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Constructing Selves*

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The ambiguity of the title is intended. The title depicts the self as the product of construction while also referring to it as the one doing the construction. By this I mean to capture one of the most salient philosophical themes of the recent past. This theme is best seen against the backdrop of philosophy's age-long preoccupation with the nature of the human subject. Writers on this topic have over the years greatly disagreed about the most adequate description of the self and about its most important or essential characteristics. But this very disagreement testifies to a deeper agreement that some such description and characteristics exist and provide a necessary foundation or backdrop for morality, and by extension, for law and politics. The theme to which I have alluded consists in a large body of thought that questions this traditional approach. The view that "man has no essence" and must create his own, though originating at least as far back as the fifteenth century (see Pico della Mirandola 1956), was given new impetus and significance in the twentieth. The insight that the meanings we create create us undergirds some of the most influential and otherwise diverse schools of thought, such as existentialism, postmodernism, and communitarianism. We can distinguish in this large body of thought two broad conceptions regarding the ways human beings define who they are, *self-constitution* and *social construction*. Though both share the view that as human beings we create ourselves, the former interprets the *we* distributively--each individual is the author of her own identity; whereas the latter interprets it jointly--social practices, discursive and otherwise, shape our selves. In either way, but most likely through some combination of both, the human subject is formed or constituted in the course of her life by actual engagements and experiences.

On this *constructive view*, the self is the largely unintended by-product of individual actions and collective practices, including

* This essay provides an overview of some themes pursued in greater detail in Dan-Cohen (2002).

those of law and morality, whose primary orientation is not the creation of a self but the accomplishment of some individual or collective goals. When we pursue our goals and promote our projects, individual or collective, we inescapably do another thing as well: we determine the composition of the self and draw its boundaries. The constructive view thus complicates and expands our normative agenda. Absent a stable, antecedently given human subject, subject and norms are now seen to be engaged in a dynamic and dialectic relationship in which neither side provides a starting point or a resting place relative to the other. The recognition that we are the products as well as the authors of our practices and norms confronts us with a double challenge: not just what to do, but also what to be. And so in devising our behavior-guiding norms we must glimpse their effects on who we are as well: what subjects will emerge from a system of activity generated by a particular set of norms?

In contemplating this second set of issues, a particular cluster of norms (by which I mean values, evaluative attitudes, practices, and the like) assumes center stage. I call them *personalized*, since they take individual human beings as their objects and so depend for their content and application on the composition of the self. Responsibility, autonomy, and dignity are prominent examples. To be responsible is, at least primarily, to be answerable for oneself; to be autonomous is to govern oneself; to have dignity is to be the locus of moral value and so to demand and attract respect toward oneself. So what precisely we're responsible for, how far our autonomy extends, and what merits respect, all crucially depend on what we take the self to be. Now since the personalized norms track the boundaries of the self, on the traditional view their scope can be determined by studying those boundaries. The constructive view denies this option. Since the personalized norms participate in constituting the self, the boundary they track is in part their own creation. To be sure, specific ascriptions of responsibility or affirmations of autonomy or expressions of respect are supported by a pre-existing vision of the subject: she did it, we say, or it's her own life, or her body. But when we probe such statements, philosophically or in cases in which they prove particularly contentious, it turns out that they rest at bottom on the sedimentation of myriads of similar statements in the past. If we wish to go beyond precedent or are forced to do so, what can we ap-

peal to? What considerations can guide us if we confront the constructive enterprise head-on?

It is natural to approach this matter in the same way in which we treat the more familiar questions concerning how to act. Just as we choose what to do in light of what best suits our values and serves our interests, so supposedly we can also choose what to be in those terms. But a moment's reflection reveals the fallacy. When action is concerned, some values and interests are foundational since they are implicitly taken to provide the incontrovertible, rock bottom answer to the question of who we are. However the question what to be comes up precisely when we realize that the supposedly incontrovertible can be controverted and that the rock is made of sand. We cannot derive norms of construction from our values and interests, since the "our" is at this stage up for grabs.

An alternative, however, exists. Building codes in general consist in part in imperatives that express the very idea of construction, of creating any structure, rather than those that pertain to the construction of a particular one. A building code for the construction of selves is no different; it too includes some such purely *formal* criteria, the imperatives of having an identity at all, imperatives oriented toward what it is for a self to exist. Two sets of such imperatives can be briefly indicated. The first concerns the relationship among personalized norms. The thought that these norms all track the boundaries of the self does not by itself tell us where these boundaries ought to lie. It does nonetheless help draw them by introducing an important constraint. Seen as tracking the boundary of one and the same entity, personalized norms must be co-extensive, they must have the same scope. To see the significance of this point, consider our attitude toward responsibility. Responsibility often carries with it burdens and so we are tempted to evade it. One way to do so is by enacting a more minimal, narrowly circumscribed self. For example, when we learn that the law applies some of its most draconian measures to what we take to be the operations of will, we may respond by contracting the will's domain and instead describe various types of actions in a deterministic vocabulary designed to place them at the periphery of the self or even completely outside its boundaries. Awareness of the co-extensiveness of the personalized norms, however, alerts us to the risk inherent in this maneuver.

Evacuating regions of the self in order to escape the burdens of responsibility has as corollary the contraction of the scope of our autonomy and dignity as well. The opposite is also true. People may incline to stake out claims to expansive autonomy and to wide-ranging grounds of respect. But here too, they must recognize the potentially undesirable constructive implications: since these claims involve expanding the self, they entail the assumption of greater responsibility as well.

In order to introduce the second set of structural imperatives, let me focus on a specific variant of the constructive view. This variant uses a dramaturgical imagery, according to which the self consists, at least in part, of the social roles that it enacts. To form a self, the roles must be integrated: they must form a dovetailing, interrelated, and interacting arrangement that we can imagine as possessing a certain 'density' or as forming a 'core'. But people can also occupy roles that are too tenuously connected to the elements forming that core to count as parts of the self. Such possibility, as well as the underlying spatial imagery, are implicit in the sociological notion of *role distance*, which denotes the possibility of enacting a social role without identifying with it and so without fully integrating it into the self (Goffman 1961a, 1961b).¹ Though identification and detachment are not fixed properties of roles, a certain degree of uniformity in the style of enacting different roles exists: certain roles are more likely to be enacted at a distance than other roles. So we can roughly distinguish between *personal* or *proximate* roles and *impersonal* or *distant* ones.

Obviously, the choice between proximate and distant roles, or between a personal or impersonal style in enacting a role, has a crucial bearing on the topography of the self, with normative implications on such matters as responsibility, autonomy, and the like. How ought this choice be made? A cluster of structural imperatives that are implicit in ordinary speech and judgments provide at least part of the answer. We often experience ourselves and others as

¹ Although I borrow the notion of role distance from Goffman, I employ it in ways that depart from his own use.

more or less *substantial*: we describe people as heavyweights or lightweights, as deep or shallow, as complex or simple, as having or lacking heft. The seat of these metaphoric qualities is the ‘core’ of the self. By forming the self’s core, proximate roles give us substance and solidity. But these structural qualities come at a price of greater vulnerability to change. The fixity and rigidity of a dense core make it brittle: an alteration in or loss of a proximate role will send shock waves throughout the entire self, threatening to shatter its identity. Distant roles, by contrast, are in this sense sources of versatility and resilience. One weathers change better when one can assume or discard a distant role without significant repercussions in other parts of the self.

This tradeoff between the structural virtues of solidity and pliability suggests that the optimal topography of the self would contain a gradation of distances or some combination of proximate and distant roles, where the distances correlate with the degree of social stability or change. But attaining such a balance in a world marked by a high level of change poses a challenge and a dilemma. Identifying with roles that are transitory and insecure may become a trap to a self whose resilience will be weakened and whose vulnerability to identity-shattering experiences increased. But the more roles are kept at a protective distance, the less there is to protect; at the limit we face the specter of the impersonal self: insubstantial, desolate, and empty.

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