PREPRINT: Gallagher, S. 2012. A philosophical epilogue on the question of autonomy. In H. Hermans and T. Gieser (eds.), *Handbook of the Dialogical Self Theory* (488-96) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A philosophical epilogue on the question of autonomy

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One of the great strengths of dialogical self theory (DST) is that it is not just a theory of the self, since even in being a theory of the self, it is also a theory of the social other. The chapters gathered together in this volume demonstrate in great detail, across a number of issues, how DST is able to explain the self only in relation to the other, whether that other be a different person or a set of persons, or a different position that stands, in some degree, as other to self, and yet, as Chaudhary (Chapter 9) suggests, an 'otherness in the self'. I want to stay with this thought, while at the same time acknowledging that these chapters bring to bear a comprehensive set of resources to address a wide range of issues, from developmental questions to the effects of changing cross- and multi-cultural factors; from psychodrama and narrative to action in lived space as well as cyberspace; from specific methodologies to various mal-adaptations and psychopathologies; from theories to therapies and applications in the areas of education, counselling, and consumer preferences. The ability to see DST as applicable to all of these various aspects of knowing and living is part of why I think it holds promise to address a particular philosophical problem that is essentially related to the question of how the self *is* only in relation to the other. The problem is the one of autonomy.

As Ho (Chapter 23) suggests, there is an ambiguity involved with the possible transpositions of self-in-other and other-in-self, and at the same time a call for personal and social responsibilities. The starting point for thinking about autonomy is not a consideration about the coercive or collaborative nature of social relations, to use Nir's terms (Chapter 16), but something more primary that precedes any claim about coercion or collaboration. It lies closer to the developmental origins of the dialogical self, discussed by Bertau (Chapter 3). The issue concerns the fact that we are immersed in interactive relations with others before we know it.

I've argued, in other places (Gallagher 2005, 2008), for the interaction theory of social cognition as an alternative to the standard theories found in philosophy of mind, psychology, and neuroscience – theories that frame the problem of intersubjectivity in terms of mindreading the other's mental states from an observational standpoint. The standard theories assume, as part of the problem, a clear separation of minds, and accordingly a lack of access to the other person's mental states. Moreover, they look for a solution that reinforces this assumption with another one: the assumption of methodological individualism: the working assumption that access to knowledge about the minds of others depends on cognitive capabilities or mechanisms of an isolated individual, or on processes that take place inside an individual brain.

The standard solution, therefore, is cast in terms of a 'theory of mind module' (Leslie 1992) or a set of neurons the activation of which constitutes a simulation of the other person's mind (Gallese 2001; Goldman 2006).

In contrast, interaction theory appeals to developmental studies to show that we are not third-person observers of others, but rather are involved, from the earliest point in infancy, in second-person interactions and dialogical relations with others, and that we start to 'understand' others through a variety of embodied practices.

I won't rehearse the evidence here (but see Gallagher 2005; Hobson 2002; Reddy 2008). I will, however, emphasize the importance of timing and emotional attunement as essential to the kind of interaction involved. Infants and caregivers are affectively and temporally attuned to each other in their dialogical vocalizations and gestures (e.g., Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997; and experiments by Tronick et al. 1978, and Murray and Trevarthen 1985). The upshot of interaction theory is that meaning and emotional significance is co-constituted *in the interaction* -- not in the private confines of one or the other person's head, and that such embodied interactive practices continue to characterize our mature adult behaviour – supplemented and transformed via communicative and narrative practices (Gallagher and Hutto 2008). In communication, for example, we coordinate our perception-action sequences; our movements are coupled with changes in velocity, direction and intonation of the movements and utterances of the speaker (Issartel et al. 2007; Kendon 1990; Lindblom and Ziemke 2007). Our movements are imperfectly synchronized in resonance with others, following either in-phase or phase-delayed behaviour, and in rhythmic co-variation of gestures, facial or vocal expressions (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Gergely 2001). In this interactive process, attunement, loss of attunement, and re-established attunement maintain both differentiation and connection.

There is significant evidence that a pre-social, pre-personal interaction develops prenatally and primes the kind of post-natal intersubjective interaction we find in infants. A variety of behavioural and neuroscientific studies show that the proprioceptive and kinaesthetic registration of bodily movement develops prenatally, and that this development is facilitated by fetal movement. Cortical connections and body-schematic proprioceptive processes are in place by 26 weeks gestational age, but proprioceptors in the muscles (muscle spindles) first appear even earlier, at 9 weeks gestational age (Humphrey 1964). Parts of the vestibular system develop as early as the fourth month of gestation (Jouen and Gapenne 1995). In addition a differential perception (which may be conscious or non-conscious) of stimuli occurs in the late-term fetus. For example, in response to auditory stimuli, starting around 24 weeks gestational age, fetal heart rate changes; and after 25 weeks the fetus responds by blinking its eyes or moving its limbs. Cortical response to such stimuli has been demonstrated in premature infants between 24-29 weeks gestational age (Fifer and Moon 1988). The fetus shows preference for some sounds (such as the mother's voice) rather than others (DeCasper and Spence 1986). Bright light directed on the lower abdomen of the mother in the third trimester can elicit fetal eye blinks (Emory and Toomey 1988). Fetal facial movements prompted by music or voice may be indicative of a similar differential awareness (Birnholz 1988).

There is also evidence that a dialogical sensitivity to the difference between touching and being touched, moving and being moved develops prenatally since a certain kind of embodied

interaction predates all of these late-term developments, and can be found in the initial and very early movements of the fetus. For example, at 10 weeks gestational age, fetuses display structured bodily movements which they develop through habituation (Krasnegor et al. 1998), e.g., regular mouth opening and closing, and swallowing, as well as movement in response to stimuli such as the mother's laugh or cough. From 12 weeks gestation, spontaneous and repetitious movements, e.g., movement of the hand to mouth, occur multiple times an hour (De Vries, Visser and Prechtl 1982; Prechtl 2001; Tajani and Ianniruberto 1990). Moreover, in a study of twins *in utero*, kinematic analysis shows that between 14 and 18 weeks gestational age movements of one twin towards the other are different in duration and deceleration compared to movements directed towards the uterine wall or self-directed movements (Castiello et al. 2010).

The neuroscientific principle is that movement influences morphology: brain development *results* from the system as a whole adapting to new levels of organization at more peripheral levels, rather than the neurological developments unfolding to 'allow' increasing proprioceptive capacities (Edelman 1992; Sheets-Johnstone 1998; Van der Meer and Van der Weel 1995). If we ask about this originating movement that sets the train of development in motion, then we should say that it is a kind of intercorporeal interaction. Some early fetal movement is spontaneous and repetitive and starts out as a reflex that unfolds genetically (de Vries, Vissor and Prechtl 1982). Other early fetal movement, however, appears regulated and practiced – non-reflex (Krasnegor et al. 1998) – and it starts out as a response to stimuli. That is, even at this early stage, the fetus is not simply bouncing around in a container. It is responding to something. To what is this movement a response? Quite likely, to the mother's movement:

> It is likely that these earliest regulated movements, which are prior to proprioceptive capacity, are a response within and to, the maternal body in *her* regulated and habituated, body schematic movement. … Add to physical movement the regular maternal heart beat, digestion, and breathing and we can see that the intrauterine world is not only a moving but quite rhythmic or regulated animate world (Lymer 2010: 230).

Of course this is not strictly *interpersonal* interaction (the mother doesn't even know she's pregnant this early; and the fetus is not an experiencing subject), but it is what we might call *intercorporeal* interaction – a non-conscious motor coupling between mother and fetus driven toward and then driven by proprioception and touch. This kind of movement and intercorporeal interaction is, accordingly, sub- or pre-personal. To such pre-personal aspects of interaction, which remain immanent in what later becomes interpersonal interaction, we need to add super-personal aspects.

As suggested above, the intersubjective interaction that is found in infancy and that continues through adulthood is not reducible to mechanisms that belong to the individuals involved in the interaction – it's not reducible to a sum of individual capacities (De Jaegher, Di Paolo and Gallagher 2010). Rather, interaction produces a surplus where 1 + 1 is greater than 2. That is, the interaction goes beyond each participant; it results in something (the creation of meaning) that goes beyond what each individual qua individual can bring to the process. Just as when two people dance the tango, something dynamic is created, which neither one could create on their

own. Moreover, as we just saw in regard to the pre-personal aspects of interaction, we are in the tango before we even know it.

If we consider both the pre-personal and the super-personal aspects of interaction, then, not just in its origins, but as an ongoing process, interaction seems to transcend the control of the participants (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007). Merleau-Ponty (1964, 40) talks about the infant getting caught up in the "whirlwind of language" – but prior to that the infant is caught up in the whirlwind of interaction – and even as adults we remain in that whirlwind.

This, then, motivates the following question: If I, always already, even before birth, am caught up in a whirlwind of interaction, and that interaction always goes beyond me and my ultimate control, is there really any room for individual autonomy or self-agency?

There are current lively debates about self-agency and the related concept of autonomy, with a variety of positions being staked out. From materialist and reductionist perspectives, and based on neuroscientific studies, or the results of psychological experiments, numerous theorists argue that self-agency is an illusion (e.g., Wegner 2002; Banks et al. 2006). Those who defend the notion of self-agency often appeal to processes that are *in the head,* or to mind-body connections – mental causation, intention formation, reflective decision-making, or the phenomenological sense of agency. These approaches follow a traditional view that conceives of self-agency (or the lack of it) as a matter of individual subjectivity. Agency and autonomy are either in the individual system or they don't exist. Even those theories that take social phenomena into account often use the individual as a measure: e.g., for social determinists, individual free will doesn't exist precisely because we are fully determined by our social interactions or our culture.

In general, discussions of autonomy and self-agency are framed in terms of methodological individualism – they focus on the individual – the question is framed in just this way if we ask about individual autonomy. Just here I want to argue that we can conceive of autonomy and self-agency in different terms if we conceive of the agent as something other than an individual who either has or does not have free will. If we view the self as something that emerges from intercorporeal and intersubjective interactions, and develops in social interactions with others, then we are forced to face the question of autonomy in a different way. Can we still speak, and do we have a good model for speaking about self-agency in a system that is not reducible to a simple individual?

An important step for this way of thinking involves the concept of dialogical self. If we view the dialogical self as something that is won in social interactions with others, then this could offer a good model for self-agency that is not based on the assumption of methodological individualism. Beyond the idea that the concept of dialogical self allows us to think about the self-in-the-other and the other-in-the-self, it also allows for a certain volitional space to open up – the possibility of taking a critical perspective on ourselves.

We can think of this in a number of different ways. For example, we can think of it as the possibility for having what Harry Frankfurt (1971) calls *second-order volitions* – that is, volitions about volitions – volitions in which we consider our own first-order action volitions. On Frankfurt's view, this, or what Charles Taylor (1989) calls the possibility for a strong

evaluation of our own desires, is what is essential for attaining the status of moral personhood. We might think, however, that this way of putting it is still too closely tied to methodological individualism.

From an interactionist/dialogical perspective, we should say that this kind of strong evaluation is possible only as a result of a social process. For Taylor especially, this is a hermeneutical and dialogical enterprise. Not only do we gain self-understanding as we understand others, but there is a dialogical dimension built into self-understanding and self-evaluation. In strong evaluation I take a position on myself – and I am able to occupy such a position because I have always occupied such a position vis a vis others.

Hubert Hermans (2011: 660) puts it this way: The dialogical self is a

> dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous '*I*-positions' … involved in processes of mutual dialogical relationships that are intensely interwoven with external dialogical relationships with actual others. … When positions emerging from social interactions are interiorized, the self is able to *respond* to these positions in the form of counter-positions. In the interplay between positions and counter-positions the agency of the self comes to its full expression.

The autonomy of the self, then, is not constituted in just an internal intra-individual negotiation made by one self-position with respect to another, but is "intensely interwoven with external dialogical relationships with actual others."

Self-agency – and a proper sense of autonomy (which comes along with a proper sense of responsibility) – can be found only in the context of social interaction, which is dialogical, and which is where our intentions are formed in or out of our interactions with others. After all, we learn to act, and we learn our own action-possibilities, from watching and interacting with others acting in the world. Through our interactions with others we generate shared intentions and we form our own intentions out of the same fabric. In this regard, self-agency becomes a matter of degree rather than an all or nothing issue.

In case this notion sounds a little too abstract, let me add a few clarifications about how this kind of autonomy can emerge. Interaction theory holds that, starting early in development, communicative and narrative practices play a major role in intersubjective relations (Gallagher and Hutto 2008). Just such communicative and narrative practices allow for the possibility of strong evaluation – the possibility of taking a critical perspective on ourselves. I don't mean to rule out other possible attitudes, for example, the non-evaluative attitude that Hermans-Konopka (Chapter 24) calls *depositioning* oneself, that is, the possibility of leaving a particular dialogical position and entering a form of consciousness that witnesses, in a transcendental and non-judgmental way. What evaluative and non-evaluative positions have in common, however, is a narrative distance established between the narrating self (evaluating or witnessing self) and the narrated (evaluated or witnessed) self.[1] From an interactionist perspective, importantly, this is

[1] Narrative distance is a concept that goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics,* and holds for autobiographical (or self-) narrative as well as other kinds of narrative. Specifically, one can ask about the distance between the self who

possible only as a result of a social process, in a social world, where we act, and where we gain communicative and narrative competence. The autonomy that comes with this set of socially constituted possibilities (i.e., possibilities for communicative and narrative practices, and for whatever strong evaluation or depositioning such practices afford) is the possibility for what I would happily call, following Gonçalves and Ribeiro (Chapter 17), 'innovative moments' – moments of insight into my own possibilities for actions that are not divorced from others, but that are either fostered or discouraged by others, where others may be other persons, or other dialogical self-positions.

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