

STARTING OVER

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THE PHENOMENON

After a period of depression or personal turmoil, people often express a desire for a "fresh start" or "clean slate."

ELIZABETH GILBERT

author of *The Last American Man*

eat

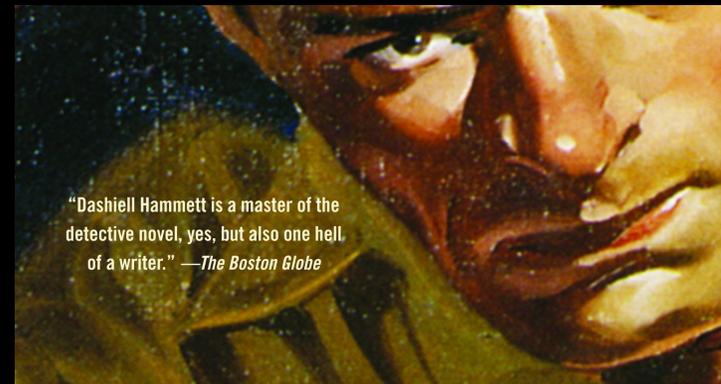
pray

love

*One Woman's Search for Everything
Across Italy, India, and Indonesia*

MY MARRIAGE
JAKOB WASSERMANN

TRANSLATED BY
MICHAEL HOFMANN



"Dashiell Hammett is a master of the
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DASHIELL **HAMMETT**
The Maltese Falcon



CENTRAL CLAIMS

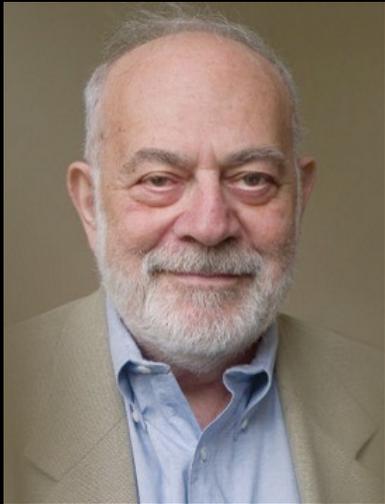
1. One's self consists in one's core commitments.
2. States of personal turmoil can be understood in terms of disunity in one's commitments.
3. We cannot will changes in the commitments that make us who we are, but we can engage in a rational process of facilitating change in our commitments, which I call **practical restructuring**. Agents in personal turmoil find starting over therapeutic because the experiences that are characteristic of starting over facilitate practical restructuring.

WHAT IS SELF-GOVERNANCE?

Autonomous agency is self-governing agency. But what does it mean for an agent to be self-governing?

We are self-governing when we act from a perspective that is uniquely "our own." Call this locus of one's autonomous agency one's **self**.

RATIONALISTIC VIEWS



Frankfurt (1971)



Watson (1975)

NON-RATIONALISTIC VIEWS



Arpaly & Schroeder (1999)



Buss (2012)



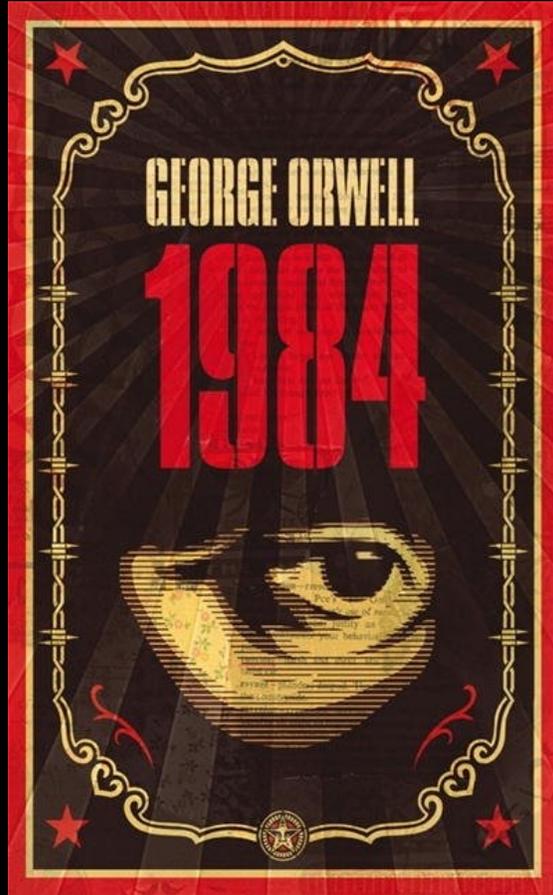
Sripada (2015)

THE SELF AS ONE'S COMMITMENTS

In other work, I defend a non-rationalistic account of the self on which:

1. A person's self consists in her core commitments.
2. Commitments are to be understood in terms of their characteristic functional role, which has emotional, desiderative, and evaluative elements (cf. Shoemaker 2003, Sripada 2015).
3. A person can be mistaken about what her commitments are (pace Frankfurt 1971).
4. Commitments play an important explanatory role; they make our actions intelligible.
5. A person's core commitments are those commitments which, if violated, would cause her to cease to be integrated and suffer a ***practical death***.

PRACTICAL DEATH



THE VALUE OF INTEGRITY

Frankfurt (1988) argues that we act autonomously when we act on the basis of wholeheartedly endorsed desires. He contrasts wholeheartedness to ambivalence and wantonness. But there are other ways that we can relate to our desires and commitments:

Wholeheartedness

No relation

Ambivalence

Repudiation

Indifference

Uncertainty

These are ways that our agency
can fail to be integrated.

On my view, we are disposed to resolve internal conflict, and this disposition (1) helps us integrate our agency and (2) is prudentially advantageous, since it protects us from psychological pain.

INTERNAL CONFLICT

Any relation we have to our commitments that isn't wholeheartedness leads to **internal conflict** or **psychic disunity**.

Ambivalence toward one's commitments might cause **confusion** or **personally costly code-switching**.

Repudiation of one's commitments might cause **self-hatred**.

Uncertainty about one's commitments might cause **anxiety**.

Indifference toward one's commitments might be indicative of **depression**.

On my view, we resolve internal conflict by engaging in **practical restructuring**. To understand what this is, it will be helpful to first consider different ways our selves change over time.

CHANGING OVER TIME

We are all numerically identical to who we were twenty years ago. But many of us are not the same *person* we were then. How did we change?

I propose that there are three ways one's core commitments (and therefore one's self) may change over time:

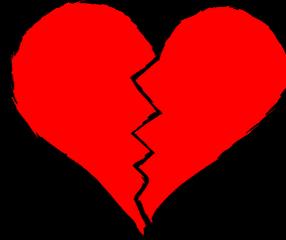
Gradual evolution: the non-rational, passive process by which one's commitments gradually change over time.

Practical death: the instantaneous loss of a commitment caused by being pushed to the limits of one's will and realizing one cannot act in accordance with the commitment.

Practical restructuring: the rational process of acting in ways that will facilitate changes in one's commitments.

Crucially, none of these ways of changing who we are allow us to ***will*** changes directly.

AN EXAMPLE: FALLING OUT OF LOVE



To illustrate these ways that one might change over time, consider the different ways a person might fall out of love with someone:

Gradual evolution: she gradually falls out of love with them.

Practical death: she betrays them so deeply that she can no longer conceive herself as being in love with them.

Practical restructuring: she takes steps to fall out of love with them; she "fakes it 'til she makes it."

None of these ways involves willing herself to fall out of love. We cannot stop caring about things through sheer acts of will.

STARTING OVER AS PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

Starting over is one way that people engage in practical restructuring.

This is why starting over is often described as “soul searching” or “figuring out who one is.” In starting over, you take steps to figure out your relationship to your commitments and integrate your agency.

STARTING OVER AS PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

Here are some reasons why starting over may be an especially effective way of engaging in practical restructuring for several reasons.

1. It involves a total disruption of one's routine and environment and can therefore help break patterns of problematic thought and behavior (Farmer & Nelson-Gray, 2005; Hayes et al., 2004).

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<https://www.strikeapose.co.uk> › [why-is-a-change-of-sce...](#) ⋮

Why is a Change of Scenery so Good for Our Mental Health

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<https://www.shondaland.com> › [live](#) › [how-and-why-a-c...](#) ⋮

How and Why a Change of Scenery Can Shift Your Outlook

Oct 22, 2021 — Forcing a little **change** of **scenery** can help us feel invigorated and more creative, as it forces our brain to process new surroundings and think ...

<https://www.johnleonard.com> › [blog](#) › [why-a-change-o...](#) ⋮

Why A Change of Scenery Boosts Remote Work Productivity ...

Sep 30, 2021 — An advantage of working from home is that you can seamlessly **change** your routine/**scenery**. Everyone has their own work style and mixing up your ...

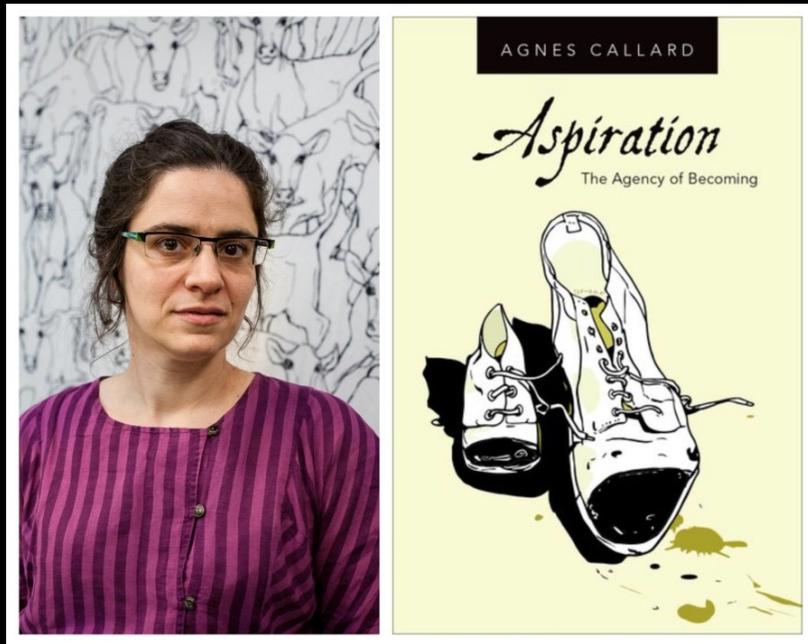
<https://www.psychologytoday.com> › [the-power-places](#) ⋮

Can We Change Ourselves Simply by Changing Location?

Feb 8, 2012 — Our physiological, psychological, and emotional states **change** as our surroundings **change**. Natural places relax us. We're able to focus better ...

STARTING OVER AS PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

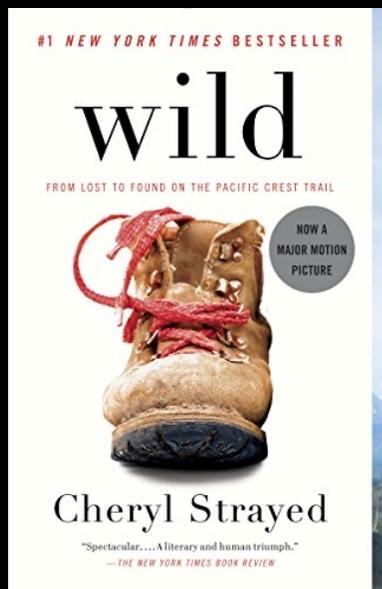
2. When one starts over, one meets new people whose ways of life can serve as inspiration, or who can be “mentors” for one to imitate.



Callard (2018) argues that aspiration—the rational process of acquiring a new value—often involves imitating mentors who have a better understanding of the value.

STARTING OVER AS PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

3. Starting over often involves going on an adventure. The strategies one uses to overcome the challenges that one endures during the adventure may be applied metaphorically to overcome challenges in one's own life.



"I was amazed that what I needed to survive could be carried on my back. And, most surprising of all, that I could carry it. That I could bear the unbearable. These realizations about my physical, material life couldn't help but spill over into the emotional and spiritual realm. [...] It had begun to occur to me that perhaps it was okay that I hadn't spent my days on the trail pondering the sorrows of my life, that perhaps by being forced to focus on my physical suffering some of my emotional suffering would fade away" (Strayed 2013, p. 92).

UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING SELF

LESS INTEGRATED
(*EXTREME: PRACTICAL DEATH*)

MORE INTEGRATED
(*EXTREME: INTEGRITY*)



GRADUAL EVOLUTION

- Nonrational
- Passive
- Temporally extended

PRACTICAL DEATH

- Occurs when pushed to the limits of the will
- Instantaneous

PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

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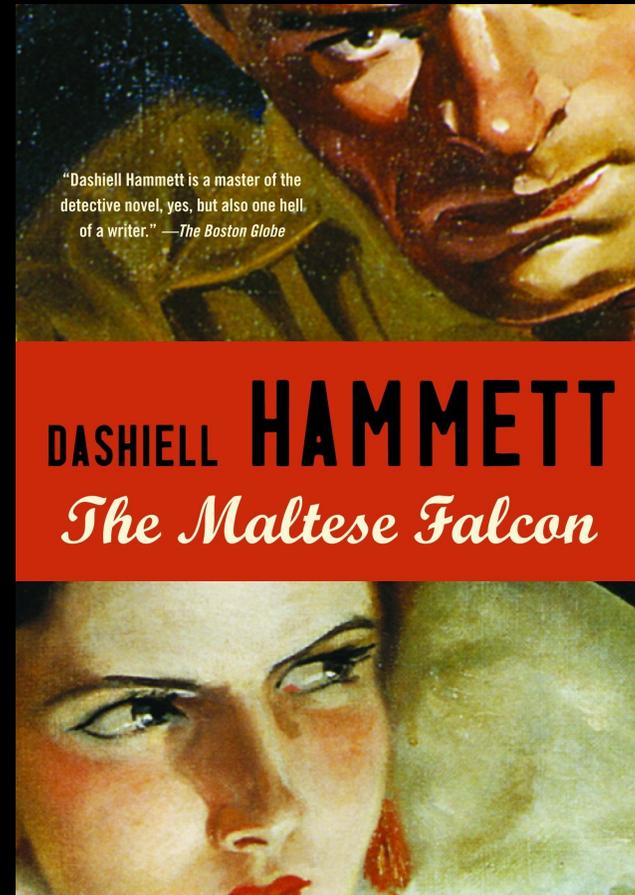
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CHANGING IS HARD

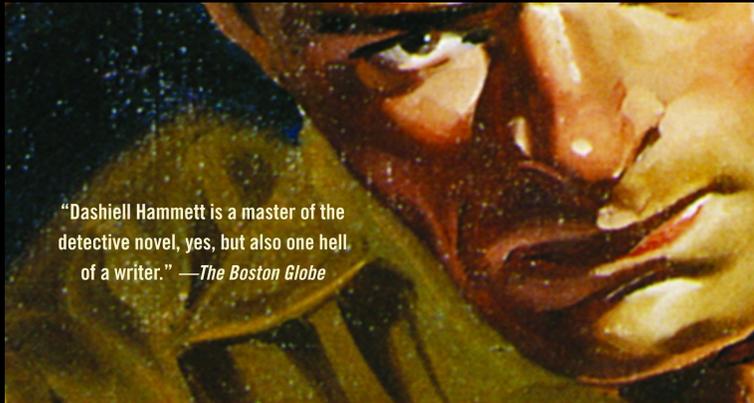
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DASHIELL HAMMETT
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"His second wife didn't look like the first, but they were more alike than they were different. [...] I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally in the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling."

WHY IS CHANGING HARD?

Do people ever really change?

People might struggle to change who they are because:

1. We never really have a clean slate.
2. Commitments affect our psychologies *permanently* in ways we don't yet understand.

THANK YOU!

I would love to hear your questions and feedback!

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