

# Hermeneutic Autonomy in an Individualised World

Master's Thesis submitted for the  
Research Master's Philosophy  
Utrecht University  
May 29, 2017

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## Abstract

This aim of this thesis will be to address a common experience of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with modern life. It will answer the question of how an account of hermeneutic autonomy can help understand the set of skills and capacities needed for understanding our own needs and desires in modern society. The argument will be that such an account of hermeneutic autonomy should take into consideration how modernity has changed our understanding of identity, should not be overly demanding and should be conceptually connected to autonomy as a whole. The work of Charles Taylor and Valerie Tiberius will be considered as possible theoretical bases for hermeneutic autonomy with these three criteria in mind. Finally, a conception of hermeneutic autonomy based on Valerie Tiberius will be proposed that defines being hermeneutically autonomous as being receptive to the values inherent in our commitments, willing to critically reflect on these values and being aware of when such reflection is appropriate.

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## Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter one .....	6
1.1.    A General Definition of Autonomy .....	6
1.2.    Christman’s historical conception .....	7
1.3.    Individualisation.....	11
1.4.    Individualisation and autonomy .....	13
1.5. Christman and Individualisation .....	17
1.6.    Criteria for Hermeneutic Autonomy .....	19
Chapter Two.....	21
2.1. Human as a Self-interpreting Animal.....	21
2.2. The social nature of strong evaluation .....	24
2.3 The Individualisation criterion.....	26
2.4. The Charge of Intellectualism .....	29
2.6. Taking Stock .....	32
Chapter Three .....	34
3.1. Tiberius’ theory .....	34
3.2. The reflective virtues.....	36
3.3. Tiberius and the Individualisation Criterion.....	39
3.3 Conclusion .....	40
Conclusion.....	42

## Introduction

When looking at the history of the Western world and its living conditions, it would seem that we ought to be happier and more satisfied with life than ever before. While we are undeniably facing great challenges such as inequality and global warming, the overall trend of history is that individuals are less hungry, have better access to education and can be more assured that their human rights are respected. Obviously, much work remains to be done in all three of these areas and there are some worrying trends, especially when it comes to the rights of minorities, but the point remains that any person born today should have much less to complain about compared to someone born just fifty years ago. This improvement in material conditions, however, seems to not have directly led to an increase in subjectively experienced happiness or satisfaction with life. Even amongst the wealthier individuals in the most affluent countries, who have all the benefits of modern society, cases of depression, burn-out, or anxiety are not uncommon.

One sentiment seems to be commonly experienced and typically modern. This is a sense of a lack of purpose and direction in one's life. While most people have an unprecedented array of options for choosing what they want to in life both in terms of profession as well as in their free time, many feel as if it simply does not matter what they do and they have no real attachment to many aspects of their own lives. For examples of this feeling, think of professionals dedicating much of their time and energy to jobs, but not experiencing these jobs as worthwhile, important or gratifying. Or look at adolescents facing the choice of what to study who are unable to see a study or career path that can motivate or inspire them. Improvements in the material conditions of life may have had a tremendously important impact on individual's opportunities to do what they deem important, but a problem has arisen that individuals are unable to see or find what it is they deem important. This sentiment, the widespread feeling of disillusionment and detachment in modern life, is the central issue that this thesis is concerned with.

The main supposition in this thesis is that the sentiment described above is essentially a problem of autonomy, understood as the capacity to live one's life according to one's own reasons and motives. To clarify this, I believe that the issue of people being unable to live lives they perceive as satisfying is best understood as a problem of the abilities or capacities needed for living autonomous lives being too high in modern times. Particularly, it has become significantly more difficult to understand one's own needs and desires, a capacity that I will refer to as hermeneutic autonomy. This supposition has two important applications. Firstly, understanding the sentiment of disillusionment as a problem of autonomy implies that it is a serious problem that needs addressing if one is committed to the idea that autonomy is an important good. In other words, the disillusionment felt by many is not just a negative emotion, but a barrier to living

satisfying, autonomous lives. Secondly, if disillusionment indicates a lack of autonomy, our understanding of what it means to be autonomous should include a description of the skills and capacities we need to not feel it. The fact is that some features of modern life seem to cause many people to be unable to see how they could live lives they experience as worth living. Given this fact, our understanding of autonomy should include some formulation of an individual's capacity to know what needs or desires have to be fulfilled in order to make their lives feel worth living. I will refer to this capacity as hermeneutic autonomy.

Given the goal outlined above, the research question of this thesis is as follows: How can an account of hermeneutic autonomy help understand the set of skills and capacities needed for understanding our own needs and desires in modern society? In order to answer this question, I will first analyse the meaning of autonomy and specify the conditions of modern life and how they affect what it means to be autonomous. This will lead to the three main conditions that the required formulation of hermeneutic autonomy should adhere to. These 'design criteria' are the following: hermeneutic autonomy should be responsive to the conditions specific of modern society. It should be demanding to lead to meaningful self-understanding, but not too demanding to be achievable by most. Lastly, it should be connected to autonomy in general. With these design criteria in mind, I will review the work of John Christman, Charles Taylor and Valerie Tiberius in order to see if their respective theories can serve as a theoretical basis for formulating hermeneutic autonomy.

The research question of this thesis will be answered in three chapters. The first chapter will serve primarily to clarify the concept of autonomy as well as specify the modern developments relevant to the research question by explaining Ulrich Beck's concept of individualisation. The latter half of the first chapter will be devoted to analysing Christman's Historical Conception of Autonomy and arguing that it runs into problems when reviewed in relation to individualisation. This will allow me to explain why individualisation requires a conception of hermeneutic autonomy specifically as well as explaining the design criteria mentioned above. The second chapter will consider Taylor's work about self-understanding and human agency and evaluate its suitability as a theoretical basis for formulating hermeneutic autonomy. I will argue that Taylor's idea of a strong evaluator is an important step in the right direction but that his emphasis on articulation and rationality is too demanding to base a formulation of hermeneutic autonomy on. The third and final chapter will turn to Tiberius' Reflective Wisdom Account which, as I will argue, meets all of the design criteria identified in the first chapter. The conclusion will use Tiberius' account to form a formulation of hermeneutic autonomy and explain its implications for possible further research in autonomy.

## Chapter one

The main goal of this first chapter will be to provide the theoretical background and concepts for discussing the main goal of this thesis. As such, this chapter will discuss the work of philosopher John Christman for providing a standard definition of autonomy and Ulrich Beck's concept of individualisation for specifying the modern conditions relevant to this work. The final aim of the chapter will be to show how the process of individualisation call for a change in how we understand the idea of autonomy. The first section will discuss how the term autonomy is generally understood and used in philosophy. It will also explain hermeneutic autonomy and how it differs from other clusters of autonomy. The following section will then explain Christman's Historical Conception of Autonomy which will serve as a standard definition of the concept. Section three and four will explain the concept of individualisation and argue that it has increased the demand to be hermeneutically autonomous while simultaneously making it more difficult. I will then return to Christman to discuss the issues that individualisation raise for the Historical Conception of autonomy before proposing the three design criteria of hermeneutic autonomy that arise from this discussion.

### 1.1. A General Definition of Autonomy

The term autonomy in philosophy is used to refer to the capacity to *"...be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces."* (Christman, 2018) This should be distinguished from freedom, which generally refers to the extent to which someone is able to act on their own desires without restrictions and constraints. Autonomy, on the other hand, deals with the authenticity and independence with which one forms the desires they act on in the first place (Christman, 2018). The concept plays a large role in both political and moral philosophy. When we consider an individual autonomous, we think they have met a minimum requirement that people need to meet in order to be held morally or legally accountable. A child, for example, has not developed the competences and abilities of an adult that grant the adult the autonomy to be held morally responsible. Furthermore, autonomy is regarded as a necessary good for human flourishing in the sense that autonomous people have the skills and means that allow them to lead lives they consider valuable.

Increasing a person's autonomy is generally understood as improving on certain capacities or skills that allow people to have control over and feel connected to their lives. Joel Anderson groups these capacities into four clusters he defines as deliberative, executive, critical and hermeneutic autonomy. Deliberative autonomy involves 'capacities

for making decisions and choices that one will have few grounds for regretting'. Executive autonomy refers to one's ability to resist temptations and stay motivated for pursuing one's aims. Critical autonomy regards capacities for discovering and distancing oneself from biases and distorting influences. Lastly, hermeneutic autonomy, the central concern of this thesis, involves capacities for "authentic openness to one's core subjective needs and desires".<sup>1</sup> (Anderson, 2017) In order to better understand the concepts, consider the example of someone who is aiming to be a doctor. If said person feels the desire of becoming a doctor, but they lack the skills to accurately assess what impact his career path will have on their life enough to make an informed decision, they display a deficit of deliberative autonomy. In the case where the person is unable to follow up on their desire of becoming a doctor because they cannot motivate themselves to study and work hard enough they are lacking in executive autonomy. In another case the person's desire to become a doctor might actually be the result of their over-demanding parents and the pressure put on the person to follow a good career path. If the aspiring doctor does not agree with their parents demanding upbringing but is unable to realise that their desire to be a doctor stems from this upbringing this would be a deficit in critical autonomy. Finally, the aspiring doctor might suffer from a lack in hermeneutic autonomy if their desire to become a doctor is the result of a shortcoming in interpreting their own needs and desires. For example, they might really prefer to have an easier, less demanding job but not allow themselves to act on that preference. Sometimes we fail to accurately interpret our own needs and make a decision based on these inaccurate interpretations.

The aim of this work will be to argue that certain modern developments which will be addressed below call for a reassessment of what it means to be hermeneutically autonomous in modern society. In particular, I will argue that modern times call for more attention to the dimension of hermeneutic autonomy and how it can be defined

## 1.2. Christman's Historical Conception

Before discussing the challenge modernity poses for a conception of autonomy, however, we should have a definition of autonomy that can serve as a starting point. The view taken as this starting point will be the *Historical Conception of Autonomy* put forward by John Christman in his book "*The Politics of Persons*" (2009). The choice for Christman as a starting point is for two reasons. Firstly, his theory is one of the most widely discussed definitions of autonomy. The second reason is that it is situated as a middle point between

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to hermeneutic autonomy, Anderson also uses other names such as discursive, disclosive or self-interpretive autonomy. For the purpose of this work, I will use the name hermeneutic autonomy to capture the sense in which trying to understand the self can involve a process of disclosive interpretation.

traditional liberal and post-modern theories of autonomy which makes it a good starting point for discussing autonomy both in general as well as for the aim of this present work.

Christman's *The Politics of Persons* could be seen as an attempt to formulate a liberal conception of autonomy that is acceptable for people in the communitarian or feminist tradition. The liberal idea mentioned here is that individuals are wholly self-created and can be understood in isolation from their social and historical circumstances. In the context of autonomy this would mean that an individual expresses autonomy when they make choices based only on their own considerations and do not need to take into account socio-historical circumstances such as for example their birthplace or gender-identity. From the outset, Christman accepts the critical argument towards this idea that this stance is not realistic. Our identity is greatly determined by factors outside of our control such as how our parents raised us, or the economic opportunities afforded to us by our socio-economic background and to say that these circumstances have no effect on the self and its exercise of autonomy would be unrealistic. As a response to these critiques, liberalists have proposed an amended version of this idea that holds that while the self is not wholly self-created but constituted at least partly by social relations and identities, an important part of autonomy and liberty is that individuals have the possibility of freely exiting and entering these social relations. Christman also dismisses this idea as unfeasible. Firstly, he argues that not all social identities function as associations that can be exited whenever one wants. When it comes to, for example gender and race, the fact that people look a certain way will inevitably cause them to be regarded and treated as if they are part of these identity aspects. This is still true even if we accept that gender and race are concepts that are constructed by society. Secondly he argues that some social relations are simply too fundamental to be discarded as someone would take off a coat. Certain close connections such as a parent-child relationship will, almost inevitably be a vital part of someone's person. This can, for example, be seen in the way that even families where the relationship is unhealthy and full of quarrel continue to see each other and feel connected to their family members. According to Christman it would be too high a demand to state that individuals can only be autonomous if they are willing or able to dissolve such close connections at will.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Christman is not fully on board with the aforementioned criticisms towards liberalism. He rejects what he calls fully relational theories of autonomy which hold that being autonomous means enjoying healthy and close interpersonal relations and being fully embedded in one's social circumstances. While he agrees with the idea that social circumstances and relations are a vital aspect of one's person and autonomy, he disagrees with the notion that these aspects are what actually define one's

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<sup>2</sup> Christman, John Philip. *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. pp. 122-123.



autonomy, in particular he states that while mutual recognition and respect from others help us with the ability to make authentic choices and maintain social relations that are important, calling these the requirements for autonomy would be putting the cart before the horse. Firstly, this would exclude anyone who rejects these kinds of close relations from having autonomy. Additionally, Christman worries about the kind of policy decisions that aim to promote autonomy solely by securing the interpersonal relationships of people rather than their individual opportunities and choices.<sup>3</sup> This is what leads him to the notion that a successful definition should, on the one hand, acknowledge the importance of one's socio-historical circumstances while, on the other hand, locate the requirement for autonomy in one's individual capacities for making authentic choices.

On this theoretical background, Christman develops his definition of autonomy which he calls *The Historical Conception of Autonomy*. According to the Historical Conception a person is autonomous if the following conditions are met:

*"(Basic requirements – Competence):*

- 1. The person is competent to effectively form intentions to act on the basis of C. (Where C refers to basic organizing values and commitment) That is, she enjoys the array of competences that are required for her to negotiate socially, bodily, and cognitively in ways necessary to form effective intentions on the basis of C;*
- 2. The person has the general capacity to critically reflect on C and other basis motivating elements of her psychic and bodily make-up; and*

*(Hypothetical Reflection Condition – Authenticity):*

- 3. Where the person to engage in sustained critical reflection on C over a variety of conditions in light of the historical processes (adequately described) that gave rise to C; and*
- 4. She would not be alienated from C in the sense of feeling and judging that C cannot be sustained as part of an acceptable autobiographical narrative organized by her diachronic practical identity; and*
- 5. The reflection being imagined is not constrained by reflection-distorting factors."*

*(Christman, 2009, p.155)*

To summarise, a person is autonomous, according to Christman if, where they to reflect on their guiding principles and values in life accurately and over a longer period of time, they would not feel alienated from these values. Three things should be qualified here. Firstly, Christman speaks of reflection over a longer period of time, or sustained reflection because he holds that for autonomy to be worth something, the reflection in question must

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<sup>3</sup> Idem: pp. 184-186

be about a diachronically experienced identity. It cannot be enough for a person to just be positive about some value at one particular moment, they have to experience this over a longer period of time. This goes for both the value itself, as well as the process by which that person acquired that trait. Suppose, for example, someone does not eat meat, but only because they have been hypnotised into disliking meat without their knowing, their vegetarian lifestyle would not be autonomous. Secondly, the reflection has to be accurate, by which Christman means the reflecting person must have the necessary abilities to engage in reflection, think here of critical skills or interpersonal connections to help them in figuring out their own feelings. Additionally, the reflecting person must also be free from distorting influences, a severe drug-addict for example might under normal circumstances be repulsed by their own addiction but be unable to accurately reflect on their circumstance because of effects of the drug. Lastly, Christman states that the demanded reflection should take place with access to all the relevant facts and information.

The third and final thing to qualify is what it meant with the word alienation. Christman defines alienation from a trait or value as more than just a lack of identification with that trait, but a strong resistance to it, a feeling of being restrained by this trait and wanting to renounce it. Accordingly, alienation is a combination of judgement and affect, a strong judgement that some part of our life should be rejected as much as possible coupled with a strongly negative affective reaction to it. If a person would experience this reaction when reflecting on certain aspects of their life and is then unable to actually abandon that aspect, they are not autonomous according to Christman. Alienation is thus stronger than simply not identifying with some aspect, I might not completely agree with the fact that I smoke, but for the smoking to count as not autonomous I would have to experience a much stronger negative reaction to it. Finally, it should be noted that Christman speaks of *hypothetical* reflection, meaning that a person does not actually have to constantly engage in reflection in order to count as autonomous, but rather that if they were to engage in the reflection specified above, they would not experience alienation.

Christman's conception of autonomy has major advantages. For one, it manages to be a liberal and non-perfectionist conception, because of the criteria of hypothetical reflection, individuals themselves are the judge of whether they are considered autonomous or not.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, the historical conception of autonomy still leaves room for discussions of policies meant to promote autonomy by including competencies and opportunities afforded to people on the basis of their socio-historical situation. Despite these advantages however, I will argue that Christman's theory runs into problems when autonomy is discussed in a modern context.

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<sup>4</sup> Christman, John. 'Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves'. *Philosophical Studies* 117, nr. 1–2 (2004): 143–164.

### 1.3. Individualisation

The last section explained Christman's historical conception of autonomy as a theoretical model to explain what choices individuals make can be seen as authentic and autonomous. The question is, however, if this model can be successful in the modern world. To answer this question, I will turn to the idea of *individualisation*, originally conceived of by German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992). Beck argues that certain trends across the world such as the loosening of social restrictions regarding choices of things such as employment, education and partner choice have made it so that individuals have to make significantly more decisions in life than previous generations. In the past, these important aspects of people's lives were (mostly) decided by the institutions they were born into such as their family, class or gender. Now it is no longer a given that we take up the profession that our parents held or marry the person our family wants us to marry. But individualisation is more than just the fact that we have more choices in life, Beck also describes it as "institutionalized individualism", by which he means that central institutions of modern society such as civil and social rights have weakened and are now addressed to the individual, rather than the collective.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, individualisation has made our lives and identities less cohesive, namely because individuals are expected to fulfil multiple roles in society. This is a direct result of the loosening of social ties due to Individualisation. With jobs and social relations being less tied to the families of communities that people are born in, people are forced to provide for themselves both in terms of food as well as social situation. As an example, Beck names the improvement of women's workers rights. While these rights have made women more able to work and granted them increased independence from husbands or family, they have also increased pressure on women to find their own way of providing for themselves and not depend on others. Additionally, since stereotypical ideas about women doing the most work in the house and caring for the children have persisted, Individualisation has actually put many women for even more difficult decisions as they now have to balance their financial independence while running a household.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that women's independence is undeniably a good thing, it is an example of Individualisation forcing people to make more difficult decisions about their life than in the past.

Furthermore, the loosening of social institutions has also increased the cultural pressure on people to actively shape their own lives. This is typified in the ideal of the

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<sup>5</sup> Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2001). *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London, United Kingdom. SAGE Publications. pp.20-25

<sup>6</sup> Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London ; Newbury Park, Calif. Sage Publications. pp. 103-106 and: Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2001). *Individualisation: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London, United Kingdom. SAGE Publications. pp. 76-103

'American Dream', the idea that any person can make it in life regardless of their social status and class at birth. More than before, there is a cultural idea that we have infinite possibilities in life and therefore must choose actively what we kind of career, relationship or social life we want to have. 'Not choosing', in the sense of just doing what your family did before you or taking a certain job just because it is convenient rather than what you want to do is seen as the lazy option. Both these factors, the increased responsibility on people to be independent and self-providing, as well as the social pressures of Individualisation have made modern life a constant exercise in choosing and planning where we want our lives to go and shaping our own identity throughout life. Consider, for example, the fact that dating apps typically ask people to write down their occupation as one of the most important pieces of information. Our jobs and careers are considered to be much more than simply how we make a living, they are increasingly important parts of our lives that say a lot about our personality. Furthermore, we are expected to have a good story as to why we chose a certain career or be considered 'boring' or 'unpassionate'.

On the flip side, our choices have also become constricted. Namely, the choice of identities we can and have to adopt due to Individualisation is also restricted by that very same process. Beck and Gernsheim (2001) argue that while social institutions have loosened, social categories have not completely disappeared, but still live on in a weaker sense. Think here of, for example, class and religion which are now social categories that we are not born into, but ones we can, to a certain extent, freely adopt and let go. One result of this is that now, belonging to a certain category is seen as a choice someone has made and life is seen as a constant process of choosing and re-evaluating our membership of a certain institution. Additionally, these categories have become more stratified, determining only aspects of our lives rather than our whole life. As such, the loosening of social institutions has not turned life into a blank slate on which we can form our life in complete freedom. Beck himself describes this as people being forced to write 'elective biographies', individualisation forces us to choose our own lives, but at the same time individuals choose between a predetermined set of options rather than being completely free.<sup>7</sup>

To summarise the effects of individualisation, modern society demands individuals to, on the one hand live more authentic lives. When it comes to personal life decisions like careers or studies, there is a demand that we choose our profession not 'just' to make a living or because others wanted us to, but because we ourselves actually wanted to. This is caused partly by societal pressures, reinforced mostly by the media, that not chasing your own, authentic, life goals is to waste your life. Another cause is the fact that now, if we chase a life goal that ends up not making us happy, we are forced to face the realisation

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<sup>7</sup> Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2001). *Individualisation: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London, United Kingdom; SAGE Publications. pp. 20-25

that other options were available to us. However, while the demand to live authentic lives is higher, it is also harder to do so in many respects. The expectations of how to live our lives based on categories such as our gender, class or ethnicity still play on while the institutions and communities that used to play a large role in defining our identity have weakened or disappeared. Furthermore, one individual now takes up more roles in society, one and the same person can now be a CEO of a large company, a mother as well as someone from a low-income class. The demand of authenticity is further complicated by the fact that we not only have to manage fulfilling these roles, but also have to negotiate how to balance them in our lives.

#### 1.4. Individualisation and autonomy

The aforementioned process of individualisation has several consequences for autonomy. To summarise these effects very briefly, it could be said that modernity has widely increased our available options in life and thereby increased people's general autonomy. At the same time however, this broadening of the horizon of availabilities has increased the demand for autonomy leading to existence of what Joel Anderson (2017) calls *autonomy gaps*. In the final section of this chapter, I will explain what these autonomy gaps are before arguing that Individualisation places extra demands on hermeneutic autonomy in particular that call for a reinterpretation of Christman's historical conception of autonomy.

Many authors have emphasised the increased demands for self-control and rational choice in modern society. The processes of democratisation and increased freedom have granted citizens more opportunities to exercise autonomy. However, because of these same developments they are also expected to exercise more autonomy which can have harmful consequences. Consider for example the recent rise of flex-work, jobs that allow employees to work from home and on flexible hours. On the one hand, this allows workers to have more control over their own working hours and how they organise their life. On the other hand, the lack of a regular work time and environment requires a greater sense of executive autonomy as workers need to be more resistant to distractions and better at managing their own time. Similarly, citizens have more democratic responsibilities in modern society, they are expected to vote in several elections on the local and national level. While this development is undeniably vital for increasing the autonomy of citizens, it also assumes that citizens keep up with the news and critically assess their political choices. As such we are expected to exercise more critical autonomy than ever before.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Joel. 'Autonomy Gaps and Social Exclusion'. In *Vulnerability, Autonomy, and Applied Ethics*, edited by Christine Straehle, 49–68. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

Anderson (2017) uses the term *autonomy gaps* to describe situations in which institutionalised expectations of autonomy skills are too demanding for individuals to meet. The risk of these autonomy gaps is that they can lead to social exclusion, for example, the expectation that all citizens speak the language of the country they live in can exclude people from participating in democracy if all voting ballots are only printed in the language of the country. Similarly, autonomy gaps can put people at risk of falling behind, many unemployment benefit schemes require their receivers to be actively looking for work which can prove too high an expectation for people with mental or physical problems and put them at risk of losing their income. Note that not necessarily all autonomy gaps are an example of injustice. This will largely depend on whether the reason for exclusion is arbitrary or harmful to a minority group. A cinema that can only be entered by going up some steep stairs would be an example of unreasonable physical abilities of a disenfranchised group. Additionally, it matters what people are excluded from. If a bar that organises live improvisation sessions for accomplished musicians does not allow amateurs on stage, they are excluding a group of people, but this could hardly be called a grave injustice. The important aspect for this discussion, however, is not whether autonomy gaps are examples of injustice but rather to just be aware that they exist and that, since they can cause material and mental harm to people, we should be mindful of what is institutionally expected of people and whether these expectations are feasible.

The process of individualisation has impacted hermeneutic autonomy in particular. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, hermeneutic autonomy has to do with our ability to be in touch with our own desires and needs. Displaying hermeneutic autonomy means that we can form desires or set goals in accordance with our own personality. Someone with a deficit in hermeneutic autonomy is someone who is either unable to ascertain which career path will be best for themselves, or someone consistently makes choices that actually go against their own personality. Essentially, there are three reasons why hermeneutic autonomy matters which are all complicated by the process of individualisation.

The first argument for the importance of hermeneutic autonomy is that being in touch with our own desires helps us avoid making decisions that we might come to regret. This argument is rather straightforward but nonetheless an important aspect of autonomy. When it comes to important life decisions that will have a long-term impact on our lives, we typically try to make decisions based on motivational factors that are relevant for our person in general, rather than just how we are feeling in the moment. If I am thinking of doing a degree in psychology I would not do so just because I happened to wake up today with a desire to help mentally ill people, but rather because I believe that this motivation is a part of me as a person and will thus still be there throughout my whole life. In thinking about such decisions, we thus try to separate short-term, arbitrary motivations (maybe I

just watched *The Silence of the Lambs* which has given me a temporary fascination with psychology) from more fundamental interests and motivations that we expect to keep with us for a long time (such as my parents encouraging talking about emotions from a young age, giving me a deeply-rooted curiosity for the human psyche). We engage in this process because we realise that decisions about such important matters will have a large impact on what we spend a lot of our time and energy on in the future, as well as what life we come to lead. Therefore, getting such a decision wrong, or acting on a motivation that will not last for a long time will cause regret, making us wish we had chosen something else or making us unhappy with our life path. The hermeneutic skills to successfully predict our long-term desires and motivations is an important part of avoiding regrets and ensuring happiness in the future.

In recent times, the importance of hermeneutic autonomy for avoiding regret has only become more significant. On the one hand this is because, since our opportunities have increased greatly, there is simply much more opportunity to feel regret. Since many people are raised with the idea that they can become (almost) anything they want to be, the realisation that they made a choice that did not make them happy hits a lot harder. In the past someone who is only moderately happy with their profession as a baker might not have experienced regret because their dream job as a doctor would have been unreachable given their economic background anyway. Now, however, that baker can ruminate endlessly about the fact that they could have studied to become a doctor, but made the wrong decision. The demand for hermeneutic autonomy has risen with the increased opportunity for regret. At the same time, it has also become increasingly difficult to successfully avoid regret. This difficulty is partly because, like I stated above, we have more options to choose from, making it harder to choose and easier to get it wrong. More importantly however, it is harder to choose because the world is more prone to change than ever before. Since society and science is advancing faster than ever before and new technologies and discoveries are made at an unprecedented rate, it has become harder than ever to predict what the future is going to look like. Furthermore, because Individualisation has loosened social ties and communities, it is significantly more complicated to understand how we are. In the past, socio-economic circumstances provided a certain background in which we could place and interpret ourselves. Now, with these institutions loosened, people's characters as well as their environments are much more prone to unexpected change and the challenge is not just to identify whether certain motivations are an important part of our character, but also how these will play out in the coming years of our life.

In addition to avoiding regrets in the future, hermeneutic autonomy also functions in helping us to navigate a complex society. This function has to do with the simple fact that we are continuously faced with an enormous number of decisions in daily life, ranging

from simple decisions such as what we want to eat to decisions such as whether we should spend time studying or doing exercise. Successfully dealing with this multitude of decisions requires different dimensions of autonomy. Of course, deliberative autonomy is important in helping us see what the consequences of certain decisions would be, additionally executive autonomy is equally important since we need to exercise a certain discipline and restraint to make sure we actually follow up on motivations that are important to us rather than succumbing to each and every temptation we are faced with. In order to navigate such a complex society however, deliberative and executive autonomy alone is not enough. Hermeneutic autonomy is also required in order to have a general idea of what is important to us. After all, if I want to decide between spending my day practicing music or catching up with friends, I don't just need to know the outcome of both scenarios and the ability to follow up on the plan I make, I also need to have some idea of what is important *to me* when deciding between both options. Hermeneutic autonomy matters because we need to have a general plan, or at least a set of important values and motivations, by which we want to live our lives in order to be able to make decisions and plans on a daily basis.

This function too has been impacted by individualisation. On the one hand, the need to have some sense of direction in life has only become more pressing. With the advent of technology, we face an unprecedented number of possible temptations and distractions.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, there is simply a much broader choice of possible things to do than in the past. Naturally, this requires us to have more executive and deliberative autonomy, but it also means we need a better idea of where we want our lives to go in order to ensure that we don't get overwhelmed with modern life's many possibilities. To put it bluntly, we simply have too many decisions to make to go through life without some idea of direction or purpose of where we want our life to go. On the other hand, since people are now required to play multiple roles in society, developing the needed hermeneutic autonomy to navigate complex society is also increasingly difficult. Consider the example of a working parent. Inevitably, this person will have to decide between spending time with their kids or working on their career. Assuming that both their family as well as their career are important to them, exercising hermeneutic autonomy requires more than just an awareness of what matters to them, but also some idea of how to balance these different motivations.

Lastly, there is an aspect of hermeneutic autonomy that has to do with well-being. This is that feeling hermeneutically autonomous, having a sense of purpose or direction and meaning to what we do in life is simply a good feeling to have. Difficult, demanding jobs can be weathered more easily if one can see their jobs as part of a larger, overarching

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of this process see: Williams, J. (2018). *Stand out of our light: Freedom and resistance in the attention economy*. Cambridge University Press.



goal in life. Similarly, passions like art or music can be experienced more intensely if one relates them to a larger sense of their own identity.<sup>10</sup> To the extent that individualisation makes forming such a sense of identity more complicated it can impact our capacity for the well-being of having a solid sense of knowing who we are and what the purpose of our commitments and experiences are.

To summarise the effects of individualisation on hermeneutic autonomy it could be said that the main issue is that modern life both demands a higher degree of hermeneutic autonomy while at the same time making it more difficult to develop and exercise it. As such, Individualisation demands a closer look at the idea of hermeneutic autonomy and how exactly it should be defined. Put briefly, a conception of autonomy needs to have a definition of how we know what motivates and matters to us in life.

### 1.5. Christman and Individualisation

The previous section showed that modern times have created an additional demand to being autonomous regarding hermeneutic autonomy in particular. Due to Individualisation, people are required to have a stronger sense of their goals and direction in life, both due to increased societal pressures as well as the increased complexity of successfully navigating modern society. Considering these additional challenges, conceptions of autonomy will need to change and incorporate an explanation of hermeneutic autonomy in their theory. A good way of understanding this requirement will be to return to Christman's historical conception of autonomy.

As explained above, Christman argues that a person is autonomous as long as they do not feel alienation from aspects of their personality. He explicitly states that he chooses the requirement of non-alienation because it is a rather low requirement because, according to him, a stronger requirement would exclude many people from autonomy. With Individualisation in mind, however, the requirement of non-alienation seems to set the bar a little too low as persons can be free of alienation while they are suffering from a lack of the hermeneutic autonomy required in modern times. Imagine, for example Andrew, an adolescent who, without really thinking about it, chooses to study biology. This choice makes a lot of sense to him, both of his parents are biologists as well, and he does have a genuine, although not deeply rooted, interest in the subject. At the same time however, Andrew does have a deeply rooted passion and talent for philosophy and studying that subject would have made his studies and life much more fulfilling. He doesn't not study philosophy because he does not have the option, or is forced to do philosophy,

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<sup>10</sup> Think here, for example, about watching a football game played by the team of your country. This experience will be more exciting and intense if the viewer has a strong sense of identity connected to their country.

but rather because he simply never really thought about what he really wants. Most likely, Andrew would not experience any sense of alienation from his choice and he could lead a moderately fulfilling life by studying biology, so he would count as autonomous for Christman. Still, it is likely that at some point in the future he will come to regret his choice and be plagued with the realisation that his life could have been much more fulfilling. Even if this does not happen, one has to admit that studying philosophy would have been the better choice for Andrew (as it obviously is for everyone), even if his choice for biology does not lead to alienation.

Similarly, the fact that we play multiple roles in society can lead to problems. As I stated before, Individualisation has meant that one and the same person is expected to perform the function of, for example, a good parent, a professional and a good friend at the same time. This aspect of modernity requires not just a great deal of executive autonomy in order to successfully manage these roles, but also an increased amount of hermeneutic autonomy so that a person does not lose track of what they find important themselves. The issue here is that for Christman, a person who does not feel alienated towards any of these roles would have to count as autonomous even if they are unable to manage these different roles.

Note that the argument here is not that the difficulties of modern life described above are completely new. Experiences of regret or difficulties in managing different expectations in life have always been around. The point is that now, in the time of Individualisation, these experiences are much more common and issues that can be expected of everyday life. Where it not for Individualisation then, Christman's requirement of non-alienation could be defended by saying that it is strong enough for most people even though some people will not lead fulfilling lives despite meeting the requirement. Now, however, with the increased demand of hermeneutic autonomy, the examples given above are not the rare exception, but likely to happen. As such, Christman's conception deems a lot of people as autonomous who are not living fulfilling lives. In order to correct this, a stronger understanding hermeneutic autonomy is needed. In other words, a modern conception of autonomy ought to explain not just how we lead lives according to our own values and desires, but also how we form and become aware of these desires.

The historical conception of autonomy does not include such a story, but it should be noted that Christman has a good reason for this. After all, he argues from a position of almost classical liberalism meaning that, for Christman, a person should be judged as autonomous or not according to their own standards. This is why the historical conception of autonomy steers clear of including a description of hermeneutic autonomy. At this point, a liberalist could defend the historical conception of autonomy and simply accept that some people might not have the most fulfilling lives while still living autonomous lives if that is what it takes to avoid perfectionism. The issue, however, is that such a liberal conception

cannot be of any help regarding the feeling of disillusionment and lack of purpose caused by individualisation. What is needed in order to address this feeling is a stronger role for hermeneutic autonomy.

### 1.6. Criteria for Hermeneutic Autonomy

The last section argued that the Historical Conception lack a description of how individuals come to realise their needs and desires and that this shows the need for more attention to hermeneutic autonomy. This leads to the question of what a conception of hermeneutic autonomy should look like in order to address the feeling of disillusionment and lack of purpose. The following will outline three design criteria for hermeneutic autonomy. The Historical Conception of Autonomy will be used to illustrate why these criteria are necessary.

The first criterion is that for a conception of hermeneutic autonomy to be successful, it should take into consideration how individualisation has made it significantly harder to form a complete understanding of our identity. This relates three aspects of individualisation: the aforementioned degradation of social structures and institutions, the unprecedented speed at which society changes and develops and the fact that individuals are expected to fulfil multiple roles at once. All of these make it so that knowing who we are, and which commitments in life will be most likely to satisfy us in life is a more difficult process. When we are trying to figure out our own needs and desires we can no longer refer to social structures. Furthermore, when we form a commitment based on our current situation, it is very possible for this situation to be completely different in a couple of years.

This means that an account of hermeneutic autonomy ought to describe how one is able to have a good understanding of one's needs and desires that can withstand this change and pressure. I will refer to this criterion as the *individualisation criterion*. Christman's condition of non-alienation does not meet this criterion since, as the example of Andrew shows, the fact that we do not feel alienation towards a certain commitment says nothing about how important this commitment will be to us in the long run. This means that in order to meet the individualisation criterion, the conditions of what it means to be hermeneutically autonomous towards a commitment or desire are more demanding than that of non-alienation. Additionally, the aforementioned societal pressures on having a strong sense of purpose of identity also call for a more demanding conception of hermeneutic autonomy.

However, even if individualisation means that the conditions for being hermeneutically autonomous should be stronger than Christman's notion of non-alienation, he is still right to point out that autonomy refers to the capacity to live a fulfilling life from *one's own* perspective and should therefore steer clear of perfectionism. Christman avoids perfectionism because the condition of non-alienation is subjectively

determined and because the hypothetical clause means even people that have not reflected on their life can still be autonomous. Similarly, a formulation of hermeneutic autonomy ought to describe how people can better understand their own core needs and desires rather than demarking that only a certain set of needs can be autonomous. Furthermore, since the goal of this thesis is to address a widespread feeling of disillusionment, the target formulation should be realistically achievable for most people. It should be relatively clear how the average person can be hermeneutically autonomous and not be achievable only by putting in an unreasonable amount of effort or resources. For this reason, the second criterion for hermeneutic autonomy is the *demandingness criteria* which holds that hermeneutic autonomy should be demanding, but not too demanding.

Lastly, for an account of hermeneutic autonomy to actually contribute to an understanding of autonomy in general, it should be conceptually connected to autonomy as a whole. I will call this last criterion the *connectedness* criterion. The aim of forming a definition of hermeneutic autonomy is not to spell out how we can understand the self and its needs, but to explain what sort of understanding actually contributes to living autonomous lives. This means that an account of hermeneutic autonomy should be conceptually connected to autonomy as a whole and it should be clear how it connects to executive, critical and deliberative autonomy.

With these three design criteria defined, the next chapter will consider Charles Taylor as the first possible candidate for serving as a theoretical basis for hermeneutic autonomy.

## Chapter Two

This chapter will consider Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's theory of self-reflection and self-understanding as a possible candidate for a theoretical basis for hermeneutic autonomy. The first two sections will explain Taylor's ideal of a strong evaluator and how it could be related to hermeneutic autonomy. I will then argue that strong evaluation as a demand for hermeneutic autonomy meets the individualisation criterion mentioned in the previous chapter. The next section will analyse the charge of Owen Flanagan that Taylor's conception of self-understanding is too intellectualist to be realistic. Although I will argue against Flanagan's overall argument, I will acknowledge that his criticism shows that Taylor's theory does not meet the criteria of demandingness and connectedness and is therefore not the best candidate for basing hermeneutic autonomy on.

### 2.1. Human as a Self-interpreting Animal

Taylor does not directly discuss the topic of autonomy as such, he does, however, discuss the concept of human agency in detail. The goal of this section will be to outline Taylor's conception of agency before connecting it to autonomy and hermeneutic autonomy in particular.

The definitive aspect of human agency according to Taylor is that human beings are 'self-interpreting animals', meaning that the central way in which we understand what it means to be human is through self-interpretation. We will first have to understand how Taylor comes to this definition before explaining what it means for human agency in particular. Taylor himself summarises his argument for human beings being self-interpreting as the result of five claims:

- 1. That some of our emotions involve import-ascriptions;*
- 2. that some of these imports are subject-referring;*
- 3. that our subject-referring feelings are the basis of our understanding of what it is to be human;*
- 4. That these feelings are constituted by the articulations we come to accept of them; and*
- 5. that these articulations, which we can think of as interpretations require language.'* (Taylor, 1985, pp.75-76)

These claims build on each other, so to understand Taylor's claim one must understand what he means with the term 'import'. He explains import as '*...a way in which something can be relevant or of importance to the desires or purposes or aspirations or feelings of a subject; or otherwise put, a property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject.*' (1985, p.48) This definition relies on the idea that experiencing certain emotions comes with the idea that there is some aspect of our situation that makes

us feel that emotion. We feel fear because something is menacing or anger because of some injustice. There is something in these situations that we cannot be indifferent to and that causes us to feel a certain way, this something is the import of a situation. Here Taylor is walking a fine line between objectivism and subjectivism. It is not subjective because it is not the case that some situation has import simply because we feel an emotion towards it.

Rather the import has to do with some particular aspect of the situation. To explain an emotion like sadness Taylor states that we cannot simply say that we are sad, but that an explanation must involve some reason for our sadness. This furthermore implies that we can also be mistaken in ascribing import to a situation when we realise that there is no good reason to be sad. In other words, the import of a situation is not completely up to our subjective standards. On the other hand, import is not a completely objective standard either. That is to say that import could not be explained from a purely reductive point of view where situation X will always lead to emotion Y. This would, according to Taylor, miss the fact that the import of a situation can only be explicated by reference to a subject who experiences the world in a certain way.<sup>11</sup> If a musician feels shame when playing a wrong note this is not because playing a wrong note is inherently shameful, but because the musician feels like playing a wrong note means they are bad at music. Put briefly, the import of a situation says something about that situation, but more importantly says something about the subject of the emotion as well, meaning it is not purely subjective.

This last point is what Taylor gets at with the second claim that some of our imports are subject-referring. The fact that we can only explain some emotions with reference to the subject that experiences them means that ascertaining the import of an emotive response is to learn something about this subject. Imagine, for example, that I get angry when I see a news item about employees in the service industry being exploited. If I explain this emotion by saying that exploitation is unjust, I am also stating that I, as a person, get angry about injustice. Understanding the import of such emotions then is a back-and-forth process between referencing aspects of the situations and aspects of our own character. This leads to Taylor's third claim that understanding subject-referring feelings are the basis of our understanding of what it means to be human. The process of learning about ourselves starts from subjective emotion states that we try to understand by referencing what situational aspect they arise from and what aspect of our character caused our reaction.

The fourth claim gives some indication of how this process of self-reflection leads to actual self-understanding. Here, Taylor states that subject-referring feelings are constituted by the articulations we come to accept of them. With this claim, Taylor really

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, Charles. *Human Agency and Language*. Philosophical Papers 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp. 50-53

articulates what is specific about the way we are moved by our inner feelings and emotions. This is that the motivations that move us are not simply given, but innately confused or hidden from us. If we are 'moved' by a force such as gravity, understanding this force simply entails giving a description of it that could include its direction or strength. Psychic forces on the other hand, such as desires or aspirations are thrust upon us without the possibility of being objectively or directly described. Instead, our attempts at understanding these forces are best seen as articulations, where we try to formulate or put into words what we feel. Since this process is not one of objective description, but an attempt at articulating what we are unsure about, this process of articulation itself changes its object. This is best understood with an example, imagine a smoker who, whenever he lights a cigarette, feels a great sense of uneasiness and shame about their addiction but they can not quite put their finger on why they are feeling this way. When discussing it with a friend, the smoker talks about how they value being independent and being addicted to smoking undermines this independence. In this articulation of the initial uneasiness, the smoker's feeling towards their addiction and their experience has changed. We could, for example, imagine that the smoker will now feel uneasy not just towards the smoking itself, but particularly when they feel that the desire to smoke impedes them from doing something they find more important. As such, the smoker has not simply uncovered what their feeling is, they have come to accept an interpretation of the feeling which has in turn changed that feeling.

The last claim Taylor's argument is that this whole process described above requires language. Taylor makes two arguments for this claim. The first is that language is a requirement for precise thoughts and resolving ambiguities. Since articulating our own emotions and mental state means making them explicit and unambiguous, this process must involve language. To understand this point, consider how gaining a better understanding of our emotions often involves finding an articulation that expresses or evokes certain aspects of the situation that were overlooked before. This understanding thus requires appropriate language and concepts. The second argument is that, according to Taylor, "certain modes of experience are not possible without certain self-descriptions"<sup>12</sup> This statement implies that without the use of language we simply could not experience certain emotions, particularly the ones that require import. We could, for example, not distinguish between anger and indignation without a description of the situation at hand.<sup>13</sup> This is because indignation is felt in response to the idea that certain standards or expectations are being violated. Without being able to specify these standards, which requires language, the experience of indignation will not be possible. Furthermore, how

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<sup>12</sup> Idem, p.37

<sup>13</sup> Idem: p.262

we specify these standards will change the experience of indignation. Other examples of such emotions would be shame, regret or pride.

Taken together, these five claims explain Taylor's vision of human beings as a self-interpreting animal. A significant part of human experience is to experience emotions with subject-referring import. These emotions can only exist and be understood through language, and the articulations we accept of them determine how we come to understand ourselves. As such, we as human beings are constantly engaged in a process of articulating and re-evaluating our experience. An important implication of Taylor's understanding of self-interpretation is that it introduces certain norms to self-understanding. Firstly, the fact that self-understanding can only arise from investigating subject-referring import ascriptions assumes that a subject has an openness and willingness towards reflecting on their feelings and emotions. Secondly, the idea of articulation assumes that a subject has the linguistic abilities to articulate their experience. Without this openness and linguistic ability, a subject cannot meet Taylor's standards for self-interpretation. A subject that does meet these standards is defined as a *strong* evaluator, someone who is always being receptive to the import of situations and trying to find articulations of these.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that being a strong evaluator could easily be construed as a condition for hermeneutically autonomous. A strong evaluator has an active understanding of the commitments and values that matter to them in a fundamental way and as such enjoys a strong awareness of their core needs and desires and is therefore hermeneutically autonomous.

## 2.2. The social nature of strong evaluation

In addition to an openness to import and the linguistic capacity for articulation, Taylor also emphasises the fact that self-interpretation is a social process. Interestingly, Taylor situates his argument for this social aspect largely as a response to modern issues that are very similar to the problems of individualisation mentioned in the first chapter. The following section will discuss how Taylor's theory relates to individualisation before arguing that this introduces an openness to discussing one's commitments with others as a final demand for being a strong evaluator.

The previous chapter outlined two important effects of individualisation. The first is that, with individualisation loosening traditional social ties and foregrounding career-and study choices as expressions of identity, these choices have become more important as well as more complex. In Taylor's terms, one could say that choosing a career or study or

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989. pp. 14, 20, 122



career now carries more import. The second, effect of individualisation is that societal pressures to be authentic have increased. In Taylor's vocabulary this would mean that successfully articulating the import of our experiences has become increasingly important. Most notably, being sure about our own character and ideals is good not necessarily because it makes us happier, but regarded as important in itself. Taylor himself makes a similar point in *The Ethic of Authenticity* (1991) where he names this idealisation of being authentic 'the culture of authenticity'. In this book Taylor attempts to provide an explanation and possible move towards a solution for the general feeling that people in modern life lack a sense of meaning and freedom. The most important aspect of this work is that Taylor argues that the culture of authenticity has negative consequences for our possibilities of freedom and self-fulfilment and situates his idea of strong evaluation as a response to this issue.

According to Taylor, the ideal of authenticity starts from the well-meant ethical ideal of universal respect for all persons. While this initially seems laudable, it can lead to individualism where someone's wishes should be respected simply by virtue of being that person's wishes. Taken to its extreme, the belief in this idea means that we have no reason to care about or be aware of issues that transcend the self and no basis to criticise the behaviour of others. As a result, people choose to neglect social relationships in order to pursue their own benefits or careers. All that matters is to be an individual, to stand out and be different. This is the criticism of modernity offered by authors in, for example, communitarian traditions but Taylor argues that this criticism misses an important aspect of the ideal of authenticity, namely that it is experienced as a moral force. He argues that people prioritising their own interests over that of others is nothing new but that what is new is the feeling that "*...today people feel called to do this, they feel they ought to this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted if they didn't do this.*" (1991, p.17) The defining aspect of the ideal of authenticity according is that it involves a moral force we experience to be our own person. For Taylor, the problem is that there is no strong articulation of this moral force to be found. After all, a defence of the ideal of authenticity has to end before the conclusion, if the good life is to live by your own standards there cannot be a fully articulated definition of the good life. On the other hand, criticisms of the ideal of authenticity do not treat it as a moral ideal but rather discredit it beforehand as just an excuse for egoism. Taylor's diagnosis of the sense of lack of meaning and freedom is that it is due to this inarticulateness of one of the main moral forces in society.

The way forward then is to treat the ideal of authenticity as a moral ideal. This requires openness to the idea that we can argue and reason about how we live our own lives. On an individual level, this means recognising that being our own persons does not mean being different from others, but being different in a significant way. Here Taylor states that some ways in which we are different are of more significance than others than

others. For example, the fact that I can play several songs by Chet Atkins on my guitar while most other people cannot says more about who I am than the fact that I happen to be born on the twelfth of November while most people are not. The ways in which some aspects of our personality are more significant than others is something we can argue and reason about. Furthermore, Taylor states that since we define who are by how we differ significantly from others, being an individual is determined in a process that will depend on others. This is in part due to the simple fact that without others to compare myself to I cannot be different. More importantly, however, it is because the idea of which differences are significant is determined by culture and our surroundings. If I was born into a society where every child is forced to learn to play Chet Atkins songs and people born on the twelfth of November were considered to be sacred the former would not be significant where the latter would be. As such, society determines in large parts how we get to distinguish ourselves as individuals through what Taylor calls *horizons of significance*. Crucially, these horizons of significance arise from the norms and values a society holds dear and as such, they can be the subject of discussion and reasoning.

If we accept these claims, then we could see how one could give articulation to the moral force of an ideal of authenticity. An important part of being a strong evaluator is to be aware of how one is different from others in aspects that have significance, and the definition of what is and is not significant is one we come to in dialogue with others. This leads to the third requirement for being a strong evaluator, which is an openness to the idea that our core commitments and values are open to rational evaluation and discussion with others.

### 2.3 The Individualisation criterion

The aim of this section will be to argue that a formulation of hermeneutic autonomy based on Taylor's idea of a strong evaluator would largely meet the individualisation criteria. In order to illustrate how Taylor's conception of self-understanding is compatible with an individualised world I will explain how Taylor's demands are stronger than the demands Christman places on autonomy, and why these demands are necessary for a conception of autonomy in individualised times.

The first demand regards the socially interdependent nature of self-interpretation. Here Christman and Taylor go in different directions. Christman argues, as discussed earlier, that the criteria for being autonomous, which for him has to do with not feeling alienated, ought to be determined subjectively by persons themselves. As I discussed in the first chapter, the main advantage of Christman's conception of autonomy are that a subjectively determined standard of autonomy avoids being paternalistic and includes a wide range of people as being autonomous. Following Taylor, however, we would be forced

to give up on a part of these liberalist ambitions. Since his view on human agency requires being a strong evaluator which demands us to be articulate about our inner states, and being articulate means formulating our inner feelings in a manner that is intelligible to others, this cannot be a purely subjective criterion. For Christman, a desire is autonomous as long as a person themselves could not find a reason to feel alienated from it. So if I were to feel the desire to give up on my current life and enter a monastery and have no reasons to feel as if this desire arose due to circumstances not genuinely my own, this desire would count as autonomous even if I cannot explain to the people around me why exactly I want to do this. The fact that the people close to me cannot understand my desire would not take away from my autonomy.

For Taylor, it would be problematic that I cannot make my desire understandable to others as this would suggest I am inarticulate about the desire. Still, Taylor's view of autonomy would not see it as completely objective, in the example above, the people close to me don't necessarily have to *agree* with my decision, it's just that my articulation of the desire has to be intelligible and I have to be open to discussing it. We could say that our desires themselves still arise out of subjective feelings, but that in the criteria of articulation Taylor introduces some objective, or at least interdependently judges standards to autonomy.

A second important point of disagreement between Christman and Taylor is about the hypothetical clause in Christman's conception of autonomy that states that a subject does not need to actually have reflected on their lives to count as autonomous. Instead, they are autonomous if they would not feel alienation if they were to reflect. Christman includes the word hypothetical in his conception because he argues that making the reflection required for autonomy would exclude far too many people from being autonomous. Here, one might be tempted to propose a version of the historical conception of autonomy that states that if someone would *hypothetically* try to form an articulation of their desires that affirms these desires as good, and this articulation would be intelligible, this person is autonomous. Such a conception of hypothetical articulation would be inclusive, without demanding everyone to be constantly engaged in reflection.

The problem is, however, that Taylor states that the act of articulation changes our desires and that the act of articulation itself is a necessary part of valuable reflection. Thus his view of autonomy cannot be based on hypothetical articulation. This reveals a fundamental difference in how both authors see the act of self-reflection. For Christman, self-reflection seems more reminiscent of the image of digging out or uncovering our inner states. In his model, we can reflect on our emotions by analysing the circumstances of how they arose, and this reveals whether they are part of our authentic selves, but this process of reflection merely uncovers our inner states and does not fundamentally change them. Taylor on the other hand, sees self-reflection as more akin to a creative,

constructive process. Self-reflection may start from an affective response that is, in a sense, given to us, but the actual act of self-reflection revolves around how we actively interpret and evaluate these responses. Since this requires someone to actually put in the work of reflection, a Taylorian view of hermeneutic autonomy cannot be hypothetical in nature. As such, the bar on being autonomous for Taylor is raised and actual reflection does become a condition on being autonomous.

The fact that a Taylorian view of hermeneutic autonomy raises the bar on being autonomous and could be more paternalistic might seem damning, but given the effects of individualisation, these disadvantages might not be quite as disastrous. As I noted in the first chapter, the demands on hermeneutic autonomy have already been increased due to individualisation and people are already expected to have a more defined idea of who they are and where they want to go in life. Because of this, a move towards Taylor could just be seen as a closer reflection of the role hermeneutic autonomy actually plays in modern life. Furthermore, given the fact that the bar is already raised on being hermeneutically autonomous, Taylor's idea of a strong evaluator is helpful because it provides an actual model of how someone could work towards being hermeneutically autonomous. One of the issues with Christman's idea of non-alienation is that, due to its subjective nature, there is not much that can be said or done about it outside of making sure people engage in 'accurate reflection'.<sup>15</sup> To a certain extent, someone does, or does not feel alienation. The condition on being a strong evaluator on the other hand, is one that people can work towards by being more curious to our inner states and more willing to trying to articulate our experiences. In a time where hermeneutic autonomy and authenticity is strongly expected, a conception of autonomy that is more transparent and clearer is worth losing some of the advantages of a liberalist, subjective conception.

Consider again the example of Andrew who decides to study biology without really thinking about his decision. I argued that, due to individualisation Andrew is likely to experience regret towards this decision but Christman's demand of non-alienation could not explain why his commitment to autonomy was not hermeneutically autonomous. From the perspective of Taylor's theory, however, one could easily say that Andrew has to be more curious to his actual reasons for choosing biology and more open to evaluating his needs and interests before deciding.

To conclude, Christman and Taylor have very different goals. Christman's historical conception of autonomy is explicitly subjective because he is concerned with the effects that a more objective, paternalistic conception would have on people's freedoms on the

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<sup>15</sup> For Christman, reflecting accurately mostly means one reflects on their situation with access to all the relevant facts and free from any manipulating or coercing influences. While Taylor would not object to these criteria, he would, of course, add that reflecting should also include being receptive to import and the ability to articulate one's feelings.

level of society and policy. Taylor on the other hand, is more concerned with the personal experience and well-being of individuals. His theory of the strong evaluator includes strong demands that one must meet in order to gain an understanding of one's self, but the strong understanding that Taylor requires will likely allow a subject to meet the pressures of individualisation. Without social structures to fall back on when trying to understand our identity, openness to the imports of our emotions is likely necessary for us to understand our core needs and desires. Furthermore, the societal pressures on having a strong sense of identity likely require the capacity for articulation as spelled out by Taylor. For this reason, Taylor meets the design criterion of individualisation.

#### 2.4. The Charge of Intellectualism

The last section argued that there are good reasons to adopt a view of hermeneutic autonomy inspired by Taylor despite its seeming disadvantages. Regardless of these reasons though, the notion that Taylor's view could set the bar on autonomy too high does warrant a closer look as even if the idea of the strong evaluator offers a more transparent conception of being authentic, it would still be worrisome if the ideal of a strong evaluator is unreachable for most people. The next section will discuss a similar charge put forward by Owen Flanagan who argues that Taylor's view on authenticity and human agency is too intellectualist to be realistic. While I will disagree with most of Flanagan's argument, it will lead to a similar worry that Taylor's focus on language, and particularly on a linguistic reconciliation of personhood might be too rigid to be viable in respect to individualisation.

In *Identity and Strong and Weak Evaluation* (1993) Flanagan criticises Taylor's notion of strong and weak evaluators, arguing that Taylor's position is too intellectualist. He identifies two main issues in Taylor's view. The first is that, according to Flanagan, Taylor ties human agency too closely together with linguistic competence. Flanagan disputes the notion that all actual self-understanding is achieved through language and articulation and that better self-understanding can be achieved "...by way of feelings of coordination, integration, and integrity, of fit with the social world mediated by the body language of other, and so on. Such self-comprehension might involve an evolving sense of who one is, of what is important to oneself, and of how one want to live one's life. But the evolution of this sense might proceed relatively unreflectively, possibly for the most part unconsciously." (1993, P.52) He compares this to great athletes who clearly show great know-how and skills in their respective sports, but are often unable to explain exactly what they are doing. The second problem Flanagan raises is related to the first and is the fact that Taylor constitutes identity in the process of self-evaluation. Here, he disputes the fourth of Taylors claims that I outlined above. While Flanagan agrees with Taylor that one of the constitutive elements of being an agent is that things matter to us and that we are

defined by what we care most about. However, since Flanagan disputes that all self-comprehension is achieved linguistically, he disagrees with the idea that the things we care most about are the things we come to accept through the process of articulation. Instead, he argues that a more accurate reflection of our personhood comes from the goals we set and how we invest our times and energy, regardless of our linguistic evaluations of these. The overall charge Flanagan raises is that Taylor's position is too intellectualist, reserving strong evaluation only for those with the ability (or you could even say, privilege) to spend a lot of time and energy carefully studying their own feelings and with the linguistic ability to clearly articulate themselves.

Overall, Flanagan's criticism is not entirely convincing, mostly because his interpretation of Taylor seems somewhat uncharitable. The first criticism, that Taylor ties agency too closely to linguistic competence seems to conflate Taylor's notion of being articulate about import with being articulate in the sense of being eloquent or having access to a large vocabulary. As an example, Flanagan mentions the peasant characters in Tolstoy's novel that are often written as 'inarticulate' in the sense of having a limited vocabulary and less developed sense of speech compared to the richer characters in Tolstoy's novels. Flanagan argues that Taylor would not define these peasants as strong evaluators despite the fact that they are often very much in tune with their social environment and often express a strong notion of personal convictions and standards. I am not convinced that this is the case however as a more charitable interpretation of Taylor would be to interpret 'articulate' as the willingness and ability to provide clarity on one's inner feelings and communicate this with others. If Tolstoy's peasants accomplish through so called 'common' language this does not seem like a massive problem for Taylor.

Flanagan's second problem with Taylor strikes closer to home despite the fact that it is still not an entirely valid criticism of Taylor. It is an effective remark on Taylor's argument to the extent that it draws attention to the fact that there many aspects of identity-formation besides self-evaluation through articulation in the form of plans, projects and commitments people make which they are not necessarily articulate about. I will return to this point later. Where this criticism misses the mark, I think, is when Flanagan takes the next step and argues that constituting identity in these aspects is better than Taylor's way. It seems as if one could convincingly defend Taylor by stating that these pre-articulate processes are important for his conception of identity, but that his point still stands that such projects and commitments would carry subject-referring import and would relate to feelings such as love, indignation or loyalty. As such, Taylor's argument that such feelings can only be understood by evaluating and articulating the relevant aspects of the situation as well as describing our own selves still stands. For Flanagan's criticism to work, he would also have to refute this argument by Taylor.

The effective aspect of Flanagan's criticism does deserve closer attention though, as even if Taylor's argument that articulation and evaluation are the central aspects of identity-formation stands, there are still good reasons for taking into account the pre-articulate aspects mentioned by Flanagan. Consider, for example, the character Philip from Irvin D. Yalom's novel *The Schopenhauer Cure*. Philip is a former sex addict who claims to be cured of his addiction through the writings of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and is now training to be a counsellor. Philip has indeed overcome his addiction and he has done so through evaluating his situation through the philosophy of Schopenhauer and articulating his relation to it eloquently. His problem, however, is that his commitment to Schopenhauer's philosophy has led him to a pessimistic, solitary outlook on life, he has hardly any social contacts and is out of touch with both his own as well as other people's emotions which is not helping with his aspirations of becoming a counsellor. The protagonist of the novel, who is a therapist, convinces Philip to join group therapy with the aim of making Philip less pessimistic and lonely. At the end of the novel, Philip learns to relate to others and value the importance of his emotions and social relations which also helps him to become an effective counsellor. The climax of his development comes in the form of Philip reinterpreting Schopenhauer and articulating the value of being in touch with his surroundings. Crucially, however, this is achieved through a process of committing himself to his fellow patients and allowing himself to simply feel his emotions and not, in the first place, through articulating his emotions. Philip's story shows that for some people, the way to becoming strong evaluators consists not just of the intellectual process of evaluation but also requires attention to how they experience their feelings before engaging in articulation.

The example of Philip illustrates how a Taylorian conception of hermeneutic autonomy would fail to meet the criterion of connectedness. On the one hand, Philip is clearly a strong evaluator, he is articulate about his values and does not shy away from evaluating and rationally discussing these values. On the other hand, however, Philip's anti-social nature makes him unable to become a counsellor. More importantly, he does not describe his own life as fulfilling, but has rather accepted the philosophical idea that life does not need to be fulfilling. Only after the therapy sessions, when he chooses to let others in his life does he describe life as fulfilling. This shows how a strong evaluator is not necessarily an autonomous person. Strong evaluation describes exclusively on understanding our needs and desires, but being articulate about one's needs does not necessarily make one able to organise one's life around these needs. This would require the conception to be connected to the other dimensions of autonomy as described by Anderson. Because it lacks such a connection, Taylor's theory does not meet the criterion of connectedness.

The criterion of demandingness also points to an aspect of how Flanagan's critique reveals a real issue for the idea of using Taylor as a basis for defining hermeneutic autonomy in the face of individualisation. This issue comes from the processes explained in the first chapter, namely the fact that individuals are expected to perform multiple roles in society, the fact our socio-economical background has become less determining of our identity and the fact that our socio-economic circumstances are more prone to change. What this means for identity is that it is less graspable, more fluid and less uniform. Effectively, our lives contain more inconsistencies and constant situations that ask us to reconsider our identity. This means that it has become more difficult to come to a consistent, all-encompassing articulation of our identity.

The problem with Taylor's almost exclusive focus on articulation as constituting identity and as the requirement of strong evaluation is that language and evaluation can only lead to a sort of internal reconciliation of one's experience. This internal reconciliation through language, however, does not leave any room for accepting the more diverse nature of what identity is in times of individualisation. Imagine, for example, a parent balancing the care for the family with their aspirations to have a successful career. To be a strong evaluator, this person would need to have to be able to articulate clearly what their commitment to both their job and family mean to them and how these commitments relate to each other. Most people, however, would struggle to provide such an articulation. The problem is, however, that these two commitments pull in such different directions that it is hard to see how someone could form a cohesive articulation of them at the same time. The parent is unlikely to balance these two commitments through a process of evaluation and articulation since there is bound to always be at least some tension between the two that is unlikely to be resolved by Taylor's somewhat intellectualist approach. Due to this, being a strong evaluator is most likely too strong a demand for many people and it does not meet the demandingness criterion.

## 2.6. Taking Stock

The next chapter will look at how a more intuition and feeling based conception of self-reflection could be included in hermeneutic autonomy, but for now let's take stock of where we are so far. The first chapter looked at Christman as a starting point for a conception of autonomy and argued that the modern issue of individualisation asks for a reinterpretation of autonomy. In particular, the increased demand on and difficulties for being authentic asked for a more demanding notion of hermeneutic autonomy than Christman's non-alienation criteria offers. From Taylor, we learned that realising who we are entails learning what we care about, which is discovered through articulation, an interdependent, social process of reflecting on situations and ourselves. The idea of strong evaluation, being



receptive to the import of our emotions and having the linguistic abilities to form articulation is the first step towards a more concrete conception of hermeneutic autonomy that takes in mind the criterion of individualisation. The latter part of this chapter, however then argued that since strong evaluation is so strongly purely language-oriented it does not meet the other two criteria. For these criteria, we most likely ought to turn towards a more feeling-based approach of hermeneutic autonomy. The coming chapter will look at what sort of attitudes or skills could be included in strong evaluation by looking at the work of Valerie Tiberius.

## Chapter Three

As the last chapter showed, the next step in a search for a sound theoretical basis of hermeneutic autonomy in times of individualisation is to turn to a theory that does follow Taylor in asserting some form of evaluative standards on reflection and authenticity, but also incorporates a more sentiment-based, prelinguistic aspect of self-knowledge. This chapter will discuss Valerie Tiberius' proposal of the Reflective Wisdom Account of living well and consider it as a candidate for being the basis of an account of hermeneutic autonomy. The first section will outline Tiberius' concept of reflective virtues and how they could be the basis of an account of hermeneutic autonomy. The second section will further explain Tiberius' theory by analysing what she calls reflective virtues. I will argue that because of these virtues, the Reflective Wisdom Account meets the demandingness as well as the connectedness criteria. The following section will compare the Reflective Wisdom Account to Taylor's theory from the previous chapter. In this section I will argue that the former also passes the individualisation criterion.

### 3.1. Tiberius' theory

This section will start by outlining the main aims of Tiberius' theory and what she calls reflective values. The explanation of reflective values will lead to the first indication of what a conception of hermeneutic autonomy based on the Reflective Wisdom Account could look like.

Tiberius starts of her discussion with the question of what it means to live well. Tiberius quickly rejects the notion that this question can be answered by arguing for any objective theory of the human good or well-being since the problem with such accounts is the lack of consensus about what the target of a good life is. Without such consensus, objective theories of well-being or flourishing fail to offer a clear target of living a good life and are not of much help for someone trying to live a good life. For this reason, Tiberius explains her project as outlining a "*...first-personal, process-based account of how to live...*" that takes the perspective of the deliberator, someone who wants to live a happy, good life but has limited knowledge of what this means and how their decisions will play out in reality (2008, pp.5-6).

According to Tiberius, the next question is what the relevant, first-person point of view is for such a deliberator. She first considers the perspective of rational deliberation, which relies only on reasons and deliberation for figuring out how to live. Ultimately, however, she states that this perspective is not entirely reliable based on recent findings in empirical psychology by authors such as John Haidt that have showed reason and deliberation are often not as reliable as we think and are plagued by inaccurate predictions,

biases and distraction.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, she also rejects the idea that we should let ourselves be guided by our emotional selves. Our emotions are often confusing and lead us to different directions, making them less effective at guiding our decisions. More importantly, she states that when we are asking the question of how we should live our lives, we are already engaged in reflection, so the answer we give will have to be satisfactory to us as reflective creatures. The middle road that Tiberius eventually takes is to argue for a first-person perspective that is reflective, but aware of the fact that not all of reflection is reliable. The project for someone desiring to live well then, is to aim at training one's rational and reflective capacities be reliable and to function together with our emotions, mood and desires.

Since Tiberius argues for a first-person reflective point of view as the right perspective for judging whether our lives are going well, she posits that we need to have certain standards of evaluation. Her argument is that when we ask ourselves what it means to live well, or what makes our lives worth living we are asking whether our commitments are normative in the sense that they are appropriate, justified or good to have.<sup>17</sup> Taking this reflective point of view, means forming certain values that are guiding to us when we reflect on our life. These values are what Tiberius calls 'reflective values'.<sup>18</sup>

Reflective values are characterised firstly by the fact that they motivate or move us when taking decisions or forming commitments in daily life. With just this characteristic, however, every goal or desire could count as a reflective value. This introduces the second feature: stability, which distinguishes reflective values from merely occasional desires. For a value to be stable means, on the one hand, that it is diachronically consistent, meaning we feel it over an extended period of time. A regularly experienced, enduring desire to practice music, for example, is stable, while a strong, but infrequent, desire for chocolate is not. Another, perhaps more important, factor of experiencing a value as stable is what Tiberius defines "*...a defeasible disposition not to reconsider our values*" (2008, p.26). By this she means that a stable value is one that tends to not reconsider due to certain extraneous circumstances. Suppose, for example, that a person with the aforementioned strong and enduring commitment to music notices that they have not been able to commit time and energy to music due to stress and anxiety. An important part of a stable value in this example is recognising that this stress and anxiety is just temporary and does not necessarily mean the commitment to music should be reconsidered.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example: Haidt, Jonathan. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Tiberius means 'appropriate, justified or good' here as not necessarily good for the universe, but from at least good for one's self.

<sup>18</sup> Tiberius, Valerie. *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely With Our Limits*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp.24-25

The third and final aspect of reflective values is that they have a certain kind of authority to us. Here Tiberius means that we endorse them as important to our lives and believe ourselves to be justified in pursuing them. She remains somewhat open to the question of the actual content of our reflective values, they could be explicitly moral commitments such as helping those in need. They could be commitments to an art or craft such as learning an instrument, or even commitments to specific people or family in general. She does, however, state that certain commitments are more likely to relate to reflective values. For example, since the Reflective Wisdom Account holds that living well is to live in accordance with one's own values life-satisfaction and self-direction are presupposed by this account. Furthermore, she mentions some empirical research that shows that a commitment to close personal relationships and, to a lesser extent, to moral goals or ideals (meant in the broad sense of commitments to benefit others or society) are often experienced as reflective values.<sup>19</sup>

Astute readers might at this point object that Tiberius' definition of reflective values is somewhat circular. Reflective values are those values we hold with the motivating force, stability and normative justification that living in accordance with them will make our lives worth living. But Tiberius also argues from the first-person perspective of a person who does not have complete knowledge of what actually makes a life worth living. Tiberius' argument is that in order to live a fulfilling life, one must form reflective virtues that can give a sense of purpose to one's life. From the start, she assumes that the actual content of these values will differ per individual but they do have to be motivating, stable and justifiable. This is the first clear indication of how Tiberius' theory connects to hermeneutic autonomy, being hermeneutically autonomous means to form reflective values that give a sense of the commitments or desires that will make one's life feel fulfilling and worthwhile.

### 3.2. The reflective virtues

The question that follows is how one actually would be able to form reflective values. Tiberius argues that there are certain skills and dispositions that are more likely to make someone able to form reflective values, she calls these *reflective virtues* and identifies four of them. The following section will outline these reflective virtues and argue that including them helps the Reflective Wisdom Account pass the demandingness criterion.

The first reflective virtue identified by Tiberius is that of wisdom. She stresses two important aspects of her account of wisdom. The first is that a wise person has a conception of a good life that guides them in reflective moments. The sense of wisdom here is close to the idea of practical rationality in that it imposes some order on particular

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see: Schwartz, Shalom H. 'Basic human values: Theory, methods, and application'. *Risorsa Uomo*, 2007.

commitments and reveals how they are related to each other with respect to mutual support or priority. She offers the example of someone committed to running a marathon where this commitment is supported by more general commitments to health or achievement. Wisdom here is having some general idea of how one's specific commitments relate to one's overall conception of a good life. The second aspect of wisdom on the other hand, is to also allow one's conception of a good life to be shaped by unreflective moments and know when a more practical, engaged perspective is appropriate. When it come to, for example, having genuinely loving relations with other people, constant reflexion on whether these relations accord with one's value commitments can make us unable to actually experience them. In other words, shifting perspectives is sometimes necessary to fully realise the value of some of our commitment.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, she advocates the importance of flexibility, being able to sometimes engage with the situation as it is and not reflect as a vital part of wisdom if we are to realise our reflective values.

The second reflective virtue is that of perspective. Tiberius states that: "*The virtue of perspective includes the ability to relate others' experience of their values to our own, and the ability to bring our thoughts, feelings and actions into accord with these reflections*" (2008, p.107). Essentially, Tiberius argues that perspective helps us overcome certain weaknesses in our ability to reflect, she mentions our tendency to become excessively distressed when things we care about are threatened, our poor ability to appreciate certain values until they become threatened (think about how people often only realise how much they value their health only after falling ill) and our tendency to be overly influenced by violently felt emotions. These weaknesses can be addressed by cultivating the habit of taking a different perspective, and considering whether our distressed reaction is really justified. One way of doing this is by doing is by 'counting your blessings', taking the view of other's whose values are threatened in different, more serious ways. Another important part of perspective is to resist the urge to make decisions on strongly felt emotions we experience in moments of distress.

Imagine, for example, a grad student receiving negative feedback on their first research proposal. Anger and sadness might make this student consider quitting their studies. By reminding themselves that fellow students have received similar feedback and are not reconsidering and that a momentary flash of anger is not likely to lead to making a good decision they take a different, more realistic perspective. This also shows how perspective is a virtue. Habits like considering the perspectives of others, reminding

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<sup>20</sup> Here Tiberius mentions the case of Juan and Linda from Railton's (1984) paper *Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality*. She argues that when Juan decides that it is defensible to take a flight to see his loved one from a consequentialist point of view because, as a consequentialist, he would not desire a world in which people did not have such close relation, Juan cannot make this decision while occupying this reflective point of view, but must shift attention to a more unreflective perspective in order to fully experience his relationship to Linda.

ourselves to not act in the heat of the moment are skills and dispositions that we can learn and cultivate

The third reflective virtue is that of self-awareness, which is important as it allows agents to make choices that better reflect their own values and suit their needs and interests. In her discussion of self-awareness discusses some problems with the idea of self-awareness, namely the fact that it is hard to define exactly what it means to know one's self and that acquiring self-knowledge is, in line with Taylor's perspective, better understood as a process of interpretation. She furthermore mentions the psychological evidence that people are often poor at understanding their own feelings and disposition and have an unrealistic view of their own person.<sup>21</sup> As such, the reflective virtue that Tiberius advocates is what she calls moderate self-knowledge which is comprised mainly of a capacity for criticism and an openness to various sources for knowledge about the self. Note that, again, this virtue is meant mostly to avoid certain biases we experience when reflecting on ourselves. Furthermore, since an openness to criticism and a disposition to seeking out various sources of information about our own character are faculties we can learn and develop, the word virtue seems appropriate.

The fourth and final reflective virtue is optimism. Tiberius' argument for optimism relies on the idea that optimistic people are more likely to engage in endorsing important ends and living their lives according to certain reflective values. This claim relies partly on empirical research and partly on the argument that optimistic people are more inclined to see the good in people and assume the commitments they form will lead to desirable result. In part, Tiberius' discussion of optimism is an inditement of cynicism as being overly cynical can impede one's ability to care about life and deeming certain values as justifiable. Tiberius argues that these are good prima facie reasons to cultivate what she defines as realistic optimism. A realistic optimist is defines as someone who is open evidence that a certain situation or person is either bad or good, but she is disposed to look for evidence that points to it being good.

This completes how the Reflective Virtues Account could form a theoretical basis for defining hermeneutic autonomy. To be hermeneutic autonomy is live in accordance with reflective values This is achieved by cultivating the four reflective virtues as they make up the necessary skills disposition that allow us to form reflective values by which we can live fulfilling lives. Since this account of hermeneutic autonomy is based on developing virtues, it meets the demandingness criterion. This is because it provides a clear description of how one would develop hermeneutic autonomy. Under Tiberius' account, encouraging someone to develop hermeneutic autonomy would involve encouraging them to practice certain efforts such as not acting on violent, inappropriate

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<sup>21</sup> See: Wilson, Timothy D., and Elizabeth W. Dunn. 'Self-Knowledge: Its Limits, Value, and Potential for Improvement'. *Annual Review of Psychology* 55 (2004).

emotions or being more accepting of criticism. While cultivating reflective virtues might not be an easy process for everyone, it is not unfeasible to think that most people would be able to take these steps so this conception of hermeneutic autonomy would not be overly demanding.

Another thing to note is that construing developing hermeneutic autonomy as developing reflective virtues is that this account connects it closely to the other three dimensions of autonomy as outlined by Anderson. This is because understanding hermeneutic autonomy as having certain skills and dispositions implies that the extent to which a person is autonomous in other aspects of autonomy would impact their hermeneutic autonomy. To elaborate, cultivating reflective virtues presupposes that a person can effectively deliberate about their circumstances, has the critical skills to evaluate their reflective values and has enough discipline and willpower to not get distracted from acting on their reflective values. Accordingly, a conception of hermeneutic autonomy based on the Reflective Wisdom Account would meet the connectedness criterion.

### 3.3. Tiberius and the Individualisation Criterion

Since Tiberius' theory meets both the demandingness and the connectedness criteria, the remaining question is whether it is responsive to the challenges of individualisation. In the previous chapter, I argued that Taylor's account is successful in meeting the individualisation criterion because of the demands it places on successful self-understanding. These ensured that a Taylorian account of hermeneutic would lead to meaningful self-understanding that can survive the challenges of individualisation. This section will compare Taylor and Tiberius their accounts and argue that the latter is less demanding overall, but still demanding enough to pass the individualisation criterion.

The first and most important similarity between Tiberius and Taylor is that both offer a central role to reflection for their respective theories. Both authors agree that living a good life revolves around living according to the values one comes to affirm through reflection. The important question here is exactly what role they give to reflection. Clearly, Taylor does not regard reflection as just a prudential value that matters because it helps us live well. In other words, engaging in reflection is, according to Taylor, not just important as a decision-making tool that helps us to be happy in the same way that someone could decide that an hour of exercise a week will make them feel happier. Rather, Taylor sees reflection as a central aspect of being human and argue that human beings cannot help but feel the need to reflect and that denying this need is means missing out on a vital aspect of human understanding. The nature of the importance of reflection in Tiberius' account is slightly more complicated. On the one hand, reflection seems to be a

prudential value as she discusses it primarily with the aim of finding out how people can live the good life. She states quite clearly that having reflected on a certain commitment or value is not the minimum for being justified in acting on it. She explains that justification means “...*you think a story could be told, not that you are actually prepared to tell it.*” (2008, p.28) This would imply a less necessary role for the actual act of reflecting than in Taylor’s theory.

On the other hand, reflection clearly plays a necessary role in Tiberius’ philosophy. Firstly, a necessary condition is to live according to values that one would accept upon reflection. Furthermore, she states multiple times that even if not every decision or commitment we make has to be deeply reflected upon, at least some occasional reflection on our lives is necessary in order to form reflective values that can make our lives feel worthwhile. As such, Tiberius’ evaluation of reflection seems to best described as a necessary prudential value. It is not the absolutely necessary condition of successful self-understanding that Taylor deems it to, but it is necessary in at least some capacity. This idea of reflection as a necessary prudential value seems to keep on board the advantage of Taylor’s theory that there is some evaluative content to how we form our identity. Developing reflective wisdom, just like becoming a strong evaluator, means to form a conception of oneself and one’s values that is comprehensible and justifiable from a perspective larger than one’s own. Accordingly, the authenticity gained through developing reflective wisdom is not empty or arbitrary.

This means that a conception of hermeneutic autonomy based on the Reflective Wisdom Account would pass the individualisation criterion. While Tiberius does not demand someone to be perfectly articulate about all their values and commitments, her account does imply someone should develop a general, overall idea of what gives their life direction and purpose. The demands Tiberius places on these reflective values are high enough that they are likely to be realistic and enduring despite the fact that that understanding our identity is more complex due to individualisation. Notably, Tiberius discusses similar difficulties in modern life that are very similar to the ones raised in the discussion of individualisation in the first chapter. She mentions conflicting values in society, an increased emphasis on authenticity and self-direction and an erosion of community ties and argues that her project is, in part, an answer to these difficulties.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.3 Conclusion

The Reflective Virtue Account is successful in all three design criteria for serving as a theoretical basis for hermeneutic autonomy. Her requirements of what counts as self-

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<sup>22</sup> Tiberius, Valerie. *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely With Our Limits*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. pp.59-60



understanding are demanding and meaningful enough to meet the individualisation criterion. At the same time, the theory does not demand an unrealistic amount of articulate self-understanding to be unachievable for most people and provides a clear idea of how one could develop more hermeneutic autonomy, so it meet the demandingness criterion. Finally, the reflective virtues are clearly connected to an overall theory of autonomy, ensuring the connectedness criterion is met. To conclude this thesis, I will provide a formulation of hermeneutic autonomy based on Tiberius' theory before suggesting some possible complications and indications for further research.

## Conclusion

The end of the last chapter showed that the Reflective Wisdom meets all of the design criteria for an account of hermeneutic autonomy. In this conclusion I will propose a definition of an account of hermeneutic autonomy based on Valerie Tiberius' work. First, however, I will take stock of what the preceding discussion has shown to be important for such a conception.

In the first chapter, the discussion of autonomy revolved primarily around the work of John Christman whose historical conception of autonomy served a starting point or a standard definition of autonomy to work with. The conclusion was that Christman's did not have a clear explanation for how individuals come to understand their needs and desires that allow them to live satisfying, worthwhile lives and that what was needed was a stronger focus on the concept of hermeneutic autonomy. In the second chapter, the discussion of Charles Taylor's work specified this problem. Taylor's argument that self-understanding is fundamentally connected to a process of evaluating one's standard showed that a conception of hermeneutic autonomy based on strong evaluation was demanding enough to pass the individualisation criterion. The other conclusion of the chapter was, however, that a conception of hermeneutic autonomy cannot be solely based on the linguistic, rational aspect of self-understanding that Taylor discusses as this might prove to be daunting in an individualized world. This led to the discussion of Tiberius in chapter three, where I argued that it is possible to offer an account of how people can form meaningful values without relying only on linguistic or rational capacities for reflection. Furthermore I argued that because the Reflective Wisdom Account emphasises the cultivation of reflective virtues it meets both the criteria of demandingness as well as connectedness.

Together, the lessons drawn from these authors lead to the following conception of hermeneutic autonomy:

*Hermeneutic autonomy is the dimension of autonomy that is concerned with how we come to understand the desires, needs and values that are important to us as individuals for living a satisfying life. It involves firstly an openness and receptivity to perceiving the values relating to our concerns and commitments. Secondly it involves the willingness and ability to engage in reflecting on how these values can be justified beyond a first-person perspective. Lastly, hermeneutic autonomy involves the ability to know when one should or should not engage in this reflective process so that one can realistically live according to their reflective values. Developing hermeneutic autonomy is achieved by cultivating one's reflective virtues.*

Before concluding this thesis, I want to make three final remarks. Firstly, my formulation displays a clear difference with Christman's conception of autonomy in that

there is no clear way of 'testing' it in the sense of looking at an individual and definitively seeing whether they are or are not hermeneutically autonomous. It should be noted, however, that this was not the goal of this thesis. Rather, the aim was closer to forming an account of autonomy as an ideal that is both guiding as well as realistic. In the sense that it can further discussion on how people could be helped and encouraged to develop it.

Secondly, it should be noted that hermeneutic autonomy as formulated above is heavily related to the other three dimensions of autonomy as defined by Joel Anderson. A lack of critical autonomy, for example, will make it harder to be hermeneutically autonomous as it will be more difficult to justify one's reflective values. Conversely, developing more executive autonomy will make living according to one's reflective values more manageable. I believe this speaks for the formulation of hermeneutic autonomy as it is in line with statements by many authors that autonomy involves many interrelated aspects. Furthermore, research into how being strongly hermeneutically autonomy contributes to, for example, developing greater executive autonomy is likely to provide invaluable insights.

Thirdly, I want to suggest another implication for basing hermeneutic autonomy on reflective virtues. This is that an important part of being autonomous is connected to one's capacity for what could be defined as 'embodiment'. In many ways, Tiberius' reflective virtues reveal the importance of how we relate to our physical bodies in being autonomous. Think for example of how realising the importance of a loving relationship can be achieved by simply focussing on the warmth of a lover's touch. Similarly, in a moment of panic or despair, the realisation that we are breathing rapidly and our blood is boiling can be what pulls us out of a panic and simply taking a deep breath is the first step to introducing some perspective on our situation. Research into how our bodily sensations and reactions relates to our capacity for hermeneutic autonomy valuable for our understanding of autonomy both theoretically as well as practically.

The issues noted in this thesis regarding individualisation and how it causes many people to experience a feeling of disillusionment are unlikely to become less relevant as modernity marches on. During the writing of this work, the world experienced an immensely impactful pandemic and an election period in the United States that was unprecedentedly divisive. It cannot be understated how such developments have severely impacted the lives of many people. In such a rapidly changing world, the ability to understand our own needs and be able to see what commitments will help us to live fulfilling lives in the face of such massive challenges is going to be increasingly important and the arguments presented in this thesis should be seen as an important step in this project.

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