Autonomy, Care, and Self

PHGA 7764: Fall 2009
Thursdays 12 - 2 PM Collins
Instructor: John Davenport
Phone: 212-636-7928
Email: Davenport@fordham.edu
Office: Rm.921f Lincoln Center; Mailbox: Rm 916

Office Hours: Thursdays after class 2:30 - 4:30 pm in Collins 119. Wednesdays I will often be at RH for meetings as well. Tuesdays and Fridays I will be at LC, and Mondays I'm working at home.

Précis of the Seminar: This course introduces students to three closely related topics that have received a lot of productive attention in contemporary philosophy:
(1) Personal autonomy or “self-determination” is widely understood as successfully guiding one's intentions and actions according to one's own priorities and values; it contrasts with coercion, weakness of will, and forms of wantonness or lack of rational self-scrutiny. Autonomy in this sense may also be understood as a condition of full responsibility for one's character.
(2) A set of phenomena called “caring” is widely seen as based on a special kind of motive involving emotional and cognitive components in which the agent is active, and through which his or her life acquires definite shape in priorities and commitments that tend to be sustained over time.
(3) There are several concepts of "self," the most familiar of which is the “subject” of self-consciousness as the basis of identity over time; but the notion of "self" as "practical identity" has become especially important in recent moral psychology and moral theory.

These concepts are tied together if autonomous intention and action are understood as expressions of an autonomous practical identity, and if one's "self" in the sense of autonomous practical character consists in large part of one's cares. But hard questions loom about how a "self" can get going at all, or how a practical identity and the cares it involves can be "self-formed." There is disagreement concerning whether norms or value-standards must already be recognized in some way to guide autonomous formation of one's cares or higher-order volitions, or whether such norms emerge from the process of self-constitution. We will consider these questions and more.

While there is a large and ever-growing literature on each of these topics, this course will sample some of the most widely cited and helpful recent essays and chapters on each of them, and focus our discussion on their possible connections. It helps to look at these questions as closely interrelated rather than working on any one of them in a vacuum. While quite a few of the readings are drawn from analytic philosophy in the last 30 years, we'll also consider some more "continental" works, especially on the fraught question of whether practical identities have a narrative form, and whether autonomy involves "narrative unity" of some kind in one's will, e.g. among one's cares. As with much work in moral psychology and ethics today, our readings are applicable to themes and issues in both analytic and continental traditions, and will be comprehensible to students specializing in either (or hoping to bridge them).

Despite the high course number, this course really is an introduction to these literatures; though students with some background in these areas may wish to focus on an advanced project, the goal
will be a final paper linking one or more of our main themes with the student's other interest in moral psychology or moral theory (e.g. virtue theory, normativity, moral demands versus personal projects, philosophy of emotions, existentialism, free will, etc.). A key course goal is to ensure that students see how these topics are connected and why the relations among them are important for figuring out the right account in any one of them.

**Required Books:**

**Recommended texts:** (bookstore should have a few copies):
Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988)

**Assignments:**
15% Class participation. This includes questions on the readings, objections, and discussion.
30% 2 argument analyses on readings of your choice (approximately 4 pages each).
15% 1 report to the class on a given reading for the day (3-page written summary and questions)
40% Final Research Paper (15 - 20 pages) on a topic to be developed in consultation with me.

**Readings.** To avoid the familiar problem of trying to cover too much in 14 class meetings, I will list the mandatory readings that we will definitely discuss first in each week’s topics, and mark the less vital readings as secondary (which is more than merely recommended, yet less than required). In general, the readings are listed in order of priority unless I note otherwise.

**Tentative Schedule**

**Sept. 3: Introduction**
(1) Introduction to moral questions involving personal autonomy.
(2) Aristotle on reason as the true self in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX ch.4 1166a & ch.8 1168b.
(3) Kant's idea of autonomy as authority over one's actions, and the claim that this necessarily involves the authority of moral standards of justice/fairness being in some sense self-legislated. See *Groundwork* II 431-33.
(4) Thomas Hill, Jr., "Kant on Autonomy" in *The Inner Citadel* (eres and handout)
(6) Secondary background: Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, ch. 4: "Varieties of Autonomy." [This is a later version of “Which Autonomy?”]. We will use pp.117-126 of this chapter as an introduction to the topic.

**Sept. 10: Moral and Personal Autonomy: The Early Frankfurt-Dworkin Hierarchical Model**
Sept. 17: Recognized Problems with Early Hierarchical Models
(1) Frankfurt and Dworkin continued.
(2) Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” in Free Will (eres)
- The objections: regress problem, ab initio/authority problem, and manipulation/source problem.

Sept. 24: Frankfurt's Later Alternatives: Care, Wholeheartedness, Satisfaction
(1) Frankfurt, “The importance of what we care about,” in The Importance of What We Care About, ch.7 (eres)
(2) Frankfurt, “Identification and wholeheartedness,” in The Importance of What We Care About, ch.12 (eres)

Oct. 1: Frankfurt's Later Work on Care, Love, and Volitional Necessity
(1) Frankfurt, "On the Necessity of Ideals" continued.
(3) "On Caring," in Necessity, Volition, and Love.

Oct. 8: Blustein on Caring and Integrity: a response to Frankfurt and "Care Ethics"
(1) Jeffrey Blustein, Care and Commitment, chs. 1-13 on caring and integrity (eres).

Oct. 15: Williams on Practical Identity through Ground Projects and Commitments
(1) Williams, "Persons, character, and morality," from Williams, Moral Luck, ch.1 (eres)
(2) Williams, "Moral luck," from Williams, Moral Luck, ch.2 (eres)
(3) Secondary Reading: Williams's critique of utilitarianism in Utilitarianism: For and Against, esp. sections 1-2 and the section on "integrity" (eres)

Oct. 22: Flanagan on Identity, Character and Self-Narrative
(1) Owen Flanagan's response to Williams and others in Varieties of Moral Personality, chs.2-4.
(2) Flanagan on self-identity in Varieties of Moral Personality, ch.6.
(3) Flanagan on character-traits in Varieties of Moral Personality, chs.12-13

Oct.29: Professor at SPEP meeting.
Time TBA: Optional Makeup Session: Flanagan and Kupperman on Character and Meaning
(1) Flanagan on character continued.
(2) Joel Kupperman, *Character*, chs. 1-3, on character, self-identity over time, and responsibility.

**Nov. 5: Charles Taylor: Strong Evaluation and Social Selfhood**
(1) Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," in *Free Will* (eres)
(2) Charles Taylor, selections from *Sources of the Self*, chs. 1-3 (eres)

**Nov. 12: Strong Evaluative Conceptions of Caring**
(2) Kupperman, *Character*, chs. 6-7.
(3) Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, ch.14 on objective grounds for caring.

**Nov. 19: Three Narrative Theories of Selfhood**
(1) Alasdair MacIntyre, "Virtues, The Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of Tradition," in *After Virtue*, ch.15 (eres); ch.14 (also on eres) is also recommend for those who haven't read it.
(2) Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Explained*, chs. 9-10 on the fictional "I" as center of narrative gravity [eres]

Nov. 26: Thanksgiving Break: autonomous turkey-eating!

**Dec. 3: The New Debate over Narrative Theories of Identity**
(3) Secondary background: Bernard Williams, “Life as Narrative," *European Journal of Philosophy* (Sept 2007 online preprint -- to be replaced with published version) [eres]

**Dec. 10: Paul Ricoeur on Narrative Selves**
(1) Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Introduction, Fifth Study, Sixth Study.
(3) Secondary Reading: Roundtable discussion of Ricoeur's work in *On Paul Ricoeur* (eres).

**Dec. 17: Ricoeur and Narrative Realism**
(1) Ricoeur continued.
(2) David Jay, "Narrative Practical Identity and Autonomy" (draft on eres)
(3) Any unfinished business.
-- Turn in final papers.
First Handout: Themes in the Contemporary Literature on Autonomy

**Autonomy and Responsibility:** A key thesis of this seminar is that agent-autonomy is part of a family of concepts related to moral responsibility: for an action, decision, motive, or disposition to be autonomous means that it is *self-determined*, or authored by the agent self, in whatever sense implies *full* responsibility for it. Thus agent-autonomy implies responsibility, though not visa-versa: autonomous actions are a subset of those imputable to the agent, or for which she can be held accountable. Thus agent-autonomy is not the same concept as the freedom or control necessary for moral responsibility; it involves something more. Conceived merely as the subject of consciousness or the cause of decisions, “the self” does not seem to have sufficient substance to make it the “author” deeply responsible for some dispositions, motives, or plans of action rather than others. The notion of acts or states coming from or expressing my true self seems to require a thicker conception of practical identity in terms of identity-defining projects, commitments, cares and relationships, as well as the values to which these volitional states respond. Can these states and relations themselves be autonomously formed in some sense, and if so, what kind of freedom is involved in the process? This is closely related to the questions: what is moral character, and kind of control do we have over the formation of our character-traits? Thus the notion of agent-autonomy is closely related to responsibility for one’s character or self.

**The Hierarchical Model, and Communitarian/Relational Critiques.** Thus theories of agent-autonomy bottom out in theories of selfhood or the formation of practical identities. This is recognized in thinkers as diverse as Aristotle and Kant, and to some extent in the seminal work of Harry Frankfurt and Gerald Dworkin, whose 1971 work marks the beginning of contemporary autonomy theory. But Frankfurt and Dworkin were initially focused on narrower questions, such as how to avoid familiar objections to compatibilist accounts of moral freedom, or how to construe the individual freedom that a liberal state seeks to protect. The resulting “hierarchical” conception explained agent-autonomy in terms of an ahistorical relationship of psychic states within an individual. Such a formal account focused only on intrasubjective structures led to several distinct and important objections. More generally, they fanned suspicions that the ideal of autonomy is a misconceived result of Enlightenment individualism taken to its extreme: total metaphysical independence, absolute self-creation, or even Hobbesian egoism. Can the “self” that adopts social roles, relationships, dispositions and traits as its own be a Sartrean for-itself choosing arbitrarily, or Iris Murdoch’s “bare point of freedom,” or what Michael Sandel famously called an entity “unencumbered” by any responsibilities prior to voluntarily assuming them (as if it had no content at all until entering into contracts)? The development of practical identities for which we are fully responsible cannot be explained in these ways, given our essentially social nature, and the complex ways in which of our reasoning abilities, values, and ability to form a life-plan depend on relationships with others who can recognize us as potentially responsible and autonomous beings.

**Alternatives to Frankfurt.** Yet how can apparently “external” sources of identity cause the emergence of an agent whose practical identity is self-determined? We will consider rationalist and normative accounts that treat autonomy as a virtue of practical reason, based on our mind's capacity to discern objective values. We will look at coherence theories and other accounts that define autonomy as a condition of mature agency more advanced than voluntary intentional action and strength of will (as the opposite of *akrasia*). We will also consider some recent lines of feminist critique and alternative proposals that point towards essentially social conditions for personal
autonomy. A central question that emerges from these approaches is: what capacities must a young person develop in order to cognitive and emotional sensitivities and powers of reflection necessary for her values to count as "her own," rather than simply implanted, imposed, or indoctrinated? A final thesis of this class will be that a suitably reformulated hierarchical conception of agent-autonomy can accommodate the need for important historical conditions on the sources of values and beliefs that underlie our identity-defining commitments.

**Kant on autonomy.** Kant's central idea is that "A person acts autonomously only when his volitions [or intentions] derive from the essential character of his will." Kant thus takes the "self" in "self-determination" to mean the universally shared structure of personhood as a type of agency in which intentions are formed under the guidance of maxims. But he famously thinks that only moral motivation (aiming at justice or fairness to each) expresses this shared personal nature, and thus counts as autonomous or free in the positive sense of *self-authored*. This gives us the following deduction:

1. An autonomous will is determined by motives that are distinctive of personhood in general: such motives have a practical necessity that comes from being constitutive of moral selfhood.
2. The only motive that is necessary based solely in the structure of moral selfhood is the good will that agents form in response to their own implicit commitment to act on maxims that are fair to all (or universalizable from the perspective of any free rational agent).
3. Thus the only autonomous will is a good will, in which moral reasons are the primary (or on some readings, the only) ground for whatever purposes (ends and means) are adopted