Will as Commitment and Resolve

An Existential Account of Creativity, Love, Virtue, and Happiness

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York ■ 2007

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davenport, John J., 1966–
Will as commitment and resolve : an existential critique of virtue, love, and happiness / John J. Davenport.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-8232-2575-0 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8232-2575-5 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Will. 2. Ethics. 3. Conduct of life. I. Title.
BJ1461.D27 2007
128'.3—dc22

2007018583

Printed in the United States of America
09 08 07 5 4 3 2 1
First edition

TO ROBIN

And to the memory of my grandparents:

Gladys Sperry, Pierce Sperry,
Daisy Davenport, and Louis Davenport II

Contents

Acknowledgments

The main ideas for this project grew out of the first half of my 1998 dissertation, which was titled *Self and Will* and directed by Karl Ameriks at the University of Notre Dame. However, less than a third of this book has any parallel in my Ph.D. thesis, so Karl is certainly not to blame for any problems. Although my argument is closely related to Kant's critique of the eudaimonist view that happiness is the proper function of human reason (and thus of human nature generally), the historical analyses and my theory of projective motivation go beyond anything found in Kant, and so the great German deontologist is the subject of only one episode in this story. Still, Karl's criticisms and advice were an indispensable help in formulating some of the initial ideas for this theory.

Among so many others who provided encouragement and questions, I want to single out for special thanks David Solomon, Fred Dallmayr, and Stephen Watson. The discussions of Kant, virtue ethics, and Levinas owe a great deal to their insights—and indeed, my conception of the will can be regarded as a development and expansion of Levinas's notion of metaphysical desire. In addition, my intellectual debts to Alasdair MacIntyre are too enormous and obvious to need stating. Though he must disagree with much of this work, I hope to have added in some small way to the new dialogue among traditions that he started. The other great debt in this work, as in much of what I have published, is to Harry Frankfurt. Here I can only repeat MacIntyre's refrain that constructive criticism of a philosopher's work is the greatest compliment one can pay.

Although this book does not discuss Kierkegaard at any length, the inspiration of countless Kierkegaard scholars stands behind it. In particular, I would like to express special appreciation to Edward Mooney, who has helped through the years in too many ways to name, including many valuable suggestions on how to make this work more readable. MacIntyre was right when he wrote that giving can never be equally reciprocal and we can only hope to pass on to others in the future the great benefits of generosity that we have received. It is also a pleasure to thank my colleague Merold

Westphal, who has provided advice on this work and helpful comments and support throughout my years at Fordham University. In this respect, he is like virtually all my colleagues at Fordham, who have seen strengths rather than weaknesses in my own philosophical pluralism. It is a high honor to serve with such a faculty.

I would also like to thank Helen Tartar and Nicholas Frankovich of Fordham University Press for their encouragement and patience. Copyediting this work was a two-year process involving enormous labor by Gill Kent, to whom I am enormously appreciative. This book also could not have been finished without the help of my research assistant, Scott O'Leary. Thanks also to Kyle Hubbard for his work on the index.

Now to my institutional debts. The main work on the manuscript of this book began during the summer of 2001 with the aid of a Fordham Faculty summer fellowship and continued with the help of one course reduction from our standard 3/3 load during the fall of 2002. The project also benefited from the opportunity to teach seminars on moral psychology at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Finally, chapters 13 and 14, which were initially conceived as part of a new book project on autonomy, were completed during the first weeks of an NEH Summer Fellowship in June of 2004.

In truth, however, the ultimate source of this book lies much earlier in my biography. Although its terminology reveals a Heideggerian pedigree, the idea expressed by the term "projective motivation" was with me long before I read any philosophy. I have hung onto it, perhaps out of a spirit of resistance, through twenty years of studying and teaching a philosophical canon in which few of the greatest authors recognize self-motivational phenomena. In short, I acquired my idea of the will from the literary masterpieces of Tolkien and Donaldson, which I read in high school. This book is a testament to their view of the great powers and dangers of the human spirit. I also saw the striving will at work in my parents and grandparents, who in their own ways each exhibited great volitional strength.

But my greatest debt of all—one that transcends all these others—is to my wife Robin, without whom there would be not only no book but probably no author either. In addition to all her love and support, she has also read most of the manuscript for grammar and typos. In her career, Robin gives new meaning to the biblical phrase, "Wonderful Counselor." In mothering our two wonderful children, she reveals the true meaning of commitment. I was drawn to Princeton University Press after college by interests in Kierkegaard, Jung, and the Bollingen Series, but I found Robin there instead. Thank goodness I learned enough from Kierkegaard not to make his mistake! We are the choices we make, and not all of mine have been good, but something gave me the grace to get the most important one right.

PREFACE

The Project of an Existential Theory of Personhood

The Issue

Although it remains popular among educated readers of the general public, enthusiasm for the existentialist approach to personhood has been declining in academic philosophical literature since the late 1970s. In analytic philosophy, metaphysical writings on personal identity over time have dismissed existentialist contributions on the complex temporality of selfhood as obfuscation. Likewise, mainstream metaphysical authors have a new semantics for possibility, necessity, and essential properties; as a result, they have difficulty in making sense of the existentialist claim that for persons, "existence precedes essence," unless this is read just as a rather confusing way of saying that we enjoy some sort of libertarian freedom. Few grasp that the existentialist objection to "personal essences" is a rejection of theories such as Molinism, Leibnizian monads, Kantian noumenal character, and Aristotelian teleology, all of which the existentialist views as inaccurate forms of determinism about human choice and motivation.

Moreover, since the development of contemporary modal logic, debates about the metaphysics of free will have been rewritten in a language relative to which older existentialist writings on freedom may seem outdated. Debates on whether moral responsibility for particular actions and omissions requires any sort of libertarian freedom, as existentialists commonly held, have also become much more complex since Harry Frankfurt's 1969 presentation of putative counterexamples to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities. Yet these debates hardly ever touch on the crucial question for existentialists: namely, what kind of freedom is required for responsibility for our own personality, character, and overall direction in life? This crucial question is addressed today only indirectly, as part of the theory of autonomy. Among neo-Kantians, compatibilist theories of autonomy have gained

popularity, while their neo-Aristotelian critics often regard existentialism as the last gasp of enlightenment individuality. Iris Murdoch accuses existentialism of reducing the person to a bare point of freedom; Alasdair MacIntyre describes the existential self as an isolated, solipsistic, ghostly, and arbitrary free will. And this critique is fair against Sartre's model of the "for-itself" of consciousness, which ignores both social and natural constraints on the development of our identities and becomes what Michael Sandel calls a totally unencumbered self "dispossessed" of its ends.[1]

Developments in feminist ethics and recent Continental philosophy have reinforced this criticism, arguing that persons are essentially social beings who can understand themselves or even develop a "self" only in terms of their relations to others, including shared values, norms, and relationships of "care" that define the sphere of activities in which they conduct their lives. In pragmatism and some forms of radical hermeneutics, the notion of personhood itself is treated simply as a social convention or device we require as an underpinning for our moral and legal language games or as a convenient metaphysical fiction needed to maintain our shared "public conception" of justice.[2] In other deconstructive accounts, subjectivity remains, but not as a property of "the self" and only as an ineffable "freedom" that relates to the world but not to itself.[3]

Thus, in analytic and Continental moral psychology, existentialism has become passé. It is also widely regarded as having little relevance for contemporary philosophy of mind, which in recent decades has focused on whether the intentionality of mental states is something more than the tendency to produce various kinds of behavior and whether the sentience that computers would have to enjoy to count as conscious beings is irreducible to physical properties of brain states. This debate is today largely about whether any form of nonreductive physicalism will work, giving us mental states that are conceptually distinct from brain states but without having to tolerate any nonphysical level of reality (other than sets). The few writers on mind (such as Daniel Dennett and Owen Flanagan) who extend their analysis of consciousness to a conception of will and freedom generally advocate a naturalistic account of these phenomena, ignoring classical existentialist objections against such reductionism.

But here, as elsewhere, the existential tradition is ignored only at one's peril. Sartre's most central point about human consciousness, deriving from ideas going back through Husserl and Fichte to Kant, is that it involves prereflective awareness of itself as subject of intentional states rather than as an object. Yet this insight and its implications for models of self-awareness seem to be virtually unknown in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind. Leading authors in this tradition, from Paul Churchland to William Lycan to David Armstrong, defend an introspective or

reflective theory of awareness without even realizing that they need to rebut Sartre's rather devastating criticism of such theories. Their approach is thus an anachronism that can be respected in the analytic world only because its practitioners are ignorant of a whole tradition of thought that refuted this approach over fifty years ago. Whether we accept the phenomenological tradition's entire understanding of consciousness or not, relative to its insights today's leading introspective theories of sentience must seem obviously or even trivially mistaken. This should be something of an embarrassment to contemporary analytic philosophy of mind.

Likewise, psychological theory ought not to dismiss existentialism out of hand as having too voluntaristic a conception of human motivational powers. For theories of motivation in empirical psychology are influenced by the history of moral philosophy, in which the dominant debate today is between a range of neo-Humean positions according to which all motivation terminates in desires we simply acquire naturally or accidentally, and neo-Kantian views according to which some motivation ultimately stems from a choice to follow impartial rational judgments. These extremes leave no room for the rich picture of self-motivational capacities that existentialist writers explored (even if it was never systematically explained). Part of the goal of this book is to begin this systematic explanation, filling a large gap in the existential tradition.

Bringing Existentialism Back into Contemporary Debates

Evidently then, a philosopher who hopes to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of existentialism has his work cut out for him. He needs to develop a conception of personhood that is recognizably existentialist—or similar in key ways to the self as described by writers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre—but which takes into account the last fifty years of developments in the many different areas of philosophy that directly affect our understanding of what it is to be a person. Pursuing this goal requires work on several different fronts in order to bring ideas from the existentialist tradition back into contemporary debates. Thus my larger agenda is to develop a revised existential account of personhood covering at least the following ten areas:

1. the lived experience of freedom and the development of morally significant character;
2. an account of individuality and freedom compatible with the narrative structure of our identity and our social nature as agents who hold one another morally responsible and who use language in ways involving implicit validity claims of several kinds;

3. the role of the will in shaping the ethos of a person, and the capacities of human motivation;

4. the concepts of autonomy and authenticity, and related intrapersonal or reflexive aspects of the will;

5. the freedom-conditions on moral responsibility for actions, decisions, and character;

6. the notion of essence, objectionable forms of "essentialism" about individual persons, and in what sense there could be an "essence" of personhood;

7. the relationship between self-consciousness and willing in the structure of the self;

8. the arrow of time, our knowledge of modality, and their relation to libertarian freedom;

9. a deliberative conception of democracy that is appropriate to the existential self;

10. the function of faith in God, or personal relationship with the divine in the development of a self, and the related existential problem of evil.

Of course, this is an ambitious program. But a unified, consistent account that could speak to both contemporary analytic and Continental literature in these ten areas could restore existentialism to the prominence that it deserves by addressing the main metaphysical and moral questions of philosophical anthropology. The result will be a more sophisticated existentialism that can be presented in today's terms as a serious challenge to current dogmas in metaphysics and moral psychology and be defended against the ascendant naturalistic, Humean, rationalistic, compatibilist, or pragmatist alternatives. This conception of personhood will in turn provide new and better bases for ethics, the foundations of political philosophy, and perhaps even theology.

With the invaluable help of Anthony Rudd as coeditor, I have made a start on this agenda in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre.* Essays by several scholars in this collection address areas 1 and 2 in the foregoing list by clarifying Kierkegaard's existentialist conception of personhood in relation to themes in contemporary moral philosophy. My own essay, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," sketches out an existentialist account of our experience of freedom and defends the deep connection between ethical obligation and authentic willing. This essay also goes some way toward explaining the idea that the social and individual sides of human experience are *equiprimordial:* Although human persons are essentially social beings with nonvoluntary relations to others, it is also essential to their personhood that they develop a volitional relation *to themselves,* which is manifested in their "work" on their own motivational character. This intrapersonal dimension of personhood is not simply derivative from or reducible to the interpersonal dimensions. Thus the existentialist emphasis on the *individuality* of human personhood is defended. Human persons are essentially social, but each person also essentially transcends her sociality and can change her acquired character. This does not conflict with the promising idea that a basis for ethics can be found in our social constitution.

This Book and Subsequent Steps

Will as Commitment and Resolve represents the next and most complex step in renewing the existentialist tradition. Focusing on the most influential historical accounts of motivation, along with some attention to closely related questions in moral theory and religion, this book lays the groundwork for all the subsequent steps. In particular, without an adequate conception of willing, one cannot get to the root of long-standing dilemmas concerning freedom of the will or understand the freedom required for the full range of moral responsibility. The idea of willing as a self-motivating process is also required to make sense of personal autonomy, authenticity, and various forms of inauthenticity or "bad faith" that have concerned classical existentialists. The content of normative ethics also depends in crucial ways on starting from the right conception of the will.

Of course, the nature of the will and its relationship to human motivation is an enormous topic, and I focus only on those aspects of a theory of will and motivation that will be most important for these later steps. Tasks 4 and 5 require focusing directly on autonomy and especially on Frankfurt's claim that persons are distinguished by their capacity to be concerned about and "identify with" or "alienate" their own first-order motives for acting. A full understanding of autonomy and authenticity depends on making sense of this great Frankfurtian insight; but Frankfurt's own approaches to explaining it all fail, because they never adequately distinguish volitional states with agent-authority from ordinary desires, which do not come with agent-authority built in. Frankfurt's phenomenological investigation of how we adopt and pursue reflexive goals concerning our own motivational character sheds light on the existentialist picture of selfhood, but only the existential tradition has the resources to make sense of Frankfurt's notion of volitional "identification," and his closely related notion of volitional "caring." I will argue that when we take a stand for or against particular dispositions, desires, and emotions as possible motives for acting, this can best be explained in terms of the notion of projective motivation developed in the present book. So *Will as Commitment and Resolve* is, among other things, a prolegomena to my next book on volitional identification and autonomy.

The analyses of caring and commitment come first, in the final chapters of *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, because they are conceptually more basic.

As later books will, I hope, show, an existential phenomenology of the will and autonomy also has interesting implications in many other areas. In the philosophy of mind, I will argue that the forms of self-consciousness unique to human beings cannot be understood without reference to our volitional self-relations. In normative ethics, I will argue that an agapē ethics cannot adequately be formulated without an existential account of willing. When it is rightly conceived, such an ethics will prove superior to other leading utilitarian, deontological, and neo-Aristotelian approaches. In political philosophy, I will argue that the deliberative account of legitimate democracy, which we find both in the republican tradition in America and in Continental discourse ethics, requires that individual citizens be much more than Hobbesian agents. In fact, it requires that they have the kind of motivational capacities described in this work, that they be existential agents as well as rational beings. These arguments will provide further support for the overall coherence of the new existentialist picture.

The Analytic-Phenomenological Method

Finally, since I blend ideas from different philosophical traditions and historical periods, a brief explanation of my method may be in order. Although I employ many of the same analytical and historical tools as do others writing on my topics, my method is also broadly speaking *phenomenological*. Although this is not generally in the foreground of my discussion, it becomes important at some crucial junctures in the argument.

In general, by a phenomenological approach I mean one that distinguishes between the primary phenomena to be explained in some area of philosophy and the rival theoretical explanations that construe these phenomena in different ways. The phenomenological approach presumes that we usually can discern, however imperfectly, some important phenomena that serve as paradigm cases or fixed points of reference for analyzing a particular problem or concept. This evidence or experience functions as an initial clue or proleptic outline of the concept at issue.[4] The task of theoretical explanation is then to provide as convincing an account of these phenomena and their grounds of possibility as can be given, where what counts as "convincing" is *itself guided by the shape of the phenomena that present themselves* more or less clearly in common human experience. Thus the first aim of theoretical explanation is to follow where the phenomena lead rather than to make them fit the mold of a metaphysics to which one is antecedently committed. This principle, which corresponds both to Husserlian eidetic

science and to the Habermasian communicative ideal of reaching conclusions based solely on *the force of the better argument* alone, is important in my case for deciphering how we can even begin to analyze concepts such as the will, volitional identification, and freedom.

Of course I am aware that objections have been raised against this principle and the phenomenological method in general. Let me mention and briefly respond to three such objections.

A. The Hermeneutic Objection

The "phenomena themselves" are never pure givens; our reception of them is mediated by a host of unexamined presuppositions (some of them theoretical and even metaphysical), which vary both culturally and historically—and it could not be otherwise for beings like us.

B. The Linguistic Objection

Our evaluation of whether an explanation meets, satisfactorily accounts for, or (in older lingo) adequately saves the phenomena is always mediated by linguistic structures whose implications exceed our capacity to make them certain beforehand in reflection and which also vary over time.

C. The Underdetermination Objection

Two theories may save all the phenomena equally well, leaving us to decide between them on other criteria.

In my view, the caveats expressed by A and B show only that judging an explanation's convincingness according to the pure phenomenological approach (or philosophical "strict science" in Husserl's sense) is always a counterfactual *ideal*, not that we should not try to approximate this ideal as best we can, nor that we have no ways to tell when we have done a better or worse job at approximating it. We cannot spell out a method that could be rationally agreed on in advance to resolve disputes about the content, relevance, and reliability of our phenomena between parties in different traditions and cultures; but the process of spelling out rival descriptions usually reveals differences in quality of interpretation that would be apparent to neutral observers—were there any—which are therefore usually also apparent to honest and self-critical although situated observers like ourselves and our interlocutors. And the problem that we cannot ever be entirely neutral observers is *itself* revealing for several issues in philosophical

anthropology and epistemology. In other words, objections A and B themselves reveal some transcendental conditions of our experience that provide useful information for philosophical anthropology in their own right (for example, that we are not *so* situated that we cannot even realize that we are situated, and so on).

Objection C poses different problems, but for the most part, the difficulty to which it refers becomes serious only in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of physics in particular; in moral philosophy and philosophical anthropology we never get theories that clearly save all the most relevant and reliable phenomena and so we never get ones that do so *equally* well. The problem is more one of a *phronetic* judgment between incomplete accounts with different and still-imperfect virtues. There is no solution for this other than continuing the debate for indefinitely many further rounds. Thus qualified, the method I follow can still bear valuable fruit if it is done well.

I

The Idea of Willing as Projective Motivation

I

Introduction

> How far from both muscular heroism and from the soulfully tragic spirit of unselfishness that unctuously adds its little offering to the sponge cake at a kaffee klatsch is the plain, simple fact that a man has given himself completely to something he finds worth living for.[1]

I. The Heroic Will

Like many of key terms in philosophy, the word "will" is used in many different ways, and it has a complex etymology (connected to *willa* in Old English and *voluntas* in Latin). In his attempt to bring this term back into psychotherapy, the psychologist Irwin Yalom lists several prominent senses of "willing":

> It is the mental agency that transforms awareness and knowledge into action, it is the bridge between desire and act. It is the mental state that precedes action (Aristotle). It is the mental "organ of the future"—just as memory is the organ of the past (Arendt). It is the power of *spontaneously* beginning a series of successive things (Kant). It is the seat of volition, the "responsible mover" within (Farber). It is the "decisive factor in translating equilibrium into a process of change . . . an act occurring between insight and action which is experienced as effort or determination" (Wheelis). . . . It is a force composed of both power and desire. . . . To this psychological construct, we assign the label, "will," and to its function, "willing."[2]

It is clear that the different theorists Yalom cites here are *not* offering explanations of the same item in our experience, and this is why any philosophical analysis of willing must first fix the basic sense(s) or concept(s) that it hopes to explain. Otherwise we will be trying to combine or decide