Existential Autonomy and Authenticity

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Synopsis: The goal of this book is to show that key ideas about the nature of selves and responsibility for character in the existential tradition can be reconstructed and defended with the kind of hierarchical theory of personal autonomy proposed by Harry Frankfurt, Gerald Dworkin, and since developed by many others. But to solve the regress problem with hierarchical analyses of autonomy, while maintaining important distinctions between levels of agent-authority, requires that the concepts of “higher-order will” and “caring” be reinterpreted as a distinctive kind of motive-process unlike typical desires – a motivation actively generated and sustained by the agent in light of apparent values worthy of devotion (which I call “projective motivation”). In addition, the famous problem of manipulation cannot be solved without both recognizing natural sources of the capacities employed in forming cares and identity-defining commitments that are responsive to the world, and accepting leeway-libertarian freedom at the level of our deepest projects, life-goals, and personal ideals (or “highest-order will”). These themes from the existential tradition and from hierarchical accounts of autonomy in analytic moral psychology shed light on each other, together providing the resources for a coherent and demanding account of responsibility for one’s character or practical identity.

Chapter outline:

Part I: The Problem is Real, Existentially Significant, and Cannot be Dismissed
1. Introduction: Modest Autonomy as a Responsibility-Concept
   (1) Two Concepts of Personal Autonomy [Absolute vs Human]
   (2) Human Autonomy as the Freedom-Condition of Responsibility for Character
   (3) From Individual Autonomy to Authentic Selfhood: Steps towards Ideal Agency
2. The Reality of Volitional Identification: A Phenomenological Response to Skeptics
   (1) From Kant to Foucault: Expression of a Shared Essence or Individual Character?
   (2) Care of the Self: Reflexive Attitudes in Foucault, Elster, and Blustein
   (3) Volitional Identification vs Fit with Self-Image: A Reply to Arpaly, Schroeder, and Oshana

Part II: An Existential Solution to the Problem
3. The Frankfurt/Dworkin Hierarchical Theory of Identification and its Flaws
   (1) Five Recognized Problems with Simple Hierarchical Accounts
   (2) The Root of the ‘Incompleteness or Regress’ Dilemma: the Neutrality of Desires
   (3) Why Frankfurt's Later Theories Fail: Identification as Satisfaction or Volitional Necessity
   (4) Other Insufficient Procedural Accounts: Bratman, Velleman, and Christman
4. The Existential Theory: Higher-Order Will as Projective Motivation Expressing Erosiac Desires
   (1) Projective Motivation vs Erosiac Desires
   (2) Confusions over Internalist and Externalist Conceptions of Moral Motivation
   (3) Higher-Order Volitions as Part of Commitment to First-Order Projects
(4) A Comparison with Heidegger on Projective Being
(5) Sartrean Bad Faith Explained in terms of Higher-Order Will

Part III. Why the Existential Account is Superior to Contemporary Rationalist Models
5. The Initial Rationalist Models Critiqued: Stump, Taylor, and Wolf
6. Alternative Rationalist Models: Mele and Buss
   (1) Mele's Insights: A+ Source Conditions
   (2) Buss's Radical Move: Autonomy as Psychological Health
7. Feminist Alternatives: Individual Capacities and Social Source Conditions
8. How the Existential Account combines Rational and Social Conditions with Volitional Effort

Part IV. Libertarian Freedom and Existential Autonomy
9. A Leeway-Libertarian Account of Responsibility for Character
10. The Narrative Structure of the Self: A Response to Lippitt
11. Authentic Emoting and Integrity

With chapters averaging 30 pages (with notes), this would be a 360 page book with the index and bibliography. Since my aim is to write a book under 300 pages this time, I may have to cut Part IV or leave most of it for a separate book defending leeway-libertarian accounts of moral responsibility. This would be regrettable, because the bulging analytic literature on free will includes little enough on liberty in responsibility for the development of one's own character, and the existential account of personal autonomy sheds light on this topic. But I will have to see how compact I can make the chapters in Parts I, II, and III. The positive account I wish to present develops directly and straightforwardly from (a) the problems resulting from Frankfurt's conception of a “higher-order volition” as a mere second-order desire to act on a first-order desire, and (b) the account of projective motivation in Will as Commitment and Resolve which allows me to define volitional identification as a state of striving to form, retain, act on, and express first-order motives in accord with the agent's identity-defining cares and commitments (which are in turn grounded in explicit or implicit rational value-judgments). This is the core of the new theory to be developed in this book; the other chapters either set up the problems to be solved in chapter four, or rebut rival conceptions (diagnosing their problems as remedied by the projective account), or help show why the problems cannot be solved without recognizing some psychological states or acts (other than simple decisions) that are non-derivatively autonomous for their agent. Along the way, a secondary aim is to show that the new account also sheds light on important contributions on the conditions and structure of selfhood in continental philosophy, thus demonstrating the relation between themes in Frankfurt and the existential tradition....

Main Contributions to the Field. This book will significantly advance current scholarship in three areas: (1) accounts of individual autonomy and theories of motivation; (2) the relationship between personal autonomy and responsibility for character; and (3) the arbitrariness problem for libertarian freedom in the choice (or acceptance?) of fundamental values, life-goals, or long-range projects. These results will also have important implications for normative ethics, because they support the idea central to virtue theory that people can be held accountable for their character – at least when they are not deprived of the basic education and development required to possess the cognitive and volitional capacities that have to be exercised to govern one's
motives autonomously. The existential account will show that authenticity and integrity are real virtues. It will help answer current objections to narrative conceptions of character and practical identity, and clarify the feedback relation between volitional goal-setting and emotions. In all these areas, this book will extend and build on the account in *Will as Commitment and Resolve*. But *Existential Autonomy and Authenticity* will focus on engaging recent scholarship in analytic moral psychology along with some famous texts in continental philosophy, which contrasts with the historical focus in two-thirds of the Will-book.

**Relation with Themes in 20th Century Analytic and Continental Philosophy.** *Existential Autonomy and Authenticity* begins by explaining what kind of autonomy needs philosophical explanation and development: *not absolute self-creation* but rather an extended form of self-control that can explain a sense of deep "ownership" of one's actions, intentions, and the motives that inform them. I argue that the most salient concept of personal autonomy (most needing philosophical attention) is really the "freedom" or "control" condition of what has been called "deep" moral responsibility -- that is, responsibility for self or character. Actions and intentions that are autonomous in this sense are fully imputable to the agent, making the agent deeply responsible for them: they express the agent's practical identity and thus (whether she explicitly admits it or not) she takes ownership of them. Such an agent's life is self-determined in the metaphysically modest sense that is possible for human beings, and reasonable for us to aspire to. The relevance of this autonomy-concept as the main target of analysis can be traced to developments in modern philosophy, and the romantic tradition in particular, that shifted the focus from a shared human essence to expression of the individual's distinctive identity.

This is the same type of autonomy that Harry Frankfurt illustrated in his 1971 paper in terms of *identification* with desires or emotions, or (oppositely) *alienation* of unwanted desires and emotions. Thus we need to explain these phenomena to explain the type of autonomy that is most relevant for moral agency. Given seemingly intractable difficulties in explaining volitional identification, some skeptics now argue that Frankfurt's description of the very phenomena to be explained was mistaken and that this is a pseudo-problem. In reply, I will argue that these phenomena are real and analyses trying to dismiss them are mistaken; they require explanation in any adequate conception of the autonomy that allows us to be deeply responsible for who we are. This stage-setting argument draws on contemporary scholarship on autonomy in analytic philosophy, but also on ideas in certain continental authors that shed light on long-standing explanatory dilemmas discovered in the analytic literature. For example, Foucault's discussion of "care of the self" helps show that reflexive attitudes of concern about one's own motivational dispositions are central to selfhood and need not constitute "one thought too many" (in Williams's sense), as Elster and others have suggested. Similarly, we cannot adequately explain the phenomena of "bad faith" or self-deception noted by Sartre without recognizing the crucial role played by higher-order volitions in such states. These examples, along with analysis of cases from ordinary life, help show that Frankfurt was right to focus on reflexive attitudes in looking for conditions of personal autonomy. The first part of *Existential Autonomy and Authenticity* will thus combine analytic and continental insights to show that we cannot (a) do without at least a moderate concept of autonomy that contrasts with coercion, wantonness, and volitional division or incoherence, and is related to responsibility for character; and (b) we cannot avoid giving higher-order volitions an important role in explaining how other psychological states become
autonomous for the agent. This means that we have to take up the burden of explaining how higher-order volitions can be directly or non-derivatively autonomous for the agent, while recognizing that this will also involve non-volitional conditions, such as sufficiently reasons-responsive cognitive processes.

The Main Thesis. Despite the intuitive appeal of hierarchical conditions for personal autonomy, Frankfurt's and Dworkin's attempts to explain volitional identification and alienation in terms of higher-order desires or critical judgments about first-order desires were clearly insufficient. The main thesis of *Existential Autonomy and Authenticity* is that the known problems with these hierarchical approaches can now be overcome using the account of striving will as projective self-motivation sketched in *Will as Commitment and Resolve*. The will's motivational function in setting new ends, forming cares, and mustering resolve to pursue standing goals and projects helps explain how we can be authors of the cares that define our practical identities. Most importantly, the higher-order attitudes that help confer autonomy on first-order motives, as recognized in the hierarchical approach, are not mere second-order desires: they are willed states of resolve or determination to be moved in certain ways rather than others because these motives and intentions express or accord with our identity-defining cares and commitments. Volitional identification with a 1st-order psychic state S is constituted by a commitment of the striving will to forming and/or maintaining S, which is (usually) undertaken because such a commitment is part of caring about some 1st-order goal, ideal, principle, or person beyond the self. Care about one's own motivational dispositions is a regulatory function deriving largely (if not entirely) by caring about agent-transcending values. This implies that individual autonomy (of the metaphysically moderate kind relevant for deep moral responsibility) is possible for us only because there are -- or at least appear to be -- many values that are worth caring about prior to our will to devote ourselves to them.

Frankfurt was close to recognizing this sense of "volition" in his own later work on caring, but rather than develop this concept to explain the type of higher-order volition that constitutes volitional identification, he instead rejected objectivism concerning values worth caring about and tried to explain individual autonomy in terms of "decisive identification," or "volitional necessity," or "satisfaction." Ironically, these later attempts to solve the problems with his initial model fail to accommodate Frankfurt's own earlier arguments that we recognize a salient difference between volitional "alienation" and "ambiguity" or conflict within the higher-order will itself. They are also subject to other objections concerning possible manipulative causes of satisfaction or volitional necessities. My existential version of the hierarchical account, in which higher-order projective motives confer autonomy on first-order desires and emotions, solves the incompleteness problem in Frankfurt's model, retains and explains the crucial distinction between volitional alienation and ambiguity, and allows us to see how the volitional component in autonomy works with other cognitive procedural and source-conditions, many of which, in turn, presuppose interpersonal processes such as nurturing and education. Thus the existential reconstruction of the hierarchical approach vindicates Frankfurt's insight that there is a volitional component to individual autonomy that is irreducible to the other cognitive conditions, but rejects Frankfurt's claim that this volitional component is independent of rational value-judgment and other source conditions.
Rationalist Insights are Incorporated into the Existential Model. Instead, as already noted, the existential model of caring supports Charles Taylor's view that the authentic self must respond to "horizons of significance" that it did not create, but which it shares with others as part of its social constitution. In general, there are several insights in rationalist accounts of autonomy by Taylor, Stump, Wolf and others concerning cognitive capacities and their exercise that are necessary for autonomy, and I will show how these insights are preserved within the existential model. The same holds for social conditions described by Marilyn Friedman, Paul Benson, and other feminist critics of traditional intrasubjective accounts of autonomy. However, rational processes along with their social preconditions are still insufficient without the volitional component of personal autonomy: the agent must earnestly will final ends and identify with the motives required for these ends to emerge from volitional "wantonness," act autonomously, and acquire deep responsibility for her character. A review of leading rationalist accounts will reveal this omission and demonstrate how it causes flaws in their respective analysis of cases.

Libertarian Source Conditions. Alfred Mele, John Fischer, and Susan Wolf, and others have given powerful arguments that certain rational and social source-conditions must be satisfied for the agent to act autonomously: while they do not overly constrain the content of ends, values, and motives that can be autonomous for individual agents, these arguments do show that purely procedural conditions such as actual or hypothetical endorsement via critical reflection on values, motives, and ends are not enough to constitute autonomy. I agree with this conclusion and apply it to higher-order willing on the projective model: higher-order volitions involved in willed cares require no further endorsement to count as the agent's own or as expressive of his "real self," but they fail to be autonomous if they are caused by external manipulation that the agent did not preapprove or if they depend on value-judgments that are corrupted by external forces contrary to the normal development of rational psychological processes and knowledge. As Robert Kane has argues, cases of "covert non-constraining controllers" show that agents can meet familiar procedural criteria yet fail to act autonomously. This shows that we must identify sources of external influence on the agent that enable or enhance autonomy rather than depriving the agent of it (what Haji and Cuypers call "baseline" or normal sources, and I dub "A+ sources"). This is an open-ended task that is difficult for all accounts of autonomy that recognize its unavoidability.

But classical rationalist accounts are unable to resolve the paradox of autonomy arising by deterministic processes from sources entirely outside the agent's own psyche. An existential account avoids this apparent contradiction by incorporating some type of libertarian freedom (such as agent-causation or undetermined choice among options) into the conditions for autonomous. It also uses this libertarian condition to answer the problem of manipulation. In the last part of *Existential Autonomy and Authenticity*, building on a paper titled "Liberty of the Higher-Order Will" and an article titled "The Deliberative Relevance of Refraining from Deciding" (initially drafted in fall 2004), I will try to defend a leeway-libertarian source condition for autonomous higher-order volitions against a version of the well-known "luck objection." At this level, the fear articulated by Mele, Wolf, Thomas Nagel, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Frankfurt is that choices of one's ultimate cares or commitments would necessarily be arbitrary, given the lack of a "contrastive explanation" or sufficient reason for choosing A over B. I will try to show that (a) demanding contrastive explanations (or endorsing versions of the Principle of Sufficient Reason that require such explanations) begs the question against leeway-libertarianism; and (b)
the apparent arbitrariness can be avoided as long as liberty of the highest-order will is temporally situated in such a way that its choices are never unconditioned by the agent's past and his/her 'initial state' as a self-developing self requiring recognition from, and interaction with, others. (This argument is already sketched out in an APA presentation given in 2002). This conception of freedom for character-development, which we find in Kierkegaard and also in the early Heidegger, avoids the arbitrariness of Sartrean freedom as presented in Being and Nothingness.