

Chapter 6 – Autonomy

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In §4.3.2, I argued that three dominant threads weave the rich and complex fabric of self-realization discourse: autonomy, authenticity and virtue. This chapter is dedicated to the first thread, namely, autonomy. The main question here is how autonomy is best interpreted in order to match the reframed account of self-realization constructed in this study. As Holstein, Parks and Waymack (2011) emphasize, “How we think about the self informs our understanding of the nature of autonomy” (p. 22). Therefore, what I am looking for is a conceptualization of autonomy that is in sync with the insights on narrative identity and moral agency discussed in the previous chapter. These insights include the fundamental social embedding of human beings and their mutual interdependence, as well as the narrative, embodied and moral nature of our identities. Moreover, since it is the underlying goal of this study to ultimately arrive at an understanding of self-realization that can serve as a resource for cultural counter narratives about later life, this chapter also connects the philosophical insights about autonomy to the context of aging.

The chapter proceeds to discuss these matters as follows. I start by introducing the philosophical debate about autonomy through a brief sketch of the classic historical view of Kant (1785/2002) that many contemporary views explicitly or implicitly relate to (§6.2.1). Next, I introduce one of the most dominant contemporary views, which focuses on procedural conditions for qualifying actions as autonomous: the so-called hierarchical account by Frankfurt (1971) (§6.2.2). I then discuss some fundamental critiques that can be brought up against the Frankfurtian account (§6.3). These critiques are exemplified by a brief discussion of the alternative views of C. Taylor (1985a) (§6.3.1), Ekstrom (1993, 2005) (§6.3.2), and Meyers (1989) (§6.3.3). The final alternative account discussed is the relational view suggested by MacKenzie and Stoljar (2000) (§6.3.4), which represents the most fundamental critique and aims for a true paradigm shift in philosophical thought about autonomy.

After discussing these philosophical accounts of autonomy, in §6.4 the discussion zooms in on how autonomy has been understood and criticized in the

context of aging. I thereby focus on three views from the gerontological realm: Moody's approach based on communicative ethics (§6.4.1), Agich's phenomenological approach (§6.4.2), and the approach by Holstein and colleagues based on relational views of autonomy (§6.4.3). I then critically evaluate the merits of the different accounts of autonomy in light of the purposes of the current study (§6.5). Drawing upon the strong points of the discussed perspectives and adding my own considerations to complete the picture, in the concluding part of the chapter an alternative "individuating" conceptualization of autonomy is presented that is able to match the requirements that this study's evolving understanding of self-realization implies (§6.6).

6.2 INTRODUCING AUTONOMY

6.2.1 Historical roots of autonomy discourse

The etymological origin of the term autonomy is derived from the Greek words *autos* (self, one-self) and *nomos* (law, rule, principle). The literal meaning of the word is thus best ascribed as self-rule or self-government. Feinberg (1986) distinguishes four closely related meanings in which the term autonomy has been understood. First, autonomy can be understood as the capacity to govern oneself; second, autonomy can describe the factual condition of self-government; third, autonomy can pertain to an ideal of character based on the notion of self-government; and fourth, the term autonomy can mean the sovereign authority to govern oneself. In this last meaning, personal autonomy is understood by analogy of the sovereignty of a political state, and intrinsically connected to the notion of a right. It is important to note the different statuses that these four meanings of autonomy have. The first two meanings, autonomy as a capacity and as a condition, are both matters of degree, above a minimal threshold, that vary among persons. The third meaning, autonomy as an ideal of character, indicates a dynamic developmental process that is never completed. The fourth meaning, autonomy as a right of sovereign authority over oneself, is by contrast either present or absent, and should be granted equally to all persons who meet the minimal threshold of the capacity for autonomy. In self-realization discourse, autonomy seems to be most explicitly used in the third meaning, that of an ideal of character. However, this use presupposes the presence of the capacity for autonomy in the agents involved. Moreover, self-realization discourse as this study understands it strives for sensitivity when it comes to the factual condition of self-government, which can be either conducive or impeding for the realization of autonomy as a character ideal. As Feinberg (1986) aptly puts it, "de facto self-government presupposes *luck*" (p. 31), i.e., the circumstances have to be favorable to exercise autonomy.

Originally seen as a feature of political states of communities, autonomy as a term describing a feature of human persons gained currency around 1800, largely influenced by the moral philosophy of Kant. He perceived human agents to be capable of following their own inner moral law on the basis of their capacity for reason. Central to Kant's view of autonomy is good will. It is by virtue of this will that human agents are capable of setting themselves moral laws. Autonomy does not mean acting randomly as we please or refusing to subject oneself to norms; autonomy means that the norms one follows are willed freely because they flow from our capacity for reason (Kant, 1785/2002). Kant famously urged people to “dare to think for themselves” (*sapere aude*) in his treatise on Enlightenment (Kant, 1784/2009). This capacity for independent moral judgment and self-legislation is crucial to the Kantian view of autonomy. His ascription of the autonomous status to the human moral agent has been of tremendous influence in our self-understanding as modern individuals. Since the Enlightenment then, we see the emergence of an increasingly dominant strand of thinking in moral philosophy that ascribes people with a unique potential for self-legislation. It is argued that reason enables people both to decide what the legitimate course of action in a certain situation is and to act in accordance with it. People's rational capacity enables them to free themselves from the false authority of conventions, traditions or other social sources of authority, and make their own moral judgments instead.

Autonomy in the Kantian sense is presented as the opposite of heteronomy – relying on the judgment of others, slavishly following conventions, being socially coerced into certain decisions or actions. A contemporary articulation of this position is voiced by Wolf (2005) when she states that an agent is autonomous, and can be held responsible for his actions “when, and only when, his actions originate from within himself, when nothing beyond or behind his self is forcing him to act as he does” (p. 261). In this sense, the traditional Kantian conceptualization of autonomy and its contemporary followers explicitly assume the typical internalization of moral sources characteristic of modernity (C. Taylor, 1989).

Although the Kantian concept of autonomy as self-government and self-determination was soon criticized for its optimistic reliance on human reason at the expense of other human faculties, it has nevertheless become a landmark concept in our modern Western self-understanding. The Kantian understanding of autonomy has been very influential, not only in moral philosophy, but also in political philosophy and applied ethics, for instance. In political philosophy, it infuses the very foundations of neoliberal societal theories that presuppose the independent autonomous individual as their cornerstone. Also, the Kantian concept of autonomy underlies typical modern interpretations of freedom, since it suggests that any limitation of our capacity for self-determination impedes our freedom as well. Thus, for neoliberalism, guaranteeing

people's freedom and autonomy means safeguarding them from unduly external interference in their lives, unless their exercise of freedom interferes with that of others. This idea has famously been described by Berlin (1958) in terms of *negative freedom*. In applied ethics, neo-Kantian interpretations of autonomy have long occupied an almost unassailable status. This was greatly influenced by the "four principles" approach by Beauchamp and Childress (1984) in bioethics, who interpret autonomy in the medical context predominantly in terms of informed consent. Among these four principles, the dominance of autonomy as the ethical principle of "first among equals" is often interpreted as causally connected to the Western dominance of individualism. As I will discuss in §6.4 however, this bioethical interpretation of autonomy is a poor match to the context of aging, particularly in long-term care (Agich, 2003; Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011; Holstein, 2015; Moody, 1992).

6.2.2 Harry Frankfurt: A dominant contemporary account

Recent moral-philosophical interpretations of autonomy focus predominantly on the autonomy of persons with regard to their own desires, choices, attitudes, character dispositions, et cetera. The implicit underlying image of the person still resembles the Kantian rational moral agent, but most dominant contemporary accounts focus more explicitly on procedural criteria for autonomous actions. Thereby, the autonomy of a person's actions is generally measured by the way in which they flow from a properly reflected and authentically appropriated set of motivations (J. Taylor, 2005). Frankfurt's (1971) so-called hierarchical view provides one of the most prominent examples.

The term hierarchical pertains to the distinction Frankfurt makes between different levels of motivations. In order to qualify as an agent, Frankfurt contends that people should be able to reflect on their initial *first-order* desires and form *second-order* desires, which are desires about first-order desires. To be autonomous, one needs to appropriate one's second-order desires as one's own, willing them to guide one's actions. Frankfurt describes this in terms of (second-order) *volitions*. For instance, the volition to live healthy overrules the first-order desire to have that huge chocolate chip cookie for dessert. Thus, the ability to reflect on one's desires and promote some of them to the status of action-guiding volitions, freely and rationally chosen to guide one's conduct, is what defines the autonomy of persons and constitutes their agency (Frankfurt, 1971). One of the advantages of Frankfurt's approach is that it evades the discussion about determinism and free will that plagues the autonomy debate. The criterion for autonomy is not that one is totally "self-determining" in the sense of "free from external determinants", but that one identifies with one's higher-order desires and wants them to decide one's actions. Freedom of the will is

therefore always conditional freedom and does not presuppose independence from determining (for example, social or cultural) factors (Bieri, 2001).

Frankfurt's (1971) account of autonomy does not concern itself with the substantive content of motivations underlying a certain choice. A choice simply qualifies as autonomous as long as the requirements of critical reflection and the resulting identification with one's action-guiding motivations are answered. The moral value (or lack thereof) of a given motivation is not considered relevant to judge people's autonomy. In this sense, Frankfurt exemplifies the category of what have been called *procedural* (as opposed to *substantive*) accounts of autonomy (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). The majority of contemporary philosophical accounts of autonomy can be described as procedural. Within the category of procedural accounts, Frankfurt's (1971) view represents a *structural* version, which takes what Mackenzie and Stoljar (2005) describe as a "time-slice approach to autonomy" (p. 15). This means that its assessment of the autonomy of the agent performing a certain action is based solely upon the occurring motivational structure at one given point in time. In contrast, *historical* versions of procedural theories argue that it is also important to consider the origins of the desires, beliefs and attitudes that have led to the agent's motivations. Historical versions of procedural theories have the advantage of enabling a *developmental* perspective on autonomy.

6.3 SELECTED ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTS OF AUTONOMY

Although hierarchical accounts such as Frankfurt's (1971) have been very influential in the contemporary philosophical debate on autonomy, there have also been some serious critiques. The more formalistic of these relate, for instance, to the threats of manipulation of desires and of infinite regress in explaining the authority of higher-order desires (J. Taylor, 2005). From the perspective of self-realization taken in this study, it is of particular importance to discuss four other objections that can be raised against the structural, a-historical and hierarchical approaches exemplified by Frankfurt's (1971) account of autonomy. All of these are illustrated below through alternative accounts of autonomy developed by different thinkers. The discussed views represent a continuum of critique that ranges from essential amendments to fundamental rejection of Frankfurt's philosophical-anthropological assumptions about human agency.

The first critique, represented by C. Taylor's view of human agency (1985a), questions the content-neutrality of procedural accounts. It points to the importance of a normative evaluation of the hierarchy of desires that is believed to constitute our autonomy. The second issue, illustrated by Ekstrom's view (1993, 2005) addresses the a-historical nature of Frankfurt's (1971) account. It suggests positioning autonomy more in the context of a coherent set of values that

we identify with throughout our lives. The third issue, represented by Meyers' view (1989), relates to the conditions needed for the practical applicability of relatively abstract criteria for autonomy. It raises the question which competencies are needed to be able to execute one's capacity for autonomy. The fourth issue, represented by feminist relational thinkers (e.g., Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), provides a critique against the fundamental anthropological assumptions about what it means to be a human person that underlie the traditional dominant accounts of autonomy. These accounts are discussed in turn below.

6.3.1 Charles Taylor: Autonomy and the strong evaluation of desires

In his account of human agency, C. Taylor (1985a) takes Frankfurt's (1971) original hierarchical interpretation of autonomy in terms of first- and second-order desires and volitions as his starting point. However, he argues that this misses an important element which in his view is fundamental to human agency (and thus to autonomy). To be human agents, we do not only have to be able to identify and endorse our desires by forming volitions about them, we also have to evaluate and order them according to their relative qualitative value.

Fundamental to C. Taylor's (1985a) view about agency and autonomy is the distinction he makes between weak and strong evaluations. Weak evaluations imply a weighing of desires, and choosing which one accords most with one's current preferences. Thus, for example, we can choose between having a snack or going for a walk. What we choose depends on our preference at that moment. However, our choice does not express a qualitative judgment about the value of snacking over walking or vice versa. Weak evaluations imply choosing between options that are in principle of equal value. What is missing from such choices however, is the evaluation of available choice options in terms of a hierarchy of values that motivate us. Strong evaluations, by contrast, do imply such a qualitative judgment, in terms of values that are perceived as indefinitely higher or deeper and therefore more worthy to guide our actions. C. Taylor calls these our "hypergoods" and regards our attempts to approach them more closely as essential to our moral identity formation (C. Taylor, 1989). Importantly, strong evaluations are coupled to certain ways of living that are considered expressive of who we want to be. For instance, I can choose a certain course of action, say, speaking up for a colleague who is being mistreated by our mutual superior, because I regard it as more courageous than the alternative, which would be to keep my mouth shut because of the risk that addressing this injustice might entail for my own job. My choice of action is then intrinsically connected to my evaluation of courage as a value. If I choose to speak up, this is an expression of my moral preference for a courageous way of living over a cowardly or indifferent one. In this sense, the capacity for strong evaluation is linked with

my identity, because my strong evaluations and the choices based on them are guided by who I want to be. The ability to draw qualitative distinctions and articulate them in a value-laden language of what C. Taylor (1989) calls “qualitative contrast” is thus perceived as essential to what it means to be a human agent exercising autonomy.

It is important to note however, that the value-evaluations involved in making these qualitative contrasts are no individual preferences in which “anything goes”. Instead, they have to be rooted in the cultural horizon of meaning that both embeds and transcends the individual life. The ability to make qualitative distinctions - and thus to exercise our strong evaluative capacity - is indispensable in acquiring moral identity and becoming a moral agent.

6.3.2 Laura Ekstrom: Autonomy and the coherence of our value orientation

The “coherentist” view of autonomy suggested by Ekstrom (1993, 2005) counts as an objection against the a-historical character of Frankfurt’s (1971) approach, which focuses on presently existing desires and their hierarchy without connecting them to the broader narrative context of the person’s identity. Essential to Ekstrom’s (1993, 2005) view is that the autonomy of the agent relies on a sense of personal integration or coherence. Instead of focusing on agents’ autonomy with respect to their desires, as the traditional hierarchical approaches do, she is concerned with the autonomy of agents with respect to their preferences. A preference is defined by Ekstrom (2005) as “a desire that has survived a process of critical evaluation – in particular with respect to an individual’s conception of the good” (p. 148). For example, suppose I have a desire to eat fresh pineapple. But I have also seen documentaries that have taught me the environmental burden of a Western lifestyle, and stimulated me to make more sustainable choices in my life. Since I realize that growing pineapples and transporting them to Europe is not very environment-friendly, my momentary desire for the pineapple may then be replaced by the decision to eat a locally-grown organic apple. This will cohere with my preference for a sustainable lifestyle, which is crucial to who I want to be. It can therefore be regarded an autonomous choice in Ekstrom’s account. A preference is, in other words, part of an attitude describing accurately one’s identity, “what one is like”, which is formed by processes of (self-)evaluation in the context of one’s pursuit of the good. In this respect, Ekstrom’s view of a preference and its role in autonomy shows some important resemblances with C. Taylor’s (1989) idea of strong evaluation and the importance of situating oneself in relation to one’s hypergoods for identity. It also acknowledges the fact that our deepest aspirations (the ones relevant to self-realization) are connected to the kind of person we want to be (see §4.2.1).

Ekstrom (2005) states that the autonomy of a person depends on the coherence of the set of preferences that is characteristic of the person's true or most central self. A consistent character disposition or set of attitudes has to underlie and justify one's actions in order to qualify as an autonomous agent. Having discussed the complications related to the idea of narrative integration and the concept of a unified self in §5.2.3, we could frown at this condition for autonomy. However, Ekstrom's perception of coherence is relatively modest. It does not require an inner core self in any essentialist metaphysical interpretation, but only a certain amount of coherence and durability through time concerning the set of motivational preferences underlying one's actions. Ekstrom (2005) formulates her account of a "true self" in the following terms: "the idea is that certain of our attitudes are more central to who we are in a moral or psychological sense than are other of our attitudes, and that it is in acting on these more central attitudes that we exert special direction over our lives" (p. 153). The preferences expressive of this true self need to be long-lasting, able to resist external challenges and be embraced wholeheartedly by the person.

Importantly, Ekstrom's approach does not deny the possibility of conflicts between aspirations, values and feelings that characterize most people's lives and identities. Her notion of coherence, she states, must not be misunderstood to exclude people struggling with such internal conflicts from the realms of autonomous agency. Instead, she states that her coherentist account of autonomy provides room for inner conflict and disorder. It just states that in order to qualify as autonomous, a person's motivating preferences must: 1) have undergone critical evaluation in light of the person's conception of the good; 2) be formed without being coerced by others; and 3) cohere with the person's other preference states. Such preference states support each other, creating a relative stability of character through time (Ekstrom, 2005, p. 154). In a later essay titled *Identification and Wholeheartedness* Frankfurt (1988b) too acknowledged the importance for autonomy of a certain durable engagement with what we authentically, wholeheartedly care about. These are the kind of commitments that Ekstrom (2008) describes as preferences that give our identity coherence. Both authors hereby implicitly affirm the need for the historical, narrative conception of the person and their identity as advanced in chapter 5.

6.3.3 Diana Meyers: Autonomy and the conditions of its practicability

Meyers' (1989) work *Self, society and personal choice* provides yet another alternative approach to the autonomy question, which criticizes the abstract and de-contextualized nature of dominant structural views. Meyers understands autonomy in terms of the ability to act on the desires and preferences of one's authentic self. She shares Ekstrom's (2005) idea that a certain amount of coher-

ence in one's personal character and set of preferences is an important criterion for autonomous agency. However, Meyers (1989) observes that a coherent personality can still be compatible with a lack of autonomy, if one's circumstances impede acting on what one really wants to do. Therefore, in Meyers' (1989) words, "a tenable account of autonomy must link the abstract desideratum of coherence to practicability" (p. 33).

The focus on practicability implies addressing the question of how people become disposed to engage in the self-reflexive consultation necessary to distinguish autonomous from heteronymous decisions and what capacities are needed in order to exercise autonomy in practice. For Meyers, autonomy is therefore best understood in terms of an autonomy competency. Her definition of competency describes it as "a repertory of coordinated skills that enables a person to engage in a complex activity" (Meyers, 1989, p. 56). Autonomy competency consists of a set of three such repertories: self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction. Whereas the emphasis in traditional accounts of autonomy usually remains limited to self-direction, Meyers underscores that self-discovery and self-definition are indispensable capacities for autonomy as well. The three capacities cannot be separated from each other, they function in mutual interaction.

Self-discovery implies the capacity to learn what one's true desires, values, feelings, and attachments are. I get to know myself by reflecting on my inclinations, reactions, judgments, et cetera. For example, I may observe in myself a growing unease with the materialistic, consumerist lifestyle that advertising tries to lure me into. I also feel moved when I see other creatures suffer as a result of my lifestyle choices, and appalled with what I see as the hedonistic, materialistic preferences of others in my surroundings. On the basis of the self-knowledge acquired through such reflections, I decide who I want to be and envisage a life plan on that ground. In the aforementioned example, I may decide I want to become someone with a modest and sustainable lifestyle, whose focus is on peaceful, non-harming relations with people, animals and the world. Such considerations about myself are implied in the capacity of *self-definition*. Finally, *self-direction* implies the capacity to act on the standards that are implicitly present in one's life plan and self-image. In my example, this could mean resisting the temptation to eat that delicious steak and choose a vegetarian dish instead, put effort into recycling my garbage, take the train instead of the car, turn the heat down a couple of degrees, enjoy a homemade dinner with friends instead of going out, et cetera.

Important to understand Meyers' view is the distinction she makes between *moral autonomy* and *personal autonomy*. Moral autonomy can be compared to the traditional Kantian idea of being able to apply universal rational criteria of right and wrong (Kant, 1785/2002). It is thus concerned with moral permissibility of actions (Friedman, 2000). However, Meyers (1989) underscores that

autonomy has a broader scope and should also include paying attention to the choices and values that constitute people's authentic identities, which form the domain of personal autonomy. Though personal autonomy presupposes acting within the restrictions posed by the criteria for moral autonomy, it pertains to a different area of interest than the moral permissibility of actions, namely, that of people's unique and personal choices, values and identities. In this regard, Meyers (2000) draws a connection between autonomy and authenticity which makes her account particularly relevant from a self-realization perspective, in which both autonomy and authenticity are important threads (see also §7.3.4). I should highlight that Meyers' emphasis on authenticity makes her reluctant to provide substantive guidelines or norms regarding which concrete aspirations and capacities a person exercising autonomy competency should strive to fulfill. Her view remains within the realm of procedural approaches to autonomy in this regard. As Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) emphasize discussing Meyers' (2000) approach: "Since individuals differ so significantly in their talents, capacities, character traits, values, desires, beliefs, and emotional attitudes, [...] there can be no blueprint for what constitutes an autonomous life" (p. 17).

Interestingly, Meyers' approach can accommodate both the importance of focusing on specific autonomy-constituting choices (as emphasized by Frankfurt's (1971) view) as well as the importance of a focus on the coherence of people's life (as emphasized by Ekstrom (1993, 2005)). This is induced by the distinction she makes between *episodic* and *programmatic* self-direction, encountered earlier in my discussion of narrative integration (§5.2.3). Episodic autonomous self-direction pertains to a specific situation or episode, where agents confront a choice, decide what they really want to do by deliberating about the available options, and then execute their choice. Programmatic autonomous self-direction by contrast, has a much broader scope, and requires deciding what to choose in light of how one wants to live one's life in general. Programmatic autonomous self-direction particularly reflects Meyers' emphasis on the importance of personal integration for autonomy and living in harmony with one's authentic self.

An important advantage of the notion of programmatic autonomy is that it offers an opportunity to grant autonomous status to choices that are made spontaneously, i.e., without conscious reflexive deliberation in advance as traditional procedural accounts demand. As long as the choosing self is in possession of an autonomous life plan, spontaneous actions in accordance with the central concerns of this life plan may also count as autonomous, provided they accord with the desires of one's authentic self. The notion of a life plan that is crucial to the notion of programmatic autonomous self-direction may sound problematically static, ordered and restrictive. However, as Meyers (1989) emphasizes, "Life plans should not be pictured as complicated, highly detailed flow charts spanning a lifetime. Rather, a life plan is a largely schematic, par-

tially articulated vision of a worthwhile life that is suitable for a particular individual. Life plans provide some specific directions and a great deal of general guidance. Agents amplify and refine them as they feel the need to do so” (p. 51). Life plans are thus flexible enough to accommodate for the contingencies confronted in life, for unforeseen situations and for continuous development and transformation of the self throughout life. It is not necessary to regularly question them or reflect on them under normal life circumstances. Still, they play an important role in people’s perceptions of their authentic self. Consequently, Meyers argues that it is highly questionable if anyone can be called autonomous without having a life plan.

Nevertheless, as a feminist thinker, Meyers is very sensitive to the context in which the autonomy competency is exercised and authentic life plans are formed. She is acutely aware of the fact that the socio-cultural context in which people live offers rather different opportunities to different (groups of) people to actually be able to become autonomous and act accordingly, which is one of the reasons the notion of a life plan has been criticized (M. Walker, 2007; see also §5.2.3). For example, being socialized in the female gender role limits many women’s chances to follow their own aspirations in life because - despite efforts to emancipate women - in reality they are still expected to take more than an equal share of care responsibilities. Even though Meyers (1989) maintains that authentic selfhood and the corresponding notion of a life plan are important, she acknowledges that autonomy (-competency) is thus always a matter of degree and can be severely impeded by how one is socially and culturally positioned (see also chapter 3 on the problematic effects of oppressive cultural narratives on people’s moral agency).

6.3.4 Relational view: Autonomy, interdependence, socialization and power

The relational view presents the most far-reaching critique against structural hierarchical views of autonomy like Frankfurt’s (1971). In particular, the relational view challenges the portrayal of the individual as a rational, independent, self-sufficient and atomistic creature that is typical for modern, neoliberal philosophical perspectives associated with the structural hierarchical account (compare also the underlying anthropological assumptions that, as I argued, make the late modern self-realization discourse so problematic; see §2.2, §2.5). Relational autonomy is in fact an umbrella term covering views with several nuances. Their common ground however, is more important than their differences. In discussing the relational view, I will mainly draw upon an edited volume by Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) titled *Relational autonomy. Feminist perspectives on autonomy, agency and the social self*, that unites the most important relational perspectives.

The relational view of autonomy suggests a paradigm shift when it comes to the underlying notion of the person, compared to the previously discussed accounts of autonomy. Importantly, Meyers' (1989; 2000) perspective (§6.3.3) also acknowledges the social embedding of the person; however, whereas her view of autonomy remains procedural, the relational perspective discussed in this paragraph argues for a more substantive content to be given to what autonomy amounts to. This implies that normative criteria are introduced to judge whether our decisions to act in a certain manner are motivated by inescapable and benign forms of socialization, or instead by oppressive and harmful forms of socialization (therefore rendering them not truly autonomous) (Stoljar, 2000; Benson, 1991; see further §6.6).

The relational view of autonomy draws upon feminist philosophical ideas about the social and relational embedding of human beings. In moral philosophy, these ideas have been most prominently defended by the ethics of care (Noddings, 1986; Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006). Care has often been presented as a typically "feminine" value, and the origins of the ethics of care are usually located in the famous debate between Kohlberg and Gilligan regarding the differences in moral development between boys and girls (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969; Gilligan, 1982). However, the ethics of care typically objects to the idea that care is a feminine domain, stressing that it should instead be seen as a fundamental feature of human life in general, permeating our existence from cradle to grave. Furthermore, a particularly strong feature of the ethics of care is its emphasis on the political and cultural opportunities for transformation. Tronto (1993) states that, "The values of caring and nurturance, of stressing the importance of human relationships as key elements of the good life, remain enticing possibilities in a culture that stresses, as its bottom line, an unlimited concern with productivity and progress" (p. 2).

Three points are particularly characteristic of the relational view of autonomy: 1) the relational view emphasizes that the individual is not an atomistic, independent and self-sufficient agent, but a socially embedded creature, involved in networks of relationships and responsibilities that highlight the fundamental interdependence of the human condition; 2) following from this relational conception of the individual, the relational view explicitly addresses the paradoxical connection between autonomy and socialization; and 3) the relational view exhibits a strong sensitivity to the consequences of social inequalities and power differences based on gender, socio-economic status, age, ethnicity and so forth, with regard to the development and opportunities to exercise autonomy. I will discuss these three points in some more detail below:

1. *Interdependence*

The first important contribution to the discourse on autonomy provided by the relational view relates to its strong critical implications for the phil-

osophical-anthropological framework, particularly the assumptions about personhood, supporting traditional views of autonomy. The care-ethical perspective that forms the foundation for the relational account of autonomy makes it clear that interdependence is an inescapable reality of the human condition. Its influence is much deeper and more pervasive than can be recognized by the supposedly atomistic, independent status of an autonomous agent claimed by the traditional views. The relational view stresses that the dominant neoliberal conception of the individual should be regarded as an artificial abstraction, with only limited usefulness. It also seems to be a particularly Western conception, whereas the construal of the self in Eastern cultures seems to be more interdependent to start with (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Importantly, acknowledging the reality of interdependence denies the exclusive association of care with helpless infants or old, fragile and disabled people. It emphasizes that (inter)dependence and the associated vulnerability is a fundamental feature of human life, instead of a shameful and deplorable state of specific vulnerable groups. This affirms this study's reflections on existential vulnerability as an inescapable reality of all human lives (see §2.4.6).

Despite the importance and legitimacy of the fundamental critique on traditional notions of agency and human personhood, Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) argue that the feminist critique has often been directed against a caricature version of individual autonomy. They describe this caricature as “the self-sufficient, rugged male individualist, rational maximizing chooser of libertarian theory” (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000, p. 5). While this particular caricature, which is deeply entrenched in the cultural imaginaries of modern Western societies, deserves continuing criticism, it would be unfair and undesirable to repudiate the whole concept of autonomy because of this caricature. The relational account of autonomy aims for a fundamental reframing of mainstream conceptions of personhood. This reframing intends to acknowledge insights about the fundamental interdependency of the human condition, the social nature of the self and the values of care, responsibility, solidarity, et cetera (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Barclay, 2000; Code, 1991; Held, 2006). Moreover, the relational account also strives to acknowledge a richer variety of relevant faculties of agents to be considered in weighing their autonomy. Whereas traditional accounts focus mostly on the rational capacities needed for critical reflection on one's motivations, the relational approach stresses that agents are not only rational beings, but also embodied, desiring, feeling, creative and expressive beings (Mackenzie, 2000).

2. *Socialization*

The second important contribution of the relational view lies in its attempts to clarify how socialization and autonomy relate to each other. As we have

seen, in traditional views of autonomy socialization is perceived as a source of heteronomy, and thus something to be overcome in the development of autonomy. The classic freedom-determination debate typically touches upon this matter. While modern structural views acknowledge the fact that freedom cannot exist without a certain form of social conditioning (Bieri, 2001), they still presuppose that autonomy requires being able to self-reflexively distance oneself from these influences and acquire an independent attitude towards them.

Through its emphasis on the social nature of the self, the relational view shows that socialization is inescapable and not something to be conquered in order to become truly autonomous and “free”. Instead, the relational approach contends that one cannot even acquire the competences needed to exercise autonomy without continuing processes of socialization. As Barclay (2000) puts it, “the claim that social determinism undercuts the possibility of autonomy [...] is based on a misunderstanding of the notion of autonomy. [...] Autonomous agency does not imply that one mysteriously escapes altogether from social influence but rather that one is able to fashion a certain response to it” (p. 54). Code (1991) clarifies this point by drawing on a notion by Baier (1985) who stated that we are essentially “second-persons”, relying for our personal development on relations of dependency with others – beginning with our caregivers in infancy and extending to a broader social realm throughout life. Self-knowledge and self-determination can only be realized by engaging in continuing, formative, dialogical social relationships with these others, not by reflecting on our desires and choices in self-dependent isolation. The fact that other people’s values and decisions often differ from our own is not a threat to our autonomy. Instead, by challenging our views and actions other’s alternative views help us define ourselves more clearly. Thus, other people play an indispensable role in what C. Taylor (1985b) has called our hermeneutic self-constitution.

At the same time, feminist thinkers are deeply ambivalent about processes of socialization, since the latter have also had severely negative consequences for the life opportunities and social freedom of women (as well as other groups that are traditionally disadvantaged in terms of societal power and influence) (M. Walker, 2007). A distinction thus needs to be made between necessary forms of socialization that are inevitable and should be welcomed to develop and exercise autonomy, and oppressive forms of socialization that impede this process (Benson, 1991). Consequently, Friedman (2000) argues that it is important to see that “socialization does not as such impede autonomy, whereas coercion as such does do so” (p. 37). Cultural master narratives that are stereotyping and marginalizing are an important factor in such oppressive and coercive forms of socialization given their effects

of depriving people of opportunities and causing infiltrated consciousness (Lindemann Nelson 2001; see §3.2.2).

Oppressive socialization can impair autonomy at three different levels, according to Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000): first, at the level of the formation of the agent's desires, beliefs and attitudes; second, at the level of the development of relevant capacities such as self-reflection, self-direction and self-knowledge; and third, at the level of the actual making of autonomous choices and performance of autonomous actions. Notice here the interesting parallel with the modes of self-realization (aspiration fulfillment and capacity fulfillment) discussed in §4.2.1, as well as the recognition that self-realization proceeds through acting in concrete practices (see §4.2.3). At each of these levels, oppressive socialization may thus impede self-realization.

3. *Power*

The third important contribution of the relational view to the autonomy debate is closely related to the problem of oppressive or otherwise problematic forms of socialization. The relational view raises our awareness of the simple fact that exercising autonomy requires social opportunities, or else it becomes a useless notion. Relational approaches stress that moral ideals like autonomy are always situated in a concrete, historical, social and cultural context. M. Walker (2007) emphasizes that marginalized groups can be denied access to the opportunities to realize certain moral ideals, because it is assumed that these are of no relevance to them. For example, women have long been excluded from higher education on the assumption that this would offer no added value for their typical life fulfillment as culturally perceived, namely, being housewives, mothers and caregivers. Similar paternalistic mechanisms stymie the aspirations of other social groups – including elderly people – who are not given an appropriate voice in the existing dominant structures of our culture and society (see §3.2.2).

This point draws our attention to the power structures enabling and maintaining our social and cultural world. As a result of these power structures, there exist profound differences in the opportunities for people to live according to their own values, and even to formulate such values in the first place – what M. Walker (2007) has called their “epistemological position”. It is also a fundamental insight of care ethics that all moral theories and concepts are influenced by a context of power relationships, which need to be taken seriously in evaluating their content and value (Tronto, 1993). Suggestions from the relational perspective for remedying this situation include a strong emphasis on the importance of social recognition of one's position as a moral agent, reminiscent of the arguments by Honneth (1995) and Lindemann Nelson (2001) discussed earlier (see §3.2.3). As long as people are not recognized as (potentially) autonomous moral agents, ascribing autonomy to them, be it as an anthropological characteristic or as a fun-

damental human right, remains an empty, theoretical abstraction. Giving voice to marginalized groups should improve their epistemological, moral and social status as autonomous, relationally embedded subjects, and thereby enhance their autonomy (M. Walker, 2007; Meyers, 2002).

Although it is a great advantage of the relational view that it is able to acknowledge the fundamental social embedding of moral agents, it has two crucial shortcomings that merit specific attention. The first is a certain vagueness about the substantial content of relational autonomy. Despite the important critiques that the relational approach contributes to the autonomy debate, it seems to give far more information about what autonomy is not, than about what the suggested alternative relational conceptualization would in fact look like. The second shortcoming is that the relational view offers insufficient means to rethink the importance of the social practice of “becoming individual” for exercising autonomy (compare with the reflections on narratives of becoming in §3.4). Before the relational view can serve as a basis for an account of autonomy that fits the outlook of my conceptualization of self-realization, it needs to be enriched with a more explicit concern for what constitutes people’s identity as *selfhood*, which underlies their moral identity and enables moral agency (see §5.4; §5.5).

6.4 AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF AGING

Before proceeding towards an evaluation of the discussed conceptualizations of autonomy and their suitability for the narratives of becoming based on the self-realization discourse, let me first connect the theme of autonomy to the context of aging. Autonomy is an often highly contested value in the context of aging (Polivka & Moody, 2001). Whereas some approaches to late modern aging – in particular those associated with what I have termed age-defying narratives – treat autonomy as an important flagship concept, other views have pointed out the difficulties in applying the notion of autonomy to aging, in particular because, as Moody (1992) puts it, autonomy in the conventional understanding seems “incompatible with existential facts about old age” (p. 40).

The fundamental critique posed against the dominant liberal conceptualization of autonomy with regard to aging is, according to Holstein, Parks & Waymack (2011), that it “obscures the fact that we ultimately lack control over aging, illness, disability, suffering, and death. To admit this lack of autonomy is to admit that the human condition is beyond our control; to relinquish autonomy is to acknowledge our deep vulnerability, especially as we age” (p. 12). Besides this, the tendency of traditional conceptualizations of autonomy to favor independence leads to an unfortunate association of dependence with weakness, incapacity and loss of dignity. This has a particularly negative impact

on aging individuals, whose dependence on others in executing daily tasks, such as bathing, dressing or eating, tends to increase once they become frailer. An identification of autonomy with independence, rational choice and freedom from interference, hinders a satisfactory moral consideration of issues confronted by aging people in their daily lives, especially when living in circumstances that severely restrict their opportunities to exercise autonomy in the traditional sense (Dodds, 2000). For this reason, autonomy critique in gerontological debate has strongly focused on the context of long-term care (Agich, 1990, 1995, 2003; Collopy, 1988; Moody, 1992; Polivka & Moody, 2001; Cole & Holstein, 1996; Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011).

To illustrate how ethical problems surrounding autonomy in the context of aging have been addressed, let me select three suggestions by authors from the field of aging studies that approach autonomy. These include the communicative approach advocated by Moody (1992), the phenomenological approach suggested by Agich (1990, 1995, 2003), and the account put forward by Holstein and colleagues (Holstein, 2015; Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011; Holstein, 2010a, 2010b) which applies the above discussed relational view of autonomy to the context of aging. What all three of them have in common is that they react against the neoliberal view of autonomy associated with Western individualization, a view that feeds into contemporary bioethical discourse in the form of the equation of autonomy with free choice and informed consent (see §6.2.1). The discussed perspectives share a deep concern about the impoverishment of contemporary moral discourse and the detrimental influence that this has on the lives of older people. As Moody (1992) states, “The irony is that we want to uphold autonomy for the elderly at just the time in life when their condition makes autonomy least attainable and at a time in life when other human needs – for care, for respect, for meaning – are more pressing. Yet the poverty of our moral discourse is such that we can only offer to those in the last stage of life *more autonomy*” (p. 4).

6.4.1 Harry Moody: The communicative approach

In *Ethics in an aging society*, Moody (1992) suggests replacing the dominant bioethical informed-consent approach to autonomy with a communicative approach. Communicative ethics is based on the influential philosophy of Habermas (1984). His theory of communicative action underscores the importance of deriving valid decisions from an un-coerced dialogue between all involved agents, which should ideally lead to moral consensus. In Moody’s (1992) interpretation, the communicative ethical approach suggests replacing the notion of *informed consent* by the notion of *negotiated consent*. Moral decisions are not to be made by an insular individual, but negotiated among the social network surrounding the person concerned. Moody argues that this has obvious advantag-

es over the informed consent approach in the context of aging, especially when people have diminished cognitive capacities, for instance, because it involves a dialogue about the decisions to be made that can also involve family members and caregivers. Such a dialogical approach also provides better opportunities to acknowledge the social nature of human personhood discussed in chapter 5.

An important aspect of communicative ethics is its sensitivity to the structures of power and influence that characterize the context in which communication has to take place. Moody particularly observes that, though autonomy as informed consent is highly valued in theory, the practice of many care settings tends to lead to a structured dependency of older people, thus aggravating their existential reality of vulnerability and dependency. For instance, signing a consent form or an advance directive means very little for people's actual freedom of choice in a vulnerable situation, if the whole care setting remains implicitly centered around the dominant authority of professionals and their expertise. Thus, the traditional autonomy discourse, in Moody's (1992) view, leaves older people with "a new myth promising us a fulfillment that is bound to leave us disappointed" (p. 40). Inevitably, Moody's preference for a communicative approach to ethics calls for making concessions to the promise of universally applicable rules assumed by bioethics. It emphasizes the fact that moral dilemmas in their complexity, often escape the uncluttered framework of clear principles suggested by bioethical approaches. However, the focus on communicative principles enlarges the possibility of honoring the different perspectives of all those involved in a situation of moral choice. This is a big advantage when we want to acknowledge the social embedding and mutual interdependence of human beings.

6.4.2 George Agich: The phenomenological approach

The second selected account from the realm of aging studies is formulated by Agich (1990, 1995, 2003) who focuses on autonomy and dependence. He acknowledges the political and legal relevance of the neoliberal interpretation of autonomy that relates it to freedom of choice, independence and non-interference, but questions its applicability in the context of long-term care. Importantly, Agich observes that the neoliberal account of autonomy not only dominates politics and law, but has developed into a broader cultural ideal. In accordance with what was discussed in §2.5.2 and §3.3.4, Agich (2003) notes that the resulting problem in the context of aging is that "the cultural dominance of this model of autonomy creates a backlash against dependence of any sort, so that the frail and infirm old [...] are especially vulnerable to the pejorative meanings associated with dependence. They are seen and frequently see themselves as burdensome and less than full persons" (p. 10). As an alternative to the neoliberal view, Agich (2003) suggests a phenomenological view in which autonomy

involves “a dialectic of independence and dependence that takes place within a social space characterized by interdependence” (p. 96). In this view, autonomy should be perceived in terms of a lifelong continuous process of development without a well-defined end-state.

Agich (1990, 1995) makes a relevant distinction between “nodal” autonomy, pertaining to the capacity for informed, free choice that is the dominant understanding in informed consent approaches, and “actual” autonomy, which refers to the process of enacting autonomy in everyday life. The latter view of autonomy seems to be the sort of autonomy that is primarily relevant to the life reality of people living in long-term care contexts. Actual autonomy underscores that autonomy can never be just about making a free choice between clearly delineated alternatives at a given point in time. Actual autonomy also implicates questions of value, relations and meaning that represent a continuous process through time which helps constitute who we are. Agich’s notion of actual autonomy is therefore closely related to the conceptualization of narrative and moral agency discussed in chapter 5.

In particular, Agich emphasizes that in order to contribute to actual autonomy, people should not only be able to choose, but also have options to choose from that are meaningful to them in the context of their personal lives, their relationships and their values. Most situations in which actual autonomy is implicated in a long-term care context may seem highly trivial, because they involve matters that most of us see as self-evident, for instance, having the freedom to decide what to eat, or having privacy in your own space. However, these things are far from obvious in a long-term care setting. In the liberal account, giving people more choice about their daily meals may be seen as an increase in autonomy. However, the choice between a pork chop, a sausage or clam chowder, for example, is hardly a meaningful, freedom-enhancing choice for people who have been vegetarians all their lives, or Jewish or Muslim for that matter.

Another important point made by Agich is that actual autonomy for frail or otherwise dependent people can be improved if they are supported by others who help them formulate or carry out the choices that are meaningful to them. In the conventional view, such help would limit people’s self-dependency and thereby restrict their autonomy. However, being reticent about giving such support in a desire to respect elders’ supposed independence may have the undesired result of compromising people’s actual autonomy. A clarifying distinction made by Collopy (1988) in this regard is that between decisional and executional autonomy. Whereas the former represents the freedom of choice cherished by the neoliberal view, the latter expresses that one needs to be able to execute one’s choices in order to experience actual autonomy. If people’s decisional autonomy is sufficiently intact but frailty impedes their opportunities to exercise it, stepping in to support people in their executional autonomy will actually enhance their freedom. The bottom line of Agich’s view is that dependence on

the support of others to realize actual autonomy need not be compromising one's freedom, as long as it is conceptualized in a way that is different from the neoliberal account. Steering between the opposite poles of the neoliberal view and its communitarian critics, he proposes a contextual approach to ethics. This takes into account the many ways in which individuals are interdependent, socially embedded and vulnerable, without giving up the idea that their individuality, their choices and their aspirations truly matter and have a valid claim to being considered in ethical debates.

In Agich's phenomenological view, individuals are interdependently connected as social and embodied beings that share a common moral ground. Any viable account of autonomy in the context of aging needs to be sensitive to what is happening in this shared space. Obviously, this means that the phenomenological view paints a far more complex picture than the ideal type of autonomy in conventional accounts, because it deals directly with the "messy incompleteness and uncertainty" of the reality of everyday living (Agich, 2003, p. 92).

6.4.3 Martha Holstein and colleagues: The relational approach

Holstein and colleagues (Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011; Holstein, 2010a, 2010b, 2015) suggest a perspective that applies the previously discussed relational view of autonomy to the context of aging (see §6.3.4). They share the previously discussed worries about the inapplicability of the neoliberal view of autonomy to the life reality of many older people, particularly those living in long-term care contexts. Holstein and her colleagues highlight three advantages of a relational approach to autonomy in the context of aging that are of particular relevance to this study:

- First, Holstein emphasizes that the view of the self that underlies the relational conception of autonomy is much more apt to acknowledge the fact that we are fundamentally *embodied* beings. This also includes the insight that reason is not the only relevant human faculty to be taken into account when talking about agency and autonomy. Feelings, desires, intuitions and imagination also belong to who we are and thus help constitute our agency. That we are embodied beings is true for our entire lives, of course; but when we get older, we tend to be more and more confronted with gradual bodily discomforts that make us acutely aware of how much our selves are intertwined with our bodies (Holstein, 1999, 2015; Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011).

Both the development of our identities and the development of our autonomy competency (Meyers, 1989; see §6.3.3) are tied to our bodies. There is a mutual process of influence between the external experiences of our aging bodies (as informed by cultural decline narratives or age-defying nar-

ratives, for instance) and the internal development of our autonomy competency. The relevance of taking embodiment into account when it comes to autonomy is further increased by the observation that our society tends to approach older people, especially women, predominantly as “older bodies”. When older people start acting upon this implicit identification of who they are with their bodily appearance, it raises difficult questions regarding their autonomy (Holstein, 2015; Tulle, 2004). For example, if an older woman feels compelled to dye her graying hair or to stop wearing shorts in the summer as a result of the internalized cultural norm of youthfulness, the autonomy of this decision might be questioned.

- Second, Holstein, Parks & Waymack (2011) emphasize that exercising autonomy – even relational autonomy - highly depends on the availability of autonomy-enabling societal structural arrangements. However, they are highly critical about contemporary social institutions and public policies influencing older people's lives. The way the pension and social security systems, or the health care system, are centered around norms of independence and individual responsibility excludes many older individuals from the realm of autonomous life choices, because their vulnerability precludes their living up to these implicit norms.

As Holstein argues, neoliberal societies tacitly assume that older people answer to the typical image of the Kantian rational man. However, this image has been unmasked by the feminist, relational discourse as a harmful illusion. This tendency is particularly damaging for older women as well as minority groups (Holstein, 2015). As Holstein, Parks & Waymack (2011) aptly observe, “it is a long way from the paradigmatic Kantian rational ‘man’ to the 88-year-old woman with congestive heart failure, mild cognitive impairment, and osteoporosis” (p. 256). Although this is a noteworthy observation, it need not mean that the underlying ideal of autonomy ascribed to the paradigmatic Kantian man is of less relevance to the frail 88-year old. Her situation may even urgently call for the possibility to make choices that are well-informed and in continuity with the value orientation that has accompanied her identity throughout her life. But Holstein, Parks and Waymack are right to suggest that a proper interpretation of autonomy needs to transcend the caricature that is often made of the Kantian rational man in order to be of value to the context of aging.

- Third, and related to the previous two points, Holstein, Parks & Waymack (2011) emphasize that a viable understanding of autonomy needs to be able to recognize people in their diversity and particularity. This implies acknowledging them not only as the vulnerable, interdependent human beings that they are, but also as moral agents with a deep interest in leading a meaningful life. Impediments to this social recognition, both on the structural societal level and on the micro-level of the social networks surround-

ing the individual, will disregard the fundamental moral value of their life. Lack of social recognition will erode people's sense of identity, and thereby their opportunity to exercise autonomy, which is relationally embedded (see also §3.2.3).

It follows that both formal and informal systems of care and support need to be sensitized to pay attention to older people's expressions of individual personhood, if autonomy is to be a meaningful category in the context of aging. This is particularly true in situations where the capacities usually associated with upholding a sense of identity begin to erode, such as in the case of dementia. As Holstein, Parks and Waymack (2011) emphasize, "Self-conception, identity, and self-esteem are all, to some degree, a social project [...] What happens then, as dementia progresses, is that we come to depend more and more on others to help maintain our identity" (p. 221). In their analyses about the conditions of autonomy in such situations of dependency and fragility, Holstein, Parks and Waymack confirm my contention that Lindemann's (2014) view of identity as a social practice (see §5.3.2) is particularly well-suited to be applied in a reframed interpretation of self-realization for the context of later life.

6.5 EVALUATION OF THE DISCUSSED ACCOUNTS ON AUTONOMY

In this chapter, I have discussed a variety of conceptualizations of autonomy, both as developed in philosophical discourse and as applied in the context of aging studies. The question remains how these different perspectives should be evaluated in light of the search for a conceptualization of autonomy that matches the understanding of self-realization developed in this study. Recall that I proposed an understanding of the self that is embodied, socially embedded, reflexive and narratively creating a sense of continuity, against the background of the inescapable temporal horizon of human existence. Moreover, I argued for an understanding of identity and agency as fundamentally moral categories. This means that our identity presupposes an ethical commitment to certain values, aspirations and capacities that express something about who we want to be or become, and what we want to remain true to (see chapter 5). A satisfactory conceptualization of autonomy should match with these insights on narrative identity and moral agency.

The views of autonomy discussed in this chapter can be interpreted as constituting a spectrum ranging from predominantly individualist understandings to predominantly anti-individualist understandings. A first and rather obvious conclusion we can draw is that the traditional individualist understanding of autonomy represented by the structural hierarchical view (see §6.2.2) cannot accommodate for most of the insights about narrative identity and moral agency

described in chapter 5. The traditional individualist interpretation of autonomy fails to acknowledge the social embedding, interdependence and fundamental vulnerability of the human condition. It also lacks the life-historical scope that is required from a narrative perspective and pays insufficient attention to the identity-constituting identification with values. In addition, I share the gerontological critiques discussed in §6.4 that traditional individualist accounts of autonomy do not match the life reality of most older people.

Despite these objections, individualist accounts of autonomy should not be pushed aside too easily. Their emphasis on the agent as the source of uniquely individual desires, aspirations, motivations, capacities and actions remains of crucial significance from a self-realization perspective. Yet the problems raised by the classical structural hierarchical interpretation need to be solved if individualist accounts are to be integrated in this study's understanding of autonomy. The amendments made by C. Taylor (1985a), Ekstrom (1993, 2005) and Meyers (1989) to the mainstream interpretation of autonomy are a valuable start to enrich the traditional view of autonomy and adapt it to the account of self-realization developed here. As we have seen, C. Taylor's account sensitizes our view towards the importance of an identification with strongly held values positioning ourselves in relation to a moral horizon of (hyper)goods, for our agency and autonomy. Ekstrom adds a focus on the development of our desires and preferences over the course of our lives, and acknowledges the importance of continuity that we also encountered in chapter 5. She thereby introduces a developmental life course perspective to the debate on autonomy that is very valuable, both from the perspective of self-realization and from the perspective of aging. Meyers, finally, contributes important considerations regarding the competencies that we need to practice autonomy in concrete circumstances. She also stresses the conditions of development of human moral agents which need to be beneficial in order to acquire such competencies. This addition is very important for this study's reframed account of self-realization, which requires sensitivity to the socio-cultural and structural factors that enable or impede people's striving towards the good life.

When combined, the views of C. Taylor, Ekstrom and Meyers, all situated on the individualist end of the spectrum of autonomy views, offer important ingredients to repair the discussed shortcomings of the structural hierarchical view. The relational view of autonomy, on the other hand, represents a view from the anti-individualist end of the spectrum. A distinct advantage of the relational view for this study's purposes is that it shares many assumptions with the understanding of self and identity as socially embedded, embodied, vulnerable and interdependent. This also explains its obvious appeal for the context of aging as we encountered in the discussion of gerontological views. Therefore, at first sight, it makes sense to say that the relational view presents a candidate conception of autonomy that is less problematic than the individu-

alist accounts when applied to the context of aging. However, I argue that the relational account as it is, needs some amendments to arrive at a satisfactory conceptualization of autonomy in the context of self-realization as a resource for narratives of becoming about later life.

First of all, the account of autonomy that I am looking for should somehow combine the insights of the relational view about the social embedding of human beings with the most important benefit of individualist interpretations – their focus on the moral status of the agent as a source of uniquely individual desires, aspirations, motivations, capacities and actions. Furthermore, this study's account of autonomy ought to be able to integrate the *ethical dimension* of our personhood, discussed in §5.3.3 and §5.4. It is questionable whether either the individualist or the anti-individualist views of autonomy that I have so far discussed are sufficiently capable of integrating this ethical dimension. What is needed then, is to formulate a conceptualization of autonomy that answers to three conditions: 1) it values the moral status of the agent as a constantly developing *individual* with uniquely personal aspirations and capacities, 2) it acknowledges the *relational* embedding of these individuals, and 3) it is capable of integrating the *ethical* engagements that are essential for our moral agency and thereby for the purpose of our self-realization.

6.6 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN INDIVIDUATING CONCEPTION OF AUTONOMY

Let me call this alternative view an *individuating* conceptualization of autonomy. The term individuating is derived from the term individuation that was originally introduced by Jung (1971). Jung describes individuation as a complex psychological process of searching for your true, authentic self, coming to terms with the “shadow-sides” of your personality. Individuation, as elaborated by Jung, also implies freeing yourself from the pressures of outside conventions, in order to (re)connect with the deeper spiritual values and meanings of life. We could say that individuation represents Jung's perception of self-realization because it enables people to fulfill their deepest and truest potential for selfhood. More broadly speaking, the term individuation could be translated as *becoming individual*. It is mostly in this more general sense that I will apply the term when I speak about an individuating conceptualization of autonomy. This implies that individuating autonomy is seen as a developmental ideal that is part of the broader process of moral self-development. On a side note, it is interesting that individuation was understood by Jung (1971) to be a task particularly associated with the *second half of life* (see also Atchley, 2009; Hillmann, 1999). In combination with its linkages with the discourse of self-realization

this association has also contributed to my choice for this particular term in the search for a satisfactory conceptualization of autonomy.

Though Jung seems to perceive individuation primarily as a process of inner spiritual growth, I stress that individuation as it is implicated in the notion of individuating autonomy, is quintessentially a *social* undertaking. Again, I am obliged to the suggestion made by Lindemann (2014) who argues that identity should be perceived in terms of a social practice. In order to enable people to realize the best within them, they need, in Lindemann's terminology, to be held in their identities by others (see §5.3.2). This position underscores that we cannot become who we are solely on our own.

Being autonomous in the individuating account is not a state people can attain once and then claim to possess for the rest of their life. It presupposes a continuous process of moral self-development, of attaining and refining an attitude towards oneself, others and the world in general that is conducive to the realization of a good life (see §5.5). Generally speaking, the individuating account of autonomy that I propose is individualist because it cherishes people's maximal freedom to choose and identify with the life plans, purposes and aspirations that they regard the most valuable, and in greatest coherence with their constantly evolving narrative selves. The individuating account emphasizes that people should be able to stand for what they value in life and act upon that orientation, even if it goes against convention or social expectation. At the same time, the individuating account is anti-individualist in its recognition that beneath people's autonomous competency to form such life plans, purposes and aspirations lies a deeply social interdependence with others. Part of the attitude presupposed by the individuating account is a deep awareness and acceptance of the dimension of existential vulnerability that is characteristic of human existence, and an acknowledgment of the fact that this dimension can restrict one's scope of self-determination.

A further important characteristic of the individuating account of autonomy is an openness towards a plurality of value orientations and an acknowledgment of the importance of people's freedom in this regard. Consequently, the individuating account refrains from being prescriptive about which values, motivations and aspirations people should choose to strive for. It principally values individual differentiation of goods and purposes that may contribute to a good life. In this sense, it strives to offer an account of autonomy that is congenial to the late modern situation of individualization and moral pluralism. But as has been suggested before, there seems to be one important exception to this reluctance to prescribe what is good (see §5.5). After all, the individuating account of autonomy strongly emphasizes the importance of developing one's moral identity, which is a normative criterion. Despite its appraisal of a pluralism of values then, we might say that there is one normative criterion that the individuating account of autonomy does think people should adhere to: optimal

moral self-development, i.e., striving to lead a good life, with and for others, according to one's deepest aspirations and highest capacities, as full participating members of a society/community.

The individuating account of autonomy requires then, that people identify with and appropriate a viable value orientation in life that is worthy of guiding their actions. What counts as a "worthy" value orientation conducive to such a good life is not objectively defined, but it certainly isn't arbitrary either. What does and doesn't count as worthy is seen as constantly negotiated in intersubjective, narrative and dialogical encounters with others about what constitutes a good life. These moral encounters are situated against the background of a cultural horizon of meaning and values that is created by humans, but transcends the individual preferences of any single individual. Worthy purposes can, for example, be freedom, or love, or care, or creativity, or humor, or justice, or courage, or soberness. But wriggling one's toes in the mud does not generally qualify as a purpose worthy of a good life (C. Taylor, 1989).

In sum, the individuating account of autonomy presupposes that it is crucial that people develop themselves in such a manner that they optimally realize their potential for moral agency as defined in §5.5. This calls for the appropriation of an ethical orientation with which they can identify, a translation of this orientation into action, and the development of an attitude of practical wisdom and loving self-acceptance towards those things in life that we have no agential control over. In Ricoeur's (1992) view, which inspires me here, a viable approach should allow us "to reconcile the idea of autonomy with (...) receptiveness, passivity, and even powerlessness" (p. 275).

We might say that when it comes to criteria to define autonomy, the individuating conceptualization is a weak substantive theory. Weak substantive views take an intermediate position between purely procedural accounts of autonomy on the one hand, and strong substantive accounts on the other hand (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; J. Taylor, 2005). Let me first clarify this distinction:

- For procedural accounts, for a decision to qualify as autonomous it suffices that one has followed the proper procedures to arrive at it. The substantive content of the decision does not matter from the viewpoint of judging its autonomy. So, for instance, a terrorist could make an autonomous decision to commit a suicide attack in a busy underground station, as long as he has reflected on his desire to do so and has made a free choice for this second-order volition to guide his action. His decision is morally censurable, for sure, but in the procedural view, it can still be autonomous.
- Strong substantive accounts, on the other hand, require that people's actions can be judged as defensible from the viewpoint of certain objective moral frameworks. A strong substantive theory may grant that the criteria suggested by procedural accounts are *necessary* conditions for auto-

my, but they do not share the idea that these procedural criteria are also *sufficient* conditions. In addition to answering the procedural criteria for autonomy, strong substantive theories state that autonomous decisions should also answer to some non-neutral normative condition. This could, for instance, be an objective standard of rationality and/or rational criteria of right and wrong behavior (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Importantly, the terrorist attack mentioned above could never qualify as an autonomous act in the strong substantive view because it is not rationally and/or morally defensible according to these criteria. In another example discussed by Stoljar (2000), a woman's decision to consciously neglect methods of reliable birth control cannot be autonomous when this decision to take a contraceptive risk is based on faulty assumptions about the value of women that she has internalized from a paternalistic masculine perspective. So for instance, a woman can be raised to believe that her value depends on her ability to give birth, and that her way to bind a man in a relationship is to get pregnant. From this perspective her decision to neglect birth control is in her own advantage and rationally defensible. Following the "feminist intuition" that Stoljar defends however, the internalized belief is wrong and harmful. Even though the woman's decision to take a contraceptive risk may answer to all procedural criteria of reflexive endorsement of a higher-order desire, in Stoljar's strong substantive account this decision nevertheless fails to qualify as autonomous.

Arguments in favor of adding a substantive criterion for autonomy are generally based on concerns about how our socialization affects our autonomy (Benson, 1991; Friedman, 2000; Stoljar, 2000). This is a particularly pressing matter from the perspective of relational autonomy that underscores the inevitable social embedding of human agents. It necessitates coming up with a criterion distinguishing autonomy-enabling relationships and forms of socialization, which should be valued, from autonomy-impeding relationships and forms of socialization, which deserve rejection.

- The intermediate position of weak substantive accounts comes down to the following. Just like strong substantive theories of autonomy, weak substantive accounts are concerned about possible autonomy-impeding effects of certain (not all!) forms of socialization. They equally seek criteria to decide whether a decision is based on motivations that flow from an autonomy-impeding source (like internalization of false or oppressive views about the social group to which one belongs; cf. Lindemann Nelson's (2001) notion of infiltrated consciousness discussed in §3.2.2). However, as Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) observe, "[a weak substantive account] places constraints on the desires, preferences, and values that count as autonomous, [but] abandons the content specificity of strong substantive theories" (p. 20). Typical of weak substantive criteria of autonomy is that they refer to norms that are

based on a healthy psychological relation of moral agents with themselves, instead of norms based on objective moral criteria of right and wrong. Examples of weak subjective conditions for autonomy that have been suggested include, for instance, self-worth (Benson, 1994), self-respect (Dillon, 1992) and self-trust (McLeod & Sherwin, 2000).

Following the categorization discussed above, qualifying my individuating view of autonomy as weak substantive means that it aims to set general benchmarks to qualitatively judge the genuineness of someone's (claimed) autonomy that are based on its criterion of optimal moral self-development. At the same time, contrasting what would be a strong substantive view, the individuating conception allows for maximal individual differentiation regarding one's choice of values, aspirations and capacities. The only restriction would have to be that they remain within the limits of conventional morality (i.e., respect the Golden Rule) and can intersubjectively be judged to contribute to a good life in the broadest sense – what Ricoeur (1992) has called the ethical aim of human life (see §5.4). The question remaining then is how the weak substantive criterion advanced by the individuating conceptualization of autonomy is best described.

Recall that at the end of §6.5, I formulated three criteria that a satisfying account of autonomy in the context of this study should answer to. Regarding the first criterion, the acknowledgment of the relational embedding of human beings, we may gratefully integrate the anthropological position of the relational view of autonomy discussed in §6.3.4. The second criterion, the valuation of the moral status of the agent as a constantly developing individual with uniquely personal aspirations and capacities, seems to be well-covered by the amended versions of the individualist interpretations of autonomy by C. Taylor, Ekstrom and Meyers (§6.3.1, 6.3.2, 6.3.3). What still needs to be added to my view is an element capable of accommodating the third criterion, i.e., the integration of the ethical engagements that are essential for our moral agency and thereby for the purpose of our self-realization. Drawing upon the argument in §5.4 and §5.5, let me suggest Ricoeur's notion of self-constancy as a promising candidate for the weak substantive criterion that we are looking for here.

Self-constancy or identity as selfhood has been formulated in terms of our answer to the question who we are or want to become. A viable answer to this question presupposes an ethical commitment with the aim of realizing a good life with and for others. The notion of self-constancy addresses the ethical dimension of our identity which is a crucial addition to the individuating conception of autonomy in two senses:

- First, it underscores the necessity of living up to the value orientation that is essential to who we want to be or become through our choices and actions in practice. This ethical commitment is developed and realized through our

identification with and appropriation of things we want to be true to, for instance, values like love, care, justice or honesty.

- Second, self-constancy underscores our social embedding by sensitizing us to the fact that our commitment to others is an intrinsic part of who we are. Thus, self-constancy expresses something about our relationship to ourselves as well as our relationship to others. Suggesting self-constancy as one of the crucial elements of individuating autonomy implies that being autonomous requires the appropriation of an identity-guiding value orientation as well as the ability to engage in moral relationships with others, both aspects of realizing our best potential for moral agency.

These two senses of ethical commitment that are combined in the notion of self-constancy guide us in the moral choices we make and provide us with a durable and sufficiently coherent sense of identity. They also enable us to relate to others in a manner that is helpful to fulfilling the fundamental ethical aim of a good life with and for others. In this sense, I would argue that it truly is an indispensable substantive criterion for individuating autonomy.

Self-constancy does not necessarily come easy, however. It can require overcoming internal and external obstacles to remaining true to who we want to be, both in relation to ourselves and in relation to others. Self-constancy as a criterion of individuating autonomy calls for the development of certain virtues or attitudes that are indispensable to developing ourselves as autonomous agents. Some of these virtues resemble the attitudes that are also often associated with the condition of autonomy in the more traditional interpretation, such as self-reflexivity, integrity, authenticity, self-discipline, moral independence or responsibility for self (Feinberg, 1986). In addition, the individuating conception of autonomy also requires virtues like courage, perseverance, social and moral sensitivity, flexibility, self-acceptance and practical wisdom.

In sum then, people can be seen as autonomous in the individuating account when they satisfy the following criteria:

- They appropriate and engage with an authentic value orientation that is able to constitute their identity and gives them guidelines about which purposes to strive for in life
- They are able to uphold a satisfactory amount of narrative coherence in their set of value preferences and adapt their preferences flexibly and reflexively depending on what they encounter in life
- They possess the competencies and virtues that are needed to exercise autonomy in practice, such as self-knowledge, self-discovery, self-determination, reflexivity, integrity, courage, practical wisdom, et cetera.
- They are capable of acknowledging the limits of their self-determination that flow from the reality of human existential vulnerability, and integrate

what escapes their own control in their existence as autonomous moral agents

- They answer to the ethical criterion of self-constancy, which enables them to stand for their identity-constituting value orientation in concrete practical circumstances, thereby honoring their ethical commitment both to themselves and to others, as well as acknowledging the fundamental interdependence with others that characterizes human lives

A few important closing remarks are in order regarding these conditions, however. All these conditions should be understood in terms of a developmental process that continues throughout life, not in terms of a normative end-state. In order to count as autonomous in the individuating view, it is not necessary to be some sort of perfect moral exemplar. Individuating autonomy is certainly not intended as an elitist goal. Thus, one need not have a totally comprehensive life plan and value orientation, a fully coherent set of preferences, perfectly developed autonomy competencies and virtues and a spotless ethical commitment without ambiguities, to claim autonomy on this account.

Matching the phenomenological orientation advanced by Agich (1995; 2003), individuating autonomy should be regarded as a socially embedded practice with many imperfections, because it relates to the actual messy daily reality of people's lives. It is therefore something that can never be completely or perfectly achieved. In principle, all human beings groping their way towards a good life qualify as candidates to claim individuating autonomy. As a process, individuating autonomy is always a matter of degree, and its successful exercise should be carefully assessed in light of all the relevant aspects of a concrete situation. What is crucial however, is that people's lives express an enduring developmental orientation towards a more fulfilled personhood, and an ethical engagement with approaching who we want to be, to ourselves and to others. Self-constancy requires maintaining a vital involvement with the ethical aim of human life, even if this requires struggling with the contingencies and vulnerabilities intrinsic to our existence. The ancient wisdom that it is the journey, not the destination that counts would certainly apply to the case of individuating autonomy. Stagnation, isolation, indifference, lack of commitment with one's own good life or that of others, inability to engage with meaningful goals and social relationships, and closing oneself off from relevant learning processes, all represent conditions that are likely to stymie individuating autonomy. These cannot be united with the purpose of developing moral agency that is intrinsic to the discourse of self-realization advanced in this study.