

Chapter 2

A Theory of Self and Personhood for Psychology

In the previous chapter, we argued that much contemporary psychology is grounded in tacit assumptions regarding the nature of the self and personhood rather than explicitly examined and articulated ontological conceptions. It was suggested that, for the most part, mainstream psychology retains implicitly commitments to a Hobbesian perspective. This particularly is the case in that it fails to recognize the sociocultural constituents of human action and experience and promotes a compatibilist version of agency that runs afoul of the law of contradiction.

In this chapter, we offer a theory of self and personhood for psychology that attempts to overcome these problems. Our perspective is heavily indebted to the hermeneutic ontologies of being and understanding furnished in the twentieth century by Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1995), as well as insights borrowed from Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism and the sociocultural psychology of Vygotsky (1978, 1986). Yet, it is not our intention to offer an account that is entirely consistent with the work of any particular prior theorist. We hope that what we offer herein will constitute a sufficient basis for seriously and critically entertaining the possibility that persons are constituted by both biological, chemical, and neurophysiological substrates and sociocultural practices, conventions, and means, but irreducible to these constituents. We begin by sketching out a broad developmental theory of situated, agentic personhood. But first, so as to assist the reader, we offer a brief conceptualization of personhood and its various aspects connoted herein.

A Brief Conceptualization of Personhood

Our conception of a person (or psychological person) is an identifiable, embodied individual human with being, self-understanding (self), and agentic capability. The adjective identifiable references the physical characteristics and social identity of a person. Social identity refers to those socially constructed and socially meaningful categories that are appropriated and internalized by individuals as descriptive of themselves and/or various groups to which they belong (e.g., female, African-American, soccer player, attorney, mother, and community leader). The adjective embodied captures the sense of a physical, biological body in constant contact with

the physical and sociocultural lifeworld. Being refers to the existence in such a lifeworld of a single human being (an individual). Importantly, the manner of such being is historically and socioculturally effected within traditions of living. Self, for us, is *not* a substantive entity, but a particular kind of understanding that discloses and extends a person's being and activity in the world. It is that compelling comprehension of one's unique existence that imbues individual experience and action in the world with significance and provides a phenomenal sense of being present.

Finally, agency, in our conception of personhood, has two aspects, the latter of which conforms to standard philosophical conceptions of the reflective, deliberative agent capable of intentional action in accordance with his/her own authentic desires and choices (e.g., Frankfurt, 1971). More generally, however, we consider agency to refer to the activity of a person in the world and claim that the philosopher's (and our own) reflective, deliberative agency emerges from prereflective activity as part of the developmental unfolding of an individual life within a collective lifeworld. It is to this developmental emergence of reflective, deliberative agency and self that we now turn.

A Developmental Theory of Situated, Agentive Personhood

Our developmental theory of situated, agentive personhood rests upon three neo-ontological perspectives. We use the term "neo-ontological" because none of these views assumes the kind of fixed, prior essences typical of traditional attempts to posit the existence of entities such as "reality" or "person." Thus, our theory is contingent, not prior. However, it does ascribe a real, irreducible agency to the psychological person who is not commonly found in other contemporary, contingent theories of personhood. The three neo-ontological perspectives in question concern (1) our assumptions concerning "levels of reality," (2) our "underdetermination" argument for agency, and (3) our construal of self as a particular kind of understanding that discloses and extends a person's being and activity in the world. In what follows, we discuss each of these perspectives, before turning to a brief sketch of our developmental theory of situated, agentive personhood.

1. *Levels of reality*

A common philosophical understanding of reality is rendered in terms of existence independent of human perception and conception. In such terms, the physical and biological world may be taken as unquestionably real, the reality of psychological phenomena is highly debatable, and sociocultural practices fall somewhere in between. Another commonplace view in much scholarly work in the more empirical of the social sciences is that physical and psychological (mental) phenomena are arranged along a continuum of some sort that makes it possible to reduce mental phenomena back to the physical kinds from which they spring (phylogenetically and ontogenetically).

In Martin and Sugarman (1999b), we offered an alternative conceptualization of relations between what we termed physical, biological, sociocultural, and

psychological levels of reality. In this alternative understanding, psychological phenomena such as reasons and intentions are held to be real, not by virtue of being mind-independent, but by virtue of the influence they exert on actions in the world that may affect self and others. Second, physical, biological, socio-cultural, and psychological phenomena are not understood as arrayed along a single continuum privileged by the physical, but are assumed to be levels of reality that are nested within each other in accordance with a general historical unfolding. In particular, psychological phenomena are understood to be nested within sociocultural practices from which the former are constituted, while both psychological and sociocultural phenomena are nested within biological and physical levels of reality.

While biological and physical levels of reality, including human bodies, are necessary requirements for psychological phenomena and constrain what is psychologically possible, psychological phenomena cannot be reduced to these levels of reality. This is because psychological phenomena also require socio-cultural practices for their more specific constitution within particular historical traditions and forms of life.

2. *The underdetermination of human agency*

The underdetermination of human agency is the first of our two defining aspects of personhood. In response to the three problems common to traditional compatibilist views detailed in the previous chapter (i.e., compatibilism generally contradicts common sense, results in question-begging arguments, and fails to provide an adequate theory of agency), we want to: (1) attempt a nonquestion-begging argument for agency as self-determination; (2) sketch a theory of agency that fits our kind of compatibilism; and (3) indicate on the basis of (1) and (2) how human agency can be both determined and free (in our compatibilist sense of self-determination). Our compatibilism, it will become clear, is not a compatibilism of dissolutionism and/or voluntariness alone. Moreover, it issues in a kind of soft determinism that is not entailed by either of these more traditional compatibilisms. First, we offer a more detailed definition of agency. For us, *human agency is the deliberative, reflective activity of a human being in framing, choosing, and executing his/her actions in a way that is not fully determined by factors and conditions other than his/her own understanding and reasoning.* (Such other factors and conditions include external constraints and coercions, as well as internal constraints over which the person has no conscious control.) As such, agency is a kind of self-determination.

Note several things about this definition of agency. First, agency need not be unaffected by factors and conditions other than an agent's own authentic, reflective understanding and reasoning. It only must not be determined fully by such other factors, a state of affairs we refer to as *underdetermination*. Second, even if a given motive or desire may initially have been established by factors such as social conditioning or genetics, the actor (following Frankfurt, 1971) remains an agent so long as he/she has assimilated such motives or desires so as to make them objects of his/her own deliberation. Third, in saying that agency is underdetermined by "other factors," we do not mean that agency is necessarily

undetermined, only that it must itself figure in its own determination. This is what we mean by self-determination.

We especially wish to emphasize the distinction we draw between *undetermined* and *underdetermined*, because in our view the traditional Hobbesian framing of compatibilism is inadequate precisely because it fails to make this distinction. In the absence of the possibility of underdetermination, only two choices present themselves, these being strict determinism or randomness, either of which may be argued effectively to rule out a coherent sense of self-determination. The problem we see with the traditional Hobbesian dissolutionist argument is that, as Bishop Bramwell and many others have sensed, it reduces self-determination too radically to nothing more than a link in a chain of antecedent events, factors, and conditions. It leaves no room for the deliberation (reflective understanding and reasoning) of an agent that is not entirely determined by other factors and conditions—in other words, it rules out even a limited origination. From this, it should be obvious that our position is not intended to be compatibilist in the traditional sense of dissolving agency to determinism. Rather, it is intended to be compatibilist in the more radical sense of demonstrating how an agentive capability in deliberation and action is compatible with a deterministic, nonmysterious, and nonreductive account of the development of human agency within biological/physical, historical, and sociocultural contexts.

Finally, by avoiding the word “cause,” in our definition of agency, we do not restrict determination to efficient causation. Given well-known difficulties with the concept of cause (e.g., problems of infinite regress, the question of reasons as causes, the difficulty in selecting specific causes from other conditions and factors in open systems, and the satisfactory formulation of conditions of necessity and sufficiency), we feel justified in avoiding its use. Nonetheless, our conception of determinism is broadly consistent with the folk psychological idea of antecedent events, factors, and conditions influencing subsequent events with varying degrees of completeness, such that when such influence is complete, full determinism results.

The only factors or conditions, other than agency (understood as self-determination) that might determine human choice and action, aside from explicit coercion that does not always exist are: (a) physical/biological (e.g., neurophysiological) states and processes; (b) sociocultural rules and practices; (c) unconscious processes over which an agent has no control; or (d) random (chance) events. (We omit theological speculation because in our opinion invoking an omniscient being or beings removes any rationale for human argument with respect to agency.) Assuming that these options exhaust plausible possibilities for explaining human choice and action (other than the positing of human agency understood as self-determination in the manner we have specified in our definition of agency), elimination of each and all of these options as fully determinate of human choice and action will establish the underdetermination of human agency by factors and conditions other than agency (in our sense of self-determination) itself.

Our argument against full physical/biological determinism starts with the observation that human actions are meaningful and meaning requires a context. Meaning refers to the conventional, common, or standard sense of an expression, construction, or sentence in a given language, or of a nonlinguistic signal or symbol or practice in a particular sociocultural setting. Therefore, the meaningfulness of human actions requires sociocultural rules and practices, the most important of which are linguistic or language related. Consequently, the only way in which human choice and action could be determined entirely by biological/neurophysiological states and processes is if the sociocultural rules, practices, and conventions are determined by or reducible to such states and processes. Such a full reduction of society and cultures to physical biology seems highly implausible, given that we currently do not possess, nor we would argue, ever are likely to possess adequate physical descriptions of sociocultural, linguistic practices. Without such descriptions, attempting to explain agency in solely physical terms is rather like attempting to explain the activity of baseball players without reference to the rules and regulations of the game of baseball. Note that this argument against full biological/physical determinism does not rule out human biology and neurophysiology as requirements for human action. However, requirement alone is not determination.

To see why full sociocultural determinism of agency also fails, it is important to note that socioculturally governed meanings change over historical time. Such change could not occur if past sociocultural rules, conventions, and practices were fully determinate of meaning, and therefore of meaningful human action. Therefore, past sociocultural rules, conventions, and practices cannot be fully determinate of meaningful human action, but must be at least partially open-ended. Further, it seems highly likely that the partially open-ended nature of whatever conventional sociocultural meanings are operative at any given time allows for the development of personal understanding and possibilities for action that may contribute significantly to sociocultural change. However, allowance of this kind is not determination.

Moreover, despite ongoing sociocultural change, a good deal of order is discernible in sociocultural conventions, rules, and practices. Because randomness cannot account for order, the sociocultural meaning that is required for human action cannot be random. Finally, humans are at least partially aware of many of their choices and actions in ways that converge and coordinate with the observations, accounts, and activities of others. Unconscious processes alone cannot account for such awareness and coordination of human choice and action. We accept that change in sociocultural practices, conventions, and rules that guide human choice and action may, and probably often does, reflect human activity that is nondeliberative in the sense of being tacit or inarticulate. However, we submit that our phenomenal experience of ourselves as intentional agents, in combination with our ability to coordinate our actions with those of others to achieve commonly judged, orderly social ends, provides sufficient reason to forego a commitment to fully random or unconscious determination.

Having eliminated full biological and cultural determination of human action, and argued against random chance and unconscious processes alone, we are left with the possibility that human choice and action, at least in part and sometimes, result from the authentic (irreducible) understanding and reasoning of human agents. The underdetermination of human agency by these other conditions and factors does not mean that human agency is undetermined, only that it figures in its own determination. Such self-determination means that human agency is not reducible to physical, biological, sociocultural, and/or random/unconscious processes, even though all of these may be required for, and/or help to constitute it.

Of course, it might be argued that some combination of physical/biological, sociocultural, chance, and/or unconscious factors and conditions might provide a fully deterministic account that does not require self-determination. Indeed, this may be a logical possibility if one assumes some kind of generative (not strictly additive) interactivity among these various conditions and factors. However, without an exacting empirical demonstration of precisely such a generative effect (preferably one displayed at the level of everyday events, not one based speculatively on microparticulate chaos, as has been proposed by Kane, 1998), such possibilities amount to little more than gestures of faith that assume a determinism that is complete without self-determination. Consequently to us they seem only to beg the question.

Thus concludes our argument for the underdetermination of human agency. The reason that this argument by elimination is important for our current purposes is because we believe that any viable theory of psychological personhood must offer an explanation of human agency in nonreductive terms. This is, of course, precisely what our developmental theory of emergent, agentive personhood attempts to do. However, before turning directly to such theorizing, a few words will help to clarify further our conception of self as a kind of understanding.

3. *Self as understanding*

The second of our two defining aspects of personhood is self-understanding, or more specifically, our conception of self as the understanding of particular being. In our view, understanding is a process through which the physical, sociocultural, and eventually the psychological world is revealed, both tacitly and explicitly. That part of a person's understanding that uncovers aspects of her/his particular being in the world is self-understanding (self). Self is an ever changing, dynamic process of understanding particular being. This said, self, as a core, necessary aspect of personhood, is related to particular identity, embodied being, and deliberative, reflective agency in ways that give it an existential and experiential grounding. This grounding ensures some necessary degree of stability within an overall pattern of processural change. As related to these other aspects of personhood, self is recognizable to itself, even as it shifts and evolves. As such, self as an understanding of particular being is capable of taking aspects of itself (e.g., beliefs, desires, reasons, and values) as intentional objects. When such second-order, self-reflective capability

emerges within the contextualized, developmental trajectory of an individual life, full-fledged psychological personhood is attained (cf. both Merleau-Ponty, 1962 and Taylor, 1985a). Such persons are potentially capable of influencing, to some extent, those sociocultural contexts that are indispensable to their own development as persons.

We realize that the foregoing introductions to our conceptions of levels of reality, the underdetermination of agency, and self as understanding may be difficult to grasp on an initial reading. However, in the following brief description of our developmental theory of emergent personhood (Martin & Sugarman, 1999a), we believe that these three neo-ontological perspectives, and their interrelations, will be clarified.

Our Developmental Theory

At the beginning of individual human life, the infant is equipped with an evolved homo sapien sapien body and brain capable of supporting uniquely human forms of orienting to and learning from others, but with little in the way of developed capabilities other than basic, biologically given capabilities of limited motion and sensation (e.g., nonreflective movements and sensations associated with feeding and physical discomfort), orientation (especially to movement and others), and the prereflective ability to remember, in a very limited physical manner, something of what is encountered and sensed. However, the human biological infant both matures and develops within its inescapable historical and sociocultural contexts. This sociocultural world of linguistic and other relational practices comes increasingly to constitute the emergent understanding of the developing infant. Within this lifeworld, nested within the ever-present biological and physical world, caregivers and others interact with the infant in ways that furnish the developing infant with the various practices, forms, and means of personhood and identity extant within the particular society and culture within which the infant exists. Psychological development now proceeds as the internalization and appropriation of sociocultural practices as psychological tools—that is, vehicles for language and thought, much in the manner envisioned by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) (also see Harré's, 1984, neo-Vygotskian account). In this way, developing psychological persons come to talk and relate to themselves in much the same way as others have talked and related to them. In so doing, they become engaged in both the ongoing, always present sociocultural practices in which they are embedded, and those appropriated, internalized linguistic and relational practices they now employ as means for thinking and understanding.

With such appropriation and internalization, and the thinking and understanding thus enabled, the individual's mode of being is transformed from one of prereflective activity to one in which reflective, intentional agency is possible. The psychological person is a biological individual who becomes capable of understanding some of what the lifeworld (in its history, culture, and social relations and practices) and his/her being in it consists. Open to the lifeworld, the psychological person gradually becomes capable of increasingly sophisticated feats of recollection and imagination.

Concomitant with these capabilities of projecting backward and forward in time is the gradual understanding of one's embodied being in the world as a center of experiencing, understanding, intending, and acting. In this way, "self" understanding emerges, and continues to develop, within the historical, sociocultural contexts into which humans are born as biological individuals, but come to exist as psychological persons.

Such psychological persons are capable of reflective, intentional thought and action directed outward and inward. The self now has emerged as a particular kind of interpreted, reflexive understanding of an embodied, "in-the-world" human being—an understanding that discloses and extends particular, individual existence. When this occurs, thought and action are no longer entirely determined by the sociocultural practices from which they initially were constituted, and within which they continue to unfold. Given the inevitably unique history of individual experience within a lifeworld, and the capacity for self as reflexive, interpretive understanding of experience in that world, psychological persons are underdetermined by their constitutive, sociocultural, and biological origins. This does not mean that psychological persons are undetermined, only that together with biological, cultural, and situational determinants, the "self" understanding and deliberations of such persons may, and frequently do, enter into their determination. Even as psychological persons continue to be formed by the relational and discursive practices in which they are embedded, they also come to contribute to those practices in innovative ways that reflect a self-interpreting agency. As Rychlak (1988, 1997) might say, as agents, we are capable of framing "transpredications" (alternative possibilities) that draw upon but purposefully transform what we have experienced and learned as participants in sociocultural and linguistic practices and forms of understanding.

In a manner similar to that described by some symbolic interactionists (cf. Blumer, 1969), psychological persons are able to contribute to the very sociocultural contexts that shaped them. Once emergent as psychological persons with "self" understanding, human individuals no longer can be reduced to their sociocultural constituents and contexts, let alone to their physical and biological requirements. There is nothing mysterious about any of this. It just is the case that with the developmentally emergent capabilities of reflective thought and intentional action, human psychological persons can react to their sociocultural contexts and categories in ways that alter and change them. This is simply what is true of human beings, and is not true of inanimate objects, or of animals that are not self-interpreting, and therefore do not participate in the developmental trajectory just described.

For us, both understanding and agency have reflective, deliberative, and pre-reflective tacit forms and aspects. Prior to the developmental emergence of the reflective forms of understanding and agency that enable psychological personhood, humans are nonreflectively active and observant within their lifeworld. Such prereflective activity produces, and is in receipt of, various direct and vicarious consequences that gradually equip prereflective individuals with tacit understanding and basic psychological tools. Through the exercise of such primitive understanding and tools (cf. Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), more reflective forms of understanding and agency eventually emerge. Vehicles for such appropriation and transformation

probably include a wide variety of contingent processes that psychologists have labeled as reinforcement, observational learning, and so forth. (As Degrandpre (2000) recently has pointed out, these processes have been studied within both behavioral and cognitive psychology outside of a clear, coherent theory of human agency, and consequently their relevance to the kind of theorizing attempted herein has mostly gone unnoticed. It is thus important to emphasize that in mentioning them here, we nonetheless reject those mostly reductive frameworks within which they have been understood in mainstream psychology.) Through such processes, sociocultural meanings, rules and regulations, conventions, and practices gradually become understood by human individuals embedded and active within them, at first tacitly, but eventually, as individual human activity and its likely effects become more patterned, regularized, and predictable, with greater explicitness and intentional possibility. Of course, the transition from prereflective to reflective forms of understanding and agency is significantly advanced through the symbolic manipulations and transformations afforded by a society's linguistic and other relational practices, as these are taken up as psychological tools by developing persons.

Having made mention of the capability of human psychological agents to influence their historical, sociocultural contexts, even as they always are constrained and continually formed by them, it is important not to become overly enamored of human psychological possibility. For such possibility always is constrained by the limits of human reflective agency. The explicit understanding enabled by deliberative agency always is partial and incomplete when considered against the always-present background of historical, sociocultural practice from which it is constituted and within which it continues to unfold. Most of what we perceive, think, and do in everyday life escapes our conscious reflection. Our immersion in those linguistic, relational, and discursive practices of which we as psychological persons are part is so complete that we typically take for granted the assumptions and conceptions buried in this background to all of our explicit understanding. This may be especially true of that reflexive, interpretive understanding that discloses and constitutes us as selves. Most of what we understand is tacit and unexamined. As the old saying goes, if you want to know about water, don't ask a fish. It is only when our everyday routines are interrupted or disrupted in some way that requires our conscious attention that we may notice certain things about our taken-for-granted world of practices and means, things that previously escaped our reflective consciousness. When this occurs, an opening or possibility is created for extending our explicit, conscious understanding of things already present, but of which we are unaware. In this sense, much of our conscious understanding as psychological persons involves not only attempts to go beyond our sociocultural contexts, but also (even mostly) to penetrate the assumptions, conventions, and meanings implicit and hidden in those contexts and practices of which we are a part. (Note that we are not concerned here with what might be termed the problematics of socialization. We recognize that considerable variation in the assimilation of sociocultural practices and conventions exists across individuals and settings. Nonetheless, for our current purposes, what matters is that such practices and conventions are indispensable to the development of any kind of "self" understanding.)

Once emergent, within the developmental context, as psychological persons with “self” understanding, our further psychological development consists mostly of attempting to understand more and more of our context, even as this context itself shifts in interaction with our actions as psychological persons. In this way, the psychological and the sociocultural exist in a dynamic dance of mutually constitutive interaction. Of course, sociocultural evolution and change typically occur over somewhat longer periods of time, and reflect the historical and contemporary activity of many individuals and collectives, while psychological development and change are more time limited within an individual lifeline. Nonetheless, neither psychological agents nor societies could exist without the other, a consideration also emphasized by symbolic interactions like Blumer (1969). It is their dynamic interaction that constitutes the human world nested within the natural world of physical and biological reality.

Self as a Kind of Understanding that Discloses and Extends Particular Being Within Traditions of Living

Having briefly described the developmental context within which psychological agents emerge and exist (for a more extended discussion, see Martin & Sugarman, 1999a), it now is possible to clarify further our ontological claims concerning self as a particular kind of understanding. Of great importance in this regard is to note that human subjectivity, whatever its contingent historical, sociocultural character, exhibits care, in the sense of concern for itself. As revealed by Heidegger’s (1962) phenomenological and ontological hermeneutics of being, psychological persons are ontologically unique in that they care about their own existence. They are self-aware and concerned.

The primary way in which the care of psychological persons manifests is in understanding. Understanding opens possibilities for psychological persons to develop and extend themselves. Because both being and understanding require a background of historical, sociocultural practices, care must be situated within both the individual and collective projects of humans within a tradition or way of life. For psychological persons, understanding always includes a kind of valuing—a finding of significance and personal meaning in the lifeworld. The interpretation of personal meaning and significance in lived experience is thus a necessary, ongoing aspect for the understanding and care of psychological persons. It is what takes human psychological development forward at both collective and individual levels. (Of course, personal meaning and significance would be impossible were it not for the existence of historical, sociocultural meaning as manifest in social, linguistic rules, regulations, conventions, and practices.)

To care for itself in a mostly physical and biological world, a nonhuman animal must get by as best it can with a nonreflective, relatively primitive consciousness and activity in the world. However, to care for itself within an historical, sociocultural lifeworld of discursive and relational practices, the human psychological

person must understand. As already hinted, human understanding is both tacit and explicit. Tacit understanding is the kind of “know how” that comes from acting with others in general accord with, but without explicit recognition and articulation of, the conventions, norms, and shared assumptions of the sociocultural context. Explicit understanding is achieved through a more purposefully engaged interpretation of the lifeworld in relation to particular concerns of a psychological person, concerns that reflect the care of such a person for his/her own being. Tacit understanding may become explicit, particularly when the concerns of a psychological person are thwarted in some way that requires the individual to penetrate the tacit, taken-for-granted background of historical, sociocultural practices that yields meaning and potential intelligibility. Such penetration requires interpretation, and not infrequently is assisted by consideration of the articulated, shared understandings of others within a particular tradition of living.

All understanding opens up possibilities for the extension of psychological being within a lifeworld. However, given that tacit understanding typically is sufficient for the execution of everyday routines, it is the opening of possibilities through reflexive agency and interpretive activity that enables a psychological person to develop beyond whatever set of tacit understandings currently constitutes that individual’s way of being in the lifeworld. This is especially true of the self—that understanding that discloses and extends one’s particular being in the world. Interpretive understanding begins with a concern related to a psychological person’s care for his/her particular being and involves some kind of inquiry into the world of lived experience. The concern may be relatively minor (e.g., locating an alternative route to work during heavy traffic) or major (e.g., attempting to discover what has gone wrong in an intimate relationship). Concerns may lead to other and further inquiries and to possible reorganizations of relatively small or large areas of understanding, experience, and activity.

As the opening of possibilities for living and self, reflexive, interpretive understanding always is ongoing, mutable, and incomplete. It ebbs and flows, as concerns arise in the course of living and acting. Explicit, interpretive understanding is possible only because of the set of tacit and potential understandings available in the background of practices and assumptions that form a tradition of living. Interpretation involves an attempt at openness to one’s own and others’ understanding and the historical, sociocultural tradition or traditions within which any understanding takes place. It also involves attempts to apply what is understood within this necessarily dialogical activity to the concerns and questions that motivated the interpretive inquiry. All understanding has this general form, whether it relates to our everyday attempts to understand ourselves, others, and events, or whether it relates to more formalized, collective disciplinary practices such as psychology. It is the fact that any interpretation always is nested within traditions of living (which consist of shared and potentially sharable practices, conventions, meanings, and assumptions) that makes it possible for psychological persons to discern and judge the understanding it yields.

“Self” understanding thus does not discover facts about the properties of an inner substance or entity but expresses how psychological persons have dealt with and are

dealing with questions of their own existence or being. Such understanding is not only about relations among interpretations and ascriptions concerning any particular, embodied being, but also concerned with the background or lifeworld within which all particular being unfolds. “Self” understanding connects particular being to the lifeworld in ways that respond to the cares and concerns of embodied agents. Self emerges developmentally as an understanding capable of reflectively taking both sociocultural practices and meanings, and aspects of itself (desires, reasons, and deliberations extracted from immersion in requisite sociocultural practices and meanings) as intentional objects. As a consequence, possibilities resident in the lifeworld are made available to human agents in the world. It is in this sense that selves are understandings that disclose and extend particular being within traditions of living.

Possible Challenges to Conceptualizing the Self as an Understanding

We have presented a developmental context and conception of self as a developmentally emergent, embodied understanding of psychological persons that discloses and extends their particular being (and related activity) in the world. How viable, coherent, and potentially fruitful is this perspective on the self? While we are unable to predict all possible challenges to our position, three seem quite obvious. First, if the self is nothing more than a particular kind of understanding, what is it that understands? Second, what distinguishes our use of the terms person, being, agency, and self? And finally, what advantages does this perspective have over other contenders?

With respect to the first of these challenges, in our view it is a Cartesian fallacy to hold that thinking and understanding are so entirely and solely mental activities that their very perception demands a private self conceived as a homunculus within. From the perspective we have articulated, it is the embodied person, active within the lifeworld, who understands. There is no need to posit a solitary inner self as a separate, distinct component of such an irreducible entity.

This position leads directly to a response to the second challenge. The irreducible psychological unit in our view is the embodied person who comes to understand something of his/her particular being in the world. Being, for us, refers to the existence in the lifeworld of a human individual. Prior to the developmental emergence of “self” understanding, humans exist mostly as biological individuals. The emergence of understanding that discloses and extends forms of being and activity in the world is what we call self (or “self as understanding” or “self” understanding). Agency, in our account, refers to the activity of a person in the world and may be either prereflective (when such activity occurs in the absence of “self” understanding) or reflective (when the activity of a genuinely psychological person reflects that individual’s “self” understanding). We use the verb “extends” to mean that with the emergence of “self” understanding, a human psychological person is able to engage in purposeful interpretation of his/her being, and is able reflexively to control and

intervene in the lifeworld, through the exercise of reason, choice, and action. Of course, it is precisely such reflexive agency that most analytic philosophers consider to be authentic agency.

We realize that neither our ideas about personhood and self nor our developmental theory of their emergence succeed entirely in resolving important, time-honored questions concerning the exact constitution of agency understood as intentional action that is at least partially self-determined, or the precise relationships that might exist among the various kinds of understanding with which we have been concerned. While falling short of such comprehensive, definitive results, we nonetheless believe that our approach to such matters contains particular advantages that we hope others might build upon.

In particular, we believe that our developmental, sociocultural perspective on self as understanding shares several advantages that we also perceive in certain social constructionist accounts (e.g., Harré, 1989). It does away with the Cartesian homuncular regress and with the troublesome dualisms that attend a radical separation of mind and body, and mind and world. It also appears to handle the possible contradiction of positing both a unitary and multiple selves, in that “self” understanding may contain certain core or central ideas and propositions, while displaying considerable temporal and contextual shifting in what might be considered to be its more peripheral components. Moreover, unlike much social constructionist theorizing, our approach manages these advantages while retaining the possibility of a socioculturally enabled and constrained agency. Such agency is nonetheless authentic in that it is not entirely determined by sociocultural and/or biological factors, but (once emergent) always is capable of free choice and action, to the extent that the lifeworld allows. Thus, the overall position we offer has all of the advantages of social constructionism, but also retains a viable conception of irreducible agency that many theorists require of theories of self (e.g., James, 1890), without dissolving into Romantic, humanistic fantasy. Finally, while our self as understanding is undeniably relational, it is not conceived as any sort of entity (either substantive or relational). Rather, as an understanding that discloses and extends particular being and enables related activity in the world, our “self” understanding is capable of coherently explaining those imaginative, projected possibilities for selfhood with which “entity” conceptions of self invariably struggle.

If self is construed as the kind of understanding we have attempted to describe herein, the age-old problem of knowing oneself is at least partially dissolved. “Self” understanding is not a matter of hurdling a Cartesian barrier to confront an unsituated subject standing apart from its own being. Rather, it is a matter of finding ways to articulate a disclosing and extending understanding that is always already present, at least potentially. The problem of knowing oneself is not one of objectivity, but concerns the limits of one’s ability to penetrate the background of the lifeworld, and to be open to, and able to grasp and apply, possibilities for being.

Self and other psychological kinds cannot be conceived apart from interpretations and descriptions given to them within historical, sociocultural traditions of living. Only in the light of cultural history can psychologists’ conceptions of psychological phenomena be seen as embedded in the larger ongoing project of humanity

attempting to understand itself. The discipline of psychology belongs to the history of ways human beings have developed for interpreting themselves psychologically. It is precisely this history that has constituted self and other psychological kinds. As Danziger (1997b) argues,

Before there could be anything for the discipline of psychology to study, people had to develop a psychological way of understanding themselves, their conduct, and their experiences. They had to develop specific psychological concepts and categories for making themselves intelligible to themselves. (p. 139)

The idea of self as a kind of understanding, while perhaps somewhat radical, really is quite consistent with much twentieth-century theorizing about the self from pragmatic, hermeneutic, social constructionist, and postmodern perspectives. All of these perspectives have succeeded in challenging the Cartesian and Romantic views of the self as a substantive, privileged epistemic entity and have insisted on its situated, relational, and embodied character. It really is not going much further to suggest that self is nothing more than understanding that both discloses and extends the being and activity of a particular embodied agent in the lifeworld. We are in the world and only in the world do we know ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Implications for Understanding Human Agency

One way to understand the implications of our approach to agency as self-determination is to contrast it with an influential conceptualization of self-determination that has been advanced by the libertarian Robert Kane (1998).

To say that persons self determine. . . is to say that they perform. . . acts and that they have plural voluntary control over their doing so and doing otherwise [right up to the very point of acting]. Agents have plural voluntary control when they are able to do what they will to do, when they will to do it, on purpose rather than by accident or mistake, without being coerced or compelled in doing, or willing to do, it, or otherwise controlled by other agents or mechanisms. (p. 191)

Kane, unlike many other contemporary libertarians, insists that such self-determination need not invoke a mysteriously unique kind of nonoccurrent agent causation. (Nonoccurrent causation is the causation of an action or other occurrence by something other than other occurrences.) His tactic here is to take seriously the possibility that a kind of self-network exists that somehow can be mapped onto neural occurrences and that all of this (both the conscious experience of agency and the intervening self-network) is somehow related to the quantum character of reality. Here, it is interesting to note just how closely Kane seems to come to the kind of functionalism currently favored by many hard determinists who employ computational, supervenient models in an attempt indirectly to link agentive kinds to an underlying physical level of strict causation (e.g., Kim, 1996).

While sometimes seen as alternatives to contemporary hard determinist, materialist accounts of agency, functionalist accounts that employ supervenience seem to us mostly to beg the reductive question by purposing an intermediate level of

rather mysterious “computational,” “connectionist,” or “schematic network” kinds that somehow are supposed to mediate between psychological, agentic, and physical kinds. In our view, such efforts experience the same kinds of difficulty as earlier, more directly and obviously reductive, central state materialist and computational models in accounting for important features of our psychological states such as intentionality, rationality, normativity, and first-person perspective (cf. McDowell, 1994; Searle, 1992). Moreover, they frequently seem to conflate requirement with identity relations in apparently assuming that because human agents require biological bodies, they are nothing more than biological bodies, albeit “computerized” and/or “schematized” ones. In all such approaches, sociocultural meanings, rules, conventions, and practices, which for us play critically important background, contextual, and constitutive roles in the development of human self-understanding and agency receive extremely short shrift.

In contrast to Kane’s version of contemporary libertarianism, our own treatment of agentic self-determination is more modest in requiring only that self-determination be an irreducible part of the determination of at least some of the actions and experiences of psychological persons. For us, all self-determination emerges developmentally, as a kind of reflective self-understanding linked to deliberate action, within the constraints and influences of both biology and culture, but not reducible to either. We thus attempt to avoid both a reduction of agency to neurophysiology and a speculative appeal to microparticulate theorizing that seems ultimately to substitute quantum uncertainty and “indeterminacy” for agentic reason, intention, and perspective. To us, such moves seem to sacrifice precisely what we hope to maintain and try to explain. Interestingly, more recently Kane (2002) also seems to recognize a need to balance the neurophysiological aspect of his theorizing with a kind of emergence, perhaps not totally dissimilar to that discussed herein.

Traditional libertarian and hard determinist approaches to agency tend to ignore the historical, sociocultural constitution of agency. In the case of libertarianism, this tendency manifests in question-begging assertions of radical freedom emanating from a metaphysically isolated agent somehow disconnected to the physical, biological, and sociocultural world. In the case of hard determinism, this tendency often manifests in implausible attempts to reduce agency to nothing more than physical kinds and causes. By bringing agency “into the world,” we hope to have moved some small way toward addressing the three problems associated with compatibilist theories that we posed earlier. In particular, we have attempted a nonquestion-begging argument for agency as self-determination and indicated, through a brief elaboration of our theory of agentic development, how this conception of agency may be held coherently as being both determined and determining.

What we claim is that agency arises from the prereflective activity of biological humans embedded inextricably within a real physical and sociocultural world. It is this activity and its consequences that make available sociocultural practices, conventions, and meanings to the increasingly reflective understanding of human persons. That part of such understanding that reveals aspects of the particular being of a human individual is constitutive of the self of that person. With the onset

of reflective, “self” understanding capable of memorial recollection, imaginative projection, and reason, a kind of situated, deliberative agency becomes possible. This is an agency that is of nonmysterious origin, being constituted and determined by relevant physical, biological conditions and requirements, and sociocultural practices and meanings. Yet because of the reflective self-understanding and reason upon which it rests, such an agency also consists in a kind of self-determination that never acts outside of historical and sociocultural situatedness, but which can aspire beyond, and cannot be reduced to such situatedness alone, nor to its other biological and physical requirements. Moreover, the resultant agency is not only voluntary, but has an aspect of origination, not in any radically free sense, but in the capability of self-interpreting, self-determining agents to selectively take up, modify, and employ available sociocultural practices and conventions as bases for psychologically significant activity. *It is in this sense that the situated, deliberative agency we argue for, and theorize about, is both determined and determining.*

Our approach is compatibilist in the sense that it relies centrally on an idea of self-determination, but it is not dissolutionist, nor restricted to voluntariness alone. With respect to psychology, we are of the opinion that the kind of compatibilist theorizing we have attempted herein eventually may contribute to an understanding of psychology as a rigorous, but nonreductive study of the experiences and actions of human agents in historical, sociocultural, and developmental contexts. Such a psychology would carry implications for a form of psychological practice that approaches concerns of living within relevant traditions and practices, without forgetting, but also without elevating inappropriately, necessary physical and biological factors and considerations. It is this nesting of the psychological within the historical and sociocultural, which in turn are nested within biological and physical reality, that we regard as a proper “metaphysics” of the human condition. This is not a traditional metaphysics of transcendental or first principles, certainty, and essentials, but a “neo-metaphysics” consisting in historical, situational, and developmental contingencies that are inseparable from, the “acting-in-the-world” of embodied, biologically evolved human beings who seem uniquely “culture-capable.”

Concluding Remarks

For us, self as understanding and agency as self-determination are the hallmarks of psychological personhood. Together, they give rise to what we regard as a uniquely human capability—deliberative, reflective activity in framing, choosing, and executing actions. While there is some limited origination in this, it is important not to overstate it. Psychological persons never can stand outside of the determining influence of relevant physical, biological, and sociocultural (especially relational and linguistic) factors and conditions. Nonetheless, their self-understanding is underdetermined by such other factors and conditions, and capable of entering into the framing, choosing, and execution of actions, both routine and mildly innovative.

The approach to personhood that we have described in this chapter is socioculturally contingent, yet claims genuine agency and self-understanding that cannot be reduced to their sociocultural origins or to any pregiven physical/biological properties, processes, or structures of the human body or brain. It is a personhood nested within physical, biological, and sociocultural reality, both historically and ontogenetically. As such, it refuses extreme forms of both atomism and holism, and charts a middle course between physical/biological reductionism and sociocultural determinism. In this sense, it fits within a view of psychological phenomena as irreducibly situated within traditions of living that have unfolded socially and culturally within the physical and biological world. It thus preserves a unique disciplinary ground for psychological studies, assuming the kind of reconfiguration of such studies envisioned by theoretical psychologists such as Richardson et al. (1999) (also see Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003b).

Our account of personhood, with its closely related conceptions of agency and self-understanding, does not view human action as purely procedural and rule-governed instrumental activity that somehow is given antecedently to sociocultural and historical contexts. In light of the developmental framework we have described, our reasons for judging and acting come largely from our having been initiated into a lifeworld comprised not only of means and practices for reflection, but also of goods and ends that contribute substance and direction to our deliberations. This sociocultural and historical lifeworld, replete with meanings, identifications, and significances, is an ever-present tacit background to all our attempts to deliberate and understand.

In contrast to a view of deliberation that hinges on instrumental rationality, we pose our conceptions of understanding and self-understanding. Individuals deliberate and exercise choice not simply for the instrumental gratification of desires, but to create possibilities for an existence that is both meaningfully connected to the lifeworld and something of their own agentive making. The development of a capacity for reflective, explicit understanding makes it possible for us to achieve some measure of critical distance from tradition and from our own niches and ascribed identifications, and, in so doing, critique and revise our practices, ends, and, inevitably, ourselves. From this perspective, the political individual is not a transcendent, rational chooser, but rather an enculturated, yet emergent agent capable of individually and collectively pursuing possibilities that might go somewhat beyond those already enacted in public and civic life. To demonstrate, in the next chapter we explore the ways in which our conceptualization of the self as a kind of understanding along with our thesis of underdetermination bear important implications that might inform political thought with respect to understanding historical and contemporary debates between liberals and communitarians.



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Martin, J.; Sugarman, J.H.; Hickenbottom, S.

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