

Phenomenology of Autonomy in Westlund and Wheelis

PRESCOTT JACKSON

Andrea Westlund, in “Selflessness and Responsibility for Self,” argues that for one to be autonomous—or responsible for self—one must hold oneself “answerable . . . to external critical perspectives” (495). For Westlund, holding oneself answerable is connected to one’s ability to critically reflect and engage in justificatory dialogue. Westlund thinks her view improves on identificationalist views of autonomy because it can handle cases of self-abnegation, while identificationalist views cannot. This certainly seems true; however, I believe that it is not an inability to engage in justificatory dialogue that is fundamental to autonomy deficiency. I will argue, inspired by the writings of psychiatrist Allen Wheelis, that autonomy deficiency fundamentally results from the lack of a sort of prior phenomenological recognition of one’s options as live options. I will show that there a space for my view of autonomy, whether or not Westlund herself would endorse it, is already present in her writing. I will show how, on my view, it is rather common that people are somehow autonomy deficient. I will finish by examining how this view relates to our moral intuitions about autonomy deficiency in general. I think that my view is useful for accounting for some of our intuitions but leaves some questions unanswered.

Prescott Jackson is a senior at Brigham Young University and will graduate in April 2019 with a major in philosophy and minor in computer science. He plans to attend graduate school in 2020. His philosophical interests include phenomenology, agency, and identity.

1. What is Fundamental to Autonomy

Westlund joins the conversation by rejecting accounts of autonomy (like those presented by Frankfurt and Bratman) on the grounds that they seem to be unable to account for our intuitions about cases of self-abnegating deference. Self-abnegating deference is deference wherein even one's deliberation about one's reasons for action are deferential in nature. In contrast, one might defer to a party or interest for reasons of one's own which do not seem to conflict with autonomy. In such cases of prudential deference, an agent would be able to give self-referential reasons for one's deferential action. For example, one might say, "I defer to my mother always, because I think she is wise and loves me. Therefore deference is good for me." In contrast, one who is self-abnegating in one's deference would only be able to give reasons for one's actions that are themselves deferential. In this circumstance, one would be unable to reference oneself or one's own interests when accounting for why one is doing what one is doing.

Westlund gives the example of Thomas Hill's deferential wife (DW). She supposes that DW is talking with a friend about moving to Minneapolis (487). The move should be a problem for DW, but she has, as is her fashion, deferred the decision to her husband and decided to go. When asked why she is going, DW is only able to give answers such as, "it is important to him [her husband], it really is a great career opportunity for him . . . I'm sure he's thought it through, and I just know this is what he really wants" and "I just want him to have what he wants; that's all" (487). DW is unable to tie any of the reasons behind her actions to anything but the interests of the person to whom she defers. Westlund calls this being "deeply" deferential (488). We see a similar problem in the devotedly religious person who defers to the objects of his religious convictions in a self-abnegating way. While neither religious belief nor cooperation are inherently problematic on most accounts, someone who is unable to tie their action to self-referencing reasons seems problematic.

Identificationalist accounts of autonomy seem unable to account for our intuition that these sorts of cases are problematic. Frankfurt's account, for example, states that a person has first-order desires—which have the potential to cause their actions—and second-order volitions—which are our desires about which of our first-order desires we wish to be effective. Thus, freedom of the will results when one's effective first-order desires equate the objects of one's second-order volitions (Frankfurt). However, it seems that both DW and our devoted acolyte (DA) would have second-order volitions directed at their deferential actions. It seems that both DW and DA can identify with their actions, or, in other words, would consider their actions

as speaking for their true selves (Westlund 491). At very least, it seems that neither would suppose that they were acting in spite of themselves unless, in fact, they failed in their deferential role.

Westlund suggests that, rather than identification, a particular sort of critical reflectiveness is necessary for someone to be autonomous. She writes that “responsibility for self [is] a matter of holding oneself *answerable* . . . to external critical perspectives” (495). When someone is not held answerable for some action, they are not responsible (from an observer’s perspective) for that action. If someone, therefore, does not hold themselves answerable for an act, they are not holding themselves responsible for that act. Westlund later states that autonomy is self-responsibility and, therefore, is this ability to hold oneself answerable (498).

I think that Westlund is thoroughly convincing in her reasoning to this point. However, I find it strange that she finally identifies willingness to engage in justificatory dialogue to real or imagined critics as fundamental to answerability (and therefore autonomy) rather than the view of things that must be prior to that willingness. She writes, “standing in this sort of relationship to oneself both changes the way in which one experiences the demands of flesh-and-blood critics and makes possible a distinctive form of independent self-criticism” (497). This seems correct, but “standing in this sort of relationship to oneself” seems to be more fundamental to autonomy than the actual experience of demands from critics (and certainly one’s response to them). I think it is this standing in a specific sort of relationship to one’s self that is fundamental to autonomy, and it happens to be the case that this ability always leads to one’s being able and willing (in some sense) to engage in justificatory dialogue.

2. Phenomenology of Autonomy

Westlund identifies some seemingly phenomenological requirements to one’s being able to hold oneself answerable. I think there is room in her view for interpretation that, to be autonomous, one must, prior to some metaphysical ability to respond to justification questions, actually perceive one’s responsibility in a matter in the right sort of way:

Nonetheless, merely being capable of appropriate response does not yet amount to holding oneself answerable. One might be capable of appropriate response, and yet not be inclined to exercise this capability in the absence of material incentives to do so. One might fail to see (or perhaps to be moved by the thought) that an answer is owed. One might even have the cognitive skills and social sensitivities required to understand and

appreciate where answers are owed by others (and so have the generic concept of answerability), without feeling the normative force of demands for answers in one's own case. (496, emphasis added)

It is a noteworthy consequence of this passage that someone might even have the thought of their ownership of a particular response but, if not moved by it, they are not holding themselves answerable for that response. In Westlund's account, this person is, therefore, neither self-responsible nor autonomous about the response in question. This seems to philosophically legitimize the view of psychiatrist Allen Wheelis in *How People Change*, that autonomy¹ is "the awareness of alternatives and of the ability to choose" in the sense that someone who is self-abnegating is not aware that their actions are up to them in the way that someone who is not self-abnegating is (Wheelis 15). Now, it is surely the case that DW or DA would be able to identify some sort of theoretical ownership of their deferential actions. If we were to ask DW who it was that moved with her husband to Minneapolis, she would almost certainly say, "I did it." However, it seems that she is unable to see her choice in the matter. It is precisely to questions like, "why did you not do something differently?" that she has no real response. She is unwilling to engage in justificatory dialogue because she does not see, as we do, that she had a choice in the matter.

Wheelis suggests that this sort of lack of autonomy is rampant and a part of everyday life for everyone. He breaks necessity down into two camps: objective and arbitrary. I take objective necessity to refer to things like the necessity of one's inability to fly through the atmosphere unaided. It is, roughly, that which we metaphysically have no say over. Gravity will pull us down, and the dead will remain dead despite our deepest wishes, I will feel pain in my hand if it is cut and my nerves are uninhibited. All of these outcomes seem objectively necessary. Arbitrary necessity, on the other hand "derives from forces within the personality, but construed to be outside" (Wheelis 25). Thus, we can see some things which are

¹Wheelis uses 'freedom,' but in such a way that it seems reasonable to change the term to match Westlund's.

metaphysically within our control as outside of our control.² For example, we do not typically decide, upon greeting any person, not to attack that person. It is metaphysically true that we could attack anyone we meet, but such a randomly violent act typically does not show up for most people as an option they must respond to. Wheelis writes, “A kind man does not ponder becoming a sadist, an honest man does not consider whether to become a bandit; we prefer to have such matters settled, removed from choice and hence from freedom”³ (23). If we were to question our kind man why he has done something kind, he might initially be, in DW’s style, bemused at the question. For him, that sort of act is simply what is done. Wheelis writes that “the issue [of autonomy] is at the boundary of the self, the limits of the ‘I’” or what we see as actually within our control (25). This is in-line with Westlund’s statement that “when we treat another person as autonomous (as her own representative) in ordinary reciprocal relations, we presuppose that she is disposed to treat her action-guiding commitments as her own responsibility” (499). When we treat another person as autonomous, we do so because we suppose that they are aware of their ownership of alternatives, that thoughts of ownership are moving the person in the right way.

Now, Wheelis’ kind man may come around to give us (or himself) a self-referential reason for his actions (that is to say, he may succeed in engaging with us in justificatory dialogue) but he will first have been confronted with the phenomenological realization that his being a sadist is really up to him. Moreover, according to Wheelis—and, it seems, Westlund—he must actually be moved by the thought, rather than just having it as a theoretical option that one could verbally reference (Wheelis 26, Westlund 496). It is not the case, in short, that a kind man goes about

²Something will need to be said, at some point, about determinism. I am explicitly avoiding the topic because I do not intend my argument to be a proof for or attack against determinism. However, the issues are wrapped up tightly with one another. What I mean here by metaphysical, as opposed to phenomenological, control should follow normative lines. The assumption of determinism would seem to make everything phenomenologically out of one’s control also metaphysically out of one’s control, assuming, as I contend, that the phenomenology of alternatives has some causal role. I do not think this makes this argument irrelevant to discussions that assume determinism is true. In such a case, phenomenological freedom would be the division of freedom that is affected by the laws of perception and introspection.

³Another thing I find interesting here, though I will not go into it in this paper, is how these two examples of a sort of ‘normal lack of autonomy’ are talked about in terms of roles that they fill. I suspect that, in taking on roles, we induce upon ourselves arbitrary necessity. As soon as I cease merely performing kind acts’ and instead become ‘a kind man,’ the option of committing sadistic acts becomes, in a way, closed off for me. We see this same sort of thing in the case of Mr. Stevens, below.

each day making the straightforward decision in each circumstance not to be a sadist, rather he does not see that there is indeed a decision to be made and is therefore not really holding himself answerable for to his non-sadism (again, unless he is made to recognize his ownership).

It would not even be so strange to suppose that the kind man could not be made to see his answerability in this case. In fact, I think that many people think of morals in this way. It is not the case that I do not kill because I see it as a personally offensive option and make the straightforward decision not to. Rather, unless I get myself to think in some morally strange ways, I do not see killing another person as a decision for me at all. Furthermore, in non-philosophical circles, an inability to give justificatory dialogue about morals can be seen as a good thing as long as the moral defended by that inability is generally agreed upon. If someone were to assert that killing is wrong, most would probably not follow up with “why do you think that?”

3. Autonomy as a Moral Responsibility

Westlund writes that “we expect, encourage, and even exhort others to take responsibility for themselves—to be their own persons, to think for themselves, to take charge of their own lives—in a range of contexts that extend far beyond the narrowly moral in nature” (497). However, it is actually strange to hold someone responsible for their own autonomy (or, in Westlund’s terms, it is strange to hold someone responsible for their own responsibility). To conclude this paper, I will examine not whether we are autonomous in typically moral questions, but the moral obligation of autonomy itself.

DW seems problematic because that which is arbitrarily necessary for her—deference to her husband—is strange to us. When we consider the kind and the honest, or even ourselves, it is perhaps interesting to us that these people are not always acting completely intentionally, but certainly not problematic because we suppose that they could easily be made to see their ownership of their actions. Even if we should consider one of those who could not be made to see their ownership (who was deeply deferential, for example, to the principle of kindness to the point that they could not question or justify it), we are not seriously perturbed because we do not see any problem for them or others if they are kind and honest. DW and DA, however, are different because it is possible for them to perform acts that seem morally wrong without being open to any sort of correction. These examples seem to be arguments that it is better to be autonomous than

not.⁴ Upon further reflection, however, it seems strange for us to “expect, encourage, and even exhort others to take responsibility for themselves” where this responsibility does not already exist. If one of the results of self-abnegating deference is an inability to reflect and engage in justificatory dialogue critically, then it seems unlikely that somebody so afflicted would be able to ever change. If deep deference is “a matter of [not] holding oneself answerable . . . to external critical perspectives”—one’s own and those of others—it does not really seem correctable (Westlund 495). If this is a sort of phenomenological lack, it does not seem that someone within the problem would be able to recognize as much. Our criticisms would seem analogous to exhortations to imagine a color one has never seen.

Which leads us, finally, to the case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Mr. Stevens. In the novel, *The Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens is a butler reflecting on his service to Lord Darlington, a British nobleman and Nazi sympathizer during the period following the first world war. Mr. Stevens is extraordinarily deferential to Lord Darlington and, influenced by this deference, commits several socially reprehensible acts (including firing all of the Jewish staff at his employer’s request) as well as some personally strange acts (such as missing his father’s final moments in order to fulfill his role as a butler and likewise denying a genuine and significant romantic interest to fill similar duties) (Ishiguro 104–106, 147–150, 218–219). What is interesting about reading through Mr. Stevens’ story is the sense in which one feels both sorry for him and a little bit disappointed in him. In one sense, he seems less responsible for his actions because of the way he apparently perceives the world.

On the other hand, one also feels that he ought to perceive the world differently. When, for example, he dismisses the Jewish servants, I tend to excuse Stevens from full responsibility (though not fully from responsibility) for this act. It seems that, as a profoundly deferential character, Stevens does not see the world in the same way as someone less deferential. Because of this, he is not making the same reprehensible decision that a less deferential character would have to make in order to perform the same actions, and therefore does not seem to be responsible in the same way (really, he is just committing a different action than someone without his deference would have to commit in order to bring about the same consequences). On the other hand, inasmuch as Stevens is responsible for his deference, he seems to have made a moral mistake. Yielding oneself up to the possibility

⁴There are, however, arguments to the contrary. Wheelis, for example, suggests that we subject ourselves to arbitrary necessity in some cases so that we do not have to deal with the turmoil of making too many decisions, or internally feeling responsible for ‘too much’ (28).

of being accessory to such (and perhaps more) moral wrongness seems to be a failure of moral judgment.

4. Conclusion

I share Westlund's intuition that self-abnegating deference is a case of a lack of autonomy. Because identificationalist accounts cannot account for this lack of autonomy, there is something deficient, either in their account or our intuition about deference. Westlund does a marvelous job of describing why someone who is deeply deferential is unfree. However, I think that her assertion that one's willingness to engage in justificatory dialogue about an action constitutes their autonomy, while correlatively true, does not identify that which is absolutely fundamental to autonomy. I have proposed the view that phenomenological perception of one's ownership (or, in other words, of alternatives that are actually live options) is that which constitutes one's ability to engage in justificatory dialogue and, therefore, that which actually constitutes autonomy. About her view, Westlund writes,

One might even suggest that there are simply two different senses of autonomy in play here—self-governance of choice and action, on the one hand, which may be captured by the structural accounts offered by identificationalists, and self-representation in justificatory dialogue, on the other, which may be captured instead by an account centered on the attitude of responsibility for self. My own view is that these two forms of autonomy are deeply linked—or, more precisely, that one's autonomy as a chooser and actor is partly constituted by one's readiness to engage in justificatory dialogue about the commitments that guide one's choices and actions. (500)

I suggest (although I cannot now say for sure) that by going deeper than justificatory dialogue into its phenomenological basis, we may find a bridge between these two senses of autonomy.

I also discussed the mystery of one's responsibility for self-autonomy. I mainly identified some intuitions about deference and drew no definitive conclusions. I think that more work needs to be done before we can say how morally reprehensible DW, DA, and Mr. Stevens are for the way in which they are submissive. What needs to be identified is if an agent can be responsible for their own lack of self-responsibility, how self-abnegating deference comes about, and what the historical difference is between a self-abnegatingly deferential agent and one who is deferential in another way.

Works Cited

- Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person."
The Journal of Philosophy, vol. 68, no. 1, 1971, pp. 5-20.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. Vintage International, 1993.
- Westlund, Andrea C. "Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference
Compatible with Autonomy?" *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 112, no.
4, 2003, pp. 483-523.
- Wheelis, Allen. *How People Change*. Harper Colophon, 1975.