Determining oneself and determining one's self

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Abstract: In this essay, I exploit an ambiguity in the concept of self-determination. Self-determination can mean to determine oneself in choices and actions or to determine one’s self. The second kind of self-determination leads to our capacity to imagine alternative selves of ourselves, which are to be actualized. This creates the basis for a normative conception of self-determination, i.e. a conception that incorporates the aspect of a right or good way to determine oneself. I defend a normative interpretation of self-determination, which is illustrated by reference to three theorists: Harry Frankfurt, Thomas Hill Green and John Stuart Mill.

In this essay, I exploit an ambiguity in the concept of self-determination. Self-determination can mean to determine oneself in choices and actions or to determine one’s self. I will call the first interpretation self-actualisation and the second self-formation. The second kind of self-determination leads to our capacity to imagine alternative selves of ourselves, which are to be actualized. This creates the basis for a normative conception of self-determination, i.e. a conception that incorporates the aspect of a right or good way to determine oneself. I defend a normative interpretation of self-determination, which is illustrated by reference to three theorists: Harry Frankfurt, Thomas Hill Green and John Stuart Mill.

In the first section, I set the context by describing in general terms how I conceive the connection between freedom and human beings' idea of themselves. There is a conception of self-determination that sets no limits in the sense that any possible uncoerced way to express oneself is supposed to be self-determined. There is a second conception that introduces norms of proper forms of self-determination. I call the former voluntarist and the second perfectionist accounts of self-determination. In the second section, I introduce the general distinction between self-actualisation and self-formation and connect them with the two accounts from sections one, so that I end up with a classification of four ideal-types of theories. The following three sections discuss three versions (one is disregarded for being implausible) with historical illustrations. A version of voluntarist self-actualisation is represented by Harry Frankfurt in section 3. In the fourth section I discuss Thomas Hill Green's version of perfectionist self-formation, before moving on to John Stuart Mills' account of perfectionist self-actualisation in section 5. Mill's theory seems to me the most plausible in that it allows for normative constraints of proper self-actualisation but also insists on one's own individual versions of self-determination. Section 6 concludes.

1. Introduction

The value of our freedom to act does not merely stem from the fact that it enables us to do things that we may, at some specific point in time, strive to do. The value of individual freedom especially derives from the desire of human beings to express themselves in the world. Human beings do not merely want to satisfy their relevant preferences, but also to realise their individual identity – the way they are – in their decisions and actions.

This necessitates a capacity to see oneself as a being that possesses and commands certain continuous attributes, such as evaluative beliefs, ideals, and a character. Restrictions to our options seem to us to be problematic wherever they bring us to do something with which we do not identify ourselves, or when we are not able to do something for which we stand. This is, in a word, the value of self-determination.

If we did not have the capacity to identify with our actions – or to distance ourselves from them – self-determination would not seem to have value to us; for whatever we would do, it would be impossible to evaluate it from our own perspective. We would simply actualise that which currently impels us to do so. If we were for instance automata, then we would not need to be concerned about whether we have actually realised ourselves or not. We would simply act, and would either be capable or incapable of doing that which is given to us as a goal, e.g. by a computer program. An automaton can have freedom to act or not, but it cannot be self-determined. Self-determination, rather, has to do with freedom of choice. Only when beings can be this or that, when they have alternative ideas of themselves arises the idea of a self and thereby the significance of whether one can realise oneself in the world or not.

The idea of self-determination is not commonly understood such that every way we express ourselves through our actions actually counts as an acceptable form of self-determination. There are indeed many examples, especially in literature and film, in which human beings do not reach their potential or “waste their lives”. For instance, should we consider the life of Jeff Lebowski, also known as “The Dude”, protagonist of the film *The Big Lebowski*, as a self-determined one? The Dude does not do much else than to consume drugs, to go bowling, and to take care of his shag rug.

Many philosophers believe that we human beings have a natural need to cultivate our individual capabilities as much as possible. According to this understanding of the human life the Dude would not live up to his own nature. In this manner John Rawls for instance has made the claim: "Human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (...), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity." (Rawls 1999, 364). We could paraphrase this so-called “Aristotelian principle” of Rawls’s in that human beings have a perfectible nature, and that they are interested in improving this nature. Here the connection between self-determination and happiness or the good life of human beings is clearly visible. Indeed, many would claim that only a self-determined life can be a good life. In this way it seems important *how* and *to what end* we determine ourselves.

But not to see the Dude as at all self-determined is perhaps demanding too much of a self-determined life. In the end, for all we know he has chosen his life without coercion. Is it not enough for the goal of self-determination that certain formal criteria for free choice are fulfilled? The Dude may fall short of real happiness or he may simply foster some sort of unconventional interpretation of the good life, but he lives his life in self-determined fashion all the same. From this point of view there would be no prescribed external norms of proper self-determination whatsoever. A person would then be self-determined where she voluntarily lives a life according to her free choice; only where she does not choose freely, her self-determination would be in doubt.

The discussion about the concept of self-determination accordingly seems to oscillate between two philosophical poles: On one side, the ideal of perfectionism, which takes the development of potentials as a criterion for self-determination, and, on the other side, the ideal of voluntarism – as I call it – which only focuses on an individual's own selection of options. As it often happens, or so it seems to me, the most plausible approach lies somewhere between the two extremes.

In my analysis I would hence like to illuminate the notion of self-determination a little more, not in pursuing any sort of conceptual analysis, but rather by discussing actual philosophical interpretations of this concept and weighing their arguments. First and foremost, I will defend a normative conception of self-determination. I believe the most plausible interpretation of self-determination necessarily encompasses an aspect of the right or good way of self-determination. In pursuing this argumentative goal my point of departure will be an equivocation that engenders two central aspects of the idea of self-determination: Self-determination can either mean to determine oneself in the world or it can mean to determine one’s self. The possibility of the second sort of self-determination – which I will call self-formation – implies envisaging alternatives for one’s own self that can be realised (cf. Bransen 2002). The mentioned alternatives of understanding self-determination, combined with the distinction between voluntarism and perfectionism, leads me to a four-fold categorisation of different theories of self-determination. In the following I will illustrate this classification with the help of philosophical theories devised by Harry Frankfurt, Thomas Hill Green and John Stuart Mill.

When I refer to "a self" in this paper, I merely mean to refer to the attributes, capabilities, value beliefs and characteristics of a person. I do not want to add a metaphysical claim about the ontology of selves (cf. Velleman 2006, 1). As far as I am concerned, selves are assemblages of aspects of an individual being. In addition, I want to presume that there is a self only where there is a relationship of a being to itself; where it can understand itself this or that way (cf. Taylor 1985). To this end it is important that such a being is conscious of itself and acquires knowledge about itself. The peculiar form of self-relation is an old theme of philosophy (cf. Taylor 1989), of course, but for my analysis it is only relevant in terms of representing a precondition of self-determination. My main aim is to clarify what it means to determine oneself and one's self.

2. Self-Actualisation and Self-Formation

As mentioned before, the concept of self-determination has two dimensions: The determination of decisions and actions by oneself and the determination of one's self. In most contexts self-determination is understood in the first sense, for instance when applied to the choices of patients in a medical context. They determine themselves in cases where they decide between therapeutic options and where this decision is actually implemented. Talk of self-determination as a determination of the self, i.e. self-determination in the second sense, is predominantly discussed in connection with the metaphysical problem of free will: In order for freedom of the will to be possible, some might claim, it is required that unfixed aspects of the self, for instance the character of a person, has been determined by the person herself and not arisen through some deterministic mechanism. For the sake of simplicity, I will from now on refer to self-determination as action under the aegis of oneself – self-determination in the first sense – as *self-actualisation* and to the determination of one's own self – self-determination in the second sense – as *self-formation*.

To illustrate the two ideas, one could claim that a student only self-determinedly or freely chose to study philosophy if the underlying desire itself was in turn determined or generated by that person herself. The willing student of philosophy might actualise herself by acting on her choice, but her respective will might not have been formed by herself. I believe many quarrels about people being or not being self-determined are due to cross-purposes regarding the two different ideas of self-determination.

Still, should we really accept this differentiation between two meanings of self-determination? Does is not lead to various philosophical dead ends, especially in terms of the metaphysical problem of free will? It seems to me that we can indeed make sense to the relevant distinction in a way that does not simply merge into the problem of free will. Indeed, it appears to me that a focus on the debate over free will would put us on the wrong course. For it seems to pose the problem of self-determination in the following way: Self-determination is the actualisation of aspects of the self – desires, value judgments, personal characteristics, etc. – in the world; but how does the self, which determines itself here, arise? Was it determined by itself or “externally” determined? The problem with this point of view lies in the fact that existence of the self is postulated prior to its own actualisation.

This is a problematic point of view: according to it, first a self is developed, and this is then actualised through actions. The problem is that within such a framework we can ask the question whether one's self has been determined by oneself, which makes it obvious that a synchronic doubling of the self has arisen. There would have to be in turn someone, a self, who forms the self. The structure of self-determination as an actualisation in the world is transposed onto the self within this dubious framework; the self becomes the result of the forming actions of a – probably another – self. This view therefore produces a kind of homunculus that forms the person.

To be sure, these problems are by no means new, and especially in relation to the related philosophical problem of self-consciousness they have been well analysed (Tugendhat 1989). The questionable aspect stems from the translation of a subject-object structure into the idea of self-formation. In order to be able to “form” oneself – an object – there would have to be already to be a subject in place, which precedes the self to be formed. But here subject and object are of course identical, and herein lies the philosophical oddity.

The problem of the subject-object structure is relatively easy to solve. We should simply say that a person forms and expresses herself through her actions (Schechtman 2004). This framework circumvents the problematic implication of a split between a forming self, the “former”, as it were, and that which is to be formed. There is accordingly no prior self, no homunculus. Insofar as we have different options there are also different possible self-formations.

In addition, this way of understanding self-formation allows “quality control”; in other words, assessments of right and wrong or good and bad self-formations. As we shall see, this is a central element of the philosophical discussion about self-determination: Human beings have an “evaluative self-relation” (Quant, 2007, 29).

Yet understood in this way the difference between self-actualisation and self-formation indeed seems to collapse, for to actualise oneself now simply seems to mean to express one’s self. To be sure, one could form oneself in various ways so long as one can act in varying ways, but there would seem to be no scope here for an incongruence between self-actualisation and self-formation. One would simply be what one expresses, or what one does.

This would be an unsatisfactory result in my opinion, since the relevant phenomenon of actualising oneself in a way that one is not, hence in a way that does not correspond to one's true self, is very real. One can be a person who does not express herself in the actions she commits. The person’s actions in these cases are, as it is said, alienated or inauthentic (cf. Oshana 2010). Here the person is therefore not expressing herself qua self-determined actions; nonetheless she acts self-determinedly, in the sense that she actualises a self freely.

It seems implausible to me to completely abandon the concept of self-determination in those cases in which actions are alienated in order to maintain a conceptual identity between self-actualisation and self-formation. There are definitely forms of self-actualisation in which a person does not express *her self* and still acts self-determinedly. Indeed, the converse also seems possible: A person might express her own self in that she actualises herself; these are cases in which the person identifies with her actions. Here she determines herself (really), that is, here the congruence between self-formation and self-actualisation is present. Indeed, this congruence seems to be the primary goal of self-determination: To express oneself through actions in the way that one sees oneself; which in turn means to act in harmony with oneself. Collapsing the idea of self-actualisation and self-formation seems to undermine our conceptual resources to describe and value these cases.

In my opinion we should therefore not level the difference between self-actualisation and self-formation, for we would remain on the level of factual description if we see congruence in each case. We could then do no more than indicate that a person is the one who actualises herself in free action; that is, we would have generated a purely descriptive concept of self-determination. The only relevant criterion of self-determination would be the exhibition of voluntary decisions and the corresponding options to act. Naturally I do not want to claim that this purely descriptive use of the expression “self-determination” would be pointless or useless. It does indeed function well in political philosophy, where for instance the limits of legitimate influences on decisions are involved. Yet it seems to me that such a restricted view of the concept of self-determination neither fully captures the phenomena nor takes account of all ways of looking at related ethical problems.

The idea of self-formation implies the idea of alternative selves. We are not simply those who actualise themselves in decisions and free actions, but rather ones who have the possibility – however limited – to be this or that way. In brief, we can form ourselves in certain limits (cf. Glover 1988). We can also conceive of different alternatives of ourselves; we can for example imagine how it would be like to be more selfish or to live the life of an artist in the South Seas instead of with a family in the big city. We can also evaluate these alternatives. We can try to bring these hypothetical, alternative selves – let’s call them self-ideals – into reality. In this way a potential incongruence arises between the actual self-actualisation and possible alternative forms of self-actualisation, that is to say, the actualisation of alternative selves. Here it is important to note that the difference between the actual self, which actualises itself in actions, and the self-ideal, which could be actualised in actions, does not lead to a problematic doubling of the self – criticised above – since here no synchronically present multiple selves are postulated.

With this differentiation we succeed in gaining a normative point of view in application to the concept of self-determination, for now we can ask how and towards what end we should determine ourselves. The goal in this pursuit is to reach a congruence between self-actualisation and self-ideal, that is, to express one's ideal self in self-determining actions.

Now we can return to the extreme positions of voluntarism and perfectionism that were mentioned at the beginning, so that four possibilities of conceiving self-determination arise:

1) Voluntarist Self-Actualisation: Self-determination means to actualise one’s true self. This self is not created by the person herself, but is rather revealed through her actions. The point is to be what one is. The goal of self-determination is to be authentic.

2) Voluntarist Self-Formation: Self-determination means to actualise one’s chosen self. The point is to make oneself that which one has chosen oneself to be. The goal of self-determination is to actualise one’s own self-conception.

3) Perfectionist Self-Actualisation: Self-determination means to become one’s best possible self, to actualise one’s potentials. The point is to become the most developed variation of oneself that one can be.

4) Perfectionist Self-Formation: Self-determination means to actualise the best possible self. The point is to become the most developed variation of a self that is possible.

It barely needs emphasising that this categorisation has its own problems. It will nevertheless serve to bring order into the upcoming examples of philosophical theories and hopefully to help making progress in the discussion on self-determination. I refer to the philosophical theories I discuss as theories of self-determination, even if the concept of self-determination is not central to all the respective theories. As shall be seen, I refer to Harry Frankfurt’s approach as a version of voluntarist self-actualisation. The problem of his reflections seems to me primarily to lie in that he leaves no room for a self-ideal that departs from the mere being-identical-with-oneself. Thomas Hill Green, who represents the perfectionist self-formation version, has, as it were, a little too much of this idea of the ideal self. He lays out an ideal self that is not one's own self, but is rather attained from the outside by reference to the idea of reason. In John Stuart Mill we find an ideal of one’s self that is thoroughly one’s own self; a self which does not lie outside of the self-relation of the person, hence is not self-formed, yet can be improved. Mill therefore represents the perfectionist self-actualisation version. This approach seems to me most plausible and I will defend it up to a certain point. The voluntarist self-formation version, which can perhaps be connected most closely to Jean-Paul Sartre, will not be discussed here. To me this approach seems a non-starter, because it either reproduces the homunculus-problem or, in any plausible variation, in which a person actualises herself as the self she has formed, collapses into either of the two self-actualisation variants.

3. Self-Identification: Harry Frankfurt’s Voluntarist Approach

According to Frankfurt a specific capacity of persons is to turn desires into objects of our volitions (Frankfurt 1971). We can accordingly take a stance with respect to ourselves in that we may desire to be effectively motivated through specific desires. Desires in this model are hierarchically structured; we can evaluate desires of the first order and thereby generate desires of a second order – desires with respect to desires. This is in no way a strange philosophical idea, but is rather in line with everyday experience, for instance when we, starting from a desire to eat chocolate, distance ourselves and desire instead that the particular action may not be initiated.

According to Frankfurt, a person acts from her own will when the effectively motivating desires are the ones that she desires to be motivated by; hence if a person's so-called second-order volitions are actualized. For our purposes we might want to say that second-order desires represent an element of the self-ideal of a person. This self-ideal does not actualize itself in each case of action. For numerous reasons an incongruence can arise between the way in which one actually determines oneself and the way in which one desires to determine oneself. If a person however identifies herself with the desire that has a motivating effect on actions – that is, the "will" in Frankfurt’s terminology – then she acts on the grounds of her *own* will. This, according to Frankfurt, means to enjoy free will (Frankfurt 1971, 17).

The question presents itself, on which basis one identifies oneself with certain desires. Structurally, within Frankfurt's model, it is second-order volitions that have this function of identification, but from where do these in turn come? Are they self-chosen and thereby, potentially anyway, brought under the hierarchical model? This would require a possibly infinite regress in the structure of desires; that is, even higher-order volitions. Frankfurt’s answer is that the continuation of the volitional hierarchy ends where one wholeheartedly identifies with a desire (Frankfurt 1987). Accordingly, action-controlling desires – representing the will – are not always themselves objects of wilful identification. In other words, in the case of decisive identification there is no considered choice between different first-order desires, rather, when acting wholeheartedly, the will is simply based on who a person is.

For a person, it can lie at the heart to act one way and not another; and then it appears unthinkable to her to have another will. Although this almost sounds like a description of compulsive behaviour, according to Frankfurt a person is nevertheless not acting unfreely in this case. On the contrary, she then acts on her *own* free will – on what she cares about – because she identifies herself wholeheartedly with the motivating desire. Such an identification does not lead her to any further weighing or reasoning – a kind of undecidedness – but rather to a satisfaction with a given configuration of the will (cf. Seel 2002, 291f.)

When developing his theory, Frankfurt later went even further and introduced the notion of volitional necessities (Frankfurt 1982). In a supposedly paradoxical way, volitional necessities become the epitome of freedom, because through them we act wholeheartedly on the basis of our own will. The necessitating character of these special volitions in turn inhibits the ascent into always higher spheres of volition – it ends all questioning and balancing about motivating desires' adequacy or justification. Since there is no assessment of desires possible in these circumstances – after all a person is then driven by a form of compulsion – there is no scope for an infinite progress of hierarchies of volition.

Frankfurt even describes the phenomenon of love within this model: Its will-defining necessities signify culmination points within the structure of caring. “Loving is a mode of caring. Among the things that we care about there are some that we cannot help caring about; and among the things that we cannot help caring about are those that we love” (Frankfurt 1999, 165).

However, Frankfurt has created a new problem with his analysis, one that has garnered much criticism: Volitional necessities cannot really be objects of a person's own evaluation, because they are not really available to the person; they have no control over volitional necessities. Yet this means that the very possibility of subjective critical engagement with any of one's wholehearted desires, has apparently been ignored by Frankfurt. Such a model seems to leave out something rather important: the critique of oneself in terms of one's basic commitments. Frankfurt insists on a model of self-determination that builds on reflexivity – desires regarding desires – without reflection – a critical stance towards oneself (cf. Christman 1991b; Herrmann 2000, 159).

Accordingly, in Frankfurt's model, whether a person acts in unity with her own will is ultimately determined merely by a specific volitional relation, namely a strong identification between volitions. Self-determination is accordingly independent of what would be intelligent, rational or morally imperative – independent of any subject-external normative standard. Frankfurt indeed insists that in exactly those things that are central to a person's self-understanding, it is the very unavailable subjective will that forms reasons of actions, and not the other way around. In an alternative model, where a person would weigh and assess reasons for or against a specific action, she would require, according to Frankfurt, prior evaluative criteria. Yet, these criteria themselves can only be based on the person's own wholehearted commitments.

“This means that the most basic and essential question for a person to raise concerning the conduct of his life cannot be the *normative* question of how he *should* live. That question can sensibly be asked only on the basis of a prior answer to the *factual* question of what he actually *does* care about” (Frankfurt 2004, 26; emphasis in original).

For Frankfurt, the concern about something is the source of reasons. We cannot justify what we care about, only uncover it, for we are “beings, who do not create themselves” (Frankfurt 2004, 20). To be sure, Frankfurt does in no way want to exclude that the worthiness of an object can causally produce or influence caring or love. But in order to really be able to love something or someone, this behaviouristic basis is not sufficient to produce worthy volitions, since a person must individually be able to actualise – to live, as it were – a particular object of love or concern. “It is not necessarily as a *result* of recognizing their value and of being captivated by it that we love things. Rather, what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it” (Frankfurt 2004, 38f.; emphasis in original). The desirable or valuable object has to possess an attractive power for the lover. Therefore, an unavoidably personal element is found in love. We show ourselves in what we love.

It seems to me that there are very significant insights regarding the concept of self-determination within Frankfurt’s model of the will structure, even in the supposedly overstretched idea of volitional necessity. The capacity for self-determination touches upon our capacity to enter a position towards ourselves. We act self-determinedly if we can actualise the conception of our self in the world with which we identify ourselves. Our freedom appears exactly at that point, when we are determined in a special way from the bottom of our hearts, or through aspects about which we are most concerned. The point of self-determination is not to actualise a supposedly free, self-produced will, but rather our *own* will.

Yet Frankfurt’s strict rejection of any reflection about the question as to how one should live or rather what kind of person one should be, independently of the question of what one is content with, indeed seems excessive. He seems to be driven by a concern, which is internal to his theory, to avoid the potential infinite regress of his hierarchical model of volition. Yet it is a common experience of human beings that we are not only able to take a stance towards our motivating desires, but also in relation to deep-rooted aspects of ourselves. If we determine ourselves, then we are always – however indirectly – concerned with the right ways, or at least with alternative ways, of self-determination.

Few people would generally be satisfied with a simple “I am what I am” – even if that might be enough for their daily lives. Our self, that is, our attributes, evaluative beliefs, motivations, etc., is not clearly predefined. We can always think of new alternatives to it. Even if Frankfurt rightly emphasises that we should be concerned with realising ourselves in the form in which we are contented with ourselves, this does not mean that we could not very well have reasons nonetheless to imagine ourselves differently and perhaps even to hold these images as better for us. We can foster desires for alternatives to what kind of person we are. Frankfurt's philosophical concern regarding the hierarchical structure of his model seems to be unfounded: The decision in what way or to what end we should actualise ourselves does not require a third order of volition, although it does require some kind of consideration.

To be sure, Frankfurt rightly questions the idea of a wilful formation of one's own self. Perhaps we merely delude ourselves when we assume that we would have the possibility to form ourselves in our deep-rooted aspects. To illuminate this further I will elaborate on the idea of the formation of one's own self in the following section.

4. Self-Realisation: Thomas Hill Green’s Ideal of Perfectionist Self-Formation

Before discussing Green, it helps to introduce a famous critic of his account, who has unfortunately dented his philosophical reputation for some time. Isaiah Berlin, in his famous Oxford inaugural lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty*, speaks out against an ideal concept of liberty, and he ascribes this idea mainly to Green. Even if in this work Berlin does not explicitly use the concept of self-determination, it is clear that his discussion is pertinent to the interpretation I have pursued so far (Berlin 2002, 53). For Berlin the problematic idea of positive freedom results from asking the already mentioned question whether a person is indeed herself that person who forms herself. In Berlin's own words: whether one is master over one’s own self (Berlin 2002, 178).

In this way Berlin also seems to reject any normatively conceived conception of the correct or best way of self-determination or of the exercise of freedom, because such a normative account seems to come with an ideal of rational or moral self-determination. For instance, he endorses Bentham's rhetorical question: “The liberty of doing evil, is it not liberty?” (Berlin 2002, 194). To be sure, I do not believe that Berlin therefore has to accept every possible form of actual self-determination as unproblematic and as the right form for the particular person; this does not seem for instance to be the case if a person is ignorant about what is in reality contributing to her own good.

But Berlin does not seem to allow for there to be incongruence between the self that is actually expressed in actions and another form of self-actualisation that could result from an alternative account of one's self. Berlin is quite careful not to commit to postulate alternative selves, even where he wants to allow criticism of some exercises of freedom (Berlin 2002, 41, 177). In my terminology, it might be said that when he explains the possibility of criticising self-actualisation, he avoids any possibility of self-formation. Yet in this regard he seems to be going too far, for he thereby dismisses the possibility of differentiating between the actual self-actualisation in particular actions and a possible alternative self-actualisation in line with a self-ideal.

This is a problem for Berlin, because not every conception of ideal self-actualisation seems to necessarily take on the problematic form that Berlin dismisses, namely to be determined to a degree by a conception of the "'real' self, of which the poor empirical self in space and time may know nothing or little" (Berlin 2002, 180). To this extent the differentiation between various ways of self-actualisation and their evaluations would not be problematic as such, even according to Berlin, but rather the specific form of this differentiation, which is assumed in theories that take as a basis an subject-external ideal, for instance on grounds of an account of human purposes. Berlin therefore seems to accept forms of “quality control” of self-determination, but he dismisses normative considerations of how – or in which way – we should determine ourselves. Yet exactly here lies the flaw of Berlin’s argument, for it means to dismiss the underlying practical question of how one is to live. To omit this very aspect seems inadequate when it comes to a theory of self-determination (cf. Gerhardt 1999).

British philosopher Thomas Hill Green, who was strongly influenced by Hegel, is one of the best-known proponents of a conception of positive freedom. As mentioned, he is also one of the antagonists of Berlin's defence of negative freedom, which merely requires the absence of coercion. Green, in contrast to Berlin, is of the belief that freedom consists in determining oneself in a particular way.

It needs to be stressed that Green does not commit the previously discussed error of adopting a kind of homunculus in order to differentiate between actual and right ways of determining oneself. His point is accordingly not to ask in a kind of iteration whether the will that actualises itself in actions could itself count as free. Locke had already brushed off this question as meaningless in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and Green shares this view. The will as such is *by* *definition* free, because human beings express themselves in executions of their will; indeed, Green describes the figure of speech “free will” as a pleonasm (Green 1879, 308). In this respect Berlin's critique of Green has to be challenged, since it depends on the assumption that when using the concept of positive freedom one need to presume that there is an agency – the “dominant self”– that rules over the will, or the "empirical self" (Berlin 2002, 179f.). Green however maintains: “The will is simply the man” (Green 1883, 158). Accordingly, Green postulates no synchronic reduplication of the self, even when he talks about being “master of himself” (Green 1897, 322). To be the master of oneself does not mean to be a self that has a master, who is identical to oneself.

“There is no such thing as a will which a man is not conscious of as belonging to himself, no such thing as an act of will which he is not conscious of as issuing from himself. To ask whether he has power over it, or whether some other power than he determines it, is like asking whether he is other than himself. Thus the question whether a man, having power to act according to his will, or being free to act, has also power over his will, or is free to will, has just the same impropriety that Locke points out in the question whether the will is free” (Green 1897, 317f.).

Green distinguishes between freedom in the “juristic” or civil sense – the negative freedom of Berlin's – and a freedom that represents a certain form of self-formation (Green 1897, 315), whereby this form allows different interpretations: The formation of oneself according to nature, as the Stoics assumed; according to God’s will like in Paul; in the sense of a universal lawgiver as in Kant; or pursuant of the interests of a well-regulated state like in Hegel. For Green himself, the best result of self-determination consists in realising a specific version of an ideal self. To discuss this ideal, he indeed uses the notion of positive freedom, but for him this positive freedom is based on negative freedom. In this regard positive freedom therefore does not stand in opposition to Berlin’s approach.

“[T]o the grown man, bred to civil liberty in a society which has learnt to make nature its instrument, there is no self­enjoyment in the mere consciousness of freedom as exemption from external control, no sense of an object in which he can satisfy himself having been obtained. [...] 'freedom' is the natural term by which the man describes such an object to himself, – describes to himself the state in which he shall have realised his ideal of himself [...]” (Green 1879, 323f.).

The will therefore has to lead to a specific goal in order for a person (in this positive sense) to be able to be free: The improvement, and in the end the perfection, of herself. There is nothing philosophically strange or at all in this idea. Berlin was of course concerned about the possible political consequences of such a conception, which could come close to forcing people to achieve the relevant perfection. But nothing in Green's account as such seems to imply these potentially coercive measures (cf. Geuss 1995). His approach is indeed in harmony with my previous observations, for Green's point is to hold firm that the idea of self-determination always includes possibilities or potentials and that a driving force of human beings consists in realising these potentials: “[Man] has the impulse to make himself what he has the possibility of becoming but actually is not [...] (Green 1883, 182).

The problems that Berlin pointed out begin where such an ideal is forced onto persons and does not even represent a person's own ideal self. To be sure, at least on the face of it, for Green the idea consists in purely formal aspects, so does not seem to impose a particular interpretation of the ideal self. To the extent that one can control oneself through the operation of one's practical reason, the perfection of oneself consists in the best possible operation of the capabilities connected with reason (cf. Simhony 1993).

The label Green introduces for this idea, especially in the posthumously published *Prolegomena to Ethics*, is “self-realisation” (cf. Brink 2003, 41). Yet the realisation of the self in Green’s approach does not appear to be a realisation of one's *own* self after all. It rather consists in the realisation of the best possible self that is determined on the basis of criteria that are not our own, but stem from a theory of the rational nature of human beings. In this respect, Berlin's worries seem well-founded. "Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man" (Berlin 2002, 180).

In addition, the notion of self-realisation has connotations that cast doubt on the very idea of actualising one's own potentials. 'Self-realisation' seems to be referring to the realisation of that which is already present in the self. To which extent are alternatives of our selves actually available to us? To which extent is it in our power to form ourselves? If we cannot form ourselves according to an ideal of the self, then Green's theory is potentially vacuous. A philosophical theory that allows insights regarding the restricted scope for self-formation is that of John Stuart Mill.

5. Self-Development: John Stuart Mill’s Conception of Perfectionist Self-Actualisation

It may be surprising to suggest that Mill puts in doubt the possibility of human beings to form themselves, since he is generally supposed to be a proponent of a fairly radical liberalism that wants to see individual freedom as broadly protected. Why protect something that cannot really be achieved? Yet liberalism involves first and foremost a perspective on the societal and political conditions of self-determination in the sense of self-actualisation. One can reasonably want to protect self-determination without believing in the possibility of the independent formation of alternative selves. Political liberalism as such is non-committal about the feasibility of self-formation. If the idea were rejected, the point of political provisions to protect self-determination would then be to model them in a way that an already laid out or latent self can develop. Mill seems to suggest exactly this approach when he compares self-development with the growing of a tree: “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.” (Mill 1859, 263). The inward forces here might very well be interpreted as the specific characteristics of a pre-conceived individual self.

In contrast to Green Mill does not speak of self-realisation, but rather of self-development, although it – so it seems – could terminologically have come the other way around, since Green's account involves perfection and Mill refers to the realisation of inner forces. Obviously this choice of terms has, at least in Green’s case, philosophical-historical reasons and goes back to his reference to Hegel. Be that as it may, in the quoted passage Mill indeed sounds as if he allows self-formation only little scope. A tree just cannot decide in which direction it wants to grow, although its growth is influenced through its environment and not completely determined by inherent forces. Self-determination, within this picture, would consequently be merely the actualisation of an already existing, latent self. To be sure, a person could still act inauthentically, for instance when she does something against her own nature only because the majority of people do it. She then acted, according to Mill, not as an individual, but rather as a member of a herd. Individuality requires in his opinion having one’s own idea of how one should live. The point of self-development is therefore to actualise one’s own self. Yet this very self seems again to be something to be discovered, not created or formed.

Understood this way, Mill's theory seems unpromising because the development of one’s own potentials alone seems deficient as an ideal of self-determination. Consider Sisyphus: His potential – though admittedly forced upon him by the gods – consisted in again and again hauling a stone up a mountain. Would the development of this potential already be a worthwhile way to self-determination? Now Sisyphus could always develop this ability, which still remains for him to actualise. Joel Feinberg speculates accordingly: “[T]he gods might have designed for him a peculiar talent for rock­pushing much like others' talents for piano­playing, tennis, or chess. The new Sisyphus starts all over as a perpetual youth, and from the start he is a veritable prodigy at rock­pushing. He comes to enjoy exercising his skills, and makes ever­new challenges for himself. He pushes the rock right­handed, then left­handed, then no­handed, then blindfolded, then does two at a time, then juggles three in the air all the way to the summit, eager to return for another so that he can break his record” (Feinberg 1980, 320). Most people would likely regard the life of a perfect stone-hauler as an absurd form of self-realisation, even if – contrary to the actual example – Sisyphus had himself chosen the occupation of a stone-hauler. This sentiment is perhaps based in the belief that the practice of certain capabilities cannot represent a reasonable self-ideal, and that their actualisation therefore also facilitates no proper form of self-determination.

So far, we have interpreted Mill's idea of self-development as restricted to preconceived individual characteristics. Yet Mill's conception of discovering one’s own self in order to live self-determinedly allows two possible interpretations: On the one hand the point of self-determination could be to discover in each case one's own nature, that is, the essence of each individual, and to actualise this in the world. Here the concept of authenticity would be appropriate, since it is applied to describe the relation of an individual to itself. On the other hand, it would be conceivable that Mill postulates a general nature of human beings, which in turn would be there to be discovered in self-actualisation. Here we would not be speaking of authenticity, but perhaps of self-emergence – since it is here that a person altogether comes to a specifically human way of life.

Mill is renowned for his deliberations on individual diversity and originality, up to a defence of human eccentricity. In this regard the first interpretation appears pertinent, whereupon self-determination is the actualisation of a unique self; a "quiddity" (Gray 1991, 193). Accordingly Mill emphasizes the value of pluralism of “experiments in living” (Mill 1859, 281). In this interpretation there appears to be no normative standard of a right self-determination: The point simply is to actualise oneself as one is. The authentic Sisyphus or the authentic Dude, to use the former example, would from this point of view be self-determined human beings.

If, however, we refer to other works, especially Mill's account of hedonism in *Utilitarianism*, it is clear, at least to my mind, that also the second interpretation, i.e. the assumption of specific human aspects of self-development, was not foreign to Mill. For there he claimed that a genuinely human life would be preferable to a "pig-like” life (Mill 1861, 210ff.). In these passages Mill sounds Aristotelian and hence perfectionist – there are according to him bad kinds of self-actualisation after all, because they violate the ideal form of a human life. "Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs" (Mill 1861, 211).

The two interpretations of Mill's account of self-determination do not in any way have to contradict each other: One can indeed postulate a general human form of self-development and simultaneously be of the opinion that every person qua self-determining being develops her own individual version of this general human nature, i.e. forms herself into an individual person. The only case where these two accounts conflicted would be where an individual way of life would to some extent be unhuman. For Mill, this extreme case seems to imply that it does not involve genuine self-determination. Whether this again is a philosophically dubious proposition depends first and foremost on how narrow the perfectionist framework, which Mill builds, actually is. Although I cannot elaborate on this question here, it seems clear to me that the point for Mill is to reveal forms of merely alleged self-determination that deny the underlying human capabilities. His point was not to establish specific ways of life as the only appropriate ones for humans; that would also contradict his belief in the “unlikeness of one person to another” (Mill 1859, 273) in connection with his notion that to develop oneself is only possible where one lives one’s own life.

Surely it is empirically possible, according to Mill, that one does not actualise underlying human capabilities, or does not want to actualise them, and therefore lives against human nature, somewhat like a pig. Yet it would just not be desirable – Mill can make that claim, for he proposes a normative conception of self-determination. At the same time this framework does not involve more than the claim that self-determination shall lead to a life that achieves the predicate “human”. Within this frame there remains a variety of good ways of individual self-development. In summary, the scope for self-formation is limited by an account of the proper form of human nature, yet the scope is still wide and allows for individuality.

There is still the question whether Mill allows for self-formation. It seems that certain aspects of human nature by and large elude human control in his account. To be sure, he merely seems to imply that we cannot determine the contours of the appropriate frame of self-determination, properly understood, for this is given to us as human nature. To properly determine oneself it is necessary to stay within this frame. At the same time, we individually actualise ourselves within these contours because we understand it as a task or responsibility, not because we are forced, that is, determined by the laws of nature. It is necessary to choose the right goals, namely those that do not defraud a human life. This means to form oneself according to one's own ideal within self-endorsed limits.

This conception still allows the possibility to form oneself as a unique individual. Individuality in this understanding does not solely consist in affirming through choice exactly that which our individual nature specifies for us. In his work *A System of Logic*, of which the sixth book is dedicated to the “logic of the moral sciences”, Mill takes to task the fatalistic argument whereby the character of a person “is formed *for* him, and not *by* him” (Mill 1843, 840, emphasis in original; cf. Evans 2007, 61ff.) and that it would therefore be useless to desire that it was cultivated in a different way. To this Mill replies: “But this is a grand error. He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed *by* him as one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organization); but his own desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential” (Mill 1843, 840, emphasis in original).

So according to Mill, the desire to cultivate and educate one's self is essential for self-formation. But how does this desire in turn come about? Is it accessible to us? Mill grapples with this last fatalistic objection: “But to think that we have no power of altering our character, and to think that we shall not use our power unless we desire to use it, are very different things, and have a very different effect on the mind. A person who does not wish to alter his character, cannot be the person who is supposed to feel discouraged or paralysed by thinking himself unable to do it. The depressing effect of the fatalist doctrine can only be felt where there is a wish to do what that doctrine represents as impossible” (Mill 1843, 841, emphasis in original).

It therefore doesn’t matter whether the desire to form oneself was itself again determined; it matters whether it is present. We have to conceive of ourselves as self-forming beings; only then can we be satisfied or unsatisfied with ourselves. The fatalist cannot at all account for the common distinction between those who live under the aegis of necessity and those who live under the aegis of freedom. We have already seen before that self-determination does not mean to have a self that is brought forward through one's own choice. Self-determination means, also according to Mill, to actualise oneself in the world in the way one would like to. Now to still ask the question whether having chosen freely the way one would like to be means asking too much.

However, an important problem indeed, which fatalists could draw attention to and which is connected to the idea of authenticity, seems to be the following: Up until now we have expressed the idea of self-determination such that a person forms herself in that she expresses herself in actions, value beliefs etc. In addition, there was the idea of a self-ideal, which can bring us to conceive of other actions, value beliefs etc. to form ourselves in other ways. Yet, on this basis, how shall we explain the phenomenon that it can happen that a person never, or at least extremely rarely, expresses herself in actions in a way that corresponds to her self-ideal? In other words, on what basis can someone claim to be rather someone else, an ideal version of herself, if she never expresses this ideal version of herself in reality?

An example shall illuminate this consideration: Assume that a person who maintains herself to be orderly and exact carries out activities that are consistently sloppy. Can this person reasonably claim that she is actually completely different – namely orderly and exact – but for whatever reasons consistently acts inauthentically; that is that she is permanently “out of character”? In order to be able to really act inauthentically, so it seems, there has to be at least evidence of another possible self in a person. Whether this alternative self exists seems in turn not to be entirely a matter of the person, but also to a substantial degree depend on the assessment of others. If for example others never experience a person as polite, then she is not polite. Surely she can strive to become more polite, but to claim that she is not really herself when she is impolite seems in these circumstances inconceivable.

The idea of authenticity depends on the possible incongruence between the factual self-actualisation and another way to determine oneself, which supposedly better actualises the self. A distinction between actual and possible self-actualisation therefore makes philosophical sense. Where single actions contradict observably consistent characteristics of a person, judgements of inauthenticity indeed seem to be justified. Yet self-ideals cannot be determined fully detached from how a person really actualises herself. I do not mean to imply, of course, that people can never change themselves – only they have to change themselves first before they can reasonably claim that they do not show their true selves when they trespass against their own ideals. In brief: A Saul might change himself into a Paul. But Paul cannot claim that he did not actualise himself as Saul.

In summary, Mill's account helps us to see that the idea of self-formation needs to be closely linked to the ides of self-actualisation. We can form ourselves, but we always need to evidence it in expressions of our self. At the same time, Mill's account stands for the perfectionist idea of improvement of character. For him, there is a shape of a human life-form, which we need to endorse if we want to really be self-determined. Within these contours, we can become an individual; our very own person.

6. Conclusion

Let us summarise what has resulted in the course of this analysis. Self-determination does not merely mean to actualise a self, but also to scrutinise whether someone actualises oneself in the way that he or she wants to be or should be. This *should* seems to me to always be understood in a hypothetical sense, not categorical, since it is bound to the perspective of the person herself, insofar as the point is realising an *own* self (cf. Christman 1991a). An ideal self that only comes from the outside, with which one then does not identify, cannot fulfil this criterion. Hence self-determination can be understood as a normative concept. Human beings have aspirations that allow them to describe alternatives to themselves and to strive towards these alternatives (cf. Gewirth 1998). In this regard incongruences can appear between the self that one expresses in decisions and actions and the self that one wants to be.

Additionally the possibility arises – which Harry Frankfurt appears to ignore – that we are the ones who we want to be – or to be more precise: that we are content with ourselves – and yet at the same time foster alternative self-ideals, because we see reasons to be different. There is no contradiction involved between acting wholeheartedly and still striving to be different: In the same way that we can be content with different lives, we have the possibility to foster different self-ideals in ourselves, towards each of which we can attempt to strive. We do not need a sophisticated theory for how to choose or how we should choose between these alternative selves. It is enough to acknowledge that we can actualise ourselves in different ways and that we can take a stance towards the specific way and the goal of our self-actualisation. We identify ourselves with our decisions and actions not merely on the grounds of a preconceived idea of who we are, but rather evaluate this self on the grounds of simultaneously available alternative ideas of who we could be. There appears to be little that can be said regarding to which extent these alternative selves are available to us. On the one hand we know that human beings can change drastically, and on the other hand a self-ideal to be actualised should still be one's own self.

It also does not seem to me to be once and for all clear to which extent we should better ourselves in order to determine ourselves in the right way, or in order to become our best selves. In a negative fashion one could agree with Mill that at least the lower threshold set by general norms of self-development – those of human nature – restricts the scope of self-determination. But the assumption that one must also actualise individual potentials as best as possible seems to me to go too far.

I have called Mill's version of self-determination perfectionist self-actualisation. Labelled in this way, it presents an ideal-type position within a categorisation that mainly serves to organise the field of philosophical theories. When discussing Mill’s theory more closely, it becomes clear that it does not allow for any simple categorisation after all. It is perfectionist only in a limited sense, as it leaves a large degree of leeway to subjective ideas as to how it is best to live. Even if it is first and foremost a theory of self-actualisation, its approach also remains obligated to the idea of self-formation. When we put together the best elements of the discussed theories, it appears to me that the proper way of self-determination consists in developing one's own human potentials as far as one oneself would like, in addition to realising these potentials in decisions and actions.

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