

# Human Identity and Bioethics

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## Human Persons

### *Narrative Identity and Self-Creation*

Erik wasn't sleeping well. In fact, several hours before he went to bed each night, a feeling of dread about going to work the next day began to grow in him. He hated his job as a paralegal: the notion that time was well spent only if it could be billed to a client; the harassing (and lying) letters to members of the sheet-metal trust fund saying the law firm would sue in ten days if debts were not paid to the fund; phony lawyers pretending to care less about money and more about humanistic concerns than they did; the rigid hierarchy; the way lawyers procrastinated and then had to pull consecutive all-nighters right before a brief was due, spreading misery to everyone who worked with them; the use of the cliché "This is the real world" to justify every unethical act; the cruelty toward vulnerable coworkers such as secretaries and newcomers like Erik. No, Erik wasn't sleeping well. He was moderately depressed and very anxious. And his mind worked overtime when he was supposed to be sleeping.

"Should I quit my job?" he asked himself. "But I've long planned to go to law school. Assuming I do, wouldn't it make sense to get more legal work experience? And, if I can't handle my first job, what are my prospects for a legal career? Then again, maybe I'm just not cut out for work in corporate law. There are lots of things you can do with a law degree, like working for the government or a nonprofit firm; I've heard public defender positions can be satisfying and less intense than jobs in private firms. I'm obviously a good fit for law school, being strong in the humanities – yet also practical.

"Or is it obvious? Maybe I've always assumed that because Dad and Mom both went to law school. I majored in history, and I really love

medieval history. But you can't pursue that! Not without a lot of risk, anyway. Think of it: five or more years of grad school with a very real chance of unemployment or only part-time work afterward. No wonder Dad discouraged me from considering grad school! But... there I go again: taking my parents' point of view. What do *I* want? What would make *me* happy and fulfilled? Who the hell am I, anyway?"

Unlike Penelope from Chapter 2, who was preparing to undergo a cerebrum transplant, Erik finds himself in a predicament that is familiar to us. He is trying to decide whether or not to quit a job, what type of education to pursue next, and, more generally, what life direction to take. Most of us have confronted questions like these. The familiarity of such questions sets the tone for this chapter, which will investigate questions of identity that are significant practical issues for real, presently living human beings. The question "What am I?" seldom arises, except among the very philosophical. The question "Who am I?" is more common. It *might* raise the issue of numerical identity but, if someone asks the latter question in earnest, she probably suffers from amnesia or another mental disturbance. The more ordinary sense of "Who am I?" inquires about one's identity in a familiar sense of the term that we may call *narrative identity*. Such related questions as "Who shall I become?" or "In what direction should I take my life?" ask about what we may call *self-creation*.

The remainder of this chapter begins by picking up a question that was only partially addressed in Chapter 2: "What matters in survival?" A more complete answer highlights that we human persons care a great deal about our narrative identity – who we are, in the familiar sense of these words – and about our self-creation, or what we make of ourselves. Thus, the next section takes up narrative identity, formulating a cluster of questions connected with this theme, providing a conceptual framework for addressing such questions, and noting the close connection between narrative identity and several practical concerns discussed in Chapter 2. The section that follows explores self-creation, explaining what it is and addressing these questions: To what extent is self-creation possible? How does it relate to autonomy, self-narratives, identification, identity, and one's own values? (Because self-creation and autonomy prove to be closely related, the discussion includes a detailed exploration of the nature and possibility of autonomy.) Do demands of authenticity set moral limits on self-creation? The chapter concludes by tying numerical identity and narrative identity together into a unified conception of human persons.

## WHAT ELSE MATTERS IN SURVIVAL?

Chapter 2 supported the thesis that numerical identity is necessary for what primarily matters, prudentially, in survival: In order to benefit in the future, one has to be around. A possible exception to this rule was noted in the case of cerebrum transplantation, but for all cases that we have encountered in real life thus far, identity was found to be necessary for what matters in survival.

But, while identity is necessary for what prudentially matters, for most of us it isn't sufficient. Some people, perhaps for religious reasons, value life itself – biological life – so much that they consider being alive not only necessary, but also sufficient, for what matters. "Life," they may say, "is a precious gift from God, and all I want for myself is to hold on to this gift as long as possible." But this attitude is very rare. Even among those who believe that the gift of life should not be taken away through human actions such as suicide or terminating life supports, few would agree that just continuing to be alive suffices for what *prudentially* (as opposed to morally) matters.

Nearly everyone wants more than maintaining numerical identity, or merely surviving. With few exceptions (which I will hereafter ignore), we human persons want, at a minimum, to retain the capacity for consciousness – to continue to be able to have experiences. But we also want to avoid a terribly low quality of life, or quality of experiences, so we would prefer death to survival with extremely poor experiential welfare and no prospects for improvement. (These points, remember, concern what matters prudentially; from an ethical standpoint, some will not prefer death, given this choice, because they consider unethical the only means to death.)

So far, our answer to the question of what else – besides survival itself – matters in survival has considered only *experience*. But to stress experience is to stress a relatively passive side of human persons: what we take in through the senses and process with our minds. Of course, we human persons are also *agents* – beings who act, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes after deliberation and planning. Agency seems no less central to what we are (at least during our existence as persons), and what we care about, than experience is.<sup>1</sup> So we want to retain not only the capacity for consciousness but also the capacity for action.

<sup>1</sup> Christine Korsgaard explores the importance of agency to personal identity, although I cannot tell whether she is addressing numerical identity, narrative identity, or some merging of the two ("Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 [1989]: 103–31).

But that's not all we want. Suppose one is presented with a choice between dying soon or surviving with the capacity to experience and act but in a severely demented state. One is further told that this state is likely to be reasonably pleasant, but involves such severe memory loss that one would be unable to remember the previous day, and such severe destruction of executive functions that one could not plan more than a few minutes into the future. Some people would prefer to live in such a state rather than die, while others would prefer to die. But we would all prefer, over both options, a state of existence that permitted a reasonable degree of psychological continuity between different stages of our existence.<sup>2</sup> From the standpoint of the present, we would like to be able to *anticipate* having experiences and performing actions, not just accept the promise that we will, in fact, experience and act. Put another way, we want to be able to *identify* with the future subject-agent, regarding her subjectivity as a continuation of our own.<sup>3</sup> While some of us would assign *some* value to a pleasant life lacking such psychological continuity, we could agree that the latter is *a major part* of what matters in survival.

Another way to capture how we value psychological continuity is to think in terms of our self-narratives or inner stories. Each of us has a mental autobiography, an extremely detailed story of what we have experienced and done and a perhaps less detailed account of what we intend, or at least hope, to experience and do. This autobiography is not a mere listing of personal events and intentions. The story is richly colored by a sense of one's own beliefs, desires, values, and character – which affect which events are remembered and how they are remembered, make sense of and even help determine plans for the future, and shape the overall self-conception of an enduring protagonist. People differ greatly in how explicit their self-narratives are. Highly introspective people may frequently think through large segments of their inner story and even share those chapters with others. Many other people have a more implicit inner story – a set of memories, intentions, values, and other mental states that add up to a self-narrative that can be made explicit upon prompting

<sup>2</sup> Thus I suggest that the psychological view of Parfit and others is closer to the mark in addressing what matters in survival than in offering a theory of our (numerical) identity. But I also think some leading versions of this view underestimate the importance of identity as a *necessary* condition for what matters.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Martin develops similar claims about anticipation and identification, but holds that numerical identity is not necessary to what matters in survival (*Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], ch. 3). We will examine identification further in Chapter 5.

from others.<sup>4</sup> Despite individual variations, every person has a mental autobiography.

Such self-stories are deeply connected with what we value in survival. Marya Schechtman argues, rather plausibly, that persons are precisely beings who create self-narratives.<sup>5</sup> Further, persons care deeply about continuing their self-narratives, which is to say continuing to exist as persons.<sup>6</sup> Her remarks suggest that we regard surviving as persons (as opposed to merely sentient beings, say) as intrinsically valuable. But surviving as persons may have instrumental value as well. As Jonathan Glover states, “[o]ur inner story lets us get our bearings as we act. Without it, all decisions would be like steering at sea without a map or compass.”<sup>7</sup> If you lost your inner story, due to dementia or a brain injury, you might not know what to do since your sense of yourself and your values would be missing. This possibility suggests the instrumental value of having an inner story. Admittedly, another possibility is that after losing your inner story you would simply follow your immediate desires, displaying no paralysis or confusion about how to proceed. But, we who *as persons* contemplate such a state – following desires without any values or sense of oneself with which to evaluate and adjudicate among them – consider it far less preferable, other things equal, than existence as a person, as someone who receives guidance from an inner story. This judgment confirms the earlier claim that we regard having self-narratives as intrinsically valuable.

Our reflections suggest that what we value in survival isn’t just survival *per se*. We value survival with the capacities for action and experience. But not the mere capacities; we want to continue to act and to experience. Further, we want our present self-narratives to continue to unfold and include the future actions and experiences, maintaining psychological continuity between ourselves now and ourselves later. But this isn’t all.

<sup>4</sup> Although one’s self-narrative might be significantly implicit, it could not be entirely hidden from one. Otherwise, it would not in any meaningful way be *that individual’s* self-story. Cf. Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 114–19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99–105. Somewhat similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that we are essentially story-telling animals (*After Virtue*, 2nd ed. [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], ch. 15). In saying that I find Schechtman’s thesis plausible, I mean that I think it’s *roughly* correct. As argued in Chapter 1, I don’t think any *specific* analysis of personhood is authoritative.

<sup>6</sup> *The Constitution of Selves*, pp. 150–4

<sup>7</sup> *I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 152. Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216.

For suppose one continued to live the life of a person but found, on one's deathbed, that the whole thing seemed a flop. A disappointing or unsatisfying life is not a flourishing life. Those of us whose basic needs are met, giving us the leisure to dream a little and a modicum of control over our futures, want *to make something* of our lives. For us, survival's value is partly instrumental: Continuing to exist as persons allows us not only to get our narrative-entrenched bearings when we act, as just explained, but also to pursue longer-term projects that we value and to become the sorts of people we want to be. Thus, for those who are fortunate enough to entertain such possibilities, much of what matters in survival is its making possible *projects of self-creation*.<sup>8</sup>

Since much of what we value in survival concerns our self-narratives and self-creation, these topics merit fuller exploration. It turns out that they have a great deal to do with identity. A self-narrative can answer the question "Who am I?" as this question is most commonly asked. The answer provides the person with her narrative identity. But who I am has a great deal to do with who I will become if I take an active role in shaping my future. Thus projects of self-creation flow from narrative identity and, as they do so, continue to write and often edit the narratives from which they flow.

#### NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Chapter 2 investigated our numerical identity, the question of what makes someone considered at a particular time one and the same individual as someone considered at a different time. Most people, in ordinary contexts, are not very interested in numerical identity. Certainly Erik the

<sup>8</sup> Glover develops this thesis in a discussion both forceful and pithy (*I*, p. 106). See also Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 5. Is the importance we assign to self-creation limited to the modern world or a certain stage of society? When, in earlier times, people's social roles were largely determined independently of their choices, would such agents have cared so much about self-creation? They may have cared less about it, in which case the importance given to self-creation may be a modern phenomenon. Do people in contemporary nonliberal societies, in which people's roles are often externally determined, care much about self-creation? Although I cannot defend my claim here, I think such people tend to care about self-creation – at least when their basic needs are met, giving them the opportunity to entertain such possibilities, *and they are aware of the possibility of self-creation*. That is, they are at least disposed to care about self-creation. Some evidence for my claim can be found in Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).



paralegal isn't. He is interested in his narrative identity. As Schechtman puts it, this sense of identity raises *the characterization question*: Which actions, experiences, values, and character traits can be ascribed to a particular person? Which of these characteristics make her the person she really is? This is the sense of identity at issue when someone has an identity crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Erik's predicament is precisely that of an identity crisis: "Who the hell am I, anyway?" We might imagine him following up with these questions: "What am I like – what sort of person am I? What are my central qualities? What's most important to me, giving me my sense of self? With whom or what do I identify?" Considering the impact of his parents on his sense of direction thus far, Erik might also ask, "How do other people shape my identity?"

### A Framework for Understanding Narrative Identity

Let us consider a framework for addressing such questions. When someone like Erik raises the characterization question about himself – "Who am I?" – a helpful response will take this form: "*You are the individual who is realistically described in your self-narrative or inner story.*" Several aspects of this response merit comment.

First, the response states "You are the *individual* . . ." Although only a person will raise the characterization question with regard to herself, her inner story can include episodes that took place or will take place at times when the protagonist is not a person. Thus, one can meaningfully say, "I was born at such-and-such hospital," and "If I permanently lose the ability to remember my life history, don't keep me on life supports." It doesn't matter that one can't remember being born and might have trouble anticipating a state of severe dementia. One knows on the basis of others' testimony and everyday biological and medical knowledge that one was born and might someday become demented.<sup>10</sup> Thus the past event is appropriated into one's inner story, and the possible future state is appropriated as a possible continuation of the story.

<sup>9</sup> *The Constitution of Selves*, p. 74. MacIntyre also stresses the role of narratives in exploring personal identity (*After Virtue*, ch. 15). See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), chs. 1 and 2.

<sup>10</sup> At least we ordinarily take ourselves to know such things. If the biological view of our numerical identity is correct, as argued in Chapter 2, then considerations of numerical identity do not cast doubt on such claims.

Why does our general answer stated previously to the question “Who am I?” make one’s self-narrative authoritative? Why not say that one is the person who has objectively had such-and-such a life and has such-and-such prospects for the future? Or that one is the person who is (realistically) described by other individuals? Why favor the first-person perspective, which can be distorted by self-deception, over objective or intersubjective third-person perspectives?

The reason is that only an answer that favors the first-person standpoint does justice to such a first-person question. If someone asked “Who am I?” with the reidentification question in mind – say, after a bicycle accident that resulted in amnesia – an objective, third-person answer would be germane: “You are Dan Scribner, born to Joseph and Ethel Scribner on June 20, 1939. You live at. . .” But when one asks “Who am I?” in the more familiar sense of the question, one seeks a highly personal answer that, among other things, filters through objective facts about oneself, deeming only some of them salient. When Mr. Scribner’s faculties function normally, that he is a husband and father is likely very salient to him, very much part of his (narrative) identity; that his fingerprints look such-and-such a way is probably not salient to him and not part of his identity, even if they identify him uniquely.

Nor is his identity comprised simply of those objective facts concerning him that he considers salient. *Interpretation* of the facts plays a major role in one’s self-conception. Thus, being a jock, an opera buff, and a humane person may be part of his identity even if some people might reasonably disagree among themselves over whether he is all of those things. So long as a self-attribution is *within reason* factually, he can own the characteristic in question. Meanwhile, his neighbor might exercise and participate in sports no less than Scribner, yet being a jock is not part of *his* identity if he doesn’t consider it important to who he is. Consider another example. Although Mr. Scribner once cheated on an exam in high school, he doesn’t consider this act an important part of who he is; cheating was out of character for him, the deed was never repeated, and it had no significant effect on his personal development even if it occasioned a brief episode of guilt and repentance. Clearly, Mr. Scribner does not *identify* with his act of cheating. By contrast, another person might think his own single act of cheating is the tip of his evil dispositional iceberg, especially if he’s often tempted to cheat. These examples suggest that a person’s sense of herself is inextricably linked with who she is, making the first-person perspective indispensable to narrative identity. (In the next

section, I will say more about why other individuals, who also subjectively sift through and interpret facts about a person in forming a sense of who she is, lack special authority in determining her identity.)

What if one's inner story is completely implausible? One might worry that we pay a high price for making the first-person perspective authoritative: allowing unrealistic or even delusional self-attributions to play a role in determining who someone is. I once met a woman who claimed that another woman had turned her into a snake. If we give a person's self-narrative free reign in determining who she is, then we seem obliged to conclude that this woman was once a snake! But the proper response to this sort of concern is not to abandon the first-person perspective as identity-constituting. The proper response is to insist that the self-narratives that qualify as identity-constituting are those that are *realistic* or *within reason*, given what we know about the person in question, about persons generally, and about the way the world works.<sup>11</sup> It is not realistic to suppose that a woman might have temporarily been a snake, so this part of the woman's inner story is not identity-constituting. "You are someone who was turned into a snake" is not part of a correct answer to her question "Who am I?"

What if someone's self-narrative is largely or (if this is conceivable) thoroughly unrealistic? Our framework states that one is the person who is *realistically* described in one's self-narrative. That means that one is the person described when we accept the bulk of one's inner story but not those parts that are clearly out of touch with reality. We can accept Mr. Scribner's self-attribution of being a jock, although some who know him well might not think of him this way. We could not accept his claim of being an opera buff if he had never listened to opera in his life and knew nothing about it. (Perhaps he is putting on airs in claiming to be an opera buff.) But unlike Mr. Scribner, Mr. Reilly is systematically deluded about himself due to extreme psychosis. If we reject those of his self-attributions that are way off base, we may have very little inner story remaining to serve as the basis for his narrative identity. Let's say he's right about who his family members are, where he attended school, and his age. But he also believes that his thoughts are controlled by the CIA through the Internet, that most of the people he sees on the street are spies, that animals are somehow secret agents, and that everything we see in the sky is an optical

<sup>11</sup> Schechtman offers essentially the same solution in an illuminating discussion that influenced this one (*The Constitution of Selves*, pp. 119–30).

illusion deliberately created by some international agency. In what does his narrative identity consist?

I suggest that, in the face of extreme tension between someone's first-person perspective and what we know about the world, we retain the first-person perspective but qualify its objects. After all, the narrative we seek in response to his asking the characterization question must, in some way, be *his* narrative; it has to be an *inner* story, not some external story primarily determined by others. So who is Mr. Reilly? He is someone who, for example, is *X* years old, has such-and-such family, and went to these schools. Continuing our answer, we employ qualifications: He is someone who *deeply believes* that. . . . This sort of reply to the characterization question in the case of a severely deluded person seems faithful to who that person really is without unpalatable metaphysical implications – such as that his thoughts really are controlled by the CIA through the Internet.<sup>12</sup>

#### The Role of Others in a Person's Narrative Identity

Our remarks about highly unrealistic self-portraits suggest one role other people play in determining someone's narrative identity. The knowledge possessed by nearly every person that human beings cannot become snakes prevents the woman's claim that she was turned into a snake from constituting part of her identity. Alternatively, if we allow the claim to play a role, then what counts as part of who she is merely the *belief* or *feeling* that she had been turned into a snake. So persons other than the narrator set limits on, or qualify, self-narratives that constitute identity. Note that it isn't only facts about the world – in this case, that human beings can't become snakes – that play a role here. Since self-narratives, like other sorts of narrative, are the sorts of thing that in principle can be shared with others, other people's *knowledge* of the relevant facts provides social reality checks that shape the story that will be accepted. (By contrast, as I will argue, other people's *distortion* of relevant facts carries no authority in shaping someone's identity if the protagonist dissents from the distorted claims.)

Should we further claim that others have as much authority in determining who someone is as the protagonist herself does? In an insightful

<sup>12</sup> Of course, we could also qualify the objects of the first-person perspective of someone like Mr. Scribner, saying that he is someone who *believes* that he is a jock, rather than simply accepting his claim that he is, as part of his identity. But, since his self-attribution, unlike some of Mr. Reilly's, is within reason, it seems unnecessary to make such qualifications in his case.

discussion, Hilde Lindemann Nelson suggests that narrative identity is a tissue connecting one's self-story with other people's stories about one.<sup>13</sup> But, as narrative identities involve *self*-conceptions, I find a privileging of the first-person standpoint the only reasonable option. In support of her view, Nelson states that "[m]y conception of myself as a skilled office manager who knows the firm from inside out goes nowhere if the new CEO thinks of me as the faithful old retainer who ought to be pensioned off."<sup>14</sup> True, in this case my self-conception will not lead to satisfying professional results. But that hardly vitiates the commonsense points that, regardless of what the CEO thinks, (1) I can *be* a skilled worker who knows the firm inside out and (2) if my self-esteem is healthy, I can *continue to regard myself as such*, making it part of my identity.<sup>15</sup>

Another way other people can affect someone's identity is by playing starring roles in her self-narrative. A large part of who you are is a function of your interpersonal relationships, some of which are central to your identity. For example, much of who you are might be described in terms of relationships with a life partner; your children, siblings, and parents; your closest friends; the neighborhood you grew up in; the schools you attended; your colleagues; familiar members of your religious community; and so on. Although these individuals, groups, and communities are not *literally* part of *you* – imagine what your weight would be if they were – they are certainly part of your *identity*. So, to some extent, their interests are your interests. That is why if my wife or daughter flourishes, I am ipso facto better off. It is not simply that their flourishing makes them better company, or easier to live with or care for. To the extent that they are part of my identity, our interests overlap and their well-being constitutes part of my well-being.

In addition to starring in one's inner story, and setting limits via reality checks on the story's content, other people can affect the tone and details through *mirroring*. Mirroring in this sense occurs when one person sees his own "reflection" in another person's apparent image, conception, or characterization of him. For example, if your friends and family frequently compliment you for (what they perceive to be) your integrity, you are much more likely to think of yourself as having integrity than if they didn't compliment you in this way. If nearly everyone you date comments

<sup>13</sup> *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), ch. 3

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson eventually grants the first-person standpoint some priority over the third-person one in constituting one's identity (*Ibid.*, pp. 104–5), but her supporting arguments are moral, whereas the issue of what constitutes narrative identity is primarily conceptual.

on how attractive (they think) your face is, this feedback is likely to affect your physical self-image. A great deal of mirroring, however, does not involve the ascription of a single trait, such as integrity or a handsome face, but rather the presentation of a highly complex, nuanced portrait – and the person mirrored may be quite unable to articulate in detail the reflections he saw or their effects on his self-image.

Suppose Beth, age forty, accepts an invitation to attend a party in her hometown, which she hasn't visited in many years. At the party Beth spends hours talking to old neighbors, friends, and fellow swim teamers, most of whom she has not seen since her teens. She finds the experience almost overwhelmingly stimulating and understands that much of her excitement involves seeing people from her past and, in them, a large part of her own past. She realizes that, besides being interesting and important to her in their own right, they also make her feel good about herself. As characters who played important parts in earlier chapters of her inner story, they are part of her identity. But at the party they also function as mirrors for her – though she can't describe with any specificity what they reflect back to her. Ruminating for several hours after the party, she feels somehow *consolidated*. Seeing all those old friends and acquaintances helps to shore up her sense of her life as a whole – as a narrative that hangs together and makes sense to its author – clarifying her past as part of who she is.

Of course, mirroring can have distorting effects, just as others can perceive one incorrectly. Suppose Julie has considerable mathematical ability, but her mother, believing women to be inherently inferior at quantitative thinking, has consistently conveyed to Julie that her interest in math is not worth pursuing. Julie grows up believing she is below average in math. When she gets high standardized test scores in quantitative reasoning, Julie considers them lucky. It is clearly false that she lacks mathematical ability, so being bad at math is not part of her identity. That she thinks of herself this way, however, is part of who she is (unfortunately), as is her intention not to pursue mathematical studies beyond high school. As we will see later, significant distortions in mirroring can undermine the autonomy of an individual's choices.

### Narrative Identity's Close Fit with Certain Practical Concerns

Having identified a framework for understanding narrative identity, let us consider its fit with the practical concerns discussed at some length

in Chapter 2. Although, in the world as we know it, *numerical* identity is necessary for what matters in survival and for the more specific practical concerns to get a foothold, it is typically not sufficient. On the other hand, if an individual persists over time – that is, maintains numerical identity – and a single self-narrative includes that individual at different points of time that we wish to consider, that is generally sufficient with respect to the practical concerns.

For example, although one can persist between two points of time without having self-knowledge over that time, if one also has a self-narrative that covers that span of time, one necessarily has *self-knowledge* spanning that time period. Similarly, to the extent that one includes oneself prospectively in one's self-narrative, one is capable of *planning and prudence* with respect to those future times. Moreover, having a narrative identity is nearly sufficient for moral agency and therefore *moral responsibility*; nearly everyone who has an ongoing self-narrative has sufficient decision-making capacity to qualify as a moral agent, as someone who can be morally responsible. Admittedly, there are exceptions. A normal two-year-old certainly has a (relatively simple) self-narrative, but it seems a stretch to attribute moral responsibility to her at this age. Indeed, developing a self-narrative may be a prerequisite to the self-control and grasp of reasons necessary for moral agency. Still, as these examples of the practical concerns suggest, narrative identity fits very well with these concerns. Perhaps it is only slightly inaccurate to generalize that numerical identity is necessary for these practical concerns to apply, while narrative identity (which presupposes numerical identity) is sufficient.

If we turn from the specific practical concerns to the broader question of what matters to us in survival, we find that narrative identity is, for many of us, clearly insufficient. We don't just want to *have* a self-narrative and know who we are. We want our inner story to go a certain way, and we want to *be* a certain way – to be a certain kind of person. These interests concern self-creation.

## SELF-CREATION

### Is It Possible?

As I use the term, *self-creation* refers to *the conscious, deliberate shaping of one's own personality, character, other significant traits (e.g., musical competence,*

*athletic prowess), or life direction.*<sup>16</sup> When someone sincerely resolves to become more patient with other people, bolder in professional circles, or more accomplished at running, she intends to embark on a project of self-creation. When a person forms a conscious plan to become a successful stockbroker, and strives for years to meet this goal, she is engaged in self-creation; similarly with an individual who endeavors to become the sort of fully present parent that she didn't have while growing up. By contrast, if an individual just fills the roles set out for him, with no independent thinking about what to be and no conscious deliberation about how to reach his goals, he is not engaged in self-creation in the present sense. (Filling roles set out for one is compatible with self-creation, however, if the agent consciously and deliberately chooses that path with genuine appreciation of other possibilities.) As noted earlier, those whose basic needs are met and who have the opportunity to think about the possibilities of self-creation generally want to make something of themselves and their lives. Sadly, many people in the world, very possibly a majority, are too hungry, too economically deprived, or too socially oppressed to aspire to self-creation. For them, endeavors of self-creation either don't make it onto the mental radar screen or register as transient blips that disappear as quickly as most dreams do as we return to the business of waking life.

*A Preliminary Challenge to the Possibility of Self-Creation and a Reply.* But is self-creation possible even for those of us who are relatively advantaged? Some may doubt it, thinking that when we change, or pursue some life direction, the forces behind the "movement" are outside our agency. If you become a more cheerful person, such a skeptic might say that the change in you is due to a genetic predisposition, or the medication you took, or the social forces that pressured you to brighten your outlook or take that medication. If Erik decides to become a public defender, the skeptic might claim, his decision is determined by the combination of parental modeling in favor of law and the pain he experienced while working in a private firm, which caused a modest change of course. Self-creation and, indeed, free action generally are illusory.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Glover, *I*, p. 131. The term *self-shaping* would have the advantage of not implying that your own efforts can literally bring you into existence, but *self-creation* is commonly used (and I like the way it sounds).



This skeptical view flies in the face of both phenomenology, which suggests to each of us (who is sufficiently fortunate) that she can change herself or her life direction to some extent, and everyday social observation, which suggests that other people sometimes manage such self-changes. From these commonsense perspectives, it seems that one may try, with some success, to become more disciplined; practicing disciplined acts tends to inculcate the virtue of discipline. One might even succeed in making oneself less disciplined if workaholism or perfectionism has come to feel unhealthy or too obliterating of life's joys. We may work at being more patient or more generous or more willing to stand up to authority, and sometimes we may change in the ways we want. We may aspire to orient ourselves more toward a relationship – or less, if we need to become more independent. When we succeed in making the changes we set out for, or in moving ourselves in the life direction we seek, it does not seem to us or other observers that what has happened is entirely due to factors outside our own agency. To be sure, our genetic makeup and our experiences, especially early experiences, have much to do with what is possible for us. But, within what is possible, our choices and efforts often play a significant role in determining what we do and become. Or at least that is the way it seems from an everyday commonsense standpoint (combining phenomenology and observations of others): Actively working on oneself and one's life can make a major difference to the results.

Before we consider an objection to the present appeal to phenomenology and social observation, it is worth emphasizing that neither suggests unlimited capacity for self-change and control over one's destiny. That we don't entirely control our destinies is almost too obvious to say, because the world outside our agency sets limits to what's possible. Al Gore, for example, could determine how hard to work in his campaign for president, but he could not single-handedly determine whether he would achieve his goal of becoming president; no one could *make* an electoral majority vote for him in a free election. Possibilities for self-change are also limited. People with addictions or obsessive-compulsive disorder know that their will isn't the only force driving their actions. It is widely appreciated that a character trait like laziness is not overcome in a single act of will; changes of disposition take time. We are frequently reminded that there are limits to what we can accomplish in changing our behaviors and characters, just as there are obvious limits to what our bodies can achieve in sports.

While active self-shaping is possible, it is only one crucial process that entails what we and our lives become. Possibilities for self-creation are limited by our enmeshment with other crucial factors and processes.<sup>17</sup> For example, we cannot escape the genetically encoded cycle of human life: the dependence of infancy and childhood, the turbulence of adolescence, the gradual loss of physical powers in advanced age, and so forth. Other critical factors concern the tools we are given to work with, especially our individual genetic endowment and the quality of our early environment. A final crucial factor involves the random, unexpected, yet momentous consequences of some of our choices. I once decided, somewhat reluctantly, to go to a Halloween party – where I happened to meet the woman who later became my wife and the mother of my child. According to the present perspective, while self-creation is possible, the range of possibilities available to a person is both opened up and limited by other major factors and processes that shape us and our lives.

*The Deeper Worry: Hard Determinism.* While acknowledging some limits to self-creation is helpful, a critic might reply, doesn't the present view beg the question of free will? If causal determinism is true, there is a strong case that, whatever phenomenology and social observation may *seem* to suggest, our actions are not really free – in which case self-creation is an illusion. This is a powerful challenge. While the relationship between determinism and freedom could easily occupy an entire chapter, or even a book, our discussion of this issue will be brief. Let us first sharpen the thesis of determinism and then consider its implications for freedom and self-creation.

According to a determinist, all events, including our intentional actions, are determined by causal laws. A superintelligent being who knew these causal laws and the state of the universe with perfect precision could, in principle, infallibly deduce what would happen in the future. In that case, any of your actions could have been predicted long before you were born. At first glance, this seems to rule out freedom of will (or action) and self-creation. If what you do is determined in advance, how can it really be up to you? If what you become is settled beforehand, how can the result be even partly of your own making?

A common response to this issue is that contemporary physics has undermined determinism. Quantum mechanics, in particular, suggests that events at the subatomic level do not display causal regularities. But the

<sup>17</sup> In developing the points that follow, I largely follow a discussion in Glover (*I*, p. 138).

prevailing theory of quantum mechanics does not so obviously threaten determinacy at more macro levels that include human action. Statistical regularity at the subatomic level may permit predictability at the level of brain events – neuronal firings – and this could allow us, in principle, to predict human actions.<sup>18</sup> Or if some set of factors other than brain events constitutes the subject matter of causal laws relevant to human behavior, they may occupy a level at which determinism holds. Let's assume, at least for purposes of argumentation, that determinism at the relevant level is true. What follows for freedom and self-creation?

One can imagine this response: "If determinism is true, then I'm not responsible for anything. In fact, nothing I do can affect anything, since all that happens is determined in advance. That, by the way, is why I didn't come to class this morning, Professor." However common this sort of response may be, it is sophomoric and confused. If determinism is true, then all that happens is determined by prior causes, but there is no reason to think that one's own intentions, choices, and efforts cannot be among the causes that determine one's actions. In ordinary circumstances, intending to come to class and trying to do so at the relevant time will get one to class. (Moreover, if our interlocutor were correct, I couldn't be responsible for blaming him.)

So, even if determinism is true, our agency plays a role in causal processes and has effects in the world. This is the beginning of a defense of the possibility of self-creation that falls under the heading of *soft determinism* – the view that although determinism is true, determinism and human freedom are compatible. (Hard determinism holds that they are not compatible, so the truth of determinism precludes freedom.) But, even if our choices make a difference in the world, a problem remains. To put it somewhat crudely, do we have any choice about our choices?

Suppose I leave my house this morning to go to work. I leave the house because I want to go to work, I believe that leaving the house is the only way I can do so, and nothing prevents me from leaving.<sup>19</sup> From an everyday, commonsense perspective, if, as in this example, I do what I want to do, then I act freely.

Now suppose, changing the example, that my department chair expected me to attend a meeting at work but I didn't show up. Did

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> For an influential account of intentional action according to which the latter is the product of appropriately related beliefs and desires, see Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

something prevent me? No. Did I mistakenly believe the meeting was to be held another day? No. If something prevented me, the chair would have excused me; if I had been confused about the date, he would have tempered his annoyance with me (perhaps holding me partly responsible for not trying harder to record the meeting date correctly). But, in fact, I didn't show because I didn't want to attend. The chair is furious with me, holding me fully responsible. But why is the desire component of my intentional behavior treated differently from the capability and belief components? Probably for two reasons. First, our desires reflect our more general motivations and attitudes, and, as Glover notes, our motivations and attitudes are central to our relationships with people in a way that abilities and relevant beliefs (e.g., "The meeting is today") generally are not.<sup>20</sup> Second, we generally assume that people can control their motivations sufficiently to do what we ordinarily expect people to do, such as show up for department meetings. Even if I didn't really feel like going to the meeting, I could, we generally assume, motivate myself sufficiently to get myself to the meeting. Thus, according to my chair, I am culpable for not attending because I could have made it. The bottom line in determining whether one is responsible for one's conduct, we tend to think, is whether one *could have done otherwise*. Since I could have come to the meeting had I chosen to, I am culpable.

But suppose I agree that I could have come *had I chosen to*, but since I didn't so choose, I couldn't possibly have come. (No one was going to carry me there kicking and screaming.) My chair, however, is unimpressed, insisting that I could have chosen to attend and, had I been properly motivated, I would have. But I might reply that I was not, in fact, properly motivated and in fact could not have been. Why not? Because, I might reply, ultimately all of my motivations and choices were determined in advance by causal laws. It is irrelevant what I might have done, in counterfactual situations in which I had different motives, made different choices, and had a different character. While we generally hold people responsible for their choices, motives, and character, it makes no sense to do so, according to the argument. Ultimately, in the actual world (as opposed to counterfactual situations), I could *not* have acted other than I did. Whether we do what others expect of us is, in the final deterministic analysis, a matter of luck, something beyond our control.

This imagined reply to the department chair expresses hard determinism. It challenges the ways we ordinarily think about freedom, arguing

<sup>20</sup> *I*, p. 185.

against its possibility. If the argument is correct, then self-creation would also appear to be impossible. Moreover, our everyday attitudes and practices of praise and blame, guilt and moral satisfaction would make no sense, resting on the illusion of genuine metaphysical freedom.

*Soft Determinism and Frankfurt's Account.* Confronted with this challenge to the possibility of freedom, the soft determinist must refine an account of freedom to argue persuasively for its compatibility with determinism. Perhaps the most influential of such accounts is that of Harry Frankfurt, who argues essentially as follows.<sup>21</sup>

Freedom of *action* (which, we may note, is often called *liberty*) is being able to do what you want. You want to do *X*, and nothing – such as external constraints on movement or others' coercion – prevents you from doing *X*, so you do *X*. But, in addition to wanting or desiring to act in certain ways, people often have attitudes or desires regarding such first-order wants or desires. He wants to go to the happy hour and get drunk, and does so, but wishes he weren't the sort of person who had such a desire; he wants not to have the desire to go to the happy hour. She wants revenge on her tormentor but wishes she could rid herself of this desire, which conflicts with her understanding of healthy psychology. Or she wants revenge and is glad she is sufficiently independent of liberal ideology that she can enjoy vengeful desires, which she wants to retain. Frankfurt calls the first-order desire that motivates the action we perform, the one that wins out if there are conflicting first-order desires, one's *will*. Thus, freedom of *will* is the ability to have the will one wants. The conflicted drunk is free to drink but lacks freedom of will, because his will, the first-order desire that prevails, is to drink, and that's not the will he wants. He *identifies* himself with his (first-order) desire to abstain from drinking through his second-order desire that this desire be his will. According to Frankfurt, someone who has both freedom of action, being able to do what she wants, and freedom of will has all the freedom that we could possibly want or imagine.

If only matters were so simple. Before examining challenges to Frankfurt's account, let us reconnect the discussion to our main themes. Our question is whether *autonomy* and self-creation are possible. What Frankfurt calls freedom of action and freedom of will are closely related to autonomy as philosophers normally understand this term. Freedom of action does not entail autonomy because a free action, like our alcoholic's

<sup>21</sup> "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20.

drinking (which he does because he wants to), can be performed without free will, stripping both the choice to drink and the drinking itself of autonomy. Both are driven by a force, his addiction, with which he does not identify. Let us say, as a first approximation, that autonomous action is action performed with free will, so that not only does one do what one wants to do; one wills what one wants to will. When we act autonomously, that is, we do what we want and want that first-order desire to prevail.

Naturally, the concept of autonomy applies not only to actions and choices, but also to communities, persons, and entire ways of living – the last connecting with the idea of self-creation. Our issue regarding self-creation is whether we can autonomously construct the lives we want to lead and autonomously become the persons we want to be. Since such constructing and becoming would consist in innumerable choices and actions, the possibility of self-creation depends on the possibility of autonomous choice and action. Since autonomous choice is implicit in autonomous action, I will focus on the latter. Is autonomous action possible?

This question is closely connected with that of whether Frankfurt's account, or a similar one, can provide a plausible conception of autonomy. That's because some leading doubts about whether his account adequately characterizes autonomous action (or freedom of will) prove to be doubts that our actions can really be autonomous in a deterministic universe. Let us therefore consider five leading challenges to Frankfurt's and similar accounts.<sup>22</sup>

*Challenges to This and Similar Accounts.* Challenge 1: This account wrongly implies that coerced action can be autonomous.<sup>23</sup> If you are held up at gunpoint and turn over your cash, you are unlikely to have a second-order desire that conflicts with your desire to fork over the money and save your skin. Even on subsequent reflection, you are likely to approve of your sensibleness (and the first-order desire). But since in this situation your second-order desire – that your first-order desire to obey the thug prevail – and your first-order desire are both satisfied, the present account implies, implausibly, that your action is autonomous.

<sup>22</sup> The following discussion of five criticisms and my reply to them draw somewhat from my "Autonomous Action and Autonomy-Subverting Psychiatric Conditions," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 19 (1994), pp. 284–7.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Irving Thalberg, "Hierarchical Analyses of Unfree Action," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1978), pp. 212–17.

Challenge 2: Since second- or even higher-order desires are not self-validating, they cannot be the key to autonomy. We act autonomously only when our actions are governed by our *values* – desires one has for things believed to be good – and not by mere appetites or conditioned desires. Higher-order desires are no less susceptible to conditioning than lower-order desires are (as examples will show in a moment).<sup>24</sup>

Challenge 3: The appeal to higher-order desires is insufficient for another reason.<sup>25</sup> Imagine that seventy-year-old June, a traditional housewife, cleans house, does the laundry, makes meals, and scrubs the dishes for her retired husband, who hires out his former areas of responsibility (e.g., yardwork) and spends his time watching television, surfing the Internet, and napping. Why doesn't June "retire" and hire out her traditionally assumed housework? She wants to do this work. Moreover, she identifies with her desire to do this work and, when feeling tired or lazy, she wants her desire to do housework to prevail over conflicting desires to slack off or visit friends. But suppose June's attitude about her domestic role is not the product of critical, independent reflection about various options open to her. Rather, she was virtually brainwashed from an early age to think of women as worthy only if they cheerfully performed such tasks. Her dominating husband reinforces this traditional image at every opportunity. In short, June is a subordinated, subservient housewife whose choices and actions hardly seem autonomous. Yet the present account implies that they are.

Challenge 4: The top-down structure of the model is arbitrary. According to the model, one who had acted nonautonomously in virtue of certain prevailing first-order desires (e.g., to get drunk) can achieve autonomy by revising them so that they accord with higher-order desires (e.g., to be free from alcoholic temptation); in such cases the higher-order desires motivate the change. But sometimes first-order desires (e.g., *not* to vacuum the house) initiate the revision of desires (e.g., of a higher-order desire to be a dutiful housewife) that leads to greater autonomy.<sup>26</sup>

Challenge 5: On the present account, one acts autonomously if one *identifies* with the desire that moves one to act as one does. But identification itself is a kind of action, raising the question of whether one's

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gary Watson, "Free Agency," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 205–20.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in Ferdinand Schoeman (ed.), *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 46–62.

<sup>26</sup> Marilyn Friedman, "Autonomy and the Split-Level Self," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), pp. 30–2.

identification is autonomous. (Those who prefer to speak in terms of autonomous desires, as opposed to actions, can say that the issue is whether one's second-order desires are autonomous.) Suppose, for example, that Jaime, a scholar, has a very powerful desire to work. He works not just a typical workweek, but also on evenings and weekends. He works most holidays and takes vacations sparingly so that he can get more work done. He also experiences no conflict over his lifestyle. When he reflects on his behavior, he justifies his constantly working (and the desire to work) by reference to the valuable things that hard work makes possible – such as income, fame, and career opportunities – and the assumption that diligence and discipline are inherently admirable. So Jaime has a second-order desire to want to work, which harmonizes with his constant desire to work. While the present account suggests that Jaime works autonomously, this is not obvious.

Is his identification with the desire to work itself autonomous? There seem to be two possibilities, both of which pose problems for the present account.<sup>27</sup> One possibility is that his act of identification is autonomous. But, then, what makes it so? Perhaps he has carefully reflected on the value of the products of work, as well as on his assumptions about what's admirable, and has validated these judgments in light of this reflection. But the problem of autonomy now moves to this higher-order evaluation: Was it autonomously carried out? Because we may raise similar questions at any level, we seem to encounter an infinite regress.<sup>28</sup> Another possibility is that the acts of identification are *not* autonomous. Perhaps Jaime was heavily influenced by his parents, community members, and professional peers and never seriously questioned the assumptions behind the strong work ethic he now embraces. In that case, while there is no regress, it seems doubtful that one's actions can be rendered autonomous by a process – consisting of acts of reflection and identification – that is not autonomous. Note that the first possibility will likely fall into the second. An infinite regress of autonomous reflection and identification seems impossible for any finite being, so presumably such higher-order evaluation must stop with some values and desires that are simply “given” to one by factors outside one's agency – such as socialization,

<sup>27</sup> The two possibilities are nicely laid out in John Christman (although he doesn't ultimately endorse the critique), “Introduction,” in Christman (ed.), *The Inner Citadel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 10–11.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Watson, “Free Agency,” p. 218.



conditioning, and one's genetic makeup.<sup>29</sup> We have returned, in effect, to the thesis that determinism precludes autonomy and, with it, self-creation.

*A Reply to These Challenges.* Let us begin with Challenge 5's specter of infinite regress. Anticipating this concern, and thinking of someone like Jaime, Frankfurt responds as follows:

There is no theoretical limit to the length of the series of desires of higher and higher orders; nothing except common sense and, perhaps, a saving fatigue prevents an individual from obsessively refusing to identify himself with any of his desires until he forms a desire of the next higher order. . . . When a person identifies himself *decisively* with one of his first-order desires, this commitment "resounds" throughout the potentially endless array of higher orders. Consider a person who, without reservation or conflict, wants to be motivated by the desire to concentrate on his work. He can properly insist that this question concerning a third-order desire does not arise. . . . The decisiveness of the commitment he has made means that he has decided that no further question about his second-order volition, at any higher order, remains to be asked.<sup>30</sup>

Let's say that Jaime decisively identifies with his first-order desire to work, thereby deciding, according to Frankfurt, that no higher-order issue about his second-order desire remains. Is that sufficient for autonomy?

Consider the specification of Jaime's case in which his work ethic – which establishes, or includes, the second-order desire to want to want to work – was largely handed down to him without his ever questioning it. I could imagine Frankfurt and critics reasonably debating whether Jaime works autonomously in this scenario. But suppose, changing the example, that Jaime used to embrace more of a leisure ethic. He now decisively identifies with his desire to work only because a hypnotist manipulated him, without prior consent, while he was hypnotized, causing him to make this decisive identification after returning to normal consciousness.<sup>31</sup> In this case, Frankfurt's view seems incorrect in implying that Jaime's acting in accordance with his work ethic is autonomous. After all, his identification with his desire to work is itself nonautonomous.

But maybe there is a way to avoid an infinite regress without implying that a relevant act of identification is nonautonomous. Perhaps the act of identification that is supposed to cut off further questions about

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Glover, *I*, pp. 186–7.

<sup>30</sup> "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Christman, too, cites a hypnotist in criticizing Frankfurt's theory ("Introduction," p. 10).

autonomy – thereby preventing an infinite regress – can be autonomous *in a different way from the way in which first-order desires and the actions that flow from them can be autonomous*.<sup>32</sup> We can allow, first, that since first-order desires may conflict and sometimes cause us to act nonautonomously, a first-order desire expressed in an action needs to be validated, through identification, for our action to be autonomous. But, second, our act of identification might be validated in a different way that neither suggests that the original problem of autonomy has moved to the higher level nor invites an infinite regress.

We need a condition for acts of identification to count as conferring autonomy on first-order desires, a condition that will clearly not have been satisfied in the hypnosis case. Gerald Dworkin suggests that one acts autonomously when one acts “for reasons [one] doesn’t mind acting from.”<sup>33</sup> But this is insufficient if one *would* mind acting for certain reasons if one gave them any thought. In a later writing, Dworkin mentions the need to distinguish ways of influencing one’s reflective capacities that promote and enhance them from those that subvert such faculties. Where a person or action is autonomous, “identification is not itself influenced in ways which make the process of identification in some way alien to the individual.”<sup>34</sup> If alienating influences are absent, then the condition of *procedural independence* is satisfied. (Dworkin analyzes autonomy as authenticity – higher-order identification with one’s first-order desires – plus procedural independence.)

If procedural independence can make an act of identification autonomous, of what sorts of influence must identification be independent to qualify as autonomous? John Christman has a very promising suggestion: “[A]ny factor affecting some agent’s acts of reflection and identification is ‘illegitimate’ if the agent would be moved to revise the desire so affected, were she aware of that factor’s presence and influence.”<sup>35</sup> This suggestion permits the agent, on learning of a factor’s influence (e.g., that of socialization), to determine whether it is legitimate and consistent with autonomy or illegitimate. I believe this brings us close to an adequate account.

Suppose that, after much reflection and discussion with people he trusts, Jaime has come to understand how his work ethic – and therefore

<sup>32</sup> I learned of this ingenious move from Christman, “Introduction,” p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> “Acting Freely,” *Nous* 4 (1970), p. 381.

<sup>34</sup> “The Concept of Autonomy,” in Christman, *The Inner Citadel*, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> “Autonomy: A Defense of the Split-Level Self,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1987), pp. 290–1.

his identification with the desire to work – was largely shaped by his family’s influence. If this influence strikes him as alienating, so that he now feels he must reevaluate his work ethic, then the family influence counts as precluding, or at least diminishing, autonomy. If, on the other hand, he considers this influence fortunate, and the work ethic well worth having among the various possible ethics one might choose, then his family influence will count as consistent with autonomy.

But suppose Jaime, like many people, never achieves this degree of insight about the formation of his values and never seriously questions them. Would such an absence of critical evaluation strip his actions and way of life of autonomy? If so, then many and perhaps most people would rarely act autonomously (although they would often act freely, doing what they want to do). Even the most reflective people perform many humdrum, everyday actions – such as tying their shoes or talking to someone – without second-order reflection, yet these actions seem autonomous. But, in these situations, the agent usually *would* identify with the relevant first-order desires if the issue of their desirability were raised.<sup>36</sup> So a plausible approach is to permit *dispositional* identification and acceptance of influences to count as autonomy-conferring.

In that case, *would* Jaime continue to identify with his desire to work on recognizing the major influences that have shaped his attitudes and values? While in some cases there may be no uniquely correct answer to such a counterfactual question because the agent has no determinate disposition, often there will be an answer based on the agent’s overall psychology. Thus, given one’s psychology, one’s identification with a first-order desire counts as autonomous in the absence of illegitimate influences, where the latter are those that one regards, or would regard, as significantly alienating; one’s identification will not count as autonomous

<sup>36</sup> But appealing to dispositions, a critic might reply, reveals that the present account, like all multitier accounts of autonomy, is overly intellectualized; people’s real deliberations usually don’t go to second- and higher-order levels. One might consider an alternative analysis that avoids multiple tiers of preferences, such as this: *A* acts autonomously if and only if *A* acts (1) intentionally, (2) with understanding, and (3) without controlling influences that determine the action (Tom Beauchamp, “The Moral Standing of Animals in Medical Research,” *Law, Medicine, and Health Care* 20 [1992], p. 12). But autonomous action involves a harmony between the motives that prevail in one’s actions and one’s more general attitudes and values – a feature that single-tier analyses don’t satisfactorily capture. Note that, when a bird intentionally flies to her nest, she seems to satisfy the preceding three conditions no less than I do when I walk to my office. But birds lack the reflective capacities and self-control that are implicit in our concept of autonomy. Thus the alternative analysis apparently fails to provide sufficient conditions for autonomous actions. And so, I suggest, will any single-tier account.

if it was shaped by an illegitimate, alienating influence. This, then, is our criterion for autonomous identification.<sup>37, 38</sup>

Before returning to the five challenges, let us sharpen the analysis of autonomy: *A autonomously performs intentional action X if and only if (1) A does X because she prefers to do X, (2) A has this preference because she (at least dispositionally) identifies with and prefers to have it, and (3) this identification has not resulted primarily from influences that A would, on careful reflection, consider alienating.* Why substitute the language of *preference* for that of *desire*? While these two terms, as I understand them, refer to the same mental states, the connotations of *preference* are less potentially misleading in cases of

<sup>37</sup> Should our test for the legitimacy of an influencing factor ask about the agent's retrospective evaluation, as in the case of Jaime, or might retrospection come too late? Suppose Chiang has been thoroughly brainwashed by the party to accept its ideology. Consequently, he not only wants to burn books and torment intellectuals; he is even grateful for the brainwashing, which he calls "education." From his retrospective view, the party's influence is not alienating. Yet it is highly questionable whether his present party-line desires are autonomous, considering how they came about. Should we, as a test for an influence's legitimacy, ask *prospectively* whether it would be alienating? Perhaps prebrainwashing Chiang would consider such an influence illegitimate. If we hold that prospective hypothetical evaluation provides the proper test for an influence's legitimacy, that will plausibly imply that Chiang's book-burning desire is nonautonomous. But prospective judgment also has its limits. Suppose racist Jesse feels that liberal arts education is alienating, distorting people's minds so that they can no longer appreciate proper religious and parental authority. But his football scholarship, which he accepts in the hope of later playing professionally, leads him to receive such an education. He now wants racial equality and considers his old worldview narrow-minded and distorted. It's hard to believe here that prospective evaluation is the more reliable test of an influence's legitimacy. I suggest that we stick with retrospective evaluation as the appropriate test. If Chiang wants to burn books, identifies with his desire, understands the party's influence on him yet embraces this influence – not just publicly but in his heart – then Chiang has genuinely *changed* and his desire, I suggest, is autonomous, harmonizing as it does with his current worldview. It is his values, not ours, that (partly) constitute his autonomy. Another possible approach, however, would be to give prospective and retrospective evaluation equal weight in determining whether an influence is legitimate, bearing in mind that sometimes there will be no determinate answer.

<sup>38</sup> Is this criterion uncomfortably relativistic? Suppose Fritz wants to get seriously involved with Ursula and identifies with this desire. Suppose also that this identification is significantly influenced by an unconscious desire to be with his deceased mother. If Fritz is an uptight, nineteenth-century Viennese, he might be repelled by this influence on learning of it and reject it, so that he does not act autonomously in seeking serious involvement with Ursula. But if Fritz is a contemporary New York intellectual, he might laugh at this influence on discovering it – after all, Freud's ideas are hardly shocking anymore – and embrace it without embarrassment. In this case, his seeking a serious involvement with Ursula counts as autonomous. I wholeheartedly accept the implication of the present account that the same action with the same influence could be autonomous or not, depending on one's culture, socialization, and so on. After all, autonomy is partly a function of one's values, which are shaped by social factors.

conflicting desires where one doesn't "really want (desire) to" do what one does; one does, all things considered, prefer the act one intentionally performs.

Now for the challenges. Challenge 1 concerns coercion. If you hand over money to the thug, you do so because, in the circumstances, you prefer this action to any other possible action, such as fighting, fleeing, or cursing the thug. But, on our analysis, the action won't count as autonomous, on either of two ways to interpret the case. One possible interpretation is that you do not have this preference to hand over the money because you identified with and preferred this preference; you have the preference because someone threatens you. In this case, condition (2) is not satisfied. Another interpretation is that, on reflection, you would, considering the drastic circumstances, identify with and prefer the prudent preference to surrender the money – and this disposition is the reason you preferred to act this way. Then condition (2) is satisfied. But condition (3) is not, because you would clearly regard the influence that determined your second-order identification – namely, the threat of death – as alienating. So the revised account apparently provides the right answer in coercion cases.

According to Challenge 2, our actions are autonomous only if they flow from our values. Second-order desires, or preferences, may result from conditioning that throws their autonomy into doubt. But, assuming (consistent with this challenge) there is such a thing as autonomous action, surely not all forms of conditioning preclude it. Our account plausibly distinguishes cases where conditioning and other influences prevent autonomous second-order identification – and therefore autonomous action – and cases where they don't. Moreover, the requirements of reflective identification and acceptance of the influences that bear on the latter ensure that actions deemed autonomous will flow from one's value system. For one's values will provide the grounds for identification or rejection of one's motives for actions, and for acceptance or rejection of the relevant influences.

According to Challenge 3, the multitier approach to autonomy implies that a thoroughly subordinated housewife would act autonomously in carrying out her role. This is unlikely with our revised account. June may identify with her desire to perform her traditional duties. But, given the unfairness of her current situation and the way in which the men in her life have denied her any choice about her role, it is very unlikely that condition (3) would be satisfied. Most likely, she would consider alienating the influences that shaped the identification

in question if they were brought to light along with other possible roles for women.<sup>39</sup>

Challenge 4 charged the top-down structure of the model with arbitrariness, noting that sometimes first-order desires (e.g., not to vacuum) catalyze changes of higher-order desires (e.g., to be a dutiful housewife) on the way to greater autonomy. But, in cases like these, the autonomy-seeking rebellion at the lower level suggests that some condition of autonomy had previously not been met. One possibility is that the agent had the lower-order desire (e.g., to vacuum dutifully) not because she preferred to have it, but because she was subject to alienating influences such as subordination. Alternatively, if she did prefer to have the desire and genuinely identified with it, perhaps *that* was due to alienating influences such as subordination or excessive socialization. Thus, while revisions of preferences may occur at any level in leading to autonomy, this doesn't cast doubt on the requirement of higher-order identification. What the model really requires for autonomy is a kind of reflective harmony in one's system of preferences and values, a harmony that can be achieved in different ways.

Challenge 5 posed a dilemma regarding the second-order acts of identification on which autonomous action depend: Either such identification must be autonomous, a requirement that seems to lead to an infinite regress of higher-order autonomy-conferring mental acts, or such identification is not autonomous, in which case it seems incapable of supporting autonomous action. Our discussion of Jaime, in light of a criterion for autonomous identification that does not seem to invite an infinite regress, has already addressed this challenge.

But a skeptic might reply as follows: "Your criterion for autonomous identification permits factors external to one's agency to affect, in crucial

<sup>39</sup> Accepting these influences, on careful reflection, seems tantamount to accepting the idea that men should treat women inequitably, that women are morally subordinate to men. Admittedly, a woman might retain this belief, even after coming to understand the effects of socialization and reflecting on alternative, more respectful ways of viewing women. Such a woman, however, strikes me as either morally obtuse or psychologically unhealthy. Since our account does not absolutely preclude that such a person may choose a subordinate lifestyle autonomously, we face a theoretical choice: Either accept this implication or add a condition that requires reasonable moral perceptiveness, healthy self-respect, or the like. Susan Wolf has suggested that some such condition is necessary ("Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"). But, as John Christman argues, such a requirement – he has in mind requirements of "external rationality" more generally – might strip autonomy of the very self-governance that lies at the center of the concept ("Introduction"). I leave this subtle issue open.

ways, one's disposition to identify with this or that desire. A person's genetic makeup and all the social forces that bear on him (regardless of whether he would consider them alienating) will crucially affect what Jaime or anyone else will be disposed to identify with. But these factors are outside one's control, making it incomprehensible why one's identifications, preferences, and the actions they motivate should ever count as autonomous. Even if Jaime's feverishly working meets the three proposed conditions for autonomous action, the dependence of his values and choices on factors outside his control, and the fact that (assuming determinism is true) he could *not* have acted otherwise, undermine all claims to autonomy. And as autonomy goes out the window, so does the possibility of self-creation. Both are impossible."

The first thing to notice about this argument is that it embraces skepticism about autonomy itself and not simply our analysis of autonomy. So it doesn't challenge the claim that, assuming there is such a thing as autonomous action, our analysis captures it fairly well. That leaves us with the issue with which we started: Assuming determinism is true, are autonomous action and self-creation possible? In a way, we have reached an impasse. I cannot convince everyone that autonomy and self-creation are possible when some people assume that these phenomena require complete independence from external influences. Instead, I simply advance two claims: (1) If human beings are capable of autonomy and self-creation, then this chapter's characterization of these phenomena is satisfactory and (2) there are good reasons to think that the skeptic's stringent requirement – that autonomous action and self-creation require complete independence from factors beyond an agent's control – is unreasonable. I have already defended assertion (1) at length. A few further remarks will have to suffice in defense of claim (2).

If an agent does *X* because he prefers *X* to alternative possible actions, he has this preference because he identifies with and prefers to have it (at least dispositionally), and if the external factors that influence his identification are not such that he considers them or would consider them alienating, then it is very clear that the agent is actively involved in his choice and action. Even if, at a deep metaphysical level, he could not have acted otherwise, his agency – his values, choices, and efforts – are a crucial part of the overall causal processes that yield the action. We might even say that the agent is causally determined to act autonomously!<sup>40</sup> But

<sup>40</sup> Frankfurt makes essentially the same point ("Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," p. 20). Cf. Glover, *I*, p. 130.

this, of course, assumes the soft determinist thesis that determinism and autonomy, or free will, are compatible. Given the impasse noted earlier, it is hard to avoid begging some questions.

But I can avoid question-begging in pointing out that the ideas of autonomous action and self-creation are not going away soon. In ordinary life, we assume that what we do can be more or less autonomous, and that the shape of our lives can be more or less affected by our own agency. Moreover, we assign great moral and prudential importance to the differences. To disrespect a competent adult's autonomy is morally problematic. To engage in self-creation is a large part of what we hope for in life if we are lucky enough to entertain such possibilities. Those who wish to participate (intelligibly) in the immense variety of practices that implicate the concepts of autonomy and/or self-creation must assume that the latter are possible.<sup>41</sup> The remainder of this book makes this assumption.

#### How Self-Creation Relates to Narrative Identity and Other Key Concepts

Having explored the meaning and possibility of self-creation – and its conceptual cousin, autonomy – let us reconnect self-creation with narrative identity and other concepts that have figured prominently in our discussion.

Narrative identity is one's sense of oneself as the protagonist in one's own life story or self-narrative. Your sense of yourself helps you decide what is worth doing and which of your characteristics are *really* yours. Self-creation, meanwhile, is the deliberate and conscious shaping of one's own characteristics and life direction. As noted early in this chapter, self-creation projects flow from narrative identity and, as they do so, continue to write and often edit the narratives from which they flow.

Should we say, then, that self-creation is the inevitable process of continuing to write one's own self-narrative? No, because self-creation, as we saw earlier, is not inevitable and is very difficult or impossible for some people due to their circumstances. Further, there may be people who are in a position to engage in self-creation, their circumstances being

<sup>41</sup> See P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment" (*Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 [1962]: 1–25), for a discussion of our common attitudes and practices that implicate the assumption of free will, or autonomy, and the question of whether such attitudes and practices could be foregone.



sufficiently favorable, but who just never pick up the reins and take control of the bucking bronco that is their life. Self-creation occurs when one doesn't just watch one's life story being written or look elsewhere as the chapters fly by; it occurs when an individual takes an active role in authoring the biography, making it a *lived* autobiography. Rather than not wondering about how later chapters will turn out, or wondering how they'll turn out but with no sense of controlling their direction, the self-creator endeavors to write those later chapters – and perhaps, in light of the evolving story, edit earlier chapters as different themes emerge as critical and self-discoveries put old details in a different light. So, where self-creation occurs, it flows from one's narrative identity or sense of self, and where the latter doesn't enable one to take an active role in self- and life-shaping (whether or not circumstances make these possible), self-creation will not occur.

Although we have already discussed the relationship of self-creation to autonomy in arguing for the possibility of both, a few further remarks may be illuminating. We have seen that autonomy can characterize not just ordinary actions and acts of identification, on which we focused, but also desires, choices, and individuals. Importantly, human beings can live their *lives* more or less autonomously. It makes sense, then, to think of self-creation very roughly as *autonomous writing of self-narratives*. Jasmine pursues a career in academia, say, because she wants to and because, in view of the options open to her, she reflectively identifies with this ambition. In this self-creation project, she takes an active role in guiding her life direction in accordance with her values.

Autonomy and self-creation connect in another interesting way. When we act autonomously, so that we identify with the desires that prevail in our actions, those prevailing desires tend to reflect our values. Not necessarily all our values, some of which may concern ethical issues that are remote from our everyday choices. The desires with which we identify in autonomous action reflect our values concerning what sort of life would be worthwhile *for us* and what sort of people we want to be.<sup>42</sup>

From another angle, we may say that someone engaged in self-creation *identifies* with the person she is becoming, or trying to become, and with her apparent life direction, or the one for which she is aiming. The relevant sense of *identification* here is evaluative; it is not that associated with numerical identity, since it is trivially true that one is numerically

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Glover, *I*, p. 130.

identical to the individual one will become. (Chapter 5 will examine several senses of identification.)

### Do the Demands of Authenticity Set Moral Limits on Self-Creation?

We turn now to an issue about a possible limit to legitimate self-creation, an issue both interesting in its own right and important to our discussion of so-called enhancement technologies in Chapter 6. One sometimes hears the assertion that certain self-creation projects are morally suspect, or even unethical, because they are inauthentic.<sup>43</sup> Is this correct? As a preliminary, let's clarify the concept of authenticity.

Authenticity, in this context, may be understood as *being true to oneself and presenting oneself to others as one truly is*.<sup>44</sup> Presenting a false self – pretending to be someone one is not – is inauthentic. Such inauthenticity is evident in a preppy East Coast schoolboy who suddenly dresses down and adopts a southern accent in order to impress a girl from Louisiana. Another example is a middle-aged woman who talks endlessly about the 1960s as if she had been deeply involved in the era's social movements, although she was abroad at the time and didn't participate at all. Consider also a nouveau riche couple who, in order to fit in with and impress new associates, pretend to be old-money aristocracy – when in truth they retain many of the values and tastes associated with their humble origins. Sometimes inauthenticity involves communicating falsely with oneself, as in the case of a man who, ignoring relevant evidence, tells himself that he is a scientific genius (an example developed later). Authentic people, by contrast, express who they are through their choices and actions, without pretense or artifice. Because there is little tension between who they really are and the personas they present to themselves and to others, they often strike us as particularly natural and comfortable with themselves.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> I have heard this charge mostly in conversation. Carl Elliott has examined at length the tension in American culture between the values of self-fulfillment (or self-creation) and authenticity. See his "The Tyranny of Happiness: Ethics and Cosmetic *Psychopharmacology*," in Erik Parens (ed.), *Enhancing Human Traits: Ethical and Social Implications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998): 177–88 and *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: Norton, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> This is my understanding of our shared concept of authenticity. For an influential discussion of authenticity as a moral ideal in the modern West, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> Arguably, authenticity is compatible with *some* forms of self-deception. One might be decidedly optimistic in viewing one's life and the challenges it presents in order to facilitate success, since optimism tends to be energizing. But perhaps (full) authenticity

Might some self-creation projects run afoul of authenticity in morally problematic ways? Let's assume that the nouveau riche couple, for example, *deliberately and self-consciously* set out to put on airs and play the false role of old-money aristocracy, so that their social transformation counts as a self-creation project. Surely, *to the extent that they are being dishonest to others*, their self-presentation is morally problematic. In general, intentionally presenting oneself falsely to others subverts our expectations for honesty and sincerity – and may involve actively lying, adding unambiguously wrong action to bad character. But these ethical concerns are explicable by appeal to widely embraced norms for virtue and conduct, leaving unclear whether the charge that a self-creation project is *inauthentic* adds any distinctive moral content.

Suppose, then, that someone's inauthenticity consists in being untrue to himself, without any dishonesty toward others. Imagine a college student who is socially without pretense, yet lies to himself in one important respect. He keeps telling himself he is a scientific genius – because he wants to believe this – despite *overwhelming* evidence to the contrary. He presents a false self to himself. And he begins to organize his life around this self-deception, researching top graduate programs in theoretical physics, taking as many science courses as he possibly can (getting C's and B's), purchasing basic laboratory equipment, and so on.<sup>46</sup> He even gets accepted by a graduate program – one desperate for tuition-paying students. As the years continue, he keeps organizing his inner story around the theme that he is a misunderstood genius whose weak public performances, such as mediocre grades, are misleading for one reason or another. So this case, too, is an instance of inauthentic self-creation.

Is it morally problematic? Well, is it unethical to deceive oneself? Presumably not, if the relevant mental acts are beyond our control – which is quite possible, assuming the self-manipulation occurs unconsciously. I am not sure even intentional, conscious self-deception is unethical. But,

would require the agent to recognize, at least some of the time, that this bias toward the bright side is a self-management strategy rather than a reliable indicator of the agent's warranted beliefs, as Patricia Greenspan suggested to me.

<sup>46</sup> Although self-deception is paradoxical – to lie, one must know the truth, but to be fooled, one must not know the truth – we all know that it occurs frequently. Apparently, self-deception is possible because we are capable of more or less compartmentalizing different parts of our cognitive world, preventing the idealized consistency and rationality of which an information-processing system is, in principle, capable. See, e.g., David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), ch. 3.

for the sake of argument, let's assume that all self-deception is unethical or at least morally problematic.

But, then, the fact that this case involves *deception* – toward oneself – may fully explain why, as we are assuming, it is morally problematic. Once again, there is no reason to suppose the charge of inauthenticity per se adds any morally significant content. On the other hand, one might deny that what's morally troubling about inauthentic self-creation needs some basis other than the familiar one that deception is wrong and contrary to virtue. For one might claim that inauthenticity is *inherently* deceptive and for that reason morally problematic. Perhaps that's right. So let's grant that assumption, too, at least for the sake of argument. (I grant all these assumptions for the sake of argument, because doing so won't prevent me from undermining the conclusion toward which the present reasoning is heading.)

So do the demands of authenticity set moral limits on self-creation? Yes, at least insofar as self-creation should not be founded on deception. Now, the cases of deception we have considered are cases in which self-creators refuse to acknowledge – to others or themselves – who they are, what sorts of persons. But consider a subtly different class of cases that some people find morally troubling: those in which people want to *change themselves* in ways that might be considered untrue to themselves.

Consider three examples. (A) An unconfident, physically unimposing teenager wants to become more assertive, confident, and physically fit. He pushes himself to act differently in social settings, desensitizing himself to social fears; seeks pointers from “cool” neighbors who are a bit older; and begins regular exercise, including running, weight lifting, and basketball. Within a few years, he has shed the nerd image and feels in command of his social life. (B) Unlike the self-deceiver described earlier, this physics student understands that she is no genius. But she has moderate ability and wants to succeed in her major; she finds it enjoyable and values science as a constructive enterprise. Through consistent hard work and the gradual accumulation of genuine expertise, she exceeds expectations, eventually establishing herself as a research scientist who makes modest contributions to her field. (C) Tired of being told that she is a wonderful friend and conversationalist – remarks she hears when being rejected by men she wants to date – a plump, flat-chested young woman decides to become more physically attractive. She eats more healthfully, joins a gym and uses it regularly, and undergoes cosmetic surgery – reshaping her nose and enlarging her breasts. Soon she has a more active love life and finds that in professional circles her physical appearance

gives her confidence and even a measure of power that she lacked before.

These three individuals have developed self-creation projects that involve deliberately changing themselves – more specifically, their bodies, personalities, and/or levels of professional competence.<sup>47</sup> Are these individuals, in changing themselves, being untrue to themselves, inviting a charge of inauthenticity? “You’re not being honest about who you are,” our imagined critic might say to any one of them. “Your self-creation project is false.”

That this concern is at least partly misplaced is suggested by the likelihood that we will find at least one, very possibly two, and perhaps all three of the self-creation projects admirable. The easiest case is that of the physics student. Exceeding expectations, when one is honest with oneself and others, seems admirable, not morally suspect. In doing extremely well with her less than awesome natural endowment, the student does justice to the full range of her ability; she doesn’t pretend to be something she’s not.

The case of the teenage nerd who becomes more fit, confident, and assertive might give one pause if one doesn’t share his enthusiasm for social grace and control. Perhaps one finds these values superficial and those who seek them overly competitive. But, assuming the teenager doesn’t become obnoxiously aggressive, or reject others in becoming socially graceful, this sort of criticism seems excessive. And, even if he did become obnoxious and rejecting, the only clear moral fault would lie with his new attitudes and behavior. If one charged him with inauthenticity, stating, “He’s not really like that,” it would be appropriate to respond, “Look for yourself!”

I suggest that the only genuinely troubling case, morally, is that of the young woman who transforms herself into a sexier form. Those uncomfortable with this case are likely to feel especially skeptical about her decision to undergo cosmetic surgeries. These surgeries entail certain non-trivial physical risks. Even if we set aside these concerns by assuming, for the sake of argument, that the procedures are physically safe by anyone’s standards, some will remain morally troubled. One might be disturbed

<sup>47</sup> Admittedly, these individuals may be somewhat unusual in the degree to which they actively take control of their lives. But some people do self-create in such ways. On a personal note, four times – at ages eight, nine, seventeen, and twenty-nine – I have made conscious decisions to change myself in important ways and restructured my behaviors accordingly. In the latter two cases, the changes were comparable to cases *A*, *B*, and *C* in degree of impact.

that this woman – whose self-creation project requires a great deal of effort, time, and expense (in sum, considerable cost to herself) – may be reflecting socialization into sexist norms for what constitutes a beautiful woman: slim, large-breasted, straight-nosed, and so on. Moreover, while vigorous exercise is generally admirable, one may be concerned about even this part of her self-creation project if the impetus to exercise is the internalization of sexist norms of beauty.

But, if the woman strongly desires the changes she seeks, is there any basis for saying that her goals are inauthentic? “Yes,” one might say, “because her desire to look a certain way doesn’t really come from *her*, being born of socialization in a sexist culture.” Notice that this concern could also be expressed by one who questioned the *autonomy* of her desire to become slimmer, large-breasted, and so on.<sup>48</sup> And this hints at a promising way to address such cases, for in view of our earlier discussion of autonomy, the concern about autonomy is clearly legitimate.

*I suggest that any self-creation project that is autonomous and honest is ipso facto authentic.* Honesty is necessary because if, for example, one autonomously pursues a life course that involves systematic deception to others about who one really is, such a self-creation project would clearly be inauthentic. In the case under discussion, legitimate concerns about authenticity seem to be concerns about autonomy: Is her self-creation project really hers, or is she capitulating to social forces that largely determine her choice? The answer depends on the details. Suppose she is aware of sexist socialization and its impact on her desires, seriously considers options other than those of conforming to the sexist norms, but decides that, on balance, she really prefers to strive for the socially sanctioned type of beauty. In this scenario, she acts and chooses autonomously – and therefore, I am suggesting, authentically. Suppose, alternatively, that her desire to change herself in the ways described is largely a product of socialization, which she would consider alienating if only she understood its impact, and she would choose differently were she more perceptive about her psychological situation. In this scenario, her choices are neither autonomous nor authentic. She is not really in the driver’s seat of her beauty-seeking behavior and the self-image she pursues is, in an important sense, not her own.

<sup>48</sup> Recall that Gerald Dworkin defines autonomy partly in terms of authenticity – which he understands as higher-order identification with the first-order desires that prevail in action – providing some confirmation for the intuitive sense that authenticity and autonomy are importantly linked.

But one might claim that details pertaining to honesty and autonomy in a given case are beside the point, because drastic self-transformation is *inherently* inauthentic: “Just in seeking to change oneself so drastically, one is being inauthentic, abandoning one’s true self – either pretending it doesn’t exist or denying its importance.” While sensing that many people resonate with this sort of reasoning, I find it unpersuasive. It suggests, misleadingly, that the self is given as a largely fixed, unalterable entity. This static model of the self fails to recognize, or at least respect, the sort of self-creation in which we deliberately change *ourselves* – or, more specifically, our personality, character, or abilities – as opposed to merely our life direction. I see no good reason to object to self-change just because it involves major change. While some people are romantically attached to the way things are, including the way *they* are, many people are not. And it would disrespect the latter people’s autonomy to suggest that their interest in improving themselves according to their own lights is inherently problematic. To say this interest is inauthentic begs the question of who they are – and *they*, not we, are the authors of their self-narratives.

On the present view, one can authentically change oneself, even radically, if one does so autonomously and honestly. If this is correct, then authenticity sets no moral demands on self-creation beyond those connected with honesty and autonomy. In Chapter 6, however, we will revisit the charge of inauthenticity and examine in depth a related charge: that some radical self-transformations violate morally inviolable core characteristics. The findings of this section are therefore tentative.

#### CONCLUSION: BRINGING THE TWO SENSES OF IDENTITY TOGETHER

In this chapter, we have explored the important human phenomena of narrative identity, self-creation, and several related themes such as autonomy and authenticity. We have found that when someone is engaged in self-creation – conscious, deliberate self-shaping – the latter flows from the individual’s narrative identity and, as it does so, continues the life work of writing the inner story from which it flows. Narrative identity, in turn, is the sense of human identity that most concerns people in everyday life, the sense at issue when someone wonders what sort of person she is, what’s most important to her, and with what or whom she identifies in securing her sense of self.

The theoretical work completed in this and the previous chapter can be succinctly summarized in the following way: Human persons are

(1) essentially human animals and (2) characteristically self-narrators and (where circumstances permit) self-creators who care about continuing as such. Thus, we – who are now human persons – are human animals, but not necessarily persons, throughout our existence. But we human persons all have, and will continue to have so long as we are persons, inner stories whose overall character and direction matter to us. More fundamentally, much of what matters to us is our continued existence *as persons* – as beings whose complex forms of consciousness make self-narration and self-creation possible. Yet we cannot continue to exist as persons unless we continue to exist. That is why narrative identity, on the present view, presupposes numerical identity.