

STARTING OVER  
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

**THE PHENOMENON:** after a period of depression or personal turmoil, people often express a desire for a "fresh start" or "clean slate." Call this the phenomenon of *starting over*.

**CENTRAL QUESTION:** What agency, if any, do we have over our *selves*, or the people who we are?

**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.

## 2 THE SELF

On one view of self-governance, we are self-governing when we act from a perspective that is importantly "our own." Call this locus of one's autonomous agency one's *self*. Broadly speaking, there are two types of views of the self:

- **RATIONALISTIC VIEWS OF THE SELF:** a person's self consists in attitudes that she consciously and reflectively endorses (e.g., Frankfurt (1971), Watson (1975)).
- **NON-RATIONALISTIC VIEWS OF THE SELF:** a person's self consists in attitudes or dispositions that may not be consciously and reflectively endorsed (e.g., Arpaly and Schroeder (1999), Buss (2012), Sripada (2016)).

I defend a non-rationalistic view 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 (2016)).
3. A person can be mistaken about what her commitments are
4. Commitments play an important explanatory role; they make our actions intelligible (pace Frankfurt (1971)).
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*.

## 3 THE VALUE OF INTEGRITY

On my view, any way that we relate to our commitments that fails to be wholehearted (as defined by Frankfurt (1988)) is an indication of disunified agency. These include relations of ambivalence, repudiation, indifference, and uncertainty.

When we relate to our commitments in one of these ways, we are disposed to resolve that internal conflict, and this disposition is important because it:

1. Helps us integrate our agency.
2. Is prudentially advantageous, since it protects us from psychological pain.

## 4 PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

We resolve internal conflict by engaging in practical restructuring, which can be contrasted with two other ways that our selves 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* the changes directly. This is why we need to engage in practical restructuring if we want to change who we are: all we can do is act in ways that facilitate changes, not will the changes directly.

## 5 STARTING OVER AS PRACTICAL RESTRUCTURING

People who experience agential fracture find starting over therapeutic because it is an especially effective way of engaging in practical restructuring for several reasons.

1. Starting over involves a total disruption of one's routine and environment and can therefore help break patterns of problematic thought and behavior (cf. [Farmer and Nelson-Gray \(2005\)](#), [Hayes et al. \(2004\)](#)).
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 (cf. [Callard \(2018\)](#)).
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.

## 6 CHANGING IS HARD

Most of the time, after the adventure of starting over, people return to their old lives; they become more unified versions of the people they were before. Why is it so hard to change who we are?

1. Perhaps we can never really get the clean slate we want? We can never be "bare selves" and totally remake ourselves. All we can do is give ourselves a new environment.
2. Perhaps commitments affect our psychologies permanently in ways we don't yet understand?

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