

The Morality of Self:

The Myth of Independency

At the beginning of our attempt to present a philosophical interpretation of the importance and nature of the morality of the self, we would like to clarify the meaning of the concept of independency.

According to the definitions found in various dictionaries and thesauri, ‘independency’ or ‘independence’ is a special form of freedom, i.e. being free from the influence of other things or persons.

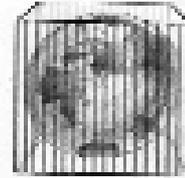
In addition to this negative—i.e. passive, opposing—meaning of the term, we can also find a positive, active definition of it, in the sense of which it is the inner state of autonomy, self-government or sovereignty.

I. What Is Independency?

All these expressions may have political connotations; in my approach, however, I will confine myself to their original, ontological context, where they have been used to characterize relations between entities or persons.

Considering the conceptual potential of the meanings listed above, it is no wonder that there is not one myth of independency, but rather a whole series of them. Thus, we can speak not only of the independency of one individual from the other, but even of the independency of one extended abstract area of human culture from the other—for example the independency of science from religion. So, there are many possible representatives for this multitude.

Nevertheless, among them we find two particularly powerful myths that have shaped the way of thinking of many generations. One of them is the independency of the self from the society, also called *individualism*. The other is its contrary, the independency of the society from the self, which is *collectivism*. Because of the



historical and existential importance of these two myths, we will focus on them throughout our investigation.

Whatever definition and context we choose, there seems to be a tight connection between the terms ‘self’ and ‘independency,’ since the latter is considered by most people to be a necessary condition for ‘being oneself.’

Consequently, we may suppose that by describing one of them we come to a better understanding of the other as well. And because a long tradition of the morality of self is known from the history of philosophy, we will take advantage of this tradition in order to get a deeper insight into the nature of the moral value of independency.

II. The Genealogy of the Self

One of the most significant insights of Western philosophy is that the ‘self’ is not something already given, but it has to be created and formed.¹ This may sound like a paradox at first hearing, for

¹ See more about this in various texts on process philosophy, eg. WHITEHEAD Alfred North, *Process and Reality*. New York, 1929.

one may either ask “who” then creates the self, or “of what” it will be created.

We cannot treat the whole issue within the limits of the present study; we can only point out that the problem is generated by the static conception of the subject long preferred by European metaphysics, and that the solution can be achieved by introducing a dynamic conception instead.

Philosophy urges the self-determined, conscious and active formation of life at every age. This lesson, however, becomes particularly important in the young and mature adulthood. The life-forming role of philosophy was first highlighted in the late antique—Hellenistic and Roman—era.²

Philosophy did not simply mean a set of knowledge or science with some typical forms of behaviour added to it incidentally; but rather philosophy itself was a way of life, or in other words, a specific form of existence.

The ‘love of wisdom’ is nothing but the exercise of cogitation, willpower and existence, the method of intellectual and spiritual advance. And the desired wisdom is considered a way of existence characterized by *peace of mind* (ataraxia), an internal liberty characterized by *self-sufficiency* (autarkeia), and *cosmic consciousness*.

Although taking different, sometimes even extreme routes—an example for this was the true Sceptics, who in the end refused to take a concrete position on any possible issue—eventually each antique philosophical school came to recognize and emphasize the capacity of the human “I” of distancing itself from everything essentially foreign to its nature.

In true philosophy one does not create theories of the cosmos, right acting or thinking; instead, one contemplates the world, filled with admiration of its wonders, and in addition to this one thinks and acts properly.³

“The carpenter does not come and say, ‘Hear me talk about the carpenter’s art’; but having undertaken to build a house, he makes it, and proves that he knows the art. You also ought to do something of the kind; eat like a man, drink like a man, dress, marry, beget children, do the office of a citizen, endure abuse, bear

unreasonable brother, bear with your father, bear with your son, neighbour, compassion. Show us these things that we may see that you have in truth learned something from the philosophers.”⁴

Or another quotation: “Empty is the argument of the philosopher, which does not relieve any human suffering.”⁵

Philosophy means permanent exercising, which does not take place in the framework of exact sciences, but within the experiences of the concrete, living, feeling, understanding and evaluating subject.

The paradigm of the whole of philosophy is the artist, who knows and uses some general rules and techniques of her or his art, yet she or he creates an individual, original and unrepeatable work of art.

Nevertheless, the aim of philosophizing is not creating a single work of art, but much more transforming ourselves into an artwork; consequently philosophy, thus conceived, can operate as the art of life.

Keynotes of such a philosophy are most of all the ‘care of the self’ (*epimeleia heautou*), ‘training’ (*ascesis*), ‘art of living’ (*techne tou biou*), and ‘spiritual exercises’ (*exertitiones spirituales*).

Its main topics are the relation(s) to ourselves, to the All—that is, to the Universe and the deity at the same time—as well as to our fellow humans. The starting point is the relation to ourselves.

This does not primarily mean knowing ourselves intellectually—as the famous oracle of Delphi says, ‘Know thyself’ (*Gnōti seauton*—but paying active and alert attention to ourselves, that is ‘to be concerned, to take care of oneself’ (*epimelesthai sautoi*)).

This primary relation always appears in a social context. On the one hand, philosophy is always pursued in a community, where the members follow their investigations together and while doing so they become intellectual and spiritual supporters for each other.

The duty and mission of a philosopher is—in spite of ways varying according to philosophical schools, which were already mentioned above—to influence the community and to promote its good.

Thus, a life truly rooted in philosophy necessarily means a commitment to ourselves and to the community at the same time.

² The presentation of late antique philosophy is based on the following authors and works: FOUCAULT Michel, *The History of Sexuality Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*. New York, 1990. 25–32., 95–108; FOUCAULT Michel, *The History of Sexuality Vol. III: The Care of the Self*. New York, 1988. 37–68.; MARTIN Luther H. et al. (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst, 1988. 9–49.; HADOT Pierre, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Cambridge, 1995. 49–70., 81–125., 206–214., 264–276.

³ See HADOT Pierre, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Cambridge, 1995. 267.

⁴ EPICETUS, *Diatribai*. III.21.46.

⁵ PORPHYRY, *Ad Marcellam*. 31. Original saying ascribed to EPICURE.

⁶ PLATO, *Alcibiades I*. 127d.

Care of the self does not simply mean virtue, i.e. the readiness for doing the right thing.

It means much more an active relationship with ourselves and a whole bunch of activities originating thereof. The expression '*epimeleia*' may refer to the activity of, first of all, the head of the family who takes care of the things around the house and of the family members (see XENOPHON).⁷

Second, it may refer to the acts of the monarch who works for the good of her or his subjects (see DION OF PRUSA⁸). Third, it can refer to the attitude of those who take care of the diseased and the injured (see PLUTARCH⁹).

Finally, it may refer to the ritual services toward the gods and the dead (see PLATO). Similar activities can be turned and practiced toward ourselves in the following fields: dietetics, i.e. healthy conduct; oikonomia, i.e. housekeeping and economy; and erotics, i.e. love life.

All these practical fields, defined in the way above, contain a complex web of contacts as well as series of specific questions, together with various techniques and skills related to each one of these.

The use of these philosophical instruments in late antiquity was by no means confined to those who committed themselves to philosophy as a profession, or to the time that was dedicated to studying philosophy.

The care of the self operated as a principle valid for everybody, for a whole life, together with each possible aspect of it. Life itself had to be changed to permanent learning and continual exercise.

Each one of the philosophical schools (Pythagoreans, Socratics, Platonists, Aristotelians, Cynics, Epicureans, Stoics or Sceptics) represented a life model, a way of searching for wisdom and of applying rationality to reality.

And despite occasional rivalries between the individual schools, the philosophical form of life did not necessarily involve one's commitment to a single philosophical tradition while excluding all other traditions.

Developing the right attitude toward time became especially important. Both Epicureans and Stoics suggested that we should

live in the present and should neither mourn over the past nor worry about the uncertain future.

This attitude, also called *carpe diem* ("seize the day"), did not at all mean irresponsible pleasure-hunting, but rather is derived from the awareness of the unique opportunity and value of existing in the universe and aims at maximizing this value.

According to PLATO, philosophy is practicing dying, and the philosopher is the one who is not afraid of death because she or he contemplates the wholeness of time and being. And in the view of EPICURE, the art of dying is identical with the art of living.

Among the techniques of the care of the self, the most significant ones are those of right life conduct, responsible for creating a healthy existence and by this, laying the groundwork for taking possession of all other practical fields.

In general, various physical practices belong here; that is, body care, exercise for attaining and maintaining the right physical condition, as well as the temperate fulfilment of natural bodily needs.

A much greater emphasis, however, has always been put on the 'spiritual exercises': meditations; readings; writing notes on things heard or read; or rethinking the already known but not yet sufficiently understood truths.

Also, conversations with a confidant, a friend or spiritual leader; describing the state of mind in a letter or diary; and, finally, asking for counsel. An entire set of techniques for self-knowledge is at the service of the 'care of the self.'

First of all, several exercises of *writing* have to be mentioned here. Recording our own inner state, in order to read and reconsider it later. Recording already attained insights, in order to be able to recall them in future situations.

Compared with pure verballity, the purpose of such written practices is increasing intensity and broadening the range of effects. Their literal manifestation may vary from real or fictional letters through different types of diaries to philosophical essays or even poems.

Philosophical *meditation* may mean preparing for a speech or an improvisation, by means of evoking the expressions and the arguments that can be used for convincing the audience.

An even more important possible application is recalling former

⁷ XENOPHON, *Oikonomikos*, V.1.

⁸ DION OF PRUSA, *Discourses*, III,55.

⁹ PLUTARCH, *Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata*, 197d. (Quoted after FOUCAULT Michel, *The History of Sexuality* Vol. III: *The Care of the Self*. New York, 1988. 49.)

reactions recorded in specific situations of the past, in order to reactivate them in imagination and to estimate how one would act in similar future situations.

The Stoics developed and preferred a very special form of meditation, the so-called '*præmeditatio malorum*,' premeditation of evil. This means considering beforehand any trouble that may occur to us in the future, so that we can prepare for it in time and in a proper manner.

Closely connected with meditations, we find practical *provings* or *trials*. On the one hand, these practices serve for promoting virtues; by them one can weigh how far one has already gone in acquiring individual readiness skills.

On the other hand, they can effectively help in measuring the grade of independence from superfluous things. In the case of Epicureans, all this primarily meant the calibration of the pain limit.

The Stoics, on the other hand, used them mainly for preparing for the coming hardships, just like a soldier prepares for war. One typical trial was when, after intensive physical exercises or bodily work, someone took a seat at an abundant table, thoroughly inspected the delicacies served, then gave his part to the servants and himself ate the food of the servants.

In any practice of this kind, the final purpose is getting acquainted with the necessary minimum, which can be useful not only in emergencies, but also makes it easier to endure everyday challenges or frustrations.

"We shall be rich with all the more comfort, if we once learn how far poverty is from being a burden."¹⁰

The next important type of spiritual exercises is the *examination of conscience*. It always means an exercise divided into several parts and well structured in time. In the mornings, one has to think over the duties and obligations of the day in order to prepare for them.

In the evenings, one is to remember back to the day that has passed and to examine it by means of questions, ascertaining what was accomplished and what remained unattained. The most important conditions are silence and quietness:

"Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day? And how delightful the sleep that follows

this self-examination—how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character! I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self. When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long aware of my habit, has become silent, I scan the whole of my day and retrace all my deeds and words."¹¹

Another important technique is *discernment*, that is, the continuous filtering, examination and classification of thoughts and fantasies. This is a serious trial of strength of will on the one hand, but the guarantee of freedom on the other.

According to the Stoic view, the main function of this practice is to distinguish between the things over which we have power or control and the ones over which we do not. The main idea of this consideration is that one should deal only with the former ones instead of wasting energy for the latter.

Although the starting point, as it was mentioned before, is to clear the right relation to ourselves, yet the care of the self can by no means be confined to sheer individualism. Instead, it always requires and urges interaction with others.

The imperative that we should take care of others has transformed whole forms of life and motivated the development of procedures, prescriptions and techniques, which have been followed, reconsidered, modified and taught through generations.

After all, this imperative led to a social practice that established firmer relationships, the sharing of experiences and communication. Furthermore, it also provided an opportunity to create institutions.

Whole communities—e.g. the Pythagorean or Epicurean schools—were organized on this basis. The advanced members played the role of leaders, but there were special exercises to change the roles, in order to practice readiness to accept help from the younger or the less respected ones.

The Stoic teachers educated different groups of disciples, depending on the occasional interest of the students or their intention to prepare for civil life in general, for important positions, or for practicing philosophy as a profession.

The institution of an existential adviser also existed, in relation

¹⁰ SENECA LUCIUS ANNÆUS, *Ad Lucilium*. 18,1–8.

¹¹ SENECA LUCIUS ANNÆUS, *De ira*. III,36.

with families or other groups, whose duty was the moral support, counselling and exhortation of the clients. Such an advisor also had to operate as a mentor or mediator in all possible social or private affairs.

Nevertheless, counselling is not confined merely to institutionalized connections. Natural and informal relationships—friendship above all—can also serve as its overall framework.

Some philosophers gave explicit advice that when in need of healing the passions of the soul, one should look for the help of some acquaintance of good fame, rather than assistance by professional experts. Mutual participation in and commitment to the care for each other may open new dimension and give more depth to the already existing relations.

The 'care of the self' was thus gradually transformed into the art of succeeding with the help of the other. Thus, some even called it the 'salvation by one another' (*to di'allelon sozesthai*), serving explicitly and purposely for the strengthening of social relations.

III. Re-evaluating Independency

After all these considerations, we are equipped with the necessary conceptual instruments for reshaping our view of independency. This may help us to blow away the two major myths around it that were mentioned in the introduction, or at least to tame them down for the sake of a balanced synthesis.

At the beginning of the treatise we already tried to clarify what independency is. In the present conclusion, first I want to raise the opposite question: what *is* independency *not*? The answer seems to be evident—it is dependency.

Accordingly, in order to achieve independence one should avoid dependence. Frequent allusions to the morality of self-sacrifice, self-negation, self-defense, self-restraint, self-denial, self-control, self-preservation, etc., seem to suggest a similar stereotype.

This stereotype would be that the independence of the self can be realized basically against the others, or might be primarily hindered by them. But finding what something is *not*, does not necessarily mean finding its contrary.

For a broader understanding, we should also look for its alternatives. And as it was shown in the previous chapter, the

alternative of extreme independence is *interdependency*; that is, a complex network of mutual relations. An even better term is *integrativity*.

It means to realize the constitutive inner relation between the parts and the whole, acknowledging the self-value of the parts, and at the same time acknowledging the new quality and value of the whole.

If we apply the new concepts to human relations, we recognize that affirming the value of the self does not exclude affirmation of the value of the community. Thus, seeking independence desperately may lead to isolation and so may be a destructive force from the point of view of the society. This is exactly the case of individualism.

To the other extreme, building any group of individuals, regardless of their intrinsic self-values, will result in a monotonous multitude or a uniformed mass, which corresponds to collectivism.

But according to the integrative model, the confirmation of the self *within* the context of the community has a positive effect for the society. It is, moreover, a constitutive element in any viable society.

Thus, a consistent morality of the self is not opposed to a social ethos. And if independency is realized in this framework, paradoxical though it may sound, it also may contribute to forming integrated communities.

Applying the same pattern, it can be shown that self-care and even self-love are not equal to selfishness; on the contrary, cultivated self-care and self-love serve as the basis and necessary condition for any true love directed to others.¹²

It is only exaggerated or deformed self-love that threatens altruistic love. Being oneself is possible together with and for the others.¹³ It also has to be remarked that the logic of the former argumentation cannot be reversed without any further consideration.

The reason for this is that it is the community after all that consists of individual members, or in other words, individuals enjoy a relative ontological priority compared to any group made up of them.

From this follows a systematic primacy of the morality of the self

¹² FROMM Erich, *The Art of Loving*, New York, 1956, 53–58.

¹³ KRÄMER Hans Joachim, *Integrative Ethik (Integrative Ethics)*. Frankfurt am Main, 1992, 75–126.

in comparison with any socio-ethical approach. On the other hand, social ethics has a practical priority in many questions, because by its nature it represents the interests of a greater number of the affected ones.

Independency as a moral value fits well into the system of the ‘ethics of being,’ which is the reflective level of the morality of the self. This kind of ethics is characterized by the search for orientation by means of examples and advice, and has an eye on the future. Its counterpart is the more socially oriented ‘ethics of doing.’

The competence of it is controlling acts by expectations and rules (commands and prohibitions, respectively), and it is mainly rooted in the past.¹⁴ In the latter, we also find the complementary value of independency, which is *solidarity*.

Finally, the philosophical advice concerning independency and its myths can be summarized as follows: “Dare to be independent! While striving for that, use any techniques that have been developed for this purpose in the past or presently. But always be aware of your inevitable embeddedness into social relations, and be in solidarity with those sharing the same human destiny.”

Suggested Reading

FOUCAULT Michel, *The History of Sexuality Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*. New York, 1990.
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¹⁴ A detailed exposition of this typology can be found in GULA Richard M., *Reason Informed by Faith*. New York, 1989.

The Myth of Independency: Between Self-fulfilment and Misanthropy

The title of this paper includes two difficult words: myth and independency. Myth refers to the sphere of religion. The word “religion” either comes from Latin “relegare” or from “religare,” which means the connection, the hanging on to and belonging to a god.

The meaning of “independency” is more difficult: the famous German Brockhaus Encyclopaedia lists four meanings of Unabhängigkeit, of which the first three meanings refer to maths and statistics. Only the fourth is related to our topic: independency in the sense of sovereignty.

Morality and Independence

It is very interesting that independence is not treated in discussions of ethics. The word cannot be found in the indices of popular works.¹ Independence and independency both come from Latin: (de)pendere also means hanging.

It is the same as in German: the German word for “independence” is “Unabhängigkeit,” which is related to hängen (hanging). But pendere can also mean “be chained up,” like an animal or a slave.

Independence therefore means—being free. As far as it applies to its meaning, religion and independence have a difficult connection: they are related to each other, but they also stand for opposites.

Independency is a term for political and national independence. So independence is in contrast to myth. But this is my first thesis: independence and independency include a religious component in their meaning.

¹ SCHMIDT Heinrich – SCHSCHKOFF Georgi, *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*. Stuttgart, 1978.; HERTZ Anselm – KORFF Wilhelm et al. (ed.), *Handbuch der christlichen Ethik*. Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1993; KÖRTNER Ulrich H. J., *Evangelische Sozialethik. Grundlagen und Themenfelder*. Göttingen, 1999.; BISER Eugen – HAHN Ferdinand – LANGER Michael, *Der Glaube der Christen*. München–Stuttgart, 1999.; KIEBLING Manfred – STEMPIN Lothar et al. (ed.), *Evangelischer Erwachsenen Katechismus*. Gütersloh, 2001.