness that marks the modern world is very much welcomed in a politics that is devoted to resisting all forms of oppression, but in a way that accepts the broad variability and contestability of values.

References

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¹ We might note the similarity between this condition and one offered by one of our other authors, Catriona Mackenzie (Mackenzie 2008). In that work, Mackenzie adds a condition of recognition for one's normative authority as a requirement of autonomy.