

ESSAYS ON INTEGRATED AGENCY

Angela Sun
angsun@umich.edu

GOALS OF THE DISSERTATION

- Provide an account of integrity as integrated agency: the unification of our actions, commitments, intentions, and other facets of our agency into a coherent whole.
- Defend the necessity of integrity for self-governance: our ability to be the authors of our own lives and act in ways that reflect what we stand for.
- Explain the consequences of failing to integrate our agency.
- Provide an account of integrity's place among other things that matter for living well (e.g. leading lives that are rich in value).

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1. PRACTICAL DEATH: a paper that argues that a person who violates the requirements of her core commitments ceases to be integrated; therefore, integrity requires that we live up to the requirements of our core commitments.
2. STARTING OVER: a paper that examines a phenomenon where, after a period of depression or personal turmoil, people express a desire for a "fresh start" or "clean slate." The paper argues that the experiences characteristic of "starting over" are therapeutic because help fragmented agents integrate their agency.
3. THE NORMATIVE POWER OF RESOLUTIONS: a paper that argues that resolutions are reason-giving. Therefore, we have a "normative power" that helps us act in ways that reflect our commitments and be self-governing.

1 PRACTICAL DEATH

Starting observations:

- Paragons of integrity are willing to die for their defining commitments (e.g. Martin Luther, Oskar Schindler).

- Popular adages suggest that we must live up to the requirements of our identities even to the point of death (e.g. "The captain goes down with the ship," "Live Free or Die").

THESIS: agents who violate the requirements of their core commitments suffer a "practical death" and cease to be integrated.

Key concepts:

- *Core commitments*: the projects in a person's life that are essential to who she is. Contrast with *mere* commitments, which may be important to her and give her life structure, but are not essential to who she is.
- *Integrity*: the quality of living up to the requirements of one's commitments, whether or not the commitments are moral in nature.

Addressing three central questions:

1. Why might a person violate the requirements of her core commitments?
 - She lacks the self-understanding to recognize what her core commitments are; she is forced to act under duress; her circumstances slowly chip away at her commitments; her habits inhibit her ability to be guided by her commitments; the commitments are compromised by external forces.
2. What happens when a person violates the requirements of her core commitments?
 - She experiences a cluster of symptoms including psychological crisis, diminished capacity for instrumental reasoning, and undermined self-governance that together I call *practical death*. Practical death just is the state of lacking integrity.
3. In order to have integrity, must an agent be willing to die for her core commitments?
 - Yes, but there is reason to think that agents can reintegrate themselves around new commitments after suffering practical death.

2 STARTING OVER

The phenomenon: After a period of depression or personal turmoil, people express a desire for a "fresh start" or "clean slate" (e.g. Elizabeth Gilbert

in *Eat Pray Love*, Cheryl Strayed in *Wild*, Mr. Flitcraft in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*).

- In these cases, an agent cannot go on as she was, yet she is so alienated from her commitments that she cannot use them to plan her next steps.
- Contrast these with cases where an agent cannot go on as she was, but *can* use her commitments to figure out how to move forward (e.g. Sartre's student who is torn between caring for his mother and serving his country).

THESIS: Agents in the grip of internal conflict desire to start over because the experiences characteristic of starting over facilitate "practical restructuring," a process by which we can facilitate changes in the commitments that make us who we are.

Key premises:

1. *Our commitments make us who we are*: A person's self is made up of her commitments (to be understood in terms of their motivational and evaluative roles).
2. *Ambivalence hinders self-governance*: When a person's commitments conflict, she experiences inner conflicts that hinder her ability to be self-governing.
3. *Practical restructuring is the rational process of integration*: A person engages in the process of practical restructuring when she acts in ways that make it more likely she will have or not have certain commitments, often because she wants to integrate her agency but cannot will her commitments to change.
4. *Starting over is an effective method of engaging in practical restructuring*: Because starting over involves (1) a complete disruption of one's routine and environment, (2) experiencing different ways of life, and (3) going on adventures that show one what one is capable of, starting over is an effective method of engaging in practical restructuring.

3 THE NORMATIVE POWER OF RESOLUTIONS

Central question: What does a person do wrong when she fails to respect her resolutions?

THESIS: When an agent resolves to ϕ , she incurs a normative reason to ϕ over and above the reasons that led her to resolve to ϕ in the first

place. Therefore, a person who justifiably breaks her resolutions fails to be satisfactorily responsive to her reasons for action.

Two arguments: Resolutions bear striking resemblances to promises. (Compare the statements "I resolve to watch less TV" and "I promise myself I'll watch less TV.") Because promises are generally believed to be reason-giving, resolutions should be, too.

1. Promises play the same coordinative role in our interpersonal lives that resolutions play in our intrapersonal lives.
2. The same considerations that can be used to ground the normativity of promises can be used to ground the normativity of resolutions for the exact same reasons.
 - (a) *Expectation view*: When we make promises, we intentionally generate an expectation and provide assurance that we will perform the promised act. It is wrong to violate that expectation without special justification. (*Compare*: when we form a resolution, we expect that our future selves will perform the resolved act, and violating that expectation is wrong because it would undermine the interests of our future selves.)
 - (b) *Authority interest view*: Promises derive their normativity from our authority interest: our desire to have authority over what others do in some situations. (*Compare*: resolutions derive their normativity from our interest in having authority over ourselves.)

Objection: The view that resolutions are reason-giving appears to permit unacceptable bootstrapping. If resolutions give us reasons, then we could bootstrap any action into rationality simply by resolving to perform the action.

Response: If resolutions give rise to reasons that are akin to promissory reasons, we can easily respond to concerns about bootstrapping.

- *Buridan's donkey cases*: Like promissory reasons, reasons from resolutions are sensitive to changing circumstances.
- *Resolutions to perform immoral actions*: There is controversy over whether immoral promises are binding. Either they are not binding or they do not bind problematically. The same arguments can be made as to whether resolutions are binding.