

The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual

with John A. Teske, "Editorial Overview"; Edwin C. Laurensen, "Agency, Freedom, and the Blessings of Opacity"; Phillip Cary, "Philosophical and Religious Origins of the Private Inner Self"; Anindita N. Balslev, "The Enigma of I-Consciousness"; Lene Arnett Jensen, "The Cultural Development of Three Fundamental Moral Ethics"; Amy Banks, "Developing the Capacity to Connect"; John A. Teske, "Externalism, Relational Selves, and Redemptive Relationships"; Kenneth J. Gergen, "From Moral Autonomy to Relational Responsibility"; Steven L. Winter, "Reimagining Democratic Theory for Social Individuals"

EDITORIAL OVERVIEW

by John A. Teske

Abstract. Concepts of individual autonomy underlie much of contemporary self-understanding, including the institutions and ways of living in modern societies. These concepts of autonomy are complex, even contradictory, and may present problems for our future. This overview sketches the narrative arc of a collection of papers addressing these topics. While autonomy and individuality are not fictions, neither do what we take to be individuality or autonomy have an unchanging reality. We are both influenced by and have an influence upon how these concepts are understood and used, and their implications for our history, our morality, our religious life, and the future of our relationships and our communities.

Keywords: autonomy community; constructionism; empathy; Ethics; externalism I-consciousness; individuality; intersubjectivity; intimacy; relationality; self-governance

Concepts of individual autonomy and responsibility are key concepts in contemporary self-understanding, and underlie much of the thought, institutions, and ways of living in modern societies. Yet they are shot through with complexity and contradiction, and may be problematic for a flourishing human future. The creative tension in this article's title rests on the ambiguity of the phrase "mythic reality." Some readers might object to an implication that autonomous individuality was merely a fiction, "mythic" in one sense of the term, others that we might be claiming an

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obdurate reality to something that might well be, if not illusory, then a construction. Our answer, arrived at across the narrative arc of the following papers, was that while not a fiction, since human autonomy has clear and very real implications and consequences, causal and otherwise, neither does it have an unchanging reality, but is developed and constructed in alternate ways and at different times, contingent upon both culture and history. We all have a role in how the “mythic reality of the autonomous individual” is understood and used, and what its implications are for our self-understanding, our historical and cultural directions, our morality, and our understandings of a number of religious themes, the health of our relationships and our communities, as well as our capacities for both personal and collective self-governance.

In the first article, Edwin Laurensen (2011) throws down the gauntlet: How can the decisions of autonomous individuals provide a rationale for freedom and self-governance if a mechanical and causal sense of the self requires one to question the foundational nature of the individual? Is there *no* such nature if the independent individual can be broken apart into components with no center left, our “narrative self” stripped of causal efficacy? He argues that this is precisely what the contemporary sciences of mind tell us, that most of our decisions originate in brain function below the level of consciousness, and that we live in a virtual world produced by mechanisms outside our control, however transparent we experience them to be. What he suggests, drawing from Metzinger’s alternate naturalization of self in his “self-model theory of subjectivity” (Metzinger 2003) is that the self-models that are all that ever grounded our experience of self (and *do*, in fact, have some important causal efficacies), may not be entirely “transparent.” Our “opacity,” the gift of *not* perceiving directly, of *not* automatically believing what we are perceiving, and thinking, may be precisely what makes it possible for us to question our first-person perspectives. So that while we may not have access to the mechanisms that give rise to our sense of ourselves, that our history of investigation can make it possible for us to analyze and understand those very mechanisms consciously. The experience of freedom then, in the sense of being able to analyze mechanisms that may of themselves be entirely determinate, provides the feedback contributing an additional determinant, that of a decision maker, in the process of making a decision, although that can itself be subject to further and subsequent reflection, the infinite regress from which our existential sense of freedom must inevitably come. One can start talking back to Mother Nature.

Given the modifiability of our self-models, and the role of development and socialization in their construction, there is certainly a history to their emergence. Phillip Cary’s (2011) contribution (Cary 2011), on philosophical and religious origins of the private inner self, traces the contemporary idea of a private inner world from Plato’s “intelligible”

world, and the Divine inner world of Plotinus, to Augustine's humanizing of this inner world, so the soul seeking God must turn inward before seeing the intelligible light of God. Locke completes this modern history by making the inner world inescapably private, individual, and separate from others. Carey argues that postmodern attempts to reconceive this relationship and reject the conception of a private inner self are still left with lingering intuitions about the immediacy of the mind. Perhaps Laurenson's "opacity" is the counter to the unquestioned "transparency" of this lingering Platonism, giving the voice by which our talking back to Mother Nature becomes more rebellious.

Anindita Balslev (2011) reminds us of the indubitable presence of I-consciousness, and the varied ways of addressing this theme from Indian and Western philosophical traditions. Addressing contrasting views of "Self" and "No-Self," she explores how these enquiries gradually assume not only epistemological and metaphysical but also ethico-religious dimensions. She further outlines the rejection of naturalism as an explanatory model by mainstream Indian traditions, a bold challenge to this important cross-cultural conversation. Lene Arnett Jensen's application of her Cultural-Developmental Template to moral psychology may provide a framework for some of this conversation. Her empirical approach suggests that three universal ethics may vary in how different traditions prioritize the three ethics and reinforce their development (Jensen 2011). Ethics of Autonomy and Community both emerge early in people's psychological lives, the former retaining and the latter increasing in importance across the lifespan, whereas the voice of Divinity may not become audible until adolescence. One wonders if our focus on the dialectic between autonomy and community is actually orthogonal to understandings of divinity. There are important and quite open questions that remain here.

Amy Banks (2011) takes the dialectic between autonomy and community head-on, providing evidence from the cognitive and neurosciences that a generations long focus on the "self-made man" in our own tradition has driven us into disconnection, despair, and poor health. Relational-cultural theory provides evidence of the importance to healthy relationships of empathy and mutuality, and of growth through and toward relationships, rather than the separation and autonomy valued in power-oriented and competitive environments. She provides evidence from neuroscience and neuroimaging that we are "hard-wired" for connection, and the latest research on the neuroscience of relationship, including the many systems that help us read and empathize with others, the adaptability and plasticity of the nervous system directly impacted by the destructive nature of isolation.

My own contribution (Teske 2011) acknowledges, and in several places documents, the consequences of the dangerous level of individuality in our contemporary culture. I argue that the historical development of an

increasingly bounded and self-contained individual has been informed by a conception of the mind, self, and soul as internal to the central nervous system, continuing Phillip Cary's story through Descartes, Kant, and the epistemological crisis in our self-knowledge fomented by Nietzsche and Freud, addressed by Laurenson (2011) and Winter (2011). I agree with Banks (2011) and Gergen (2011) that this view is at odds with most forms of communal life and suggest an externalist view of mind in which we can better understand minds and selves, even on the level of scientific and causal explanation, as not being limited to the boundaries of the individual organism. If mental events are hybrids of events in the head and events in the world to which they are coupled, then the most important of such events are relational, both within and between other people and ourselves. As suggested by the neuroscientific evidence, there is a role of empathy both in our relationality and our own self-understanding, down to the level of our embodiment, upon which our conscious experience is likely to depend. Individual subjectivity may be secondary to a primary intersubjectivity, interior/exterior, and I/we being constructed only within it. As such, a religious theme like "redemption" might be viewed, not as a private, individual relationship with the sacred, but in our relationships with others, including our bodies and our sexuality. This is consistent both with Gergen's move from moral autonomy to relational responsibility, and Winter's argument about the social practices by which we might harmonize individual and collective self-governance, including his attention to the legal issues around sexuality and reproductive rights.

Kenneth Gergen and Steven Winter both take the insight about social construction seriously, especially with regard to the practices by which autonomy, self-governance, and responsibility are constituted and sustained. Gergen's article (2011) explores the failings of the very conception of the person as an autonomous agent, particularly in terms of social divisiveness. He argues for a view of relational process as the wellspring of all meaning, and moral concepts and actions as issuing from coordinated action, which both generate a moral order and establish the grounds for "immorality" and social conflict. He advances a concept of a "second-order morality" to establish the possibility of a more inclusive first-order morality, and considers innovations in practices that lend themselves to relational responsibility.

Steven Winter's final *tour-de-force* (Winter 2011) argues that the mythology of the individual as a rational, self-directing agent distorts religion, science, economics, and politics. He argues for a rethinking of democracy, autonomy, and self-governance from the perspective of the subject as truly social. Our conceptions of self, agency, and autonomy are no longer tenable, the conventional understanding of democracy, founded on individual autonomy, puts it in conflict with equality. He urges a refocusing of attention to the practical and social conditions necessary for meaningful

self-governance, in which we recognize that much of what we think about in terms of autonomy are activities in which we engage with others, sexual behavior in particular, and cannot be coherently understood as individual rights. Such behaviors can only be expressed not merely *in*, but only *through* social relationships. Winter concludes by characterizing self-governance in such terms, and points out the profound relationships between sexual autonomy and self-governance, the former being the context in which we best learn about both responsiveness to and responsibility for others, one of the primary sites in which we seek recognition and establish identity. He argues, finally, that we establish our very capacities for self-governance and autonomy on the very ground of our intimate dependencies, freedom itself requiring such rootedness in the world.

Perhaps, as Laurenson suggests, our self-opacity is a blessing, even if our I-consciousness is undeniable (Balslev), its history, contingent upon philosophical and religious developments (Cary), located within a framework of universal ethics shaped differently across cultures (Jensen), and is a genuinely powerful invention of Mother Nature. Nevertheless, we have natural roots, all the way down to the dances of our neurophysiologies, in the empathies and mutualities of our relationships with others, upon which our adaptability and plasticity may well so depend (Banks). It may be that who we are is far less about our interiors, but what our interiors are about, and how they are symbiotic with an external material, symbolic, and most importantly, social nexus, and shaped by a primary intersubjectivity (Teske); that relational processes are what are the true wellspring of meaning and morality, our morality not so much about autonomy as relational responsibility (Gergen). By what might we reimagine alternatives to commodified, abstracted, and atomized engagement in order to nurture the intimate dependencies which root personal autonomy and collective self-governance (Winter)? It is my hope that in the articles that follow you may have as many questions raised as answered, in these “. . . explorations of what it might mean to have different notions of our selves, and why it might matter if we did” (Laurenson 2007, 815).

NOTE

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